Ethical Viewpoint Paper

The Dynamics of Grooming in Child Sexual Abuse: a viewpoint

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Introduction

The convoluted nature of tactics used by abusers in their efforts to sexually abuse children is evident in their accounts. Grooming is one such pertinent tactic that is evident in society, but there is little understanding and research surrounding this phenomenon. Grooming can be described as the act by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in the pursuit of gaining the child's trust and confidence through a relationship that appears to be outwardly sincere. It can be considered as a prerequisite for an abuser to gain access to a child and doing so enables them to get the child to accede to their abusive activity [1].

An interesting uncovering about grooming techniques is that potential victims of child sex abuse are not the only targets. These techniques can also be targeted towards those individuals who are involved in gaining access to the child's life, like their parents or other primary caregivers, colleagues and other staff members in the case of an institutional setting [2]. It is important to keep in mind that grooming may not always inevitably lead to sexual abuse and that sexual abuse can also commence in the absence of any grooming behavior.

The Grooming Process

Understanding the grooming process and the ability to identify sexual grooming behavior is critical in order to prevent child sex abuse. Some of the common elements and techniques involved in grooming behavior include: identifying a target who may be already vulnerable; befriending the target (here, the child) in order to develop trust and gain access to them; isolating the child and making them dependent; gaining the child's compliance with the abusive behavior; and ensuring that the child remains silent in regards to the abuse to avoid discovery [3]. Grooming is a process through which the abuser infiltrates the way the child sees and responds to his world in order to help keep their relationship under wraps, and by doing so avoids going to prison. Past literature has identified three types of sexual grooming which include self-grooming, grooming the environment and grooming the child [1].

Self-grooming

Self-grooming is the process by which the abusers 'groom themselves' and justify or deny their offending behaviors. This process plays a crucial part in the transition from being motivated to sexually abuse a child to the subsequent abuse and targeting of the child. Furthermore, self-grooming can be influenced by the responses from the child and the community in addition to the success or failure of the efforts of the abuser to victimize the child. Success leads to greater denial or justification of their actions accompanied by a deeper sexual interest in the child and motivation of offend. Whereas failure results in the abuser enhancing their strategies to ensure success.

Grooming the environment

Abusers often groom the environment of their potential victim's, including those close to them like their parents or teachers. This may mean that the abuser integrates themselves into places where they are more likely to meet the victims, putting them in a position of trust. They then begin grooming

the adults belonging to these communities, especially those significant to their potential victim. This behavior is carried out with the aim of creating more opportunities to access and abuse a child. We often tend to focus on the concrete and materialistic aspects of grooming, but in reality grooming behaviors can be a lot more subtle and implicit. The dynamics of grooming are so wide that in some cases, the abuser assumes the roles or replaces the child's primary caregiver as well. Familial and institutional grooming can be looked at from an evidentiary viewpoint wherein emphasis is laid on how families and institutions as a whole form the narrative of how a child is sexually abused. This vantage point looks at more than just the elements involved in the crime and the legalities, but on the context as well.

Grooming the child

The grooming of the child is the most commonly recognized type of sexual grooming. This type of behavior constitutes two different forms- physical and psychological. Physical grooming involves the gradual succession and sexualization of the relationship between the abuser and the victim. Whereas psychological grooming is used in order to attain this increased sexualization.

The process of grooming begins with the abuser justifying their sexual behavior to the child which could involve normalizing the act of sex or highlighting their responsibility to train the child for later life. The abuser successively builds the child's trust, makes them feel good, and then begins to violate boundaries [4]. Abusers often desensitize their victims to touch by beginning with non-sexual touching such as hugging, stroking the child's head, or even tickling. Gradually conversations become more sexual too.

The abuser makes the child believe that they are truly benefitting from this complacent relationship. They may also use manipulation to shift responsibility to the child wherein the child is made to believe that the abuse is their fault and that they were the cause of this wrongdoing. The abusers can also go on to assume the role of the victim in such situations, leading to betrayal and complex trauma generated dynamics.

It is worth noting that grooming can take place without any actual physical touch but through non-contact methods like voyeurism, suggestive language and introducing the child to porn as well. This complicates the course of proving intent of grooming. It also makes it difficult to distinguish friendly behaviors and behaviors that underlie the grooming process.

The Link Between Grooming and Development

In a talk on 'Evidentiary issues in child sex abuse cases,' hosted by SAMVAD-NIMHANS, Dr. Karen Muller talks about grooming as a process that is interlinked and dependent on one's cognitive developmental stage, socio-emotional stage, family/interpersonal dynamics and other aspects of their development. A child's holistic level of development underlies how easy it would be for the abuser to manipulate them.

The child's cognitive development affects their understanding of abuse- younger children do not necessarily recognize abuse, however, old children or adolescents are able to perceive and rationalize abuse. Moreover, younger children are highly egocentric so they do not have the cognitive capacity to see things from the perspective of the abuser and recognize their manipulative behavior. The lack of language development in the child also plays a part in the manipulation process and especially how the story unfolds in the courtroom setting. Grooming behaviors fit into the development of interpersonal relationships in children and adolescents, especially those about intimacy and sex.

The impact of grooming can sometimes be worse than the actual act of physical and sexual abuse itself. The model of traumagenics can be used to further explain the depth of grooming and the impact it has on a child.

Recognizing and Responding to Grooming

Recent research suggests that many children don't realize that abuse has occured because of the context it has taken place in. Recognizing grooming is important here because it is concerned with other aspects of abuse and our developmental understanding of it. The behaviors used to groom a child are not any different to innocent behaviors intended to broaden their experiences. The only

difference is the motivation that underlies these behaviors. Against this background, it could be difficult for one to recognize and respond to grooming.

Past literature proposes that the most efficient way to identify and prevent grooming and child sex abuse is through procedures and policies in account with organizational values and culture. These measures should be consistent with child-safe policies that identify inappropriate behavior towards children and strategies to address these concerns. The onus for reporting grooming behaviors should be on institutional members in order to increase the likelihood of identifying and appropriately addressing grooming [5].

Grooming in the Indian Context

When talking about the Indian context, regulating grooming behavior can prove to be difficult because at present since the law does not consider individuals under the age of 18 in capacity of giving consent. However, with the introduction of the POCSO Act (Protection of Children from Sexual Offence Act) in 2012 and its special provisions, the sexual intents and scope of reporting sexual crimes against children is changing. While the POCSO act does not explicitly recognize grooming as a punishable offence, experts have said that section 11 of the Act can be interpreted to recognize and criminalize grooming behaviors. Grooming related behaviors that involve building relationships with a child in either online or in-person settings so as to facilitate sexual contact with them is criminalized by section 67(b) of the Information Technology Act.

Conclusion

In spite of the broad acceptance of the term, sexual grooming of children is not clearly understood, especially in the public domain. A greater understanding of the meaning, its elements and the process of sexual grooming is required in order to effectively utilize this information to codify it. Grooming should be seen as something that is much more complex than we currently do, in order to make better sense of it. Greater emphasis needs to be laid on understanding why abusers go in for grooming before the act of sexual abuse, and the underlying elements operating these behaviors. The side effects of grooming in the process of disclosure also need to be looked into further. By doing so, effective evidence-based training programs can be developed to help certain groups like police or legislations identify grooming behavior.

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