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Grooming

Grooming is defined by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse as behaviours that manipulate and control a child, their family and other support networks, or institutions with the intent of gaining access to the child, obtaining the child's compliance, maintaining the child's silence and avoiding discovery of the sexual abuse.

Grooming by an adult for sexual conduct with a child under the age of 16, or with a person under the **care, supervision or authority** of that adult, is a crime under section 49M of the Crimes Act 1958 (Vic).

Grooming does not necessarily involve any sexual activity or even discussion of sexual activity. For example, it may only involve establishing a relationship with a child or a person who has **care, supervision or authority** for a child for the purpose of facilitating sexual activity at a later time. Conduct which occurred outside Victoria or while the child was outside Victoria can still constitute an offence.

Certain behaviours or acts will not in isolation constitute grooming behaviour. However, where there is a repeating pattern of indicative behaviour, or several incidents of indicative behaviour, it may constitute grooming behaviour.

Online Grooming

The sexual offence of grooming under section 49M includes online grooming which occurs when an adult (18 years or over) uses electronic means to communicate with a child under the age of 16 in a predatory fashion to try and lower the child's inhibitions, or heighten their curiosity regarding sexual behaviour or activity, with the aim of eventually meeting them in person for the purposes of sexual activity. This can include communications through social media, online chat rooms, sexting or emails.

Encouraging a Child to Engage in Sexual Activity

Sections 49K and 49L of the Crimes Act 1958 (Vic) outline offences relating to the encouragement of a child (under 18) to engage in, or be involved in, sexual activity. "Encourage" is defined in the Act to include suggest, request, urge and demand. The type of sexual activity a child may be encouraged to engage in, or be involved in, does not necessarily have to be a sexual offence in its own right to be captured by these offences, for example encouraging a child to masturbate or watch pornography.

Section 49K does overlap with the grooming offence as both are preparatory offences against children, however not all grooming behaviour may be covered by the encouraging offence. Grooming goes further than the encouragement offence as it covers conduct that doesn't include active encouragement, but assists in the cultivation of a relationship where sexual offending is more likely. For example, building a relationship with a child's parent or carer to gain trust may be an act of grooming, but is not an act of encouragement for the child to engage in, or be involved in, a sexual activity under sections 49K and 49L.

Additionally, the encouragement offences differ from the grooming offences as they do not require proof that the perpetrator intended to encourage the child to engage in, or be involved in, a sexual activity (in that the perpetrator meant to encourage the child in that way), or that they intended the child to engage in, or be involved in, a sexual activity.

While the encouragement and grooming offences are distinct and separate, due to the possibility for overlap, the following possible risk indicators apply to both types of offending.

Possible Indicators of Grooming Behaviour in Adults

- persuading a child or group of children that they have a special relationship
- asking a child to keep the relationship to themselves
- inappropriately allowing a child to overstep the rules
- testing boundaries, for example by undressing in front of a child
- manoeuvring to get or insisting on uninterrupted time alone with a student
- buying a student gifts
- insisting on physical affection such as hugging, wrestling or tickling even when the student clearly does not want it
- being overly interested in the sexual development of a student
- taking a lot of photos of a student
- engaging in inappropriate or excessive physical contact with a student
- sharing alcohol or drugs with a student
- making inappropriate comments about a student's appearance or excessive flattery
- using inappropriate pet names
- making jokes or innuendo of a sexual nature
- making obscene gestures or using obscene language
- sending correspondence of a personal nature via any medium
- inviting, allowing, or encouraging students to attend a staff member's home without parental/carer permission
- entering change rooms or toilets occupied by students when supervision is not required or appropriate
- communicating with a child's parent/step parent, legal guardian, teacher, religious official or spiritual leader with the intention of facilitating the child's involvement in sexual conduct
- inappropriately extending a relationship outside of work
- photographing, audio recording, or filming students via any medium without authorisation or having parental consent to do so.

Indicators That a Child May Be Subject to Grooming

- developing an unusually close relationship with an adult
- displaying significant mood changes, including hyperactive, sensitive, hostile, aggressive, impatient, resentful, anxious, withdrawn or depressed behaviour
- using 'street' or different language they learned from a new or older 'friend'
- having new jewellery, clothing, expensive items or large amounts of money that were gifts from a new or older 'friend'
- using a new mobile phone excessively to make calls, videos or send text messages to a new or older 'friend'
- being excessively secretive about their use of social media or online communications
- frequently staying out late or overnight with a new or older 'friend'
- being dishonest about where they have been or who they were with
- drug and alcohol use
- being picked up in a car by a new or older 'friend' from home or school or 'down the street'.

Indicators That a Child May Be Subject to Online Grooming

- discovery of pornography on their computer or device
- receiving or making calls to unrecognised numbers
- increasing or excessive amount of time spent online
- increased secrecy in what they are doing online and efforts to try and hide what they are doing online
- evidence of people on their 'friends' list that are unknown and they have never met them offline.

What is not grooming?

Not all physical contact between a student and a staff member or any person engaged by the College to provide services to children, including a volunteer, will be inappropriate and/or an indicator of possible grooming behaviour.

The following physical contact with students is not grooming behaviour:

- administration of first aid
- supporting students who have hurt themselves
- non-intrusive gestures to comfort a student who is experiencing grief, loss or distress, such as a hand on the upper arm or upper back
- non-intrusive touching i.e. shaking a student's hand or a pat on the back to congratulate a student