

GROOMING PARANOIA

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One day, after attending a workshop on sex offender issues, a residential supervisor went back to his cottage of Juvenile Sex Offenders and made some rule changes. One of them was that the boys could no longer open a door for each other or for a staff in fear that the boy opening the door might be ***grooming*** the person walking through the door.

Another day on the unit, I almost bit a hole in my lip as I obeyed the rule of not correcting a “front line staff” in front of the clients as he lectured to a group of JSOs comparing ***grooming*** alongside flirting and dating.

Then, one day I was trying to get in the door of our school building. I was balancing my cup of coffee and fiddling with my keys trying to find the right one for the door. A client from a Group Home used his politeness skills and opened the door for me. One of his peers jokingly said, “Hah, he's grooming. Mr. Horton!” followed by laughter by several peers.

I knew then I had to do something.

It had been a concern of mine for some time that the kidding and accusatory statements about grooming have gotten out of hand in the facility where I was working. The subject of grooming had become a homophobic joke and was taking the seriousness away from a serious subject. I ended up taking a shorter version of this memo and going to every unit and group home staff meeting in the facility trying to fix some misconceptions of what grooming is and what it is not...

The purpose of grooming is to make a ***victim***. Grooming is done to choose a ***victim***, to see if the person may cooperate with sexual abuse because of the imbalance of power and ***coercion***.

Grooming is done to make a potential victim feel comfortable enough to be close to an offender, to be alone with an offender, and after the ABUSE, to keep the behavior a secret.

Let's look at it this way: Two 14-year-old males named Mike and Jim. Mike is a JSO. Jim is not. Jim goes to a park, and because of poor social skills or maybe he just moved into town, he is playing with kids at the park. He pushes them on the swing, he catches them on the slide, and he plays tag with them. Sexual activity is the farthest thing from his mind. Mike is a JSO. He goes to a park to find potential victims. He pushes them on the swing, catches them on the slide, and plays tag with them. In a crafty way, he is finding out whom he can molest. He is getting those kids to be comfortable with him, so someday, maybe not today, he will molest one of them. Mike is grooming, Jim is not. The problem here is, if you had a video of both Mike and Jim, their behavior would look the same. One is grooming, one is not. What is the difference? Motivation and intent. It is Mike's motivation and intent that makes his behavior grooming.

So how do we know if a client on our unit is grooming or not? We cannot see a client's motivation. You look for patterns and you look for power differences (called power differentials). Is the client in question only trying to "play" with client's younger or less powerful? Does he/she seem to have targeted a certain peer? Always sitting next to him/her? You also ask yourself the question: If they engaged in sexual activity, would there be a *victim*?

Grooming is like flirting. But grooming and flirting are not the same. If a boy at the local High School gives a girl a stuffed animal because he likes her and has a crush on her, ***he is not grooming her***—because there is no intent of abuse. He is not intending to abuse her. A male client on a unit gives a stuffed animal to a girl on a girls unit because he has a crush on her. They are the same basic age, and they are basically the same socially. Is he grooming her? ***No***—This is normal adolescent behavior. Is it inappropriate because they live in a residential setting? ***Maybe***. Is that sad and unfortunate? ***Yes***. When are our clients going to learn the difference between flirting and grooming?

Here's another example: Two same-age, same-sex, same-socially skilled peers on a unit or group home seem to be flirting with each other. You can tell something is or will soon be going on. Are they grooming each other? ***No***. There is not a power differential and, if they engaged in sexual

activity, there would not be a *victim*. Is it inappropriate because they live in a residential setting? *Yes*. Should we step up the supervision of these two clients? *Yes*. Maybe even separate them? *Yes*. Accuse them of grooming? *No*.

From reading posts on the ATSA List Serve, it is apparent that I am not alone. It seems that across the country, especially in residential treatment centers, clients are accusing each other of grooming way too often. We teach and want our clients to have positive interaction/social skills. If you ask most people to make a list of social skills, and then you ask them to make a list of commonly known "grooming" behaviors. The lists would almost be the same. Unless the behavior is very sexually explicit, it is difficult to accurately label that behavior as grooming. To keep order, most residential centers have rules about horseplay, excessive touching, and lending and borrowing. If a client breaks a rule that may have sexual overtones, deal with it as a rule infraction without implying the motive as grooming. Call the behavior what it is. If two clients are playing "footsies" underneath the table, tell them to stop touching. If you notice a pattern that two kids are sitting next to each other—sometimes a little bit too close—talk to them about that behavior: "Ya know, Jim, I'm noticing that you are often sitting next to..." Then, talk in team and to his Clinician about a possible grooming problem that may need attention.

Changing the term.

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines grooming as...

Function: *verb*; Date: 1809

transitive verb: 1. to clean and maintain the appearance of (as the coat of a horse or dog);
2. to make neat or attractive <an impeccably *groomed* woman>; 3. to get into readiness for a specific objective: prepare <was being *groomed* as a presidential candidate>

intransitive verb: to groom oneself

One can see the direct correlation with offender issues in definition #3. Preparing the victim for a specific objective—abuse. But there are many problems with the term.

Taking the term *grooming* away from the sex offender term glossary, grooming is a good thing! A person who has good hygiene is said to have good grooming skills. He/she is said to be well *groomed*. Driving down the street you may see a store front sign—*Grooming* Supplies. Imagine how hard it is for lower IQ offenders to manage this confusion.

One time after attending a workshop on offender treatment, a well-meaning unit supervisor came back to her unit of girls (which included only one JSO out of eight girls) and made the rule that the girls could no longer comb or braid each other's hair for fear that they may be ***grooming!*** The irony here is comical. They ***are*** grooming—in an animal kingdom sort of way. In the interest of avoiding any possible “offender grooming”, this supervisor took away a positive, socially-appropriate, calming, relational activity.

Many offender treatment programs have taken the bold step of getting rid of the term ***grooming*** altogether. The most common replacement term seems to be “Set Up For Abuse.” Or simply, “The set up” (Thank you ATSA List Serve, Phil Rich, and Robert Longo). Let's say you are overhearing an action-adventure drama and you hear one actor yell to a partner “It's a set up!” followed by gunfire. What happened here? You don't even need to be following the show to know what just happened. Someone was tricked. Someone was conned. Someone was led to believe he was safe when actually he was not. Then, when he least expected it, the trap was sprung and the real intentions were realized. Unfortunately, for many victims, they don't even know how they were set up until years later. “Set Up For Abuse” seems to be a good replacement term for “grooming.”

The dog groomer

One time a staff member brought in her beautiful Golden Retriever to a unit of developmentally-delayed sex offenders. (Don't worry, this was closely supervised!) The staff member thought the young men would enjoy seeing the dog and petting it. One of the clients mentioned that the dog smelled nice. The dog owner stated that she just picked up the dog from the groomer. She discussed the cost with another staff member. The clients were very confused and asked, “You pay money for somebody to groom your dog!? How? Why?” It took weeks and the Jaws of Life to pry this visual out of their heads.

Hopefully, with proper training and, for some, changing the term altogether, our staff and our clients will be more clear about this serious issue.