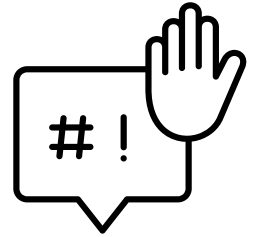


## GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

# ONLINE GROOMING



### What is online grooming speech?

Online grooming speech is carefully selected messages or communications by which an adult attempts to build trust with a child or teenager with an ulterior motive – most often for the purpose of sexual exploitation, manipulation or blackmail.

Such speech often starts out friendly, with compliments, interest in the child’s life or gifts, and then moves on to more intimate topics, demands for secrecy and sometimes sending photos.

### Why is online grooming dangerous?

Online grooming is dangerous because:

- It manipulates children’s trust, presenting itself as a friend, partner or “the only person who understands them”.
- It develops silently and gradually, making it difficult to recognize, even for those close to the child.
- It can lead to emotional, psychological and sexual abuse.
- Victims often feel guilty or afraid to report, which further complicates intervention.

### How is friendly chat different from online grooming?

Not every online chat with a stranger is dangerous. It is completely natural for young people to communicate with new people through social networks, games and apps. There is a space to share interests, hobbies and experiences without feeling threatened.

### But the difference lies in the intention, content and development of the communication.

When the conversation is honest, open and takes place within the framework of respect and equality, we are talking about healthy online interaction. But when an adult seeks to build a secret, intense connection with a child or teenager – with compliments, questions about privacy or encouraging intimate content – that is online grooming.

Online groomers often appear friendly, but their goal is to gain control through trust, and then abuse it. The conversation becomes problematic when it includes:

- demanding secrecy from parents,
- sending personal photos,
- conversations of a sexual or emotional nature.

### Is online grooming a form of bullying?

Online grooming is a covert but serious form of bullying. While it does not begin with overt aggression, it involves manipulation, exploitation of trust, emotional pressure, and often threats or blackmail.

In many cases, the groomer builds a relationship with the target (the child), uses it for emotional influence, and then pressures them to exchange intimate photos, conversations, or meetings.

While it may appear to be an “online friendship,” grooming violates the boundaries of safe and healthy communication and leaves victims with profound consequences—from guilt and shame to trauma and fear.

**Online grooming is not just wrong behavior—it is a form of abuse that must be recognized, prevented, and reported.**

# More about online grooming...

## Legal framework and challenges related to online grooming in North Macedonia

### Legal regulation

In North Macedonia, online grooming as a form of sexually oriented communication with minors is not explicitly named in the laws, but is covered through several provisions in the Criminal Code, especially in the sections relating to:

- endangering the safety of children,
- exploiting children for pornography,
- offensive communication with minors through electronic means.

The Law on Child Protection, as well as the Law on Electronic Communications, additionally regulate the obligations for the protection of minors in a digital context, but there remains room for improving the normative framework in order to more clearly define online grooming as a special form of abuse.

**Online platforms and the risk of grooming.** Groomers most often operate on platforms that offer private or anonymous communication channels – such as social networks, video games, forums and correspondence applications. These digital spaces, while offering social connectivity, often do not provide sufficient protection from contact with adults who have abusive intent.

### The role of platforms and the right to protection

Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, online platforms have an obligation to prevent abuse of their services, especially when it comes to protecting minors. However, oversight by state institutions is limited, and reporting and rapid response mechanisms are often underdeveloped or unknown to children and parents.

### Initiatives to protect children from online grooming

In recent years, organizations such as UNICEF, MKSafeNet, and the Center for Internet Safety have conducted educational campaigns and trainings to raise awareness of online risks, including grooming. However, more systematic education is needed, especially through schools and the media, as well as the introduction of obligations for platforms that offer access to minor users.

### Few things parents and educators can do to combat online grooming:

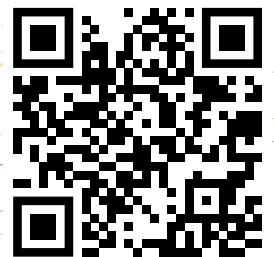
#### Promote mindful and safe online communication.

Encourage children and teens to be mindful of who they talk to online and what information they share. Encourage them to set their profiles to private, to only accept known contacts, and to talk to you if someone asks them to “keep it a secret” or asks them too personal questions.

#### Communicate regularly and openly.

Create an environment where children know they can talk about anything that’s bothering them, without fear of punishment. Ask questions like “Who’s been texting you the most lately?” or “Have you ever felt uncomfortable in an online conversation?” – not to control, but to support.

**Protecting against online grooming  
doesn't start with technology,  
but with conversation,  
trust, and presence.**



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