



**CHRISTIAN REFORMED
CHURCHES OF AUSTRALIA**

GUIDELINES ON THE PREVENTION OF SEXUAL GROOMING IN THE CHURCH



Revised and adopted CRC Synod 2021

Introduction

The Victorian government in April 2014 introduced the offence of 'Grooming' for sexual conduct with a child under the age of 16 years. This offence targets predatory conduct designed to facilitate later sexual activity with a child. Other State Governments have since introduced similar laws. Additionally, under the Commonwealth Criminal Code, it is now an offence for an adult to use a carriage service (online activity) to procure sexual activity with a person who they believe to be under 16 (Section 464.26). Importantly, this offence does not require any sexual activity to actually occur, nor does it require the person communicated with to actually be under the age of 16. Other related offences include using a carriage service in a menacing, harassing or offensive way (Section 474.17) and using a carriage service to transmit indecent communication to a person under 16 years of age (Section 474.27A). There is also a specific offence consisting of 'grooming' a child under 16 online, which is punishable by a maximum of 12 years imprisonment (Section 474.27). Under this provision, a person can be charged even without making any attempt to set up a meeting with the child, provided the intention to prepare the child for a future sexual encounter can be proven.

The Christian Reformed Churches of Australia are adamant that all its congregations around Australia should be 'safe places' for our children. To assist in that, these guidelines are provided for the churches to create awareness and help prevent the sexual grooming of the children in our care¹.

What is sexual grooming?

This is the process of preparing a person- usually a child or other vulnerable person- for sexual assault. It includes establishing a 'special friendship' with the child or vulnerable adult. Sexual grooming can include the conditioning of parents, other adults and church leaders to consider the relationship with the child to be 'normal'. Conditioning church leaders and parents is common as this builds a level of trust enabling an easier transition to grooming children.

Signs of sexual grooming

Indicators of this behaviour include an adult, or sometimes, an older adolescent/youth doing things such as:

- Giving extra praise and attention to a child
- Making a child feel special through gifts and treats
- Sending text, voice, email or online messages to a child on a regular basis
- Asking a child for personal information
- Spending time alone with a child
- Talking about sex and sexuality with a child
- Sharing secrets with a child.

Impacts of sexual grooming

- People may trust the person who is grooming
- The child might like the person who is sexually grooming them, or like certain aspects of the interaction
- Over time, the child can become isolated from peers and siblings and become dependent upon the sexual groomer

Once sexual assault has occurred, the child may feel confused, ashamed and partly to blame. They might be afraid to speak out due to a fear of not being believed or due to the range of possible consequences upon themselves or the abuser. Some children, due to their developmental stage,

¹ This material has been adopted from a Uniting Church document which has been used with permission from 'Safe Place Services' of the Adventist Church. To those denominations we express our thanks.

might not understand the nature of the abuse or have the language to describe it. It is not uncommon for a range of adverse impacts to take days, months or even years to emerge as the child grows and develops.

What can I do if I suspect sexual grooming?

While most people have normal interactions with children, parents, church members and church leaders should be aware of sexual grooming.

If an adult feels a sense of unease or concern about a person's interaction with a child, they should discuss this with a qualified person. This could be the Minister or the Child Safe Coordinator. If a child reports a concern about a person's interference with them, or with another child, it is important that adults listen and take the concerns seriously.

A healthy response in a local church

The local church should have the following safeguards in place:

- Implementation of Child Safe procedures
- A requirement that disclosures and suspicions of child abuse are reported to the church, government and community-based services
- A screening process for all children's workers consistent with the Child Safe procedures and Working With Children Check

Why should the church be aware?

- Sexual assault of children occurs across all areas of society including churches and other faith communities
- Within church (and other community organisations) settings, there is an abundance of opportunity for adults to form special relations with children. These have the potential to become exploitive
- Although children, parents and the church should be aware of 'stranger danger', most people who sexually abuse children are known to the victim through the family, friends, school, sports groups, church and other community-based activities
- There is no clear 'profile' of a likely sex offender. They could be a friend, someone who is married with children or grandchildren, or a person who is well liked and educated. They could be male or female
- Sexual grooming often begins with what appears to be a legitimate, condoned relationship with a child. Initially, conduct might appear to be innocent- even commendable- but it progresses over time and escalates

Want more information?

- Refer to the CRCA website: click [here](#)
- Contact [Safe Church Unit](#)