

GROOMING – VR and Gaming

Grooming can happen online or face-to-face. It is when somebody builds an emotional connection with a child and gains their trust for the purpose of sexual abuse, exploitation or trafficking.

Increasingly, groomers are using VR and gaming platforms to target children.

Online gaming and virtual reality (VR) environments provide groomers with unique opportunities to connect with children. These platforms allow groomers to engage in real-time communication, often under the guise of shared interests in games or virtual worlds. Groomers use general information about the child, such as the school they attend or their interests, to establish a connection.

In VR and gaming environments, groomers can interact with children without the typical barriers present in physical spaces. They exploit the immersive nature of these platforms to create a sense of closeness and trust. Groomers can pretend to be peers, offering support, understanding, and companionship, which can be particularly appealing to children seeking friendship and belonging.

Groomers can spend a lot of time gaining a child's trust. They may try to gain the trust of the whole family so they're allowed to be alone with the child. They may do this by:

- Pretending to be somebody they're not. For example, they might say that they're the same age or act as a fellow gamer or VR enthusiast.
- Offering advice and understanding. For example, if the child is going through a hard time.
- Buying virtual gifts and giving the child attention, as well as arranging in-game meetups or virtual outings.
- Using their professional position or reputation within the gaming or VR community.

Once they have gained this trust, they will then begin to exploit it and isolate the child from family and friends, so that the child is dependent on them. Increasingly, groomers are using other children to groom their friends by exploiting indecent images and threatening them and their family/friends with serious violence.

Grooming can happen over any period of time, including a matter of minutes

Signs of grooming to look out for include:

- the child being secretive,
- having unexplained new virtual possessions or connections,
- changes in behaviour or academic performance,
- being absent from education.

What can happen when Children are Groomed for Sexual Abuse

TAKEN DIRECTLY FROM THE INTERNET WATCH FOUNDATION REPORT:

<https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/why-we-exist/our-research/category-a-child-sexual-abuse-material-of-a-self-generated-nature-an-iwf-snapshot-study/>

Screenshots taken from the report:

Over the course of **5** days, we found

896

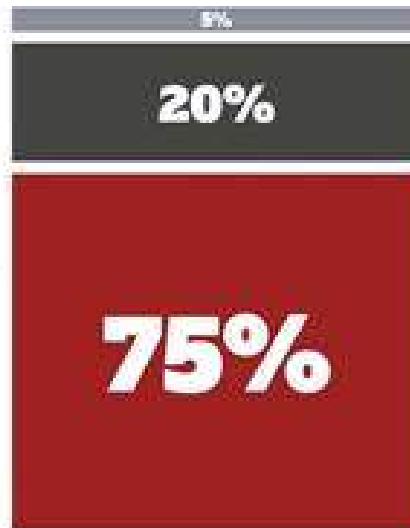
**Coerced
Child
Sexual
Abuse
Images**

involving **penetrative** sexual activity and images involving sexual activity with an **animal or sadism**.



- This averages as 179 Category A images a day.
- This equates to 25 Category A images every hour (over an analyst's seven-hour working day).
- 668 of these images contained children aged 11 to 13 years old (75%)
- 184 of these images contained 7 to 10 year olds (20%)
- 44 of these images contained 14 to 15 year olds (5%)

Age groups
found
containing
Category A*
content



14-15 year olds

7-10 year olds

**11-13
year olds**

* We categorise child sexual abuse material A, B or C. Category A being the worst kind of abuse.

Category A images involve one or more of the following aspects: penetrative sexual activity; images involving sexual activity with an animal or sadism.

- 889 images/videos contained girls (99%)
- 6 images/videos contained both boys and girls
- 1 image/video contained boys

Discussion Points

Understanding the Virtual Environment

Discuss the unique features of VR and gaming platforms that make them appealing to children and attractive to groomers.

How do these platforms facilitate interaction and communication in ways that can bypass traditional safeguards?

Consider the role of anonymity, immersive experiences, and the sense of community that can make children more vulnerable.

Identifying and Responding to Signs of Grooming

Review the specific signs of grooming that may be unique to VR and gaming contexts, such as unexplained virtual possessions, secretive online behaviour, and changes in social or academic performance.

Discuss strategies for identifying these signs and appropriate responses.

How can staff and parents be better equipped to recognise and address these warning signals?

Promoting Safe Online Behaviour and Digital Literacy

Explore ways to educate children and parents about safe online practices and digital literacy.

What proactive steps can be taken to ensure children understand the risks associated with VR and gaming platforms?

Discuss the importance of open communication, setting boundaries, and monitoring online activities to protect children from potential grooming.

What signs should you look out for to spot children in school who may be being groomed?

What should you do and NOT do if you have a concern about a child being groomed?

What advice could you give parents and children about how to keep personal information safe whilst online e.g. when using webcams?