Sometimes the very reason kids and teens blog and spend time on social-networking sites is to “meet new friends.” So it’s not always easy for them to tell when “new friends” have bad intentions, and research has shown that as much as 14% of kids receive unwanted sexual solicitations online.

“Grooming” is the way sexual predators get from bad intentions to sexual exploitation. Basically, grooming is manipulation. It’s the process pedophiles use to get young people they target online to meet with them offline, the simple goal being sex.

Sometimes it involves flattery, sometimes sympathy, other times offers of gifts, money, or modeling jobs. It can also involve all of the above over extended periods of time. That’s why it’s called “grooming.” Experts say the short-term goal of these manipulators is for the victim to feel loved or just comfortable enough to want to meet them in person, and these people know that sometimes takes time. That’s ok, they’d say, because groomers tend to have a lot of patience, and they also tend to “work” a number of targets at once, telling all of them that they are “the only one for me.” You can imagine how well that can work with kids seeking sympathy, support, or validation online.

That’s about as general as we can get, because grooming is carefully individualized. Groomers design what they say as they go along, tailoring their flattery or offers as they learn about the victim.

If you believe your child or a child you know may be a victim of grooming, please contact the organizations below:

- Australia: NetAlert - www.netalert.gov.au
- Canada: Cybertip.ca - www.cybertip.ca
- UK: Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre - www.ceop.gov.uk

For additional countries or emergency situations, please contact your local authorities.

Parents and caregivers should talk to their kids about these tactics, and kids should know to inform their parents or caregivers if they ever encounter them. Being aware of the signs of online grooming - and the fact that groomers are self-taught experts in 1) getting kids to reveal their needs and desires and 2) tailoring messages to those interests - can go a long way toward protecting kids from sexual exploitation online. It’s also a great exercise in critical thinking, the best safeguard and “filter” a young Internet user can have.