

Addressing the Sexual Exploitation of Youth

Stage One: Targeting the Youth

Exploiters target specific youth, often based on their observable vulnerabilities. They will look to identify needs that are not fulfilled in the youth's life. Youth with lower self-esteem, high emotional needs, lower self-confidence, and low adult oversight are the most vulnerable.

Stage Two: Gaining Trust and Legitimacy

Exploiters seek legitimate reasons to be involved in a youth's life. They may be a coach, partner, teacher, volunteer, guardian, etc. Exploiters are almost always known to the youth and their circle of adults. They will find ways to "be helpful." Physical and emotional isolation are foundational in exploiting youth.

Stage Three: Fulfilling the need

Once the exploiter is legitimized in the life of the youth, they will find ways to use their position to fulfill needs in a youth's life. At this stage they may already be fulfilling a need. This could be attention, support, and affection. At this stage the exploiter may be idolized. The more the exploiter has time alone with the youth, the more vulnerable the youth is to exploitation. Special interest in a youth, from an adult, may be concerning.

Stage Four: Isolating the Youth

Once the exploiter is legitimized in the life of the youth, they will find ways to use their position to fulfill needs in a youth's life. At this stage they may already be fulfilling a need. This could be attention, support, and affection. At this stage the exploiter may be important in the youth's life, even idolized. The more the exploiter has time alone with the youth, the more vulnerable the youth is to exploitation. Special interest in a youth, from an adult, may be concerning.

Stage Five: Sexualizing the Relationship

At this stage the exploiter has established emotional dependence and trust. The exploiter will begin to gradually sexualize the relationship. Desensitizing the youth is fundamental to their exploitation; the exploiter creates a new normal. Youth are naturally curious about their bodies, sex, and sexuality. The exploiter uses this to shift the youth's understanding of self to one that is inherently sexualized. The youth has learned to relate to the exploiter in a sexual way. This normalizes sexual activity with other adults, thus increasing the youth's vulnerability for further exploitation.

Stage Six: Maintaining Control

Once sexual abuse/exploitation is happening the exploiter will use shame, secrecy, and blame to maintain the youth's silence and compliance. Sexual activity may cause the youth to withdraw. The youth is entangled in the relationship at this point, and may have complex feelings about continuing or ending the relationship with the exploiter. The exploiter may have threatened the youth's safety or family. Careful steps must be taken to ensure the youth is not further victimized by disclosing their experience.