

PARENTS WITH PREPAREDNESS

The Grooming You're Not Watching For

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My daughter Grace was seven years old the first time I noticed it. She was talking to Alexa the way she talked to her best friend, asking it questions, telling it about her day, waiting for it to respond with warmth and patience every single time. And I remember standing in the kitchen watching that exchange and feeling something click into place that had nothing to do with technology and everything to do with my job.

I have spent almost a decade building systems to stop child trafficking in this country. I have read thousands of survivor case files. I have sat across from parents who did everything right and still watched a predator walk into their child's life through a phone screen. And what I saw in that kitchen was the same pattern I had read about a thousand times, just wearing a friendlier face. Endless patience. Constant availability. A presence that never got frustrated, never judged, never said no. That is not a description of a smart speaker. That is a description of grooming.

I am not telling you this to scare you before your kids go back to school. I am telling you this because preparedness beats fear every time, and most parents have never been told what grooming actually looks like. They picture a stranger in a van. The real picture is much quieter, much slower, and much closer to home than that.

Grooming is a process, not a moment

Traffickers and predators do not announce themselves. They build. They find a child who wants to be noticed, who is lonely or bored or just going through the normal growing pains of adolescence, and they meet that need before they ever ask for anything in return. They give attention. They give gifts. They give a feeling of being chosen. Only after trust is fully built do they begin asking for something, and by then the child has already been taught that this relationship is safe.

That is why the questions I get most from parents, around whether their kid is on the “right app” or if they have the right privacy settings, are honestly the wrong **first** questions. Those questions are important, but the right first question is simpler. Who is giving my child undivided attention right now, and why?

What this looks like in real life

A softball coach who starts driving one player home after practice more than the others. An online friend from a game who always seems to be free to talk at eleven at night. A family friend who remembers your daughter's birthday better than you do. None of these things are automatically dangerous. Attention from a caring adult is not the enemy. But a pattern of increasing, exclusive, unsupervised attention toward one child is worth your notice every time.

The same is true online. A teenager does not usually get lured by a stranger who asks for something inappropriate in the first message. They get lured by someone who spends weeks being the most interesting, most understanding person in their life before ever asking for a photo or a meeting. By the time the ask comes, your child may already feel like saying no would mean losing the one person who really gets them.

What actually helps

Talk to your kids before the school year gets busy, not after something has already gone wrong. Tell them plainly that anyone, adult or peer, who asks them to keep a relationship secret from you is asking them to do something unsafe, no matter how nice that person seems. Secrecy is the tell. Predators do not need your child to do anything wrong on day one. They need your child to agree to keep quiet.

Stay curious about who has your child's attention. Not suspicious of every coach or mentor, just curious. Ask who they have been talking to. Ask what that person is like. Ask why that person has time for your kid when so many adults do not.

Make it safe for your child to come to you with something confusing, not just something clearly bad. Most kids do not report grooming because they think what happened was wrong. They stay quiet because they are not sure it was wrong, and they are afraid of getting the other person in trouble or getting themselves in trouble for something they do not fully understand. If your child only hears you react with alarm, they will learn to filter what they tell you. If they know you can hear something uncomfortable without exploding, they will tell you more.

And if you ever suspect something, do not wait until you have proof. At Safe House Project we built Simply Report, a free tool at simplyreport.com and available in the app stores, specifically because families and communities needed a way to report a concern the moment they had one, not after they had gathered enough evidence to be certain. You do not need certainty to ask for help. You need a gut feeling and a place to take it.

The truth I want every parent to hold onto

Grace still talks to Alexa with advanced parental controls in place. I have not thrown out our smart speaker. What changed is not the technology in my house. What changed is how closely I watch for patterns, in every relationship my kids have, human or otherwise. That shift did not come from fear. It came from understanding what grooming actually looks like, so I could recognize it early enough to do something about it.

You do not need a background in law enforcement to protect your kids this way. You need the same thing every parent already has, a willingness to pay attention to who is asking for your child's trust, and why. Start there this school year, and you will already be doing more than most.



Brittany Dunn is Co-Founder of [Safe House Project](#), a national anti-trafficking organization she built to solve trafficking at its root through systems, technology, and public-private partnership. Her leadership on this issue extends beyond Safe House Project: she served on the Virginia Governor's Commission on Human Trafficking Prevention and Survivor Support, shaping state policy on prevention infrastructure, and she has co-authored two field-defining works, "Eradicating Human Trafficking: A Transformative Approach through Collective Impact" and "United: Bridging the Data Divide to Eradicate Human Trafficking," establishing the intellectual framework other leaders now build from.

Her voice on this issue has been sought out nationally, with features in Forbes, The Hill, CBN, and Newsmax.

Before turning to this work full time, Brittany spent ten years in international business development, experience that shaped how she approaches trafficking as a systems problem rather than an awareness campaign. She holds a B.A. from Wellesley College and graduated top of her class with an MBA from Thunderbird School of Global Management. She is a military spouse, mother of two, lifelong learner, world traveler, and protector of the vulnerable.

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