

Trust Your Gut. Take Action. Protect Kids.

Recognizing red flags and responding to behavior that crosses boundaries.

Understanding the Risk

Child sexual abuse is more common than many people realize.

In Texas, 1 in 6 high school students report experiencing it.ⁱ

Many cases go unreported, and some kids don't tell until they are grown up.

This is a crime that thrives in secrecy.

In over 90% of cases, the person who caused harm was someone the child (and often their caregivers) knew and trusted.ⁱⁱ

But there is hope.

You have the power to notice, and to act.

Nearly all survivors of child sexual abuse report that before the abuse, the person who caused the harm started by crossing boundaries and "grooming." Knowing this shows how important it is to recognize and respond to potential early warning signs. When adults recognize early warning signs and respond, they can **help stop abuse before it happens.**

What is Grooming?

Grooming is a process that abusers use to get close enough to a child to harm them, often without others noticing, and can include:

1. Choosing a child who may be more vulnerable or accessible
2. Finding ways to spend time alone with the child
3. Building trust with the child and their parents/caregivers
4. Slowly introducing and testing inappropriate or harmful behavior
5. Using pressure and threats to maintain control

Some grooming behaviors can look similar to what safe, supportive adults do. This can make it harder to recognize. That's why it's important to focus on patterns and boundaries. You don't need proof of someone's intentions to interrupt the behavior. You only need to notice when a boundary is crossed.

It is easier to say: *"That crosses a boundary. We don't do that here."* than to accuse someone of planning to harm a child.





Why Do Boundaries Matter?

Boundaries are rules and norms that help keep children safe. Boundaries create clear expectations about important things like:

- Physical touch
- Privacy
- Types of communication and topics of communication
- Roles and relationships between adults and children

Safe adults respect these boundaries. They do not need to cross them to have a healthy and helpful interaction or connection with a child.

What Do Behaviors That Cross Boundaries (also called Boundary-Violating Behaviors) Look Like?

Most adults recognize boundary violations when they are related to sexual misconduct, but do not recognize other types of boundary crossing as dangerous, risky, or even connected to abuse. Here are some examples to look out for:

Types and Examples of Boundary Crossing Behaviorsⁱⁱⁱ

Sexual misconduct and non-contact abuse:

- Walk in on child in bathroom or locker room
- Take nude pictures of the child
- Ask the child to talk about sexual things
- Show/send the child sexual images or videos

Breaking Rules:

- Give child cigarettes, vapes, alcohol, or drugs
- Allow child to break rules, or break rules with the child
- Meet one-on-one outside of school or extracurricular activities
- Be dishonest with parents/caregivers

Getting close/earning trust with child:

- Tickle child or give piggyback rides
- Give the child gifts or money
- Treat the child as a favorite
- Tell secrets to the child
- Take them for car rides, out for a treat, or to the adult's home

Getting close/earning trust with family:

- Offer to give their child a ride home
- Offer to babysit, fix things, do chores
- Give family a gift, dinner out, or money
- Have a romantic relationship with child's parent/caregiver
- Have drinks or do drugs with child's parents/caregivers

ⁱTexas Department of State Health Services, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), 2021. dshs.texas.gov/center-health-statistics/texas-youth-risk-behavior-surveillance-system

ⁱⁱSnyder, H.N. (2000). Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. [bjs.ojp.gov](https://bjs.ojp.gov/publications/special-reports/sexual-assault-of-young-children)

ⁱⁱⁱAssini-Meytin, L. C., McPhail, I., Sun, Y., Mathews, B., Kaufman, K. L., & Letourneau, E. J. (2025). Child sexual abuse and boundary violating behaviors in youth serving organizations: National prevalence and distribution by organizational type. *Child Maltreatment*, 30(3), 499–511. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595241290765>

Why would an adult cross these boundaries?

It is possible that they didn't fully understand the rules or potential consequences and just need to be taught or reminded.

Or it is possible that they are:

- Testing to see how others respond (Will the child say anything? Will anyone notice?)
- Trying to make the child feel special to gain trust
- Thinking up excuses for being alone with the child

Even when an adult does not have any harmful intentions, boundary crossing can still negatively impact a child because it can make them feel confused or uncomfortable.



Take Action to Recognize and Intervene

Now that you know what grooming and boundary crossing behaviors can look like, what can you do about it? Small actions early can prevent bigger problems later.

5 Ways to Respond to Concerning Behavior



1. Trust your instincts

If something feels uncomfortable, pay attention to it. You don't need proof to pause and think about the behavior you noticed. You don't need proof of intent before pointing out a boundary.



2. Stay close and present

Being nearby can help keep interactions safe. You can stay in the room, join the conversation, or offer to help or observe. You can make a safer situation just by being there.



3. Name the boundary (calmly, kindly, clearly)

If needed, speak up calmly and respectfully. You might say:

"Let's keep conversations with kids age appropriate."

"We try to avoid one-on-one time without other adults around."

"I'll take it from here, thanks!"

You are setting a boundary, not starting a conflict.



4. Check in with the child

Later, talk with the child in a safe, confidential space.

Ask simple, open questions:

"How did that feel to you?"

"Has anything like that happened before?"

Remind them:

"You can always tell me if something makes you uncomfortable."

If the child discloses abuse, you are legally obligated to report it.



5. Share concerns

You don't have to handle it alone.

If something continues or feel serious:

- On the job – Talk with a supervisor. Follow existing policies. Advocate for best practice policies if they do not exist.
- At your child's school – Talk with a school leader.
- At home – Talk with other family members, or a family counselor.

If you suspect abuse is happening, make a report.

REPORT suspected abuse.

Report suspected child abuse to:

Texas Abuse Hotline
1-800-252-5400
www.txabusehotline.org

The police
911
Or local law enforcement

**If you believe a child is in
immediate danger, call 911.**

In Texas, all adults are required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect. This means everyone (not just professionals) has a responsibility to act when they believe a child may be experiencing abuse or neglect.

- A child tells you something harmful has happened.
- You observe signs of abuse or neglect.
- You suspect harm based on behavior, injuries, or concerning situations.

Remember:

Noticing interactions between adults and children, trusting your gut, taking action, and speaking up helps protect ALL children, not just one.

- *Most harm is caused by people children know and trust.*
- *Small actions early can prevent bigger problems later.*
- *You don't need to be certain; you just need to care enough to act.*
- *You can make a difference.*
- *By noticing, speaking up, and supporting children, you are creating safer spaces for them to grow and thrive.*