

A Valentine's Day compliment... just a sign of love?

Valentine's Day for most people is a celebration of love, but for some it can be a more sinister time.

In the UK, young people aged between 16 and 24 year olds are more likely to experience domestic abuse than any other age group^{1,2}. They can first encounter their abusers in a variety of contexts, including through family.

Social media can also play a significant role - many young people are stalked and harassed online. This can be through abusive messages and images, received on a regular or even frequent basis. Their personal contact details may be given out to strangers, putting them at risk of grooming. It's not only strangers that pose a risk - many young people are groomed by those they know (usually 'boyfriends'). This can potentially lead to child sexual exploitation, gang affiliation and criminal exploitation. The process is gradual. Something like Valentine's Day can be used to initiate an abusive relationship or be part of the process of coercion and control.

The four stages of grooming

Targeting: The perpetrator befriends the victim and their friends, gaining trust and power.

Friendship forming: The perpetrator wants to spend time with the victim and pays them compliments.

'Caring': The start of a sexual relationship, the perpetrator may start showing pornography to the victim. They tell them they can protect them and that nobody else understands them like they do. They say and do things to both build up and put down the victim. What seems 'romantic' initially (for example, being overly attentive) quickly becomes control.

Abusive: When the victim and perpetrator become partners and misuse alcohol and drugs. Perpetrators trick and abuse their victim with violence and sexual assaults and isolate them from friends and loved ones.

Signs to look out for:

- Does the young person have two phones?
- Do they have gifts or money that cannot be accounted for?
- Have they stopped seeing their friends?
- Has there been a change in their appearance or character?
- Have there been school/college attendance issues or have they gone missing from home?

Perpetrators use power, control and isolation to make people feel powerless and worthless. They make their victims feel guilty and blame them for the abuse suffered. As a result, victims often feel they need to stay in the relationship as the abuse is their fault and they will not be believed by others.

What you should do:

- Believe the victim's account.
- Tell them they have a right to not be abused and a right to be safe.
- Keep safety planning documents with a professional if it is not safe for the victim to take home.
- If you are concerned [report it to social services](#). If someone is at immediate risk of harm, call the police on 999.
- Signpost them to agencies that can support them, such as the One Stop Shop.

Where possible, work with victims should take a multi-agency approach, so that information is shared in order to prevent and reduce re-victimisation and repeated incidents.

For more information, including details of organisations working with victims and perpetrators see <http://notaloneinsutton.org.uk/>

1. Crime Survey for England and Wales: year ending March 2017:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusefindingsfromthecrimesurveyforenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2017#which-groups-of-people-are-most-likely-to-be-victims-of-domestic-abuse>
2. Children under 16 are also at risk, but the law does not currently recognise abuse of those under 16 years old as 'domestic abuse'.

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