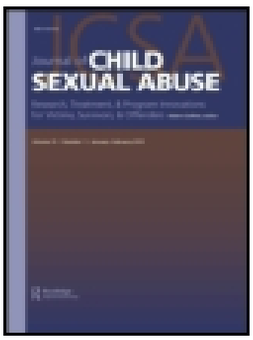

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Validation of the Sexual Grooming Model of Child Sexual Abusers

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ABSTRACT

Sexual grooming has been deemed an integral part of the child sexual abuse process. However, there has yet to be a universally accepted model for this process and, as a consequence, there is no clear understanding of which behaviors constitute sexual grooming. One proposed model of in-person sexual grooming outlined five stages of the process: 1) victim selection, 2) gaining access and isolating a child, 3) trust development, 4) desensitization to sexual content and physical contact, and 5) maintenance following the abuse. The present study sought to validate this Sexual Grooming Model (SGM) and identify behaviors that may be employed during each stage of the process. First, a thorough review of the literature was conducted to generate a comprehensive list of sexual grooming behaviors (n = 77). Second, 18 experts in the field completed a survey which asked them to rate the extent to which each of the five stages and potential grooming behaviors were relevant to the sexual grooming process. Results provided support for the SGM and produced 42 behaviors that were considered to be grooming tactics within these stages. From this, the first validated, comprehensive model of in-person sexual grooming is proposed. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications and future directions in the field.

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Sexual grooming; child sexual abuser; child sexual abuse; sex offenses

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a serious public health issue with an estimated lifetime prevalence ranging between 12–27% for girls and 4–5% for boys in the United States and Canada (Briere & Eliott, 2003; Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2017; Finkelhor et al., 2015; Letourneau et al., 2018). In the United States, individuals incarcerated for sexual offenses comprise 12% of state inmate populations (Department of Justice, 2014). Notably, however, prevalence rates published by criminal justice agencies often underestimate the severity of this problem due to low rates of victim disclosure and formal reporting of cases (Leclerc & Wortley, 2015; Sethi et al., 2013). While there are numerous reasons CSA may go undetected or unreported, it has been suggested that a perpetrators' manipulation of the victims before and after the

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abuse, known as "sexual grooming," may decrease the likelihood of its detection and disclosure (Van Dam, 2001).

It is estimated that almost half of the cases of CSA involve some element of sexual grooming (Canter et al., 1998). While there has yet to be a universally agreed upon definition in the literature, the term sexual grooming typically refers to the process by which an offender skillfully manipulates a potential victim into situations in which sexual abuse can be more readily committed, while simultaneously preventing disclosure (Van Dam, 2001; Wyre, 2000). Importantly, it is unclear what specific behaviors constitute sexual grooming, given that the behaviors may not be unlike normal adult/child interactions (Craven et al., 2006), and there has yet to be a validated model of the sexual grooming process. The lack of a comprehensive understanding of sexual grooming produces confusion amongst clinicians, law enforcement, attorneys, researchers, and community members alike. As such, the present study sought to establish content validity of a sexual grooming model, including both the stages and specific behaviors that are involved in the process.

Sexual grooming

Sexual grooming has become synonymous with CSA in the past several decades (McAlinden, 2013). The goals of grooming are to gain initial cooperation of the victim, decrease the likelihood of discovery, and increase the likelihood of future sexual contact (Lanning & Dietz, 2014). These pre-offense behaviors are thought to be a deliberate process that is highly complex and nuanced, with behaviors often mirroring normal adult/child interactions (Knoll, 2010; McAlinden, 2013). Therefore, it is difficult to establish representative prevalence rates of the number of child sexual abusers who employ sexual grooming tactics in the offense process. Of the few studies that have tackled this question, it is estimated between 30 to 45% of child sexual abusers groom their victims (Canter et al., 1998; Groth & Birnbaum, 1978).

Grooming can encompass varying behaviors which may differ based on the characteristics of the offender (e.g., age of the offender) and the victim (e.g., age or gender of the victim), as well as contextual factors (e.g., "effectiveness" of the grooming tactics, the offender's relationship to the victim, cultural factors; Kaufman et al., 2006). Notably, sexual grooming can occur both in-person or online. Online and off-line grooming processes may differ in important ways, as there are some behaviors that are not possible online (e.g., providing the victim with alcohol; Elliott, 2017) and thus, the present study will focus solely on in-person grooming behaviors.

It should also be noted that individuals who sexually abuse children may groom themselves (personal grooming) and other people (familial and institutional/community grooming), in addition to the child. Personal grooming involves the process whereby the offender grooms themselves in order to

Table 1. Sexual grooming model.

Victim Selection (n = 9)	I-CVI
Compliant/trusting of adults	0.78*
Lacks confidence/low self-esteem	0.89*
Lonely/isolated	0.78*
Troubled	0.89*
Needy	0.89*
Unwanted/unloved	0.89*
Not close to parents/parents are not resources for them	0.78*
Single mothers/need of "father figure"	0.89*
Lack of supervision	0.94*
Gaining Access and Isolation (n = 5)	
Involvement in youth-serving organizations	0.83*
Manipulate family to gain access to child	1.00*
Activities alone with children/excludes adults	0.89*
Overnight stays/outings	0.94*
Separate child from peers and family	0.89*
Trust Development (n = 10)	
Charming/nice/likable	0.83*
Insider status/good reputation/"pillar of the community"	0.78*
Affectionate/loving	1.00*
Giving the child attention	1.00*
Favoritism/"special relationship"	0.89*
Compliments	0.89*
Spending time with child/communicating often	0.94*
Engage in childlike activities (e.g., stories, games, sports, music)	0.89*
Rewards/privileges (e.g., gifts, toys, treats, money, trips)	0.94*
Provided drugs and/or alcohol	0.89*
Desensitization to Sexual Content and Physical Contact (n = 10)	
Ask questions about child's sexual experience/relationships	0.89*
Talk about sexual things they themselves had done	0.94*
Inappropriate sexual language/dirty jokes	0.83*
Teach child sexual education	0.89*
Use of accidental touching/distraction while touching	0.89*
Watch the child undressing	0.78*
Exposing naked body	0.78*
Show child pornography magazines/videos	0.83*
Seemingly innocent/non-sexual contact	0.94*
Desensitize to touch/increasing sexual touching	1.00*
Post-Abuse Maintenance Behaviors (n = 8)	
Told not to tell anyone what happened	0.89*
Encouraging secrets	0.89*
I love you/you're special	1.00*
Rewards/bribes/avoid punishment	0.89*
Persuaded the child it was acceptable/normal behavior	0.89*
Misstated moral standards regarding touch	0.83*
Victim made to feel responsible	0.78*
Threats of abandonment/rejection/family breaking up	0.83*
Items Not Included in the Five-Stage Model (n = 35)	

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Victim Selection (n = 9)	I-CVI
Selects a child who has already been victimized	0.72
Selects a child who is depressed/unhappy	0.72
Talks to the child on their level	0.72
Say things about the child's body/dress	0.72
Goes into child's bedroom while the child is in there	0.72
Goes into the bathroom while child is in there	0.72
After the abuse, threatens victim	0.72
Gains access after being approached by a child/had a child recruit other children	0.67
Treats the child like an adult	0.67
Engages in verbal threats/frighten/intimidate/coercion of the child	0.67
Violates the child's privacy	0.67
Has the child observe sexual behavior	0.67
Selects a child who is cognitively impaired/special needs/learning disability	0.61
Selects a child who has drug or alcohol abusing parents	0.61
Looks at/inspects child's body for development	0.61
Selects a child who has economic problems/parents working a lot	0.56
Gives the child rides home	0.56
Babysits the child	0.56
Gains access to children through public places (e.g., malls, arcades)	0.56
Takes photos/videos of the child	0.56
Selects a child who is young or small/slim	0.50
Selects a child who parents are divorced/marital problems	0.50
Selects a child who has a mother who was sexually abused	0.50
Uses size/authority/strength against the child	0.50
Selects a child who is attractive/pretty (e.g., hair type, skin color)	0.44
Shows helpfulness to others	0.44
Looks at child in a funny/sexual way	0.28
After the abuse, the offender assumes the child's silence	0.28
Selects a child based on his/her clothing	0.22
Has the child view violence against others	0.22
After the abuse, the offender punishes the child	0.22
Punishes the child or withholds privileges	0.17
Use of physical force/uses weapons against the child (e.g., push, shove, spank)	0.17
Presents as mean/rude to the child	0.11
After the abuse, the offender moves on to the next victim	0.11

* indicates significant results

justify, minimize, or deny their behaviors (Craven et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2006). The purpose of familial grooming is to gain the trust of caregivers in order to increase access to the victim and decrease the likelihood of disclosure. An offender may also engage in community or institutional grooming, such as becoming a respected member of society or seeking careers or volunteer positions that allow access to children (e.g., Boy Scouts, schools, foster care; McAlinden, 2006; Sullivan & Beech, 2002; Van Dam, 2001).

Given the complicated nature of identifying sexual grooming, it has been proposed that recognizing sexual grooming behaviors following the disclosure of the sexual offense is much easier than prospective identification (Craven et al., 2006). Researchers have found there is a hindsight bias associated with sexual grooming of children, in which individuals tend to overestimate the likelihood that they could have predicted these behaviors were taking place

after they learn an individual has committed a sexual offense (Winters & Jeglic, 2016). Importantly, in one study, Winters and Jeglic (2017) found that the general public has trouble identifying potentially predatory sexual grooming behaviors. Given the difficulty in identifying sexually versus non-sexually driven behaviors with children, gaining a better understanding of sexual grooming is integral to improved prevention and treatment efforts.

Legal definition of sexual grooming

It should be noted that the legal definition of sexual grooming is not necessarily synonymous with concept of in-person sexual grooming as outlined in the scientific and theoretical literature. By 2017, 63 countries had enacted legislation related to grooming that focuses solely on the online solicitation of minors (often referred to as online sexual grooming; International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2017). Notably, many of these laws do not account for sexual grooming that can occur in-person. Other countries have developed legislation that could be applied both to online and in-person grooming cases. For example, in the United States, section §2422 of the federal Criminal Code describes a law whereby an individual who "knowingly persuades, induces, entices, or coerces any individual to travel in interstate or foreign commerce, or in any Territory or Possession of the United States, to engage in prostitution, or in any sexual activity for which any person can be charged with a criminal offense, or *attempts* to do so" can be fined or imprisoned (Coercion and Enticement, 18 U.S.C. 2422). While the aforementioned law pertains particularly to cases involving sex trafficking, several states have followed suit and enacted similar laws without the requirement of "interstate or foreign commerce" which can then more generally apply to cases of CSA involving grooming. It is important to have a legal definition of sexual grooming for the purposes of prosecution of these crimes; however, legal definitions typically lack specificity (e.g., what behaviors that would be indicative of grooming). Further, and most importantly, in order to prevent grooming-based CSA, it is vital to go beyond the legal definitions to better understand the interaction between the victim, offender, and context of the offense (e.g., Nash & Williams, 2008). Thus, the grooming behaviors analyzed within this paper will be clearly differentiated from that of the already accepted legal definitions.

Models of sexual grooming

There have been numerous attempts to identify the steps involved in the sexual grooming process and to develop an overarching model of these behaviors (see Appendix A); however, none of these models have been empirically validated. One of the most widely cited models of sexual grooming authored by

McAlinden (2006) indicates, as described above, that offenders groom not only children, but also themselves (i.e., personal grooming) and family and community members who act as gatekeepers to the children. Another widely cited grooming framework by Elliott (2017) – the Self-Regulation Model – draws upon the strengths and limitations of previous models of grooming. The model is comprised of two phases: 1) the potentiality phase includes rapport building, incentivization, disinhibition, and security management; and 2) the disclosure phase which describes how gains made in the first phase enable the perpetrator to desensitize the victim to sexual abuse. Although the self-regulation model of sexual grooming advanced the field, this model is not easily understood or applied, and thus, a more simplified model is greatly needed to enhance communication across fields.

In an effort to address some of the limitations of previous models of grooming behavior, Winters and Jeglic (2017) reviewed the extant grooming literature and developed a model of grooming comprised of behaviors that could be observable to others and measurable, and thus informative in prevention and detection of sexual abuse. This five-stage model, hereafter referred to as the Sexual Grooming Modal (SGM), draws upon the commonalities identified in several of the previously proposed models (see Appendix A), as well as identifying gaps of missing information. For example, some previously proposed models did not address important components of grooming, such as victim selection or post-abuse maintenance (e.g., Brackenridge, 2001; Sheldon & Howitt, 2007). Additionally, other models have limited utility for public prevention initiatives as they are theoretically complex and thus difficult to apply in real-world settings (e.g., Elliott, 2017; Olson et al., 2007). Winters and Jeglic (2017) model of grooming behavior proposes five overarching stages that may be involved in the complex process of sexual grooming, including: 1) selecting a victim; 2) gaining access and isolating the victim; 3) developing trust with the child and others (e.g., caretakers, community members); 4) desensitizing the child to sexual content and physical touch; and 5) maintenance behaviors following the commission of the abuse. Below, each stage is described with support from the theoretical literature.

Victim selection

First, several models of grooming propose that selecting a vulnerable victim is the initial step in the grooming process (e.g., Harms & van Dam, 1992; Lanning, 2010). It has been proposed that a vulnerable child may be identified based on physical characteristics (e.g., child who is perceived as attractive, young, or small; Conte et al., 1989; Elliott et al., 1995), or emotional or psychological needs (e.g., child who is perceived as trusting, lacking self-esteem, isolative, neglected, troubled, or in need of affection; Elliott et al., 1995; Kaufman et al., 2006; Knoll, 2010; Shakeshaft, 2004). Additionally, an

offender may look to the child's family circumstances in the victim selection process (e.g., lack parental supervision, parental discord, parental mental health/substance use issues; Craven et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 2015; Kaufman et al., 2006).

Gaining access and isolation

Second, many of the prior models identify that an offender seeks to gain access to the targeted child and isolate him/her from others. Indeed, Lanning (2010), Craven et al. (2006), Olson et al. (2007), and Leclerc et al. (2009) all proposed models that include a stage whereby an offender gains access to the victim. Gaining access to a potential victim may include becoming involved in youth-serving organizations (e.g., Lanning & Dietz, 2014), frequenting public places with children (e.g., Kaufman et al., 2006), or manipulating the family in order to gain access to the child (e.g., Knoll, 2010; Lanning & Dietz, 2014). Once an offender has gained access to a child, they often work to isolate the child physically and emotionally from their family and peers (e.g., Craven et al., 2006; Lawson, 2003). For example, an offender may seek to organize activities that physically isolate the child all the while excluding adult involvement, such as overnight stays, giving the child a ride home, or babysitting the child (e.g., Kaufman et al., 2006).

Trust development

Third, after selecting and gaining access to a victim, prior models describe a stage in which the offender works toward deceptively developing trust and cooperation with the child (Craven et al., 2006; Leclerc et al., 2009; Olson et al., 2007). While some models incorporate a broad stage that refers to the overarching goal of trust development, others have outlined specific behaviors that may be used to gain the trust. An offender may try to present as likable and charming, eventually earning insider status and a good reputation in the community (e.g., Lanning & Dietz, 2014). The offender may make the child feel loved, use bribes or inducements, exploit his/her vulnerabilities, engage in peer-like activities, and befriend the child (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Harms & van Dam, 1992; Leclerc et al., 2009; Marshall et al., 2015). Additionally, literature has identified that some offenders may provide the child with drugs or alcohol (e.g., Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014), which would be most commonly used with older victims.

Desensitizing the child to sexual content and physical contact

Fourth, there appears to be a stage that involves the introduction of sexual conversation and touch, with the aim of desensitizing the child to these behaviors (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Harms & van Dam, 1992; McAlinden, 2006; Olson et al., 2007). An offender may introduce sexualized topics into

discussions, such as telling inappropriate jokes, providing sexual education, or engaging in sexual conversations (Knoll, 2010; McAlinden, 2006; Olson et al., 2007; Wyre, 2000). The offender may violate the child's privacy (e.g., spying, sneaking views of the child; Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014) or engage accidental touching (Harms & van Dam, 1992; Olson et al., 2007). Moreover, literature commonly refers to a process by which an offender desensitizes the child to touch by gradually increasing physical contact (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Harms & van Dam, 1992; McAlinden, 2006). For example, the individual may begin using tactics such as hugging or tickling, then gradually increasing contact over time to wrestling or massages.

Post-abuse maintenance

Finally, an offender may engage in maintenance behaviors which are used to continue ongoing abuse with the victim and/or prevent disclosure (e.g., Craven et al., 2006; Harms & van Dam, 1992). It has been suggested that this stage involves the offender encouraging the child to maintain secrets and not disclose the abuse (Craven et al., 2006; Harms & van Dam, 1992). An offender may try to persuade the child that the sexually abusive behavior is acceptable (e.g., Jackson et al., 2015), misrepresent standards for appropriate touching (e.g., Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014), or make the child feel responsible for the abuse (e.g., Harms & van Dam, 1992). Affection may also be employed by telling the child they love them or the child is special (Lang & Frenzel, 1988), giving the child bribes or rewards (e.g., Lang & Frenzel, 1988; Lawson, 2003; Salter, 1995; Shakeshaft, 2004), or enforcing or withholding punishment (Lawson, 2003).

While Winters and Jeglic (2017) SGM addresses the limitations of previous models, similar to all the other past models of sexual grooming, this model has not yet to be validated. Given that isolated grooming-like behaviors in and of themselves may not be indicative of sexual abuse, it is necessary to establish a model of the stages of grooming to understand the larger process in order to inform detection and prevention efforts. Thus, the present study aimed to be the first to empirically validate a model of sexual grooming and identify what specific behaviors constitute grooming.

The present study

The present study aimed to establish the content validity of the proposed SGM (Winters & Jeglic, 2017) and identify what behaviors may be indicative of sexual grooming. To this end, experts in the field were asked to identify whether they believed the five stages of the SGM are part of the grooming process and what specific behaviors (identified from a thorough literature review) might fall under each of these proposed stages. Given the lack of

previous empirical research in this area, the study was exploratory in nature and thus, no specific hypotheses were made.

Method

Part 1

Literature review

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify potential grooming tactics that have been identified in previous publications. Online searches for articles were conducted through PsycINFO, Criminal Justice abstracts with Full Text, Web of Science, and Medline Complete. The search terms utilized included: 1) Sex* groom* and 2) Child* groom*. Sources were also found by reviewing the reference lists of sources obtained through these online database searches. Searches were limited to articles in English language and peer-reviewed sources. A total of 1,363 sources resulted from literature search of the four search engines and reference lists. These sources were screened using a review of titles and abstracts, which resulted in the collection of 69 initial sources. Following a full-text review of the sources, 51 articles and books were identified as relevant. These sources all contained information regarding sexual grooming behaviors enacted by in-person child sexual abusers (i.e., online sexual grooming literature was excluded). The 51 articles and books were thoroughly reviewed, and each unique grooming behaviors was recorded in order to produce a comprehensive list of possible grooming behaviors. Through this process, a total of 77 potential grooming behaviors were identified.[1]

Part 2

Participants and procedures

Content validity of the five-stage SGM and 77 grooming behaviors was examined by having a list of "experts" in the field complete an online survey. The list of experts was developed by compiling a list of authors (n = 99) on the articles and books that were published in the area of sexual grooming (described above). Extensive research was conducted through the use of Internet search engines and contact information listed within the literature to identify the e-mail addresses of the authors. A total of 56 e-mail addresses were obtained. Following sending e-mail invitation to participate in the study, 12 e-mail addresses were inactive which resulted in a total of 44 potential participants. Three rounds of e-mails were sent to each e-mail address

[1] It should be noted that the authors also created an a priori model which identified which of five stages each behavior fell under, this was later utilized in making final determinations regarding what stage of the grooming process each relevant (as identified by experts in the field) grooming behavior would likely be utilized.

requesting participation in the expert review which involved participation in a 30-minute survey. If the individual agreed to participate, they were asked to complete the *Expert Review Survey* (see below).

A total of 18 participants completed the survey (12 males; 6 females), which represented a 40.9% response rate. In regard to participant age, four individuals were between the ages of 41–50, six between the ages of 51–60, and eight over the age of 60. The majority of experts obtained a Ph.D. (n = 15), two had a Master's degree, and one was a current Ph.D. student. There was a range of fields in which these degrees were earned: psychology (n = 8), criminal justice (n = 2), and one individual each from the fields of education, sociology, public health, social work, communication, theology, criminology, and psychology/sociology. Experts reported the area, or areas (respondents could select more than one), that *best* described their experience working with child sexual abusers, which included empirical research (n = 16), clinical practice (n = 10), publishing theoretical articles/chapters on the topic (n = 14), and other (n = 3; i.e., employee of state correctional system, consultation on investigations, investigative journalist). The experts reported a mean number of years of experience with empirical research (n = 18), publishing theoretical pieces (n = 17), and clinical experience (n = 10) related to grooming as 24.67 years (range = 2–48), 15.50 years (range = 3–48), and 22.71 years (range = 2–45) years, respectively. All participants (n = 18) had published an empirical research article related to grooming, with 12 individuals reporting between 1–10 publications, two reporting 11–20 publications, three with more than 20 publications, and one participant indicated that they were not certain how many publications they had. For the 17 people who had experience publishing theoretical articles/chapters on sexual grooming, the mean number of publications was 7.00 (range = 1–20). Of the 10 participants who had clinical experience with sex offenders, six had 50 or more clients, two had 15–50 clients, one had 5–15 clients, and one had 0–5 clients.

Expert review survey

First, participants were presented with 4-point Likert scale items inquiring about the relevance (1 = *not relevant*, 2 = *somewhat relevant*, 3 = *relevant*, 4 = *very relevant*) of the five proposed stages of grooming. Second, the participants rated the relevance of each item from the pool of 77 grooming behaviors identified by the literature review using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *not relevant*, 2 = *somewhat relevant*, 3 = *relevant*, 4 = *very relevant*). Participants were also asked for each item to select one or more stages of the grooming process the behavior fell under (i.e., *Victim Selection, Gaining Access, Trust Development, Desensitization*, and *Post-Abuse Maintenance*, other, or none). Lastly, participants completed a series of demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, degree, field of study, clinical, publication, and research experiences).

Results

Analytic strategy

The Content Validity Index (CVI) is a method originally proposed by Lynn (1986), which utilizes feedback from experts in the field to determine what content is relevant to a construct; this is a commonly used method in social science research (Research Methods Knowledge Base, n.d.). In this case, CVI calculations were used to determine what stages and behaviors are relevant to the process of sexual grooming. First, as noted above, the relevance of the five stages and potential grooming behaviors were rated by experts using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *not relevant*, 2 = *somewhat relevant*, 3 = *relevant*, 4 = *very relevant*). Second, these ratings were used to determine which stages/behaviors should be retained (i.e., they were deemed related to the construct of grooming by the experts) and which should be rejected (i.e., they were deemed not related to the construct of grooming by the experts) through the utilization of CVIs, which are calculations that examine the proportion of experts who rated the item as relevant. The CVI for each item (I-CVI) is calculated by dividing the number of experts who believed the item was relevant (either a 3 or 4 on the Likert scale) by the total number of content experts (in this case, $n = 18$). It has been suggested that the I-CVI for an item should be greater or equal to 0.78 in order to be included (Shi et al., 2012).

Stages of sexual grooming

Experts were asked to rate the relevance for each of the five stages of the sexual grooming process as proposed by Winters and Jeglic (2017). Results revealed an I-CVI index of.94 (17/18 experts) for the stages of *Gaining Access* ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .55$), *Trust Development* ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .58$), and *Desensitization* ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .62$). Similarly, an I-CVI index of .89 (16/18 experts) was found for the stages of *Victim Selection* ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .70$) and *Post-Abuse Maintenance* ($M = 3.39$, $SD = .70$). Overall, the I-CVIs for each of the proposed stages exceeded the cutoff score of 0.78, suggesting that all five stages are believed to be relevant to the sexual grooming process.

Sexual grooming behaviors

An examination of the I-CVIs for the 77 potential grooming behaviors revealed that 42 items were considered by the expert panel as relevant to the construct of sexual grooming (I-CVIs ranged between .78–1.0; see Table 1). This represents a retention rate of 54.5% from the original items.

An examination of which stage of the grooming process the experts believed the behavior belonged in was conducted. For each item that was deemed relevant ($n = 42$), the stage that the *most* experts (i.e., over 50%) believed the

behaviors to fall under was recorded. These expert-rated categorizations were compared to the theoretical categorization identified by the researchers (see footnote on page 11). Results suggested that 39 of the 42 relevant items were deemed by the majority of the experts to fall into the original a priori model developed by the authors. One item ("Threatens the child with abandonment/rejection/family breaking up") was rated by the majority of participants (n = 14) to fall under the *Post-Abuse Maintenance* stage, not the theoretically suggested *Trust Development* stage. Given the agreement among the vast majority of experts, this item was relocated to the *Post-Abuse Maintenance* stage. Two items ("Becomes involved in activities alone with children/excludes adults" and "Presents as charming/nice/likable to others") were rated by the experts as equally belonging to the *Gaining Access* and *Trust Development* stages. Consistent with the theoretical literature and a priori model, these items were deemed to fall under the *Gaining Access* and *Trust Development* stages, respectively. See Table 1 for the final grooming behaviors organized into the five-stages of the SGM.

Discussion

The present study aimed to establish content validity for the SGM proposed by Winters and Jeglic (2017) and identify which behaviors are involved in each stage of the grooming process. The results, as determined experts in the field, revealed consensus that the five stages proposed by Winters and Jeglic (i.e., *Victim Selection, Gaining Access, Trust Development, Desensitization*, and *Post-Abuse Maintenance*) are all essential components of the sexual grooming process. Moreover, findings from the study suggest there are 42 grooming tactics/behaviors that experts identified as belonging to these stages. Overall, the results of the present study resulted in the content validation of a comprehensive and parsimonious model of sexual grooming.

Stages of sexual grooming

A major benefit of the SGM's framework is that it is intuitive, easily understood, and backed by a foundation of literature. Having a comprehensive, yet easily understood, framework is vital, as information about grooming must be distributed to various consumers (e.g., law makers, researchers, parents, clinicians, criminal justice professionals). For example, parents could utilize this model to be vigilant in monitoring for potentially predatory behaviors of those around their child, while clinicians can use the model to assist in assessment and treatment of victims or offenders of CSA. As such, it is important to have a model of grooming that allows for education across fields and different types of consumers.

While establishing the content validity of the SGM is a major advance in understanding grooming behaviors, it remains but a first step. With the foundation provided by the findings of the current study, it is necessary to continue to establish empirical support for the model and begin to assess other facets of grooming behavior. For example, it is unknown whether every offender progresses through each of the five stages, or whether there is always a linear progression through the stages. For instance, if an offender already has preexisting access to the potential victim (e.g., a parent), then they are less likely to employ behaviors in the *Victim Selection* or *Gaining Access* stages. Moreover, it may be that the offender moves fluidly between stages or skips stages if not deemed necessary. As an example, if an offender utilizes behaviors in the *Desensitization* stage and then notices the child resisting, they may revert back to engaging in more behaviors in the *Trust Development* stage. Similarly, the proposed model does not assume that an offender may only utilize behavior within one stage at a given time; that is, an offender may simultaneously employ behaviors found in the *Trust Development* (e.g., showing the child affection) and *Desensitization* (e.g., using seemingly innocent touch) stages. Taken together, future research should aim to examine the types, and most common, progression of the stages during the offense process.

Sexual grooming behaviors

Overall, the study was the first to obtain data related to relevance of various behaviors to the grooming process. This is an important addition to the literature given that it has previously been unclear what behaviors constitute grooming, especially given that many grooming behaviors in and of themselves are not unlike normal adult/child interactions. Identifying the 42 behaviors that were deemed relevant to the sexual grooming process by experts in the field is an important advance. While the data has yet to be empirically validated using cases of CSA, an expert-review validation study is the first step in better understanding what behaviors are indicative of grooming. It should be noted, however, that we did not ask experts to provide items that they believed to be indicative of the stages of sexual grooming. Rather, the items were provided to them to endorse. This could lead to a reification effect in that that the experts may have endorsed items as relevant to the stages of grooming given the items were derived from existing theoretical grooming literature, yet the items they endorsed may not in fact represent concrete behaviors actually utilized by perpetrators in CSA cases. However, if that were the case, then the majority of items would have been retained as relevant in the study as they were extracted from the grooming literature, when in the study we found that only about half of the theoretically-linked items were deemed not to be indicative of grooming. Thus, it is likely that the experts were critically evaluating the items to determine which were applicable to real-world cases.

Taken together, a major strength of the SGM is that the behaviors that are observable and measurable, although it remains unclear how to differentiate these behaviors from innocent contact with children. Nonetheless, we have garnered a greater understanding, using expert consensus, of actions that may be employed by a would-be child sexual abuser. That is, a validated model will assist in identifying constellations of behaviors that are considered grooming, which is a necessary component of preventing CSA. Moreover, the SGM provides a framework for the development of an instrument that can be used to measure sexual grooming, which can help identify and quantitatively measure the likelihood that a constellation of behaviors constitutes grooming.

Implications of the sexual grooming model

Overall, the results of the study have implications for prevention, intervention, and prosecution. First, and most importantly, improved understanding of sexual grooming can contribute to efforts to identify the abuse before it has occurred (Craven et al., 2007). Having a comprehensive and understandable model of sexual grooming comprised of specific observable behaviors can be used to educate parents and individuals who work with children on how to recognize potential sexual grooming behaviors prior to the abuse. For example, parents would benefit from learning more about grooming tactics so that suspicion may be raised if *clusters, high frequency use*, or *the most severe* of these potentially worrisome behaviors are present in a person spending time with children. Similarly, individuals working closely with children (e.g., teachers, coaches) can better monitor for grooming behaviors and notify guardians or proper authorities should any concerning behaviors arise. The information gleaned from the study could also be used to educate children regarding appropriate versus inappropriate behaviors with adults in their life.

Importantly, we are not suggesting that every individual who engages in any of these behaviors individually is engaging in grooming. The intention of the SGM is not to label or pathologize innocent, caring interactions between children and adults, but to encourage increased vigilance and awareness in warranted instances where several of these behaviors are observed together. As noted previously, grooming differs from normal interactions due to the underlying, deviant intention, which may be understandably difficult to identify. While researchers are still working to understand, distinguish, and clarify this distinction, these early findings can nonetheless assist in broadly understanding grooming strategies and behaviors, and raising reasonable concerns in the face of potentially worrisome behaviors occurring at high frequency or severity.

The SGM can also be helpful to clinicians working with individuals who have committed sexual abuse of a child. Given there is evidence that offenders plan their offenses (Laws, 1989) and engage in consistent patterns of offense-related behaviors with multiple victims (Abel et al., 1987), it is necessary to

target these pre-offense grooming behaviors in treatment. If an offender groomed their victims, a therapist could integrate this framework to help the individual established a better understanding of their offense cycle, which would be helpful in informing relapse prevention strategies. Further, it should be noted that CSA cases are not homogenous (Lanning, 2010; Salter, 1995), suggesting that motivations and strategies related to grooming will vary by offender. There may be numerous psychological factors at play that influence an offender's intentions and actions throughout the grooming process; these elements are an area ripe for further research. Should an offender demonstrate changes in the beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors in treatment, they may be equipped to not engage in those types of behaviors (Salter, 1995). This model can also be used in treating victims of CSA, as a means of providing psychoeducation about sexual abuse. It is not uncommon for victims to experience guilt and blame following sexual abuse, which would be expected to be particularly heightened in instances where the victim was groomed by the offender. Thus, educating victims about these manipulative behaviors using the SGM could possibly reduce the self-blame a victim may experience.

Understanding sexual grooming using the SGM may also be of utility to criminal justice professionals. Knowledge of the stages and behaviors associated with grooming could assist in law enforcement investigations of child sexual abusers, as police should be aware of these behaviors in investigations of CSA. For example, if a child discloses abuse and is unwilling to provide the offender's name, law enforcement could investigate whether there are any individuals in the child's life who have employed possible grooming tactics in order to identify potential suspects. Additionally, a framework for grooming can also be utilized by attorneys working on CSA cases involving sexual grooming. While this study represents one of the first attempts to validate the construct of grooming, attorneys should nonetheless be aware of these types of intentional behaviors in their cases, as they may help inform the arguments of the case (e.g., the offender had frequent and close contact with the victim before the alleged abuse). In the future, should the empirical grooming literature evolve, the information can be used in the prosecution of cases or decisions post-conviction, such as post-release guidelines (i.e., types of probation stipulations based on the offender's history of pre-offense behaviors). As noted above, it is important to gather a larger empirical basis for the construct of grooming behavior to enhance the use of the concept in the courtroom and judicial decision-making.

Conclusion and future directions

This study is the first to validate a model of grooming and behaviors involved in the process, which is a major step toward developing a more universally accepted framework for these pre-offense behaviors. The results of the present study provided a thorough, yet also concise and parsimonious, content

validation of the SGM that conceptualizes the process of sexual grooming which can be useful across multiple settings. Indeed, the present study sheds light on valuable information for researchers, criminal justice professionals, clinicians, and community members alike. This study has established the content validity of a model of sexual grooming therein laying the ground work for further validation of an evidence-based model of sexual grooming. The next step is to empirically validate the SGM using the pre-offense behaviors of a sample of victims or offenders of CSA. The model should undergo rigorous testing to ensure the stages accurately represent the complex process of sexual grooming. Further, a standardized measure of grooming behaviors should be developed based upon the behaviors and stages delineated in the SGM. A reliable and valid measure of sexual grooming would allow researchers and clinicians a means of quantifying these behaviors and could be invaluable in prevention and risk assessment efforts with the goal of understanding when certain behaviors constitute sexual grooming and how to prevent CSA from occurring.

Declaration of interests

There are no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix A

Models of Sexual Grooming.

Source	Stages of Sexual Grooming	Corresponding Stage of Current Model of Grooming
Sgroi (1982)	Engagement phase	Trust Development
	Sexual interaction phase	Desensitization to Sexual Content and Physical Contact
	Secrecy phase	
	Disclosure phase *	Post-Abuse Maintenance
	Suppression phase *	
Lang and Frenzel (1988)	Gaining cooperation	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Keeping the victim silent	Post-Abuse Maintenance
Budin and Johnson (1989)	Gaining access to victim	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Trust	Trust Development
	Keeping the victim silent	Post-Abuse Maintenance
Conte et al. (1989)	Gaining access to victim and cooperation	Gaining Access and Isolation
Christiansen and Blake (1990)	Trust	Trust Development
	Favoritism	Trust Development
Applies to father-daughter grooming	Alienation	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Secrecy	Post-Abuse Maintenance
	Boundary violation	Desensitization
Berliner and Conte (1990)	Sexualization	Desensitization
	Justification	Desensitization
	Cooperation for secrecy	Post-Abuse Maintenance
Elliott et al. (1995)	Gaining access to victim	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Trust	Trust Development
	Cooperation	Trust Development
	Keeping the victim silent	Post-Abuse Maintenance
Young (1997)	Gaining access to victim	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Trust	Trust Development
	Cooperation	Post-Abuse Maintenance
Harms and van Dam (1992)/Van Dam (2001)	Identifying vulnerable child	Victim Selection
	Engaging child in peer-like environment	Trust Development Desensitization
	Desensitize child to touch	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Isolate	Post-Abuse Maintenance
	Make child feel responsible	
Brackenridge (2001)	Targeting a potential victim	Victim Selection
Applies to grooming in sport	Building trust and friendship	Trust Development
	Developing isolation and control, building loyalty	Gaining Access and Isolation Desensitization/Post-Abuse Maintenance
	Initiation of sexual abuse and securing secrecy	
O'Connell (2003)	Friendship-forming	Trust Development
Applies to online grooming	Relationship-forming	Trust Development
	Risk assessment	Victim Selection
	Exclusivity	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Sexual	Desensitization
Leclerc et al. (2005)	Gaining trust	Trust Development
	Cooperation	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Keeping the victim silent	Post-Abuse Maintenance
McAlinden (2006)	Befriend a potential victim	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Cultivate a 'special friendship'	Trust Development
	Use of 'forbidden fruit'	Desensitization
	Desensitization	Desensitization
Craven et al. (2007)	Gaining access to the child	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Ensuring the child's compliance	Trust Development
	Maintaining secrecy to avoid disclosure	Post-Abuse Maintenance

(*Continued*)

(Continued).

Source	Stages of Sexual Grooming	Corresponding Stage of Current Model of Grooming
Olson et al. (2007)	Gaining access	Victim Selection/Gaining Access and Isolation
	Cycle of entrapment	Trust Development/Gaining Access and Isolation
	Intervening	
	Outcome	Post-Abuse Maintenance
		Desensitization
Leclerc et al. (2009)	Gaining access to victim	Victim Selection
	Gaining victim's trust	Trust Development
	Gaining cooperation in sexual activity	Desensitization
	Maintaining silence following abuse	Post-Abuse Maintenance
Lanning (2010)	Identifying a target	Victim Selection
	Gaining access to the victim	Gaining Access and Isolation
	Lowering inhibitions	Trust Development
	Gaining and maintaining control	Desensitization

* No corresponding stage in the current model