

Understanding Child Grooming and Preventive Strategies: Perspectives of Primary School Teachers and Parents

Heri Saptadi Ismanto, Ellya Rakhmawati*, Wawan Priyanto

Universitas PGRI Semarang, Indonesia

ellyarakhmawati@upgris.ac.id*

Submitted:
2026-06-23

Revised:
2025-07-10

Published:
2025-08-04

Keywords:
Child Grooming; Child Safeguarding; Primary School Teachers; Parents

Copyright holder:
© Author/s (2026)

This article is under:



How to cite:
Ismanto, H. S., Rakhmawati, E., & Priyanto, W. (2026). Understanding Child Grooming and Preventive Strategies: Perspectives of Primary School Teachers and Parents. *Bulletin of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.51214/002026082076000>

Published by:
Kuras Institute

E-ISSN:
2656-1050

ABSTRACT: Child grooming represents a growing challenge for child protection because it commonly occurs before sexual abuse and is often disguised as caring or supportive behaviour, making early recognition difficult. This study aimed to explore how primary school teachers and parents understand child grooming and perceive strategies for its prevention. A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted to capture participants' lived perspectives. 12 participants, including six teachers and six parents, were purposively selected. Child grooming is an increasing child protection concern because perpetrators often conceal abusive intentions through seemingly caring relationships. This study explored how primary school teachers and parents understand child grooming and the preventive strategies they consider effective in the Indonesian context. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed. Twelve participants were purposively recruited, comprising six primary school teachers responsible for pupils' welfare and six parents of primary school children. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Participants understood grooming as a gradual process of psychological manipulation involving trust-building, emotional dependency, and the exploitation of children's developmental vulnerabilities. They identified age-appropriate sexuality education, body autonomy, self-protection skills, digital safety awareness, and school-family collaboration as key preventive strategies. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening adults' understanding of grooming to support early identification and prevention. This study contributes contextually relevant evidence for developing school- and family-based child safeguarding initiatives in Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse remains a significant global child protection challenge because of its profound and enduring psychological, social, and developmental consequences. Children who experience sexual victimization frequently suffer emotional distress, diminished self-esteem, impaired interpersonal functioning, and mental health difficulties that may persist well into adulthood (Mathews & Collin-Vezina, 2017; Rakhmawati et al., 2022; Rudolph et al., 2024). Although child sexual abuse is commonly understood as a discrete criminal offense, contemporary research increasingly recognizes that abuse is often preceded by a gradual process through which perpetrators establish access to, influence over, and control of potential victims. One of the most

prominent mechanisms underlying this process is child grooming, a deliberate and systematic strategy designed to cultivate trust, emotional dependency, and compliance before sexual exploitation occurs (Brown & Walker, 2020; Winters et al., 2024).

Child grooming is characterized by a sequence of manipulative behaviors through which offenders progressively normalize inappropriate interactions while reducing children's capacity to recognize potential harm. Such behaviors commonly include providing excessive attention, offering gifts or rewards, expressing emotional support, and gradually encouraging secrecy between the offender and the child (Winters et al., 2024; Jeglic & Winters, 2025). Because these behaviors often resemble ordinary expressions of care, affection, or mentorship, they are easily misinterpreted by children and the adults responsible for their protection (Steedman et al., 2024). Consequently, grooming frequently remains undetected until substantial psychological or sexual harm has already occurred. Recent evidence consistently identifies grooming as a common precursor to child sexual abuse and highlights the importance of recognizing its early behavioral indicators to strengthen prevention, timely intervention, and child safeguarding efforts (Dolev-Cohen et al., 2024; Winters et al., 2024; Rakhmawati et al., 2025).

The rapid expansion of digital technology has further transformed the context in which child grooming occurs. Widespread access to social networking platforms, online gaming communities, and instant messaging applications has created new opportunities for offenders to establish contact with children beyond conventional face-to-face settings (Joleby et al., 2021; Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). Grooming is therefore no longer restricted to physical interactions but increasingly unfolds through digital communication, where opportunities for parental or school supervision may be considerably reduced. Within these online environments, perpetrators can develop trust gradually, manipulate emotional relationships, and encourage secrecy while remaining largely invisible to adults responsible for children's safety. Recent studies have demonstrated that digital communication facilitates relationship-building strategies that substantially increase children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation (Sun & Zhang, 2026; Zhang et al., 2021). These developments underline the urgent need to strengthen adults' awareness of both offline and online manifestations of child grooming.

Primary school children constitute a particularly vulnerable group because their cognitive, emotional, and social competencies are still developing during middle childhood. At this developmental stage, children may experience difficulties in recognizing manipulative intentions, critically evaluating interpersonal situations, and identifying behaviors that place them at risk (Santrock, 2019; Bredekamp, 2017; Campbell et al., 2016). Their natural inclination to trust adults, seek approval, and respond positively to affection may inadvertently increase susceptibility to grooming strategies. Furthermore, increased engagement with digital technologies has expanded children's exposure to online interactions, creating additional opportunities for offenders to initiate contact and establish exploitative relationships beyond parents' or teachers' immediate awareness (Madigan et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2025). Collectively, these developmental characteristics reinforce the importance of early preventive efforts that equip children with age-appropriate protective knowledge while enhancing adults' capacity to recognize grooming behaviors before abuse occurs.

Within this context, teachers and parents constitute the two principal safeguarding agents in children's everyday lives. Teachers maintain continuous contact with pupils within educational settings and are often among the first adults to observe behavioral, emotional, or social changes that may indicate distress, coercion, or victimization (Walsh et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2020). Their daily interactions provide valuable opportunities to recognize early warning signs, initiate appropriate safeguarding procedures, and facilitate timely referrals when concerns arise. Parents fulfill an equally important protective role through consistent supervision, open communication, emotional support, and the establishment of safe family environments in which children feel able to disclose uncomfortable experiences (Rudolph et al., 2024).

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that effective child protection depends upon strong partnerships between families and schools, where shared responsibility, mutual trust, and coordinated preventive efforts enhance children's safety and well-being (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Rakhmawati et al., 2023; Rakhmawati et al., 2022). Furthermore, age-appropriate sexuality education and active parental engagement have been recognized as essential protective factors that strengthen children's understanding of personal boundaries and reduce vulnerability to sexual abuse (Putri et al., 2020; Munawaroh et al., 2024; Rakhmawati et al., 2024). Nevertheless, preventive efforts are unlikely to be effective unless adults possess a clear understanding of how grooming behaviors develop and how early warning signs may be recognized before abuse occurs.

The importance of strengthening adults' preventive capacity is further emphasized within the counseling literature, which regards child protection as a proactive educational process rather than merely a reactive response to abuse. Counseling and psychoeducational interventions seek to develop self-awareness, ethical judgment, interpersonal competence, and informed decision-making among those responsible for children's welfare. Such competencies enable adults to identify behavioral risks, respond appropriately to safeguarding concerns, and foster protective environments that minimize opportunities for abuse. Ismanto et al., (2020) demonstrated that counseling approaches grounded in personal values, self-awareness, and moral development contribute to reducing behaviors associated with sexual risk. More recently, advances in counselor education have highlighted the importance of reflective thinking, critical analysis, and professional judgment in addressing increasingly complex child protection challenges (Ismanto & Budiman, 2026). Collectively, these perspectives indicate that effective safeguarding requires not only knowledge of child sexual abuse but also preventive competencies that enable adults to recognise grooming behaviours, interpret contextual warning signs, and implement timely protective actions.

Despite growing scholarly interest in child grooming, important gaps remain within the existing body of knowledge. Previous investigations have primarily concentrated on offender characteristics, behavioural patterns, prevalence, online risks, and prevention programs, providing valuable insights into the mechanisms through which grooming occurs (Dolev-Cohen et al., 2024; Rudolph et al., 2024; Steedman et al., 2024). However, comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how adults responsible for children's care recognize and interpret grooming behaviors in their everyday interactions with children. Furthermore, the majority of published studies have employed quantitative, survey-based, or descriptive methodologies, offering limited insight into the subjective meanings, lived experiences, and contextual interpretations that shape adults' responses to potential grooming situations (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

This limitation is particularly evident within the Indonesian context. Existing studies have predominantly examined sexuality education, child protection initiatives, and public awareness programs (Rakhmawati et al., 2023; Rakhmawati, et al., 2022), whereas child grooming has received relatively little attention as a distinct safeguarding phenomenon. Consequently, there remains insufficient empirical understanding of how cultural values, parenting practices, educational environments, and patterns of children's digital engagement influence teachers' and parents' perceptions of grooming and the preventive strategies they adopt. Addressing these knowledge gaps is essential for developing culturally responsive safeguarding policies and educational interventions that reflect the realities of Indonesian schools and families.

Although awareness of child sexual abuse has increased in Indonesia, empirical evidence concerning child grooming remains limited. Existing research has largely centered on sexuality education, child protection initiatives, and public awareness campaigns, with comparatively little attention given to grooming as a distinct process that precedes sexual abuse (Rakhmawati et al., 2023; Rakhmawati, et al., 2022). Consequently, current knowledge provides only a partial understanding of how teachers and parents recognize grooming behaviors, interpret potential warning signs, and respond to safeguarding concerns in their everyday educational and family

contexts. This limitation is particularly important because perceptions of child protection are closely shaped by socio-cultural values, parenting practices, educational expectations, and children's increasing engagement with digital technologies. Understanding these contextual influences is essential for developing safeguarding strategies that are both culturally appropriate and responsive to the realities of Indonesian primary schools and families.

The present study addresses these limitations by shifting the analytical focus from offenders and victims to the adults who bear primary responsibility for children's protection. Whereas previous studies have predominantly investigated the characteristics of perpetrators, patterns of online grooming, or the effectiveness of prevention programs, considerably less attention has been devoted to exploring how teachers and parents construct meanings around grooming based on their lived experiences. Employing a phenomenological approach enables a deeper examination of how adults perceive the gradual nature of grooming, identify behaviors that may indicate risk, and formulate preventive responses within their own social, cultural, and educational environments. By foregrounding participants' perspectives, this study contributes qualitative evidence that complements the predominantly quantitative literature and enriches current understanding of child safeguarding from the standpoint of those directly involved in children's daily lives. Accordingly, this study explored the lived perspectives of primary school teachers and parents regarding child grooming and its prevention in the Indonesian context. Specifically, it sought to examine how participants conceptualize child grooming, recognize its behavioral indicators, and describe strategies for preventing sexual abuse within families and schools. Through a phenomenological exploration of these experiences, the study aims to generate contextually grounded knowledge that reflects the realities of safeguarding children in Indonesian society.

The findings are expected to contribute to both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the study extends the limited qualitative literature on child grooming by illuminating how adults construct meanings around grooming behaviors within a specific socio-cultural setting. From a practical perspective, the findings provide evidence to support the development of culturally responsive safeguarding policies, strengthen collaboration between schools and families, and inform counseling, educational, and child protection programs designed to enhance adults' capacity to recognize grooming behaviors before sexual abuse occurs. Ultimately, this study contributes to advancing preventive strategies that place early recognition, collaborative safeguarding, and child wellbeing at the center of child protection efforts.

Study Aim

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore how primary school teachers and parents understand child grooming within the Indonesian socio-cultural context. It specifically examined how participants recognized early behavioral indicators, perceived children's vulnerability in offline and online environments, and described strategies for preventing child sexual exploitation. The findings are expected to inform culturally responsive child safeguarding policies and strengthen collaborative prevention efforts between families and schools.

METHODS

Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how primary school teachers and parents understand child grooming within the Indonesian socio-cultural context. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it examines individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to a phenomenon (Dahal, 2025; Denzin, 2017). The study explored participants' perceptions of grooming behaviors, children's vulnerability, behavioral warning signs, and preventive strategies within family and school settings. Guided by an

interpretivist perspective, the study sought to generate contextually grounded insights into child safeguarding from the perspectives of teachers and parents.

Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to obtain information-rich perspectives on child grooming. The sample comprised 12 participants from SDN Candirejo 02 Ungaran, Central Java, Indonesia, including six primary school teachers and six parents of primary school children. Teachers were eligible if they were actively employed at the school and responsible for pupils' learning and welfare. Parents were required to have at least one child enrolled in primary school and to be actively involved in the child's upbringing. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, with no new themes emerging from subsequent interviews. The participants represented diverse ages, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences, providing varied perspectives on child grooming. Participants' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant Code	Participant Group	Gender	Age (years)	Educational Background	Occupation	Teaching Experience (years)
OT1BER	Parent	Female	35	Bachelor's Degree	Housewife	-
OT2F	Parent	Female	43	Senior High School	Housewife	-
OT3LD	Parent	Female	37	Bachelor's Degree	Housewife	-
OT4MWY	Parent	Female	45	Senior High School	Housewife	-
OT5WDA	Parent	Female	36	Diploma	Housewife	-
OT6RI	Parent	Female	36	Senior High School	Housewife	-
GR1FA	Teacher	Female	40	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	12
GR2IR	Teacher	Female	30	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	6
GR3M	Teacher	Female	56	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	20
GR4SPY	Teacher	Female	39	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	17
GR5TS	Teacher	Female	33	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	8
GR6IAS	Teacher	Female	28	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	4

Instruments

In phenomenological research, the researcher served as the primary instrument for generating and interpreting the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews supported by an interview guide, written informed consent, audio recordings, and field notes. Separate interview guides were developed for teachers and parents, drawing on previous research on child grooming and child safeguarding to explore participants' understanding of grooming, children's vulnerability, behavioral indicators, preventive practices, and the respective roles of families and schools. The guides were reviewed by two experts in guidance and counseling and qualitative research, revised accordingly, and piloted with one teacher and one parent; pilot data were excluded from the analysis. Interviews were conducted between May and June 2026, lasted 45–60 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with participants' consent. Field notes documented contextual observations and non-verbal behaviors to support data interpretation. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, reflexive memo writing, peer debriefing, and member checking, thereby enhancing the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), supported by NVivo Release 14 qualitative data analysis software. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarisation before meaningful text segments were inductively coded. The resulting codes were systematically organized into nodes within NVivo and compared across participants to identify recurring patterns and conceptual relationships. Related codes were subsequently grouped into candidate themes, which were iteratively reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure internal coherence and conceptual distinction (Braun et al., 2016 Gebresilase et al., 2025). Throughout the analytical process, coding decisions and theme development were continuously discussed among the research team, while NVivo project maps and coding hierarchies were used to support the organization and interpretation of the data. The final themes were derived inductively from participants' accounts, ensuring that the findings faithfully represented their perspectives on child grooming and its prevention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Analysis of the interview narratives from six primary school teachers and six parents revealed five interrelated themes that represented participants' shared understandings of child grooming and the strategies considered essential for its prevention. As presented in Table 2, the themes comprised: (1) Grooming as a Process of Manipulation and Trust-Building, (2) Children's Vulnerability to Grooming, (3) Behavioral Indicators of Child Grooming, (4) Preventive Strategies for Child Grooming, and (5) School–Family Collaboration for Child Protection. These themes reflect participants' understandings of child grooming, perceptions of risk factors, recognition of warning signs, and views regarding preventive efforts.

Collectively, these themes reflect participants' understandings of child grooming, perceptions of children's vulnerability, recognition of behavioral warning signs, and views regarding preventive efforts. Although five themes emerged from the analysis, this paper focuses on the two themes most closely aligned with the study's aims and title: Grooming as a Process of Manipulation and Trust-Building and Preventive Strategies for Child Grooming. These themes provide a comprehensive account of how primary school teachers and parents understand child grooming and the preventive approaches they consider essential for protecting children.

Table 2. Primary Themes and Sub-themes Emerging from the Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

Primary Themes	Sub-themes and Participant Initials
Grooming as a Process of Manipulation and Trust-Building	1. Grooming as psychological and emotional manipulation (GR1FA, GR2IR, GR3M, GR4SPY, GR5TS, GR6IAS, OT1BER). 2. Excessive attention and emotional closeness as trust-building strategies (GR1FA, GR4SPY, OT1BER, OT5WDA, OT6RI). 3. Gift-giving and material inducements to gain children's trust (GR2IR, GR3M, OT2F, OT4MWY, OT5WDA). 4. Gradual dependency, secrecy, and emotional control (GR5TS, GR6IAS, OT1BER, OT5WDA, OT6RI).
Preventive Strategies for Child Grooming	1. Teaching body autonomy and privacy (GR1FA, GR3M, OT1BER, OT2F). 2. Recognizing inappropriate behaviors and warning signs (GR2IR, GR5TS, OT3LD, OT5WDA). 3. Developing children's self-protection skills (GR4SPY, GR6IAS, OT4MWY, OT6RI).

4. Providing age-appropriate sexuality education (GR1FA, GR2IR, OT2F, OT5WDA)

Theme 1. Grooming as a Process of Manipulation and Trust-Building

Participants described child grooming as a gradual process through which perpetrators manipulated children's emotions, gained their trust, and established psychological control before sexual exploitation. Both teachers and parents viewed grooming as involving psychological manipulation, excessive attention, material rewards, and the gradual development of emotional dependency.

Teachers commonly defined grooming as psychological manipulation that gradually altered children's thinking and behavior. GR1FA and GR3M described grooming as:

"...In my opinion, grooming is about changing a child's psychological condition. It begins with an approach that influences the child's thinking because they are affected by someone older. It is not something that happens instantly; it is a gradual process of manipulating the child's mind until the child becomes emotionally attached..." (GR1FA; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

"...It is an effort to manipulate a child's psychology leading to sexual abuse. The perpetrator creates a situation where the child feels completely dependent on them and believes everything they say..." (GR3M; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

Participants further explained that perpetrators established trust by providing excessive attention and creating emotional closeness. According to GR1FA:

"...They usually start by giving much more attention than the child's family or other people. Then they give the child things they like, making the child feel comfortable and gradually trust them more than other people..." (GR1FA; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

"...The child is approached first. They are made to feel comfortable, given attention, and eventually become emotionally close. At first it seems harmless, but later the child becomes attached to that person..." (OT1BER; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

Gift-giving was also identified as an important strategy for strengthening children's trust. As explained by GR2IR:

"...Children are often tempted with promises, toys, money, or snacks that they really like. After receiving these gifts, they begin to think that the adult is kind and trustworthy..." (GR2IR; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

"...Sometimes children are attracted because they are offered gifts or rewards. They think the person is being nice, without realizing there is another purpose behind it..." (OT4MWY; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

After trust had been established, participants reported that perpetrators gradually encouraged emotional dependency, secrecy, and compliance. GR5TS and OT6RI explained:

"...The child eventually feels that they really need the perpetrator. The perpetrator creates an illusion that only they truly understand or care about

the child. Once that dependency develops, persuasion, manipulation, and even threats may begin..." (GR5TS; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

"...At first the child is simply made to feel comfortable, but eventually they become afraid to tell anyone because they feel loyal to that person or worry something bad will happen..." (OT6RI; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

Overall, participants perceived grooming as a progressive process in which psychological manipulation, trust-building, material inducements, and emotional dependency operated together to facilitate children's exploitation.

Theme 4. Preventive Strategies for Child Grooming

Participants emphasized that preventing child grooming requires proactive efforts from both families and schools. Rather than relying solely on children's awareness, participants highlighted the importance of equipping children with practical knowledge and protective skills from an early age. Four complementary preventive strategies emerged from the interviews: promoting body autonomy, recognizing warning signs, developing self-protection skills, and providing age-appropriate sexuality education.

Promoting body autonomy was regarded as the foundation of child protection. Participants believed that children should understand that their bodies belong to them and that certain body parts are private. They also stressed that children should feel confident refusing unwanted physical contact, regardless of who initiated it. GR1FA and OT2F explained:

"...Children need to know that their bodies belong to them. They should understand which body parts are private and that they have the right to refuse if someone touches them in a way that makes them uncomfortable..." (GR1FA; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

"...From an early age, children should be taught that they can say 'no'. They should not feel forced to obey every adult if the situation makes them feel unsafe..." (OT2F; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

Participants also highlighted the importance of helping children recognize behaviors that may indicate grooming. They explained that children should learn to identify inappropriate attention, excessive gifts, requests for secrecy, or attempts to isolate them from trusted adults. GR5TS and OT5WDA remarked:

"...Children need to recognize that not every kind person has good intentions. If someone repeatedly asks them to keep secrets or offers gifts to gain their trust, they should know that these can be warning signs..." (GR5TS; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

"...Parents should explain simple examples of unsafe situations so children can recognize them before they become victims..." (OT5WDA; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

Another preventive strategy involved strengthening children's self-protection skills. Participants believed that children should be encouraged to express their feelings, refuse to engage in uncomfortable situations, leave unsafe environments, and seek help from trusted adults when necessary. According to GR6IAS and OT4MWY:

"...Children should practice speaking up, refusing inappropriate requests, and immediately telling parents or teachers if something makes them feel uncomfortable..." (GR6IAS; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

"...Children need to know who they can trust. They should never be afraid to tell their parents or teachers if someone behaves inappropriately..." (OT4MWY; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

Participants further emphasized that preventive efforts should include age-appropriate sexuality education. They viewed sexuality education as a means of teaching children about personal boundaries, privacy, and respectful relationships rather than introducing explicit sexual content. GR2IR explained:

"...Sexuality education should begin with simple concepts, such as respecting one's own body, understanding personal boundaries, and recognising behaviour that is not acceptable..." (GR2IR; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

"...Children need honest explanations that match their age. If parents avoid these conversations, children may seek information from unreliable sources or remain unaware of potential risks..." (OT5WDA; SDNCU; 19.05.2026)

Overall, participants viewed effective prevention as a continuous educational process rather than a single intervention. Teaching body autonomy, recognizing warning signs, strengthening self-protection skills, and providing age-appropriate sexuality education were considered mutually reinforcing strategies that could enhance children's resilience to grooming while supporting a safer home and school environment.

Discussion

The present study explored how primary school teachers and parents understand child grooming and the preventive strategies they consider essential for protecting children from sexual abuse. Although the thematic analysis generated five interrelated themes, the discussion focuses on the two overarching themes that directly address the study's aims: Grooming as a Process of Manipulation and Trust-Building and Preventive Strategies for Child Grooming. The remaining themes, including children's vulnerability, behavioral indicators, and school-family collaboration, are discussed as integral components of these broader themes rather than as independent findings.

One of the principal findings concerns participants' understanding of grooming as a deliberate process of psychological manipulation and trust-building. Teachers and parents consistently described perpetrators as gradually creating emotional closeness through excessive attention, affection, gifts, and reassurance before encouraging secrecy and dependency. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary conceptualizations of child grooming, which describe grooming as a sequence of calculated interpersonal strategies designed to reduce children's resistance and increase offenders' opportunities for abuse (Brown & Walker, 2020; Winters et al., 2024 Jeglic & Winters, 2025). These findings are also consistent with Jeglic & Winters, (2025) those who demonstrated that perpetrators of child sexual abuse frequently rely on gradual trust-building, emotional manipulation, and boundary-testing behaviors to normalize inappropriate interactions before abuse occurs. Rather than relying on coercion from the outset, perpetrators cultivate relationships that appear caring and supportive, making abusive intentions difficult for children and surrounding adults to recognize.

An important finding from this study is that participants frequently associated grooming with behaviors perceived as expressions of care. Giving gifts, providing emotional attention, or spending

additional time with children were initially interpreted as positive interactions until participants reflected on the gradual development of dependency and secrecy. This finding may explain why grooming often remains undetected during its early stages, as manipulative behaviors closely resemble ordinary caregiving practices. Previous studies have similarly reported that offenders intentionally exploit children's emotional needs and adults' assumptions about trust to conceal abusive intentions (Winters et al., 2024; Jeglic & Winters, 2025). Consequently, safeguarding efforts should extend beyond recognizing explicit abuse to include identifying relational patterns that progressively isolate children from their usual support networks. Greater professional awareness of these subtle interpersonal dynamics may improve opportunities for earlier intervention before exploitation occurs.

The findings further demonstrate that participants perceived children's vulnerability to grooming as arising from an interaction between developmental characteristics and contemporary social influences. Limited understanding of bodily boundaries, unquestioning trust in adults, emotional immaturity, and unrestricted access to digital technology were consistently identified as conditions that increase children's susceptibility to manipulation. These findings correspond with developmental theories suggesting that primary school children are still acquiring the cognitive, emotional, and social capacities necessary to evaluate interpersonal risks and recognise deceptive intentions (Santrock, 2017 Bredekamp, 2017). At this developmental stage, children tend to interpret adults' behavior as inherently trustworthy, making them more likely to comply with requests that appear supportive or affectionate.

The influence of digital technology further reinforces these developmental vulnerabilities. This finding is further supported by Madigan et al., (2018), whose meta-analysis demonstrated that online sexual solicitation and unwanted sexual exposure are increasingly common among children and adolescents, highlighting the growing importance of digital safeguarding. Together with the framework proposed by Livingstone & Stoilova, (2021), these findings suggest that digital environments create opportunities for offenders to establish contact with children when supervision, digital literacy, and online safety practices are insufficient (Joleby et al., 2021). Rather than viewing digital media as inherently harmful, the present findings suggest that risks arise when children's online engagement is not accompanied by adequate supervision and digital safety education. Accordingly, preventive strategies should combine the development of children's digital literacy with active parental involvement and school-based guidance. Such an integrated approach acknowledges that children's vulnerability is shaped not only by developmental immaturity but also by the social and technological contexts in which contemporary childhood unfolds.

Another important finding concerns participants' ability to recognize behavioral indicators that may signal grooming before abuse is disclosed. Teachers and parents consistently associated social withdrawal, increasing secrecy, emotional distress, and noticeable behavioral changes with potential safeguarding concerns. Although participants acknowledged that these behaviors are not exclusive to grooming, they regarded them as meaningful changes that warrant careful observation and supportive inquiry. This interpretation is consistent with safeguarding research indicating that children subjected to grooming frequently display subtle emotional and behavioral changes long before they disclose their experiences (Steedman et al., 2024 Winters et al., 2024). Rather than interpreting these behaviors as ordinary developmental changes, participants viewed them as possible manifestations of psychological distress requiring timely adult intervention. These findings further suggest that effective early identification depends not only on parental vigilance but also on educators' capacity to recognize and respond appropriately to behavioral warning signs. This highlights the importance of strengthening safeguarding knowledge among school personnel so that potential risks can be identified and addressed before abuse escalates.

The findings also have important implications for guidance and counseling practice within primary schools. Participants emphasized that preventing grooming requires more than responding

after abuse has occurred; it depends on strengthening children's protective knowledge and equipping adults with the skills to recognize early warning signs. This perspective is consistent with counseling approaches that emphasize prevention through the development of self-awareness, resilience, and protective decision-making (Ismanto, 2020). Furthermore, effective safeguarding requires a whole-school approach in which guidance and counseling services are integrated with school policies, teacher capacity building, and collaborative partnerships with families to promote a safe and supportive learning environment (Bradshaw et al., 2021). In addition, enhancing teachers' professional competence through reflective and inquiry-oriented learning may improve their preparedness to identify grooming-related behaviors and implement appropriate safeguarding interventions in school settings (Ismanto & Budiman, 2026).

Taken together, the findings contribute to the growing literature on child grooming by demonstrating how primary school teachers and parents understand grooming as a process of psychological manipulation and trust-building, and how these understandings shape preventive practices. Rather than viewing grooming solely as an act of sexual abuse, participants recognized it as a gradual relational process requiring early identification, developmentally appropriate education, and collaborative prevention. The findings further highlight that effective prevention relies on strengthening children's protective capacities while simultaneously enhancing adults' awareness and preparedness to recognize grooming behaviors at an early stage. By integrating these perspectives, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of child grooming and offers practical guidance for developing school- and family-based prevention programs that support children's safety and well-being.

Implications

This study has important theoretical and practical implications for understanding child grooming and strengthening prevention in primary school and family contexts. The findings indicate that teachers and parents perceive child grooming as a gradual process of psychological manipulation and trust-building that exploits children's developmental vulnerabilities, highlighting the need to improve adults' awareness so that early warning signs can be identified before abuse occurs. Effective prevention requires equipping both children and adults with knowledge and protective skills through safeguarding education, while schools, particularly guidance and counseling services, should promote body autonomy, personal boundaries, self-protection, responsible digital behavior, and help-seeking strategies. The findings further emphasize the importance of strong school-family partnerships through regular communication, shared monitoring, and coordinated preventive efforts to create supportive environments where children feel safe to disclose concerns. Theoretically, this phenomenological study contributes to the limited qualitative literature on child grooming in the Indonesian context by demonstrating how teachers' and parents' interpretations shape their understanding of children's vulnerability and preventive practices, providing a foundation for culturally responsive prevention frameworks and future research on school- and family-based safeguarding interventions.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research was conducted in a single primary school in Central Java, Indonesia, and involved a relatively small purposive sample of teachers and parents. Although this sampling strategy was appropriate for a phenomenological study, the findings represent the perspectives of participants within a particular educational and socio-cultural context and therefore may not be transferable to other settings. Second, the study focused exclusively on the perspectives of teachers and parents. Consequently, it does not capture how children themselves understand grooming-related experiences or how other educational professionals may perceive preventive practices. Finally,

because the data were generated through self-reported interviews on a sensitive topic, participants' responses may have been influenced by social desirability despite the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and encourage open discussion. Future research should extend this work by exploring perceptions of child grooming and preventive strategies across a wider range of schools, regions, and cultural contexts. Including the perspectives of children, school counsellors, psychologists, and other professionals involved in safeguarding may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how grooming is recognised and prevented in different educational settings. Further studies could also adopt mixed-methods or comparative research designs to examine how teachers' and parents' understandings of child grooming vary across contexts and how these understandings influence preventive practices. In addition, intervention studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of school- and family-based programmes in improving adults' awareness of grooming, strengthening children's protective knowledge and self-protection skills, and promoting collaborative approaches to child safeguarding.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insight into how primary school teachers and parents understand child grooming and the preventive strategies they consider essential for protecting children from sexual abuse. The findings demonstrate that participants perceive grooming as a gradual process of psychological manipulation and trust-building through which perpetrators exploit children's developmental vulnerabilities and emotional needs before abuse occurs. Rather than viewing grooming as a single abusive act, participants recognized it as a relational process that requires early identification and sustained preventive efforts. The study further highlights that effective prevention depends on increasing adults' awareness of grooming behaviors while strengthening children's protective knowledge and skills. Participants emphasized the importance of age-appropriate sexuality education, body autonomy, self-protection skills, and collaborative partnerships between schools and families as key components of child safeguarding. These findings suggest that preventive efforts are likely to be more effective when children, parents, and educators share a common understanding of grooming and work together to promote safe and supportive environments. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study contributes contextually relevant evidence from the Indonesian primary school context, where empirical research on child grooming remains limited. The findings extend current understanding by demonstrating how teachers' and parents' interpretations of grooming shape their recognition of risk and inform preventive practices. Overall, the study underscores that strengthening adults' understanding of child grooming is fundamental to supporting earlier intervention, enhancing preventive education, and promoting more effective safeguarding within school and family settings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Institute for Research and Community Service, Universitas Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia, under Research Grant Contract Number: 024/SKK/LPPM-UPGRIS/REG/III/2026. The authors are also grateful to the principal, teachers, parents, and all participants at SDN Candirejo 02 Ungaran for their valuable cooperation and contributions to this study. In addition, the authors thank colleagues who provided constructive comments and support during the preparation of this manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

HIS, ER, and WP agree to the final version of this article.

REFERENCES

- Allen, K. P., Livingston, J. A., & Nickerson, A. B. (2020). Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Education: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Experiences Implementing the Second Step Child Protection Unit. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 15(9), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2019.1687382>
- Bradshaw, C. P., Cohen, J., Espelage, D. L., & Nation, M. (2021). Addressing School Safety Through Comprehensive School Climate Approaches. *School Psychology Review*, 50(2–3), 221–236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.1926321>
- Braun, M. R., Walton, P., Beck, S. B. M., & London, W. (2016). Illustrating the relationship between the coefficient of performance and the coefficient of system performance by means of an R404 supermarket refrigeration system. *International Journal of Refrigeration*, 70, 225–234. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijrefrig.2015.10.020>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bredenkamp, S. (2017). *Effective Practices in Early Childhood Education: Building a Foundation* (J. Peters (ed.); Third Edit). Pearson. [Google Books](#)
- Brown, S. J., & Walker, K. (2020). Grooming. In *The Encyclopedia of Child and Adolescent Development* (Issue 2006, pp. 1–17). Wiley: Online Library. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171492.wecad446>
- Campbell, S. B., Denham, S. A., Howarth, G. Z., Jones, S. M., Whittaker, J. V., Williford, A. P., Willoughby, M. T., Yudron, M., & Darling-Churchill, K. (2016). Commentary On The Review of Measures of Early Childhood Social and Emotional Development: Conceptualization, Critique, and Recommendations. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 45(July-August), 19–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2016.01.008>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (5 th). SAGE Publications.
- Dahal, N. (2025). Qualitative Data Analysis: Reflections, Procedures, and Some Points for Consideration. *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, 10(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frma.2025.1669578>
- Denzin, N. K. (2017). Critical Qualitative Inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(1), 8–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416681864>
- Dolev-Cohen, M., Yosef, T., & Meiselles, M. (2024). Parental Responses to Online Sexual Grooming Events Experienced by Their Teenage Children. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 14(5), 1311–1324. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe14050086>
- Gebresilase, B. M., Wang, M., Chuanxia, Z., Taddese, E. T., Elka, Z. Z., & Biramo, Y. B. (2025). Father Involvement in Family Dynamics: A Qualitative Exploration of Perceptions and Cultural Influences. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1672384>
- Ismanto, H. S. (2020). Islamic Counseling by Modern Tasawuf Approach to Prevent Sexual Risk Behavior of Individual Lesbian. *International Conference on Science and Education and Technology (ISET 2019)*, 443(Iset 2019), 523–526. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200620.104>
- Ismanto, H. S., & Budiman, M. A. (2026). Integrating Inquiry-Based Learning into Guidance and Counseling Instruction: An Innovative Pedagogical Approach in Teacher Education. *G-COUNS: Jurnal Bimbingan Dan Konseling*, 10(02), 1552–1561. <https://doi.org/10.31316/g-couns.v10i02.8730>
- Ismanto, H. S., Sugiyo,, Sutoyo, A., & Soesanto. (2020). Dynamics of Risking Sex and Sufistic Counseling at College Students in Semarang. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 5(9), 1172–1177. <https://doi.org/10.38124/IJISRT20SEP724>

- Jeglic, E. L., & Winters, G. M. (2025). An Analysis of Sexual Grooming in Cases of Child Sexual Abuse by Educators. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 170(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108119>
- Joley, M., Lunde, C., Landstrom, S., & Jonsson, L. S. (2021). Offender Strategies for Engaging Children in Online Sexual Activity. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 120(6), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105214>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry* (pp. 289–331). [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(85\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8)
- Livingstone, S., & Stoilova, M. (2021). *The 4Cs: Classifying Online Risk to Children*. In *Children Online: Research and Evidence*. <https://doi.org/10.21241/ssaoar.71817>
- Madigan, S., Villani, V., Azzopardi, C., Laut, D., Smith, T., Temple, J. R., Browne, D., & Dimitropoulos, G. (2018). The Prevalence of Unwanted Online Sexual Exposure and Solicitation Among Youth: A Meta-Analysis Danae. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 63(2), 133–141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.03.012>
- Mathews, B., & Collin-Vezina, D. (2017). Child Sexual Abuse: Toward a Conceptual Model and Definition. *Trauma Violence Abuse*, 20(2), 131–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838017738726>
- Munawaroh, Farida, I. A., & Hanurawan, F. (2024). Religiosity And Child Sexual Abuse: Systematic Literature Review Using Big Data with VOS Viewer Visualization. *Bulletin of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 6(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.51214/00202406930000>
- Putri, F. K. A., Fakhruddin, & Utomo, U. (2020). The Effectiveness of Learning Media to Introduce Sex Education among Early Childhood. *Journal of Primary Education*, 11(1), 72–77. <https://doi.org/10.15294/jpe.v11i3.36049>
- Rakhmawati, E., Fitriana, S., & Aditya, D. P. (2025). Mapping the Scientific Landscape of Psychological Crisis Affecting Child Sexual Abuse Victims: A Bibliometric Analysis. *Bulletin of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 7(2), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.51214/002025071542000>
- Rakhmawati, E., Hadjam, N. R., & Khilmiyah, A. (2022). The Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse through Teachers' Knowledge Enhancement in Sexual Education Implementation. *Journal of Human University Natural Sciences*, 49(4), 40–49. <https://doi.org/10.55463/issn.1674-2974.49.4.5>
- Rakhmawati, E., Kusdaryani, W., Suhendri, & Suyati, T. (2022). A Phenomenology Study: Teacher's Perception in Exploring the Merdeka Curriculum for Early Childhood Education. *Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, 10(3), 352–359. <https://doi.org/10.23887/paud.v10i3.55842>
- Rakhmawati, E., Maulia, D., Kartinah, & Sitinjak, C. (2023). Phenomenology Studies: The Practice of Sexual Education Applied by Indonesian Parents. *Journal of Nonformal Education*, 9(2), 198–206. <https://doi.org/10.15294/jne.v9i2.46630>
- Rakhmawati, E., Yuliejatiningsih, Y., & Rakhmawati, D. (2024). Sexual Psychoeducation of Pre-School Children: Teachers' Strategies and Barriers in Teaching Self-Protection. *Bulletin of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.51214/00202406839000>
- Rudolph, J. I., van Berkel, S. R., Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., Walsh, K., Straker, D., & Campbell, T. (2024). Parental Involvement in Programs to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse: A Systematic Review of Four Decades of Research. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*, 25(1), 560–576. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231156408>
- Santrock, J. W. (2017). *Life-Span Development: Seventeenth Edition*. In *Development psychology* (Seventeenth, p. 2017). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Santrock, J. W. (2019). *Life-Span Development, Seventeenth Edition*. In *Life-span development*, 7th ed. (Seventeenth). McGraw-Hill Higher Education. <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018012799>
- Smith, B., & McGannon, K. R. (2017). Developing Rigor in Qualitative Research: Problems and Opportunities within Sport and Exercise Psychology. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11(1), 101–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357>

- Steedman, L. A., Jeglic, E. L., & Winters, G. M. (2024). Examining Parental Abilities to Recognize Sexual Grooming Behaviors of Child Sexual Abusers. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 17(1), 197–208.
- Sun, R., & Zhang, S. (2026). The Relationship between Adolescents' Self-Regulated Learning and Academic Achievement: An Interrelated Mediation Model of Academic Emotions: Evidence from A Nationwide Sample in China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 17(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1768675>
- UNICEF. (2025). Goal 4: Quality Education. <https://www.unicef.org/sustainable-development-goals>
- Walsh, K., Zwi, K., Woolfenden, S., & Shlonsky, A. (2018). School-based education programs for the prevention of child sexual abuse: A Cochrane systematic review and meta-analysis. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 28(1), 33–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731515619705>
- Winters, G. M., Jeglic, E. L., Johnson, B. N., & Chou, C. (2024). The Prevalence of Sexual Grooming Behaviors among Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 154(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106842>
- Zhang, Y., Ding, Q., & Wang, Z. (2021). Why Parental Phubbing is at Risk for Adolescent Mobile Phone Addiction: A Serial Mediating Model. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 121(2), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105873>