

Psychological Profile of Perpetrators and Psychological Impact on Victims of Child Grooming: A Systematic Literature Review

Emilia Afniyati Timung

Universitas Bali Internasional, Indonesia

Email: emiliaafniyatitimum@gmail.com

Keywords:

child grooming; perpetrator psychological profile; victim psychological impact; child sexual abuse; systematic literature review

Abstract

Child grooming is an increasingly concerning form of child sexual violence involving gradual emotional manipulation to establish trust, dependency, and control before sexual exploitation occurs. The development of digital technology has expanded opportunities for perpetrators to approach children through online platforms, making detection and prevention more challenging. This study aims to identify the psychological profile and modus operandi of child grooming perpetrators, examine the psychological impacts experienced by victims, and formulate implications for prevention and intervention strategies. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a systematic literature review method. Data were obtained from five peer-reviewed scientific articles discussing child grooming and child sexual violence from psychological, legal, sociocultural, and intervention perspectives. The findings reveal that perpetrators generally apply sequential manipulation stages, including victim selection, gaining access and isolation, trust development, sexual desensitization, and post-exploitation control. Meanwhile, victims experience significant psychological consequences, including betrayal, traumatic sexualization, powerlessness, stigmatization, anxiety, depression, dissociation, sleep disorders, and post-traumatic symptoms. The study concludes that child grooming is a complex psychological and social phenomenon requiring multidimensional prevention through legal strengthening, trauma-based psychological interventions, comprehensive sexuality education, and collaboration among families, schools, communities, and law enforcement institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence against children is a multidimensional human rights violation, where child grooming is carried out through a systematic emotional manipulation process that takes advantage of the maturity gap and lack of digital supervision to paralyze children's critical potential. Through the approach of Grooming Theory and Routine Activity Theory, this crime is understood as a planned strategy to disguise sexual exploitation behind the guise of false affection that is difficult to detect by the surrounding environment. The manipulation strategy ends up creating a psychological dependency that leaves victims trapped in a cycle of exploitation without realizing that the threat is lurking in them (Arabi, 2025; Serban, 2023). The Indonesian Child Protection Commission recorded 640 cases of child cyber grooming from 2019 to 2022, although the actual number is estimated to be much larger considering that many cases are not reported (Basit et al., 2025). Data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection also recorded 5,488 cases of sexual violence nationwide, with an increase in cases of sexual violence against women by 21 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the previous period (Carolina et al., 2022). This trend confirms that sexual

violence, including child grooming, is not a new phenomenon, but continues to evolve as patterns of social interaction change in the digital age (Gjika, 2023; Utari et al., 2024).

In contrast to conventional forms of sexual abuse which generally involve direct physical contact, child grooming is carried out through a subtle and layered process, starting from building relationships, trust, and emotional dependence before leading to exploitation (Basit et al., 2025). McAlinden (2012, in Mulawarman & Max, 2026) defines grooming as the use of manipulation and control strategically to build trust, normalize damage, and allow the exploitation or concealment of such acts. A similar definition has also been put forward by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which describes grooming as the process by which a person builds a child's trust and then manipulates, exploits, or abuses them (in Mulawarman & Max, 2026). Both definitions affirm one important similarity, namely exploitation disguised as a form of affection.

Understanding the psychological profile of the perpetrator and the psychological impact of the victim is important for three things at once, namely early detection of risky behavior patterns, the preparation of appropriate recovery interventions for victims, and the formulation of evidence-based prevention policies. However, studies on child grooming in Indonesia so far tend to be carried out partially from one point of view only, for example, comparative juridical-normative studies between positive law and Islamic law (Basit et al., 2025), studies of socio-cultural factors in general on child sexual violence (Gea et al., 2025), and studies of counseling intervention strategies to suppress cases of sexual violence in general (Carolina et al., 2022). On the other hand, the psychological-literary study of the representation of child grooming in the film *Priscilla* (2023) provides a fairly comprehensive conceptual framework regarding the stages of manipulation and the psychological effects of the victim, but the analysis is limited to one narrative case study (Mulawarman & Max, 2026). As far as the author's search is concerned, there has been no literature review that specifically integrates the psychological profile of the perpetrator and the psychological impact of child grooming victims from these various perspectives simultaneously. This gap is what this research aims to fill.

Based on this description, this study aims to answer three main questions, namely: (1) how is the psychological profile and *modus operandi* of child grooming perpetrators based on the available literature; (2) what is the psychological impact experienced by child grooming victims; and (3) what are the implications of the findings on prevention and intervention efforts that can be applied in the Indonesian context.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method to synthesize scientific findings regarding child grooming, child sexual violence, and the psychological dimension of perpetrators and victims. The data used are secondary data obtained from five scientific articles published in Sinta-accredited national journals, which discuss child grooming and child sexual violence from the perspective of legal, psycho-literary, socio-cultural, and counseling intervention strategies.

The inclusion criteria used in the literature selection are: (1) scientific articles that have gone through a peer-reviewed process; (2) discuss child grooming or child sexual violence from a psychological, legal, socio-cultural, or intervention perspective; (3) published in Indonesian or English; and (4) the full text is accessible in full. The exclusion criteria include articles that

do not discuss the psychological or socio-legal dimensions of child sexual violence, as well as sources that do not go through an academic review process.

Data analysis is carried out through three stages, as stated by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014, in Mulawarman & Max, 2026), namely data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. In the data condensation stage, the authors extracted relevant findings regarding the profile of the perpetrator and the psychological impact of the victim from each source. At the data presentation stage, the findings were grouped into main themes, namely the psychological profile of the perpetrator, the psychological impact of the victim, socio-cultural factors that affect the dynamics of grooming, and the implications for prevention and intervention. The final stage is in the form of narrative synthesis to integrate findings from the five sources in a coherent manner.

Table 1. presents a summary of five articles that form the basis of the synthesis in this study.

Yes	Author & Year	Article Title	Study Focus	Journal (Sinta)
1	Basit, Bahrudin, & Arahman (2025)	Protection of Children from Sexual Grooming in the Perspective of Islamic Law and Positive Law	Juridical comparative normative; Modus operandi and the basis for criminalizing grooming	Al Mikraj (Sinta 6)
2	Mulawarman & Max (2026)	The Effects of Child Grooming in Priscilla (2023): Psychological Approach	The stages of grooming and the psychological impact of the victim (film narrative case study)	Cultural Sciences (Sinta 4)
3	Salwa, Nuraini, & Rochmaniya (2025)	Violence against Women: Psychological Challenges and Solutions	Psychological profiles of perpetrators and victims of gender-based violence; Psychological Intervention	Journal of Social Humanities
4	Carolina, Saputra, Nafi'ah, Mercury, & Bakti (2022)	Intervention Strategies to Suppress Cases of Sexual Violence: Issues and Trends	The impact of the victim's trauma; risk factors of the perpetrator; The Role of Counseling Guidance	BK An-Nur Student Journal
5	Gea, Mardhiyah, & Jasri (2025)	Socio-Cultural Factors, Impacts, and Efforts to Prevent Sexual Violence Against Children in Indonesia	Socio-cultural factors that trigger and prevent child sexual violence	Indonesian Abdimas Journal

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Definition and Characteristics of Child Grooming

Child grooming can be understood as a manipulative act carried out gradually by the perpetrator to build closeness, trust, and emotional dependence with the child, with the ultimate goal of committing sexual exploitation both directly and through digital media (Basit et al., 2025). The main characteristic that distinguishes grooming from conventional forms of sexual violence is its procedural and hidden nature; The perpetrator does not immediately commit exploitative acts, but takes a series of stages to weaken the resistance and build the psychological dependence of the victim first. Within Indonesia's positive legal framework, the behavior of persuading, seducing, or manipulating children for sexual purposes, either directly or through electronic media, has been categorized as a criminal act of sexual violence as

stipulated in Article 6 and Article 15 of Law Number 12 of 2022 concerning the Crime of Sexual Violence (Basit et al., 2025). This arrangement marks a shift in the legal paradigm from initially focusing on physical consequences to protection against more subtle and psychological processes of exploitation.

Psychological Profile and Modus Operandi of Child Grooming Perpetrators

A review of the literature shows that child grooming perpetrators generally do not commit spontaneous exploitative acts, but go through a planned and gradual manipulation process. Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor (2020, in Mulawarman & Max, 2026) identify five stages in the grooming process, which can be summarized as follows.

1. Victim selection, which is the stage when the perpetrator deliberately targets children who appear socially isolated, lack confidence, or have certain physical characteristics, because these traits are considered to facilitate the manipulation process. Elliott, Browne, and Kilcoyne (1995, in Mulawarman & Max, 2026) found that 42 percent of perpetrators chose victims based on physical appearance, while 27 percent were influenced by the way children dressed.
2. Gaining access and isolating a child, which is when the perpetrator seeks opportunities to interact personally with the victim and gradually isolates the child from his friends or family in order to strengthen the perpetrator's influence and weaken the victim's external support system.
3. Trust development, which is when the perpetrator builds emotional closeness through the illusion of intimacy and exclusivity, so that the victim believes that the relationship is sincere and special.
4. Desensitization to sexual content and physical contact (desensitization), which is the process of slowly normalizing sexual behavior, generally begins with nonsexual gestures or suggestive conversations before progressing to more explicit actions.
5. Post-exploitation maintenance (maintenance following the abuse), which is when the perpetrator tries to maintain confidentiality and control through the provision of gifts, guilt, or threats, thereby deepening the victim's confusion and dependence.

These stages show that the perpetrator is actively taking advantage of the gap in the child's psychosocial maturity. Icenogle et al. (2019, in Mulawarman & Max, 2026) explain the existence of a 'maturity gap', which is a condition when a child's cognitive capacity has approached the level of an adult around the age of sixteen, but psychosocial maturity such as impulse control, risk anticipation, and emotion regulation only develops fully until the age of twenty. Steinberg et al. (2009, in Mulawarman & Max, 2026) added a distinction between cold cognition, i.e. rational thinking in a neutral situation, and hot cognition, i.e. decision-making under emotional pressure; Children tend to be more vulnerable to the second situation, and it is this vulnerability that the perpetrator exploits to turn control into a semblance of affection.

In terms of personality characteristics, studies of gender-based violence perpetrators more broadly show personality disorders that appear through immature emotional states, irritability, and aggressive tendencies (González et al., 2016, in Salwa et al., 2025). This kind of personality pattern is relevant to understanding groomers, considering that emotional manipulation requires a certain amount of self-control as well as an impulse to dominate the victim. In the Indonesian context, Carolina et al. (2022) identified a number of risk factors that also affect a person to commit sexual violence, including addiction to pornographic content, lack of parental

supervision, and disharmonious family conditions. Although the findings are general and not specifically aimed at groomers, they remain relevant as predisposing conditions that magnify the risk of manipulative behavior towards children.

In addition to individual factors, socio-cultural conditions also strengthen the perpetrator's space for movement. Patriarchal norms that place men in a dominant position, while women and children are positioned as parties who must obey, create a power imbalance that increases the likelihood of manipulation and exploitation (Wardani et al., 2024, in Gea et al., 2025). From a legal point of view, this manipulative behavior still shows an element of *mens rea* or malicious intent even though it does not always involve physical contact, so the criminalization of preparatory acts is important in the framework of modern criminal law (Basit et al., 2025).

The Psychological Impact of Child Grooming Victims

The psychological impact of child grooming victims can be understood through two complementary conceptual frameworks. The first framework was put forward by Finkelhor and Browne (in Tower, 2002, in Carolina et al., 2022), which identified four dimensions of trauma in child victims of sexual violence, which are as follows.

1. Betrayal, which is the feeling of betrayal because of beliefs that should be the basis of the child's relationship with authority figures, is actually abused to threaten the safety of the child himself.
2. Traumatic sexualization, which is the formation of sexual understanding and responses that are distorted due to exploitative experiences, which in some cases affects the pattern of intimate relationships of victims later in life.
3. Powerlessness, which is the feeling of not being able to control one's body and one's own situation, which often gives rise to anxiety, nightmares, and prolonged feelings of weakness.
4. Stigmatization, which is feelings of guilt, shame, and having a bad self-image due to the helplessness experienced, which in some victims develops into self-punishing behavior.

The second framework was put forward by Elliot and Briere (1992, in Mulawarman & Max, 2026), who identified six psychological effects that victims of sexual violence prevalent experience in children, namely anxiety characterized by constant fear and tension; depression that arises as a result of feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and guilt that develop into a long-term depressive state; dissociation which is a defense mechanism in the form of disconnection from reality but ultimately interferes with the integrity of the sense of self; sexual problems that include negative feelings of intimacy and sexual dysfunction; sleep disorders characterized by nightmares and insomnia; as well as post-traumatic symptoms such as mind intrusion, avoidance, and mood swings and excessive alertness.

Both frameworks show a common view that the psychological impact of grooming does not emerge as a single event, but rather develops into an ongoing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral response. This is in line with findings in the broader context of gender-based violence, which show that victims of violence tend to experience complex mental health disorders such as anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, and panic attacks that can last years after the incident (Dokkedahl et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2017, in Salwa et al., 2025). The convergence of findings from the literature on child sexual violence specifically and the literature on gender-based violence in general reinforces the validity of these patterns of psychological impact (Forrester Fellowes et al., 2026; Rodriguez Rodriguez & Gomez-Baya, 2025).

One of the things that aggravates the psychological impact of victims is the delay in disclosure. Beitchman et al. (in Tower, 2002, in Carolina et al., 2022) note that it takes one to three years for child victims of sexual abuse to begin to open up to others about what they are experiencing. This long span of time increases the risk of repeated exploitation while deepening the accumulated psychological impact before victims receive adequate support and intervention.

Socio-Cultural Factors That Reinforce Risks and Exacerbate Impacts

In addition to the individual factors of perpetrators and victims, the dynamics of child grooming are also shaped by the socio-cultural conditions that surround it. Silent culture strengthens the victim's helplessness due to shame, social stigma, and low trust in legal institutions, so many cases go unreported (Gea et al., 2025). This condition is exacerbated by low sexuality education in children, which causes them to be unaware of the limitations of the body and signs of manipulative behavior that lead to exploitation (Lathifah, 2023, in Gea et al., 2025). At the same time, advances in digital technology have given rise to new forms of sexual violence, such as online harassment and exploitation through social media, which expand the perpetrator's space to move while making it difficult to detect and report due to weak digital regulation and supervision (Gea et al., 2025; Basit et al., 2025).

Limited access to protection institutions also hinders the overall handling of cases. The existence of the National Commission on Anti-Violence Against Women centered in Jakarta, for example, makes it difficult for victims in the regions, especially marginalized groups such as children from poor families or children in conflict-prone areas (Salwa et al., 2025). The combination of patriarchal norms, a culture of silence, low sexual literacy, and limited access to services creates an environment conducive to the sustainability of grooming practices while increasing the psychological burden that must be borne by victims (Reneses et al., 2024; Winters & Jeglic, 2022).

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

Based on the above findings, efforts to prevent and handle child grooming need to be designed holistically by involving legal, psychological, educational, and social dimensions at the same time. From a legal perspective, the implementation of the Sexual Violence Crime Law needs to be strengthened, especially in reaching digital-based crime modes that have been a weak point for law enforcement (Basit et al., 2025). Basit et al. (2025) also show that the integration of Islamic legal values, especially the principle of *maqāsid al-syarī'ah* which emphasizes the protection of honor and soul, can strengthen the normative foundation of child protection without replacing the existing positive legal framework.

From a psychological perspective, trauma-based interventions are the main need in victim recovery. Cognitive behavioral therapy can be used to change the victim's negative mindset to be more adaptive, humanistic therapy can help victims rediscover internal resources to get out of dangerous situations, while psychosocial readiness models can build victims' awareness that the behavior they are experiencing is a form of harassment that must be stopped (Salwa et al., 2025). These three approaches, although initially designed for victims of gender-based violence in general, are relevant to be adapted for victims of child grooming given the similar patterns of psychological impact experienced (Sperlich et al., 2021).

In terms of education, comprehensive sexual education needs to be provided from an early age so that children understand their body limits and are able to recognize signs of manipulative

behavior (Carolina et al., 2022; Gea et al., 2025). The role of counselors and guidance and counseling teachers is important in delivering the material contextually, by paying attention to the prevailing social norms without sacrificing the substance of child protection (Carolina et al., 2022). From the perspective of family and society, strengthening parental supervision, open communication about sexuality issues, and efforts to reduce a culture of silence and stigma against victims are important prerequisites for effective prevention (Gea et al., 2025). In the end, cross-sectoral collaboration between the government, educational institutions, families, and law enforcement officials is the key to building a comprehensive child protection system that is responsive to the evolving dynamics of child grooming (Davies, 2026; Mooney, 2024; Yulianti & Srianti, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This literature review showed that child grooming perpetrators operate through a process of gradual manipulation that includes victim selection, access and isolation, trust building, desensitization, and maintenance of post-exploitation controls, by taking advantage of gaps in children's psychosocial maturity and socio-cultural conditions such as patriarchal norms and a culture of silence. On the victim's side, the psychological impact experienced is reflected in the four dimensions of trauma according to Finkelhor and Browne, namely betrayal, sexual trauma, helplessness, and stigmatization, as well as six clinical symptoms according to Elliot and Briere, namely anxiety, depression, dissociation, sexual problems, sleep disorders, and post-traumatic symptoms. These findings confirm that child grooming is not just a single event, but a systematic process that produces ongoing psychological consequences for victims. Therefore, prevention and handling efforts require a multidimensional approach that integrates law enforcement, trauma-based psychological interventions, comprehensive sexuality education, and active collaboration between families, schools, and communities. Further research is recommended to expand the literature base to include empirical articles that specifically examine the psychological profile of perpetrators and the psychological impact of child grooming victims, either through primary studies based on clinical interviews or through systematic reviews with broader databases indexed on Scopus or other international databases, so that the resulting conclusions have a higher generalizing power. Further research is also recommended to explore the effectiveness of longitudinally specific psychological interventions for child grooming victims, given that most of the currently available literature is still descriptive and has not evaluated the long-term success of rehabilitation programs.

REFERENCES

- Arabi, S. (2025). *Breaking Trauma Bonds with Narcissists and Psychopaths: Stop the Cycle of Manipulation, Exploitation, and Abuse in Your Romantic Relationships*. New Harbinger Publications.
- Basit, A., Bahrudin, R., & Arahman, M. N. (2025). Perlindungan anak dari grooming seksual dalam perspektif hukum Islam dan hukum positif: Kajian yuridis-normatif komparatif. *Al Mikraj: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Humaniora*, 6(1), 1112–1123. <https://doi.org/10.37680/almikraj.v6i1.8478>
- Carolina, N., Saputra, W. A., Nafi'ah, H. H., Merkuri, Y. G., & Bakti, C. P. (2022). Strategi intervensi untuk menekan kasus kekerasan seksual: Isu dan tren. *Jurnal Mahasiswa BK An-Nur: Berbeda, Bermakna, Mulia*, 8(2), 60–65.

- Davies, A. (2026). *Developing a framework for measuring success and impact of multi-agency working on child criminal exploitation cases*. University of Gloucestershire.
- Forrester Fellowes, A., Kloess, J. A., & Gladden, S. (2026). The psychological impact on and mental health outcomes for victim-survivors of technology-assisted child sexual abuse: a systematic literature review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 17, 1682155.
- Gea, I. Z., Mardhiyah, L., & Jasri, R. H. (2025). Faktor sosial-budaya, dampak, dan upaya pencegahan kekerasan seksual terhadap anak di Indonesia. *Jurnal Abdimas Indonesia*, 5(4), 2386–2390.
- Gjika, A. (2023). *When rape goes viral: Youth and sexual assault in the digital age*. Univ of California Press.
- Mooney, V. (2024). *An Exploration of Contact Child Sexual Exploitation Victim-Perpetrator Interpersonal Dynamics: Providing Indicators of Exploitative Language for Law Enforcement and Safeguarding Agencies*. University of Central Lancashire.
- Mulawarman, J. M., & Max, J. I. S. D. (2026). The effects of child grooming in Priscilla (2023): Psychological approach. *Ilmu Budaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Budaya*, 10(2), 171–188.
- Reneses, M., Riberas-Gutiérrez, M., & Bueno-Guerra, N. (2024). “He flattered me”. A comprehensive look into online grooming risk factors: Merging voices of victims, offenders and experts through in-depth interviews. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 18(4).
- Rodriguez Rodriguez, M., & Gomez-Baya, D. (2025). Scoping Review of the Psychological Effects of Gender-Based Violence on Children. *Children*, 12(9), 1277.
- Salwa, V., Nuraini, F., & Rochmaniya, H. (2025). Kekerasan terhadap perempuan: Tantangan dan solusi psikologis. *Jurnal Sosial Humaniora (JSH)*, 2(1), 58–80. <https://doi.org/10.70214/4z4j0c29>
- Serban, I. V. (2023). Psychological violence and intra-family moral abuse: dynamic profiles of deviance. An Italian retrospective. *Soc. & Soc. Work Rev.*, 7, 121.
- Sperlich, M., Logan-Greene, P., & Finucane, A. (2021). Adopting a trauma-informed approach to gender-based violence across the life course. In *Understanding gender-based violence: An essential textbook for nurses, healthcare professionals and social workers* (pp. 185–202). Springer.
- Utari, I. S., Arifin, R., & Ramada, D. P. (2024). Exploring Child Grooming Sexual Abuse through Differential Association Theory: A Criminological and Legal Examination with Constitutional Implications. *Volksgeist: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Dan Konstitusi*, 7(1).
- Winters, G. M., & Jeglic, E. L. (2022). *Sexual grooming: Integrating research, practice, prevention, and policy*. Springer Nature.
- Yulianti, A., & Srianti, C. D. (2025). The Effectiveness of the Child Protection Law in Preventing and Handling Child Violence in the Digital Era. *Al Mabhats: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Agama*, 10(1), 1–16.