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**NATION**

# Weaponized grooming rhetoric is taking a toll on LGBTQ community and child sex abuse survivors

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**Key Points**

Some conservatives have begun using words like "grooming" often associated with child sex abuse.

Such rhetoric hurts the LGBTQ people, particularly gay men who have long been accused of predatory behavior.

Careless use of words connected to child sex abuse diminishes the experience of survivors, advocates say.

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Grooming, a term associated with adults who sexually abuse children, has become an attack word in today's battle over anti-LGBTQ legislation and is spilling out into the broader culture wars.

The term, coined in the 1980s, describes a process used to gain access to a potential victim, coerce them to agree to the abuse and reduce the risk of being caught, according to RAINN, a national anti-sexual violence organization.

Now, however, some conservatives are using such terms as "grooming," "groomer" and "pro-pedophile" against opponents in battles over everything from laws restricting discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools to Supreme Court confirmations. Critics say the references are dangerous, diminishing the experience of sexual assault survivors and smearing the LGBTQ community, which has long faced a false stigma regarding inappropriate behavior with children.

"I think it does enormous harm," said Michael Bronski, a professor of women, gender and sexuality studies at Harvard University and author of "A Queer History of the United States for Young People." "This really speaks to the deep-seatedness of this notion of abusing children as a political tactic."

Here are some recent examples where child sex abuse terminology has been used:

- In March, Christina Pushaw, press secretary for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, tweeted that "Parental Rights in Education" legislation restricting classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity, is an "Anti-Grooming Bill" and that anyone opposing it is "probably a groomer or at least you don't denounce the grooming of 4-8 year old children."
- Fox News host Laura Ingraham went further, labeling a program segment: "Liberals are sexually grooming elementary students."
- After Disney criticized that legislation, Lt. Gov. Jeanette M. Nuñez told Newsmax that the entertainment giant has a "not-so-secret agenda to indoctrinate our youth with topics that are very inappropriate. Sexualizing children at a young age is never OK."
- Earlier this month, first-term U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Georgia, tweeted "Democrats are the party of killing babies, grooming and transitioning children, and pro-pedophile politics" two days after calling three Republican senators "pro-pedophile" for voting to confirm Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court. Greene has a history of supporting the fringe group QAnon, whose conspiracy theories include the false claim that Democratic elites are immersed in child sex trafficking.
- And, in Michigan, Republican state Sen. Lana Theis accused Democratic colleague Mallory McMorrow of wanting to "groom and sexualize kindergarteners" in a fund-raising email, leading to an impassioned condemnation last week by McMorrow, who supports LGBTQ rights.

Use of terms such as grooming and pro-pedophile play into a persistent stereotype linking LGBTQ people to inappropriate behavior with children, "which is completely, patently false," said R.G. Cravens, assistant professor of political science at California Polytechnic State University, who focuses on LGBTQ politics and policy.

"The rhetoric has a long history with anti-LGBTQ politics," Cravens said.

He added that the use of weaponized language often arises in reaction to LGBTQ political, legal and social gains. As such, Cravens explained, right-wing groups have historically used loaded terms to discredit and delegitimize political opponents and LGBTQ people in particular and few topics draw as strong an emotional response as harm being done to children.

"There's no coincidence that the first conservative anti-LGBTQ organizations that formed in the 1970s," Cravens said, "went by names like Save Our Children."

Although specific uses of the word grooming began appearing close to 40 years ago, "the charge that gay people, or specifically gay men, will actually lure or molest young boys has actually been in active circulation for the past 100 years or so," Harvard's Bronski said.

Political language loaded with references related to child sexual abuse, especially with the history of blame wrongfully attached to LGBTQ people, goes hand in hand with a flood of state legislative bills, many targeting transgender people, seen as restricting LGBTQ rights in classrooms, medical treatment, sports participation and restroom usage, said Sarah Kate Ellis, president and CEO of national LGBTQ rights group GLAAD. "It started with over 200 anti-LGBTQ bills and now they're adding fuel to the fire with this rhetoric," Ellis said.

Tiffany Justice, co-founder of parental rights non-profit Moms for Liberty, is a supporter of the new Florida law prohibiting classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade. She defended using the term grooming because she feels kids are being indoctrinated in school.

Justice acknowledged that some people could link terms like grooming to child sex abuse, but added: "Stop teaching kids things there are laws against teaching and parents don't want taught. No one will call you a groomer then."

Justice rejected criticism that the law targets the LGBTQ community, calling it "a lie. ... Nothing about the bill says anything about gay or straight."

Log Cabin Republicans, the nation's largest organization of LGBTQ conservatives and their straight allies, also supports the Florida law and doesn't see it as an attack on LGBTQ rights, president Charles Moran said.

However, he acknowledged that some people have loosely used terms such as grooming, especially in social media.

"I'm very sensitive to the importance around child trafficking, of actual grooming, and we don't use that officially within our organization," said Moran.

## **Language's effect on survivors of sexual abuse**

Opponents of the grooming language say it doesn't have to mention LGBTQ people directly to discriminate, that a restriction against discussing sexual orientation and gender identity defaults in favor of the status quo, cisgender heterosexuals.

Child sex abuse is a serious societal problem, with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting that about one in four girls and one in 13 boys experience it, with the majority of abusers being known to the child or family.

Efforts to prevent child sex abuse and help survivors become more difficult when terms such as grooming and pedophile become cultural cannon fodder, advocates say.

"It feels like child sex abuse prevention is being hijacked by people to fit an agenda that has absolutely nothing to do with preventing child sexual abuse," said Jenny

Coleman, director of Stop It Now!, a non-profit working to stop the sexual abuse of children.

Media discussion of sexual abuse, even as part of necessary efforts to find solutions, can be difficult for survivors of harassment, assault and abuse.

It's much worse when that discussion is "misused" for other purposes, said Laura Palumbo, communications director for the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, based in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

"Many survivors may not even have disclosed (their experience) to their own friends, family and loved ones because of the shame and stigma that they face. And then to see that their stories are being tossed around by others to make a point about an unrelated issue does have a harmful impact," Palumbo said.

## **Political battles have impact on students' mental health**

Advocates are worried that harsh political language can have damaging effects on the mental health of LGBTQ students, many of whom already feel isolated and often targeted as they navigate adolescence.

According to a 2021 Trevor Project survey, 42% of LGBTQ youth – and more than half who are transgender or nonbinary – seriously considered attempting suicide, with those who learned about LGBTQ issues in class reporting a 23% lower rate.

"It's hard for me to think of who ultimately doesn't get harmed" by the tandem of bills and language, said Casey Pick of The Trevor Project, the largest suicide prevention and crisis services organization for young LGBTQ people.

Pick said hostile language once delivered anonymously is now "coming from a governor's press secretary. And that's mainstreaming this kind of vicious rhetoric in a way that is filtering through entire communities, all the way on down to our schools and playgrounds."

Schools have become "ground zero for the culture wars," said Debra Hauser of Advocates for Youth, a national non-profit that champions young people's rights to sex education and sexual health services. She points to the debate over the teaching of racial history and efforts to pull books from school libraries as parallel battles.

The language can take a toll, even when bills don't pass, she said.

For LGBTQ students, it affects their sense of self worth and their ability to believe in themselves.

"There's this idea of the internalization of oppression," said Hauser. "This rhetoric is hurtful."