

Child Socialization Patterns and the Risks of Child Grooming in Modern Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study examines child grooming as a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by everyday relational practices rather than solely as an individual criminal act. The research was conducted in response to the limited scholarly attention given to how child socialization patterns, particularly those related to trust, emotional closeness, and adult authority, may unintentionally create conditions that facilitate grooming practices. Using a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach, the study analyzed secondary digital data collected through netnographic methods, including online news reports, investigative publications, and child protection narratives. The findings reveal that grooming risks frequently emerge within socially accepted relationships characterized by familiarity, emotional attachment, and perceived moral legitimacy. Four interconnected themes were identified: trust-based child socialization, normalization of adult and child closeness, ambiguity of social authority, and limited public awareness of grooming processes. The study concludes that social norms intended to protect children may simultaneously obscure early warning signs of exploitation. However, the reliance on secondary digital narratives limits access to direct experiential perspectives and restricts broader generalization.

Penelitian ini mengkaji child grooming sebagai fenomena sosial yang tertanam dalam praktik relasional sehari-hari, bukan semata-mata sebagai tindakan kriminal individual. Penelitian dilakukan karena masih terbatasnya perhatian akademik terhadap pola sosialisasi anak, khususnya yang berkaitan dengan kepercayaan, kedekatan emosional, dan otoritas orang dewasa, yang secara tidak langsung dapat menciptakan kondisi yang mempermudah terjadinya grooming. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi interpretatif kualitatif dengan memanfaatkan data sekunder digital yang dikumpulkan melalui metode netnografi, meliputi berita daring, laporan investigatif, dan narasi perlindungan anak. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa risiko grooming sering muncul dalam hubungan sosial yang dianggap wajar dan aman karena dibangun melalui kedekatan, keterikatan emosional, dan legitimasi moral. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi empat tema utama, yaitu sosialisasi anak berbasis kepercayaan, normalisasi kedekatan antara anak dan orang dewasa, ambiguitas otoritas sosial, serta rendahnya kesadaran masyarakat terhadap proses grooming. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa norma sosial yang bertujuan melindungi anak dapat sekaligus menyamarkan tanda awal eksploitasi. Meskipun demikian, penggunaan narasi digital sekunder membatasi akses terhadap pengalaman langsung partisipan dan membatasi generalisasi temuan penelitian.

Keywords: adult authority, child grooming, child socialization, trust

Introduction

In contemporary societies, children's socialization unfolds across multiple interconnected arenas (Firinci Orman, 2020; Mancheva, 2017; Perez-Felkner, 2013), including the family, schools, community environments, and digitally mediated spaces, all of which are organized around norms of trust, protection, and adult authority as foundational elements of child development (Fry et al., 2025; Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Values such as obedience, emotional

closeness, and respect for adult figures are institutionalized as markers of appropriate and healthy socialization, both in face-to-face interactions and within online environments (Patterson et al., 2022). As children increasingly engage with social actors beyond direct parental supervision, their everyday experiences become embedded in relationships that are culturally framed as safe, legitimate, and meaningful, thereby shaping expectations that trust and emotional openness are natural components of social interaction (Peris Hernández et al., 2021). Yet, beneath this normalization of trust-based relations lie latent forms of vulnerability that often remain unnoticed, particularly in digital contexts where relational boundaries expand and the authenticity of social actors is not always immediately verifiable (Fry et al., 2025).

Within such relational contexts, child grooming does not typically manifest as an abrupt or explicitly coercive act, but rather develops through a gradual and strategic process that capitalizes on dynamics of closeness and trust (Craven et al., 2006; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Grooming consists of patterned interactions through which an adult cultivates emotional bonds with a child in order to generate feelings of safety, dependence, and psychological attachment, often by employing subtle and layered persuasive strategies (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). These interactions frequently take the form of socially legitimized roles, such as those of teachers, mentors, caregivers, or helpers, rendering them difficult to recognize as potentially harmful by both children and their surrounding social environments (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Kloess, Hamilton-Giachritsis, et al., 2017; Kloess, Seymour-Smith, et al., 2017). Because they are embedded in practices that are culturally interpreted as care and support, grooming processes tend to be integrated into everyday interactional routines and are often identified as problematic only after relational boundaries have already shifted in significant ways (Joleby et al., 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, grooming can be understood as a staged and structured process that exploits relational asymmetries between adults and children in terms of authority, experience, and emotional regulation (Craven et al., 2006; Helgheim, 2025). The sequential phases of target selection, trust construction, boundary blurring, and the normalization of secrecy operate through social mechanisms that align with culturally instilled values of obedience and deference to authority figures within families, schools, and other social institutions (Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Such unequal power relations enable manipulation to occur in ways that are rarely perceived as such by children, as they are framed through discourses of affection, attention, and protection and reinforced by cultural expectations that adults are inherently knowledgeable and trustworthy (Kloess, Seymour-Smith, et al., 2017; Plummer, 2018). Accordingly, grooming should not be reduced to an individual pathology, but rather understood as a distortion of socialization processes that are themselves sustained by dominant norms surrounding compliance, intimacy, and the legitimacy of adult authority (Finkelhor, 1984; Helgheim, 2025).

Despite its fundamentally relational character, existing scholarship on grooming has been largely shaped by legal, clinical, and forensic perspectives that prioritize offender characteristics, individual risk factors, and criminal outcomes (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2020; Whittle et al., 2013). While these approaches play a crucial role in child protection and legal intervention, they tend to conceptualize grooming as an exceptional transgression detached from the ordinary textures of social life, thereby underestimating how seemingly normal interactions can function as the medium through which relational manipulation unfolds (Patterson et al., 2022). Consequently, the sociocultural dimensions that normalize trust, emotional closeness, and obedience within child-adult relations have not been sufficiently

examined as contexts that may inadvertently facilitate grooming, both in offline and online settings (Fry et al., 2025; Joleby et al., 2021). This limitation underscores the need for perspectives that situate grooming within broader structures of meaning, communication practices, and everyday socialization processes (Helgheim, 2025; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016).

A phenomenological orientation provides an alternative lens by foregrounding lived experience and meaning-making. From this standpoint, the central issue is not only what occurs in grooming interactions, but how trust, intimacy, and authority are experienced, interpreted, and normalized in everyday child–adult relationships (Plummer, 2018). When obedience is constructed as a marker of proper socialization and emotional closeness is interpreted as evidence of safety, children may lack the experiential resources to recognize the gradual reconfiguration of relational boundaries (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2014). Under such conditions, grooming becomes embedded in taken-for-granted meanings of social life and is therefore unlikely to be immediately perceived as a threat by either children or their surrounding social environments (Calvete et al., 2022; Helgheim, 2025).

Building on these considerations, the present study is grounded in the concern that socialization practices premised on trust, emotional closeness, and the legitimacy of adult authority, while intended to nurture and protect, may simultaneously contain latent vulnerabilities that often remain unrecognized. To date, grooming has predominantly been framed as an individual deviance or a criminal phenomenon, whereas the relational meanings and lived experiences through which children come to understand closeness, obedience, and safety have received comparatively limited analytical attention. This study therefore seeks to examine how patterns of child socialization are socially constructed, experienced, and normalized in contemporary contexts, particularly as they are represented in public digital narratives, and how such meaning structures may allow relational boundaries to shift in subtle and gradual ways. In doing so, the study aims to contribute theoretically by conceptualizing child grooming as a socially embedded and meaning-laden process rather than merely an individual offense, and practically by providing a conceptual foundation for prevention strategies that are more sensitive to relational dynamics and to the subjective experiences through which vulnerability is produced and sustained.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design to explore how patterns of child socialization and the associated risks of child grooming are meaningfully constructed within contemporary social contexts. Phenomenology is adopted to foreground the interpretation of social experience and meaning as they are articulated, rather than to establish causal relationships or behavioral generalizations. Specifically, the study draws on the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes understanding how social phenomena are experienced, interpreted, and rendered meaningful within particular relational and cultural settings (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, phenomenology is operationalized through the analysis of mediated narratives, allowing experiential meanings to be examined without direct engagement with vulnerable populations.

The study is based on secondary qualitative data collected through a netnographic approach, which is well suited for examining social phenomena as they unfold in digital

environments (Kozinets, 2015). Data sources include publicly accessible online news articles, investigative reports, child protection organization websites, and open-access digital narratives that discuss child socialization, adult-child interactions, and grooming-related processes. These materials are treated not as factual records of events, but as social and cultural texts that reflect collectively shared meanings, norms, and assumptions. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select materials that offered rich descriptive content and explicit engagement with themes of trust, authority, and relational closeness. Only publicly available data were included, ensuring ethical suitability and transparency of data use.

Data analysis followed an interpretive phenomenological thematic procedure, combining the analytic sensitivity of IPA with thematic pattern identification to capture recurring experiential structures (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). The analytic process involved repeated immersion in the data, initial identification of meaning units, iterative theme development, and the synthesis of thematic patterns across sources. Analytical attention was directed toward how trust, emotional closeness, and adult authority are normalized within child socialization practices, and how such normalization may obscure the gradual emergence of grooming risks. Throughout the analysis, reflexive engagement was maintained to acknowledge the researcher's interpretive role and positionality. Ethical considerations were addressed by relying exclusively on publicly available materials, avoiding personal identification, and adhering to established netnographic research guidelines (Kozinets, 2015).

Result

Trust-Based Child Socialization

The secondary qualitative data reveal that child socialization is predominantly framed as a process of cultivating a sense of safety grounded in trust toward adult figures and surrounding social environments. Trust does not emerge as a reflective outcome of children's lived experiences, but rather is introduced as an assumed and necessary condition from the outset. Across the analyzed narratives, adult-child relationships are consistently portrayed as inherently safe spaces, in which the absence of suspicion is positioned as a defining marker of healthy social development. Within this construction, trust operates as a foundational orientation that shapes how children are expected to engage with the social world prior to developing the capacity to critically evaluate relational complexities. These patterns form the overarching structure of what is identified as trust-based child socialization.

Within this theme, trust is represented as a moral value central to child formation. The data show that children who demonstrate openness, compliance, and emotional closeness toward adult figures are depicted as successfully socialized. Trust is framed not as a situational or negotiated relational stance, but as an indicator of social maturity and moral alignment. Behaviors such as accepting guidance without resistance, sharing personal experiences freely, and demonstrating emotional availability toward adults are normalized as desirable expressions of internalized social values. This moral framing positions trust as an unquestioned good, reinforcing its role as a normative expectation rather than a relational choice. Further analysis indicates that trust is internalized as an unquestioned condition, particularly when adult figures

occupy socially legitimized roles. Teachers, mentors, religious leaders, and institutional representatives are routinely assumed to be trustworthy from the outset, based on status, institutional affiliation, or community reputation. Within these narratives, trust is rarely accompanied by explicit discussions of boundaries, monitoring mechanisms, or relational evaluation. Instead, trust becomes structurally embedded in social roles, rendering adult-child relationships socially perceived as stable and inherently safe regardless of the actual interactional dynamics that unfold.

Additionally, the findings demonstrate that trust-based socialization unfolds within a discursive space largely absent of explicit risk articulation. Early interactions between adults and children are portrayed as natural, positive, and developmentally meaningful, while potential vulnerabilities remain unspoken. Language related to risk, precaution, or relational ambiguity is notably missing in initial representations of adult-child interaction. Risk becomes visible only retrospectively, when relational disruptions or problematic interactions are already apparent. This pattern suggests that trust is constructed and reproduced as a value detached from early awareness of potential harm, systematically deferring children's recognition of vulnerability within adult-child relationships. To provide a structured overview of these findings, Table 1 summarizes the relationship between the main theme, subthemes, and data sources that underpin this analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Findings for Theme 1, Trust-Based Child Socialization

Research Focus	Main Theme	Subtheme	Descriptive Focus of Findings	Type of Secondary Data Sources
Child socialization practices and vulnerability to grooming	Trust-Based Child Socialization	Trust as a Moral Value in Child Formation	Trust is represented as a core moral value that signifies proper character development and social maturity in children. Trust toward adult figures is framed as a normative expectation rather than a contextual relational choice.	Online news articles, educational institution websites, child development discourse in digital media
Child socialization practices and vulnerability to grooming	Trust-Based Child Socialization	Internalization of Trust as an Unquestioned Condition	Trust is assumed to be inherent in adult-child relations based on social status, institutional affiliation, or community reputation, limiting critical evaluation and reflexive oversight.	Media reports, organizational narratives, public awareness campaigns
Child socialization practices and vulnerability to grooming	Trust-Based Child Socialization	Absence of Risk Language in Trust-Based Socialization	Discourses of child socialization emphasize safety and benevolence while omitting language of risk, vulnerability, or precaution, particularly in early-stage adult-child interactions.	Digital news platforms, advocacy websites, publicly accessible educational materials

Normalization of Adult-Child Closeness

The analysis demonstrates that adult-child closeness is systematically represented as an ordinary and socially sanctioned dimension of children's daily interactions. Within the examined narratives, proximity between adults and children is not articulated as a situational or conditional arrangement, but rather as a stable relational norm embedded within educational, familial, and community-based practices. Emotional and interpersonal closeness is framed as an essential component of adult responsibility, reflecting attentiveness, care, and moral commitment. As a result, relational intimacy is positioned as an inherent attribute of appropriate adult involvement, rather than as a relational configuration requiring contextual evaluation or deliberate boundary-setting.

The data further reveal that sustained interaction and personal engagement are repeatedly emphasized as indicators of positive relational quality. Adults who demonstrate consistent emotional availability, individualized attention, and ongoing personal communication with children are portrayed as fulfilling their social roles effectively. Such interactions often extend beyond formal or institutionalized contexts, encompassing informal encounters and personalized exchanges that are described as nurturing and supportive. Within these accounts, the intensification of relational closeness is rarely interrogated; instead, it is normalized as evidence of trust, mentorship, and pedagogical or moral investment. Consequently, distinctions between professional authority, caregiving responsibility, and personal familiarity become increasingly diffuse, as closeness is framed as intrinsically beneficial.

Moreover, the normalization of adult-child closeness occurs within a discursive landscape that largely omits explicit consideration of relational boundaries or vulnerability. Proximity and emotional intensity are consistently associated with safety and benevolence, while the potential implications of sustained closeness remain unarticulated. Children are predominantly positioned as recipients of care and guidance, whose acceptance of adult proximity is portrayed as both expected and appropriate. Adults, in turn, are constructed as legitimate and trusted actors whose close involvement is socially affirmed and morally justified. Through this process, adult-child closeness is reproduced as a taken-for-granted condition of everyday social life, rendered stable and unquestioned across multiple social contexts.

Ambiguity of Social Authority

The analyzed data reveal that social authority exercised by adult figures is consistently framed as a natural and morally legitimate presence within everyday social interactions involving children. Adult authority is not constructed as something that requires continuous validation through accountable or transparent practices; rather, it is presumed to exist by virtue of social position, institutional affiliation, or communal recognition. Teachers, religious leaders, senior community members, and other authority figures are represented as morally grounded actors whose intentions are assumed to align with collective values. Within this narrative framework, authority operates less as a relational achievement and more as an inherited moral condition attached to status. As a result, the legitimacy of adult authority is rarely questioned, and moral credibility is conferred automatically, shaping a social environment in which compliance and deference are normalized as appropriate responses to adulthood itself.

At the same time, the narratives demonstrate a striking absence of explicit language to describe or problematize power asymmetries embedded in adult-child relationships. While unequal power relations are clearly present—manifested through decision-making control, behavioral regulation, and emotional influence—these dynamics remain largely implicit and unnamed. The lack of articulation renders power relations socially invisible, allowing them to

be interpreted as neutral, functional, and benign. By avoiding the vocabulary of dominance, hierarchy, or vulnerability, the discourse reframes structural inequality as a natural feature of social order rather than a condition open to scrutiny. This discursive silence contributes to the normalization of authority by masking its coercive potential and by positioning children's subordination as an unremarkable and expected aspect of social life.

Furthermore, the moral legitimation of adult authority significantly weakens mechanisms of external social oversight. The data suggest that relationships involving socially authorized adults are less likely to attract monitoring, questioning, or institutional intervention, as they are presumed to already conform to accepted moral and social standards. Trust in authority functions as a protective shield that insulates these relationships from critical examination, reducing opportunities for accountability. In this context, social control operates selectively: heightened in spaces deemed morally ambiguous, yet relaxed in interactions involving recognized authority figures. This uneven distribution of oversight reinforces the ambiguity of authority, allowing practices to persist unquestioned while simultaneously obscuring the conditions under which authority may be misused. Consequently, the social legitimacy of adult authority not only structures relational dynamics but also shapes the boundaries of what is seen, monitored, and considered problematic within the broader social order.

Unawareness of the Grooming Process

The findings indicate that child grooming is predominantly represented as an imperceptible process embedded within socially accepted forms of interaction. In the analyzed narratives, early stages of grooming—such as the gradual construction of trust, emotional attentiveness, and personalized care—are not recognized as potential indicators of risk. Instead, these practices are framed as normative expressions of concern, mentorship, or moral guidance. Because grooming unfolds through behaviors that closely resemble socially valued forms of adult engagement with children, it becomes indistinguishable from legitimate socialization practices. This invisibility is not accidental, but structurally produced through discourses that associate safety with familiarity and benevolence. As a result, grooming operates below the threshold of social suspicion, progressing within a relational space that is already culturally coded as safe and appropriate.

The data further demonstrate that recognition of grooming-related risk is frequently delayed, emerging only after interactions have intensified or crossed socially acknowledged boundaries. Media narratives often portray awareness as retrospective, arising once harm has become visible or publicly articulated. At earlier stages, the relational history—characterized by trust, legitimacy, and social approval—functions as a barrier to critical reassessment. Because the relationship has already been normalized through institutional affiliation, moral authority, or community endorsement, early warning signs are reinterpreted as misunderstandings or dismissed altogether. This temporal delay in risk recognition reveals how social legitimacy operates cumulatively, shielding interactions from scrutiny until the point at which reinterpretation becomes unavoidable. Risk, therefore, is not absent but suspended, postponed by the weight of prior social validation.

Moreover, the findings reveal a deeper structural confusion in distinguishing between safe and problematic adult-child relationships. This difficulty does not stem solely from a lack of awareness or informational deficits, but from socially embedded meaning structures that normalize particular interactional patterns. Practices such as exclusive attention, emotional closeness, or private communication are socially intelligible within dominant frameworks of

care and guidance, making them resistant to problematization. The boundary between protection and vulnerability becomes blurred, as the same behaviors can signify both support and manipulation depending on context that is rarely foregrounded. Consequently, the inability to clearly differentiate relational safety from relational risk is produced by the very norms that define appropriate social conduct. In this sense, unawareness of grooming is not an individual failure, but a socially patterned outcome shaped by prevailing assumptions about trust, care, and moral authority.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that child grooming cannot be adequately understood as an isolated or anomalous criminal act, but rather as a relational phenomenon embedded within everyday processes of child socialization. The analysis shows that trust, emotional closeness, and the moral legitimacy of adult authority values that are conventionally framed as protective social capital may simultaneously function as conditions that enable vulnerability. In line with sociological perspectives on social capital, relationships characterized by trust and dense social ties are not inherently benign; instead, their protective or risky consequences depend on how they are structured, normalized, and monitored within specific social contexts. In this sense, the study extends existing grooming literature by illustrating how the very relational infrastructures intended to safeguard children can, under certain conditions, become mechanisms through which risk remains concealed rather than prevented.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the study highlights that grooming risk does not emerge from unfamiliar or overtly suspicious relationships, but from interactions that are experienced as meaningful, morally legitimate, and emotionally reassuring. This finding resonates with previous research emphasizing that grooming operates through gradual relational shifts rather than explicit coercion (Craven et al., 2006; Winters & Jeglic, 2017), yet it advances this insight by situating those shifts within broader meaning structures of socialization. Children's lived experiences are shaped by normative expectations that obedience, openness, and emotional closeness toward adults signify safety and proper development. As a result, the experiential horizon through which children interpret adult-child interactions is already oriented toward trust, limiting their capacity to recognize relational ambiguity at early stages. Grooming, therefore, unfolds not as a rupture of social norms, but as a subtle reconfiguration of them.

The normalization of adult-child closeness identified in this study further underscores how relational boundaries become diffuse through socially sanctioned practices of care and mentorship. Prior studies have noted the role of boundary blurring in grooming processes (Kloess, Seymour-Smith, et al., 2017; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016), yet the present findings emphasize that such blurring is not merely an interpersonal tactic, but a socially endorsed pattern of interaction. Emotional proximity, personalized attention, and sustained engagement are widely interpreted as indicators of moral commitment and pedagogical responsibility. Consequently, the escalation of closeness is rarely questioned, as it aligns with dominant narratives of good parenting, effective teaching, and responsible caregiving. This contributes to a social environment in which relational intensification is normalized, while the criteria for distinguishing care from control remain underdeveloped.

The ambiguity of social authority revealed in the findings further complicates efforts to identify and respond to grooming risks. Authority figures are endowed with moral legitimacy that is assumed rather than continuously evaluated, rendering power asymmetries both

pervasive and socially invisible. This observation aligns with critical analyses of authority that highlight how power is often most effective when it remains unnamed and unexamined (Plummer, 2018). By framing authority as a moral condition attached to social roles, rather than as a relational dynamic subject to accountability, social institutions inadvertently weaken mechanisms of oversight. The study thus contributes to the literature by demonstrating how authority not only structures compliance, but also delineates the boundaries of social scrutiny, determining which relationships are monitored and which are shielded from critical attention.

One of the most significant implications of this study lies in its reconceptualization of unawareness in grooming processes. Rather than attributing delayed recognition to ignorance or individual failure, the findings suggest that unawareness is socially produced through dominant meaning structures that equate familiarity with safety. This perspective challenges prevention models that rely primarily on information dissemination or behavioral checklists, as such approaches may overlook the deeper cultural assumptions that shape how relationships are interpreted. Effective prevention, therefore, requires a shift from solely teaching children to identify “dangerous strangers” toward fostering relational reflexivity within families, schools, and communities. Such reflexivity involves cultivating an awareness of boundaries, power dynamics, and gradual relational changes, even within relationships that are socially legitimized and emotionally valued.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The use of secondary qualitative data limits access to children’s first-person experiential accounts and relies on mediated representations that may reflect dominant discourses more strongly than marginalized perspectives. While this approach is methodologically appropriate for examining shared social meanings, it cannot capture the full complexity of individual lived experiences. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating participatory or longitudinal designs that explore how children and caregivers negotiate trust, authority, and boundaries over time. Additionally, comparative studies across cultural or institutional contexts may further illuminate how different socialization norms shape vulnerability and protection. Nonetheless, by foregrounding the relational and meaning-laden dimensions of grooming, this study offers a conceptual foundation for both theoretical advancement and the development of prevention strategies that are more attuned to the social realities in which children’s lives are embedded.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that child grooming is best understood not as an isolated criminal deviation, but as a socially embedded and relational process that unfolds within normative practices of child socialization. By examining trust-based socialization, the normalization of adult–child closeness, the ambiguity of social authority, and the structural unawareness of grooming processes, the findings reveal how values intended to protect children may simultaneously generate latent vulnerabilities. Grooming emerges through ordinary, meaningful, and socially legitimized relationships rather than through overtly deviant interactions, making it difficult to detect at early stages. Conceptually, this study advances a phenomenological and sociocultural framework that situates grooming within lived experiences, shared meanings, and institutional norms, thereby shifting analytical attention from individual pathology toward the relational and structural conditions that shape children’s vulnerability.

In practical terms, the findings underscore the need for prevention strategies that move beyond risk awareness focused solely on individual behavior or criminal typologies. Child protection efforts should instead emphasize relational awareness, critical engagement with authority, and explicit discussion of boundaries within families, schools, and community institutions. Educational programs may benefit from integrating reflexive socialization practices that encourage children and adults alike to recognize how trust and closeness operate relationally rather than unconditionally. For future research, longitudinal and participatory studies are needed to explore how children, caregivers, and educators negotiate trust and authority over time and across contexts, as well as how alternative socialization models might strengthen protection without undermining care. By reframing grooming as a meaning-laden social process, this study provides a foundation for more context-sensitive research and intervention approaches that align with the complexities of children's everyday social worlds.

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