



KEEPING CHILDREN, CHURCHES, AND SCHOOLS SAFE FROM SEX OFFENDERS **PART 2**

For nearly 30 years I have worked in a sex offender evaluation and treatment clinic in Oregon. I've evaluated and treated thousands of men and women who have molested children, and counseled hundreds of victims. There have been scores of people, who, unbeknownst to them, were related to, acquainted with, or supervised someone, who turned out to be a sex offender. During the past three decades I've learned two vital facts about sex offenders. First, aside from the offenders, few people truly understand the process involved in molesting children. Secondly, until we do, we will not be able to protect our children.

Most of us assume that we would know if a relative, friend, or volunteer had pedophilic tendencies. We also believe that children react to abuse by telling or showing symptoms. Unfortunately, offenders don't advertise their sexual interest in children so they are hard to spot. Fewer than one in ten children tell anyone they are being abused and very few victims exhibit the kinds of problems for which most of us were trained to watch. It's easy to understand why offenders don't broadcast what they are doing but the lack of reporting and outward symptomology in victims requires some discussion.

To begin with, most offenders are someone their victims trusted and felt safe with. Offenders also report that the initial stages of abuse involve giving their victims "lots of attention," engaging in "loving and affectionate behavior," "playing with them on their level" and "over-complimenting them."

Offenders report that these strategies accomplish several goals by helping them "weed out" children who might "resist, reject or report," while at the same time, allowing for the gradual desensitization necessary to advance to more intimate and intrusive touching. Offenders say they slowly violate boundaries by "getting them comfortable with me touching them by tickling and wrestling with them," "having them sit on my lap," "walking in on them while they are changing or using the bathroom," "kissing and hugging them extra" or "touching their private parts 'accidentally.'"

Next, they talk to children about sex and normalize abuse by telling them, "everybody does it," "it feels good," "I'll show you how to be a man" or "it's just a game." Because of the brainwashing, children adopt the mistaken belief that they can't tell anyone what's happening to them because "it's a secret" plus it doesn't feel threatening or abusive at first.

Children gradually come to believe they "went along with it" and report that the grooming made them feel loyal and protective of the offender. Offenders report that they purposefully engender these feelings by making subtle threats such as "no one understands how much fun we have together or how much I love you," "if anyone finds out what we have been doing, we'll both get in trouble and they will take me away from you." More direct threats include statements like "no one will believe you if you tell," "people will be mad at you," "I'll go to jail" or "it will hurt your mom and she'll divorce me." In some cases offenders target children who are particularly

isolated, needy or desperate for the kind of “emotional benefits” the offender can offer, which makes the grooming even more effective.

As the sexual touching increases victims say they “feel confused” and “even aroused” by the abuse. Offenders are smart. They know that fear and pain will increase the likelihood that children will report and that pleasure and guilt will inhibit disclosure. Sexually stimulating children also makes the experience more arousing to offenders and helps them convince themselves that the child “liked it,” which enables them to feel less guilty about what they are doing. Each step is a calculated exercise in deceit and manipulation and children are simply too guileless to understand what’s happening. In the words of one offender, “with kids, it’s just not a level playing field. Kids are no-match for me.”

Offenders report that in addition to the tricks they use with children, they also know how to keep other adults from discovering their crimes or reporting them to police. They say they “present an image of morality and respectfulness,” and they make people think “that I am not the kind of person who would do something like that” and they act “helpful and polite.”

Offenders comment that other adults frequently enable them to “get close to children or continue offending” because most adults don’t understand the grooming behavior they are witnessing and unwittingly encourage children to feel safe with them. In fact, one man boasted, “most people see someone being good with children as a gift that shouldn’t be questioned.” Offenders report that the methods they use also allow them to fool other adults into not believing children when they tell or failing to report the disclosure to law enforcement.

“Grooming” behavior can be subtle and appear benign. Sometimes it mimics our own behavior. But with specialized training, it can be spotted and stopped. All churches need to have trained pastors, elders and staff. It’s better to get training before rather than after a crisis is at hand. Remember, child sexual abuse is not a burden children can handle alone. The responsibility for protecting children is an adult responsibility.

Future articles in this series will offer additional information on tips for talking to children about sexual abuse, recommendations for family rules, and risk management principles for dealing with sexual abuse in church and school settings.



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Ms. Jensen has provided training and consultation to a number of law enforcement, child advocacy and Faith based organizations throughout the United States and Canada. She has also published a number of articles about sex offenders and risk management, testified as an expert witness, been the recipient of numerous awards, served on numerous committees to prevent child abuse, and been a featured guest on radio talk shows, and the Oprah Winfrey Show.

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