



KEEPING CHILDREN, CHURCHES, AND SCHOOLS SAFE FROM SEX OFFENDERS PART 1

In today's world, the ability to keep children safe from sex offenders has become one of the top priorities for risk management professionals and a critical focus of family prevention education. The personal accounts of child abuse are heartbreaking, and the numbers of sexual crimes committed against children are staggering. Studies continue to suggest that one in five children will be sexually abused during childhood and that most sex offenders commit dozens of crimes before they are apprehended.

One study estimated that the apprehension rate for sex offenders is only about three percent, and another suggested that one out of every 20 males has sexually abused a child. Experts suspect that female offenders go undetected more often than males, and that one-third of the people molesting children are other children. Studies on offenders who have been caught also suggest that most commit a variety of "cross over" crimes prior to apprehension.

When sex offenders are referred to treatment programs that use polygraphs and require "full disclosure," many admit that they abused both young children and adolescents, and both male and female minors. Some also admit that they crossed an additional boundary and sexually assaulted adults.

Offenders also engage in ancillary crimes, such as exhibitionism or voyeurism, or the use of online child pornography, a crime that appears to be the single fastest growing sexual crime in history. Given the numbers and the range of undetected behaviors, it's easy to understand the limitations of relying on "background checks" as our only method of insuring safety when screening new staff or volunteers.

In addition to the data on child abuse, the truth about the relationships abusers have with children, their motivation for offending, and the grooming tactics they use is even more disturbing. The majority of offenders are the people children come in contact with every day—parents and step-parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, family friends, teachers and coaches. Very few, perhaps less than five percent, are "strangers."

This means that the "prevention talks" parents need to have with their children are much more uncomfortable and complicated than most of us heard when we were children. Offenders are also extremely adept at seducing children in a non-threatening and sometimes "playful" and tricky manner, which makes children feel like "partners," rather than victims. Because of the tactics perpetrators use, most children fail to understand that they are being abused until it's too late. Children report that once the abuse starts, they feel trapped and are unable to tell anyone because of the subtle threats and manipulation.

Studies indicate that fewer than 10% of children report the abuse while it's happening, and that the majority of victims wait until they become adults to disclose their abuse. One of the most disheartening statistics that has emerged from offender studies is that more than half of all abusers report that other adults knew they were abusing children and failed to report them to the police. According to the offenders, not being "turned in" resulted in additional victims, and caused the offenders' own problems to get worse. As Christians, we must do a better job of protecting children but to do a better job, we must first understand the problem.

One of the issues parents and risk management professionals need to understand is the developmental process that causes people to engage in sexually criminal behavior. Although a primary concern is protection of children from being victimized, they must also be taught to avoid the kind of early sexualization that results in sexual acting out. If we continue to battle this problem after it has fully matured, it will never be reduced. It's like treating a disease when it's in its final stage, instead of the early stage.

Nearly two decades ago, studies proved that most sex offenders were not molested as children, but that most started offending when they were young. Many offenders were exposed to pornography early in life, or became overly involved in, and/or overly stimulated by sexual exploration and sexual play behavior ("show and tell") with other children.

Early sexual curiosity is a normal part of development and most children move past the curiosity, or "exploration stage" quickly. For children who get "stuck" there, sexual acting out can develop into a method of dealing with stress, frustration, anxiety, or boredom. As the behavior becomes more routine, or perhaps, more stimulating, children and teens can develop

distorted attitudes about the appropriateness of sexual contact with children, and eroticize children.

Over time, they develop sophisticated methods of engaging other children in sexual activity. Some children stop molesting children on their own, but for others, it can become a life-long pattern of offending.

Parents need to talk to their children about avoiding and reporting abuse. They also need to discuss with them about not touching other children inappropriately. None of us want our children to be abused, but we also don't want our children to grow up to become sex offenders.

Future articles in this series will offer additional information about offender behavior and "grooming" tactics, tips for talking to children about sexual abuse and recognizing behavior problems, recommendations for family rules, and risk management principles for dealing with sexual abuse in church and school settings. Remember, child sexual abuse is not a burden children can handle alone. The responsibility for protecting children is an adult responsibility.



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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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