



KEEPING CHILDREN, CHURCHES, AND SCHOOLS SAFE FROM SEX OFFENDERS PART 3

Twenty years ago I had an experience that dramatically changed my perspective on child abuse prevention. I was teaching a class on victim empathy to a group of 12 sex offenders, all of whom had sexually abused multiple children. In order to partially understand the harm they'd done, the men were asked to watch a documentary on sexual abuse called *Breaking Silence*. As the documentary was coming to an end, it showed a group of elementary students participating in a "safe touch" curriculum while the narrator explained to viewers that society needed to "do a better job of helping children protect themselves." Two of the offenders sitting next to me started whispering to each other and laughing.

When I turned off the video and asked them what they were laughing about, one of offenders said, "We can't believe that people are so gullible. They think that teaching kids junk like that will keep them

safe from people like us."

The second man nodded in agreement and asked, "Don't they understand that kids are no match for us."

Another man who'd been sitting across the room chimed in and said, "Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. It's pretty clear that the people who designed those child abuse prevention programs never talked to any sex offenders first."

At first I was angry with these men for making such callous statements. Then I realized that, in their own way, they were experts on the topic and I had a unique opportunity to learn from them. As they left the class, I asked each of them to think about our discussion and "come up with something better." The following week the offenders told me that they'd thought about our conversation.

Their consensus was that prevention programs targeted only children, who, in their minds, were “the weakest link.”

“This isn’t a problem children can handle alone,” commented one man. “You need to teach adults to watch out for grooming (set-up) behavior and intervene when they see something.”

Several years later my clinic joined forces with a group of child abuse experts and a handful of experienced child abuse detectives to create and teach a parent education class called, “Protecting Your Children: Advice From Child Molesters.” The class focused on providing parents with information about:

- how people develop a sexual interest in children
- typical patterns of offender grooming behavior or “MO” (methods of operation)
- how to talk to children about sexual abuse
- situations that put children at increased risk
- tips for supervision
- healthy family rules
- how to report child abuse and support victims
- how to respond to inappropriate sexual behavior between children.

One of the ideas we stressed was that when parents fail to talk to their children about sexual abuse, the outcome is that children conclude that sexual abuse is a topic that isn’t supposed to be talked about. This attitude makes it harder for children who’ve been abused to report and they end up being abused for longer periods of time.

Another concept we discussed was the fact that many parents don’t talk to their children because no one talked to them when they were children. Subsequently, the parents don’t know what to tell their children. We developed specific recommendations for the language that should be used with young children and

incorporated “child friendly” discussions about offender grooming behavior, such as talking to children about sex, “accidentally” exposing them to pornography, walking in on them while they are using the bathroom or dressing, or arranging for children to “walk in on them” or using “horseplay” to fondle children.

We encouraged parents to confront the tricks offenders play on children before they happen. For instance, offenders tell children the touching is “their fault” and that they will “get in trouble too” if it’s discovered. Therefore, we recommend that parents tell their children that “it’s always the bigger person’s fault” and the child “will not get in trouble.”

We also recommended that parents talk to their children about general safety issues several times a year and mix sexual abuse into conversations about other pertinent safety issues such as wearing bike helmets, street crossing, and drug and alcohol use.

Very few parents said they’d talked to their children about these topics and were incredibly grateful to have some direction. Most were even more dedicated to “having that talk” after the instructors showed video clips of offenders discussing how they manipulated children into “going along with the abuse and keeping it a secret.”

Talking to children about sexual abuse is never easy but it’s a responsibility we must embrace. “No one wants to talk to their children about sexual abuse, but if they don’t, it’s easier for me to be the person who introduces them to the subject,” said one offender. As parents, we must become more educated about sexual abuse and offender grooming behavior so we can be alert and prepared to confront inappropriate situations with our children, in our communities and churches.



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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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