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SEX OFFENDERS: Keeping Children, Schools, and Churches Safe

Research indicates that one in four girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused. The offenders will be someone close, a relative, family friend, or one of the many volunteers or professionals who come in contact with our children every day, someone most parents would never suspect. Sadly, the faith community has not been immune from these crimes, or the resulting harm. By taking the time to learn more about child sexual abuse and the people who commit these crimes, you will be joining a growing number of Christians who are becoming better educated about protecting children, safeguarding our churches, and fulfilling our missions. Remember: the responsibility for protecting children rests primarily with adults, not children alone. This presentation will briefly examine some of the factors that make children, churches, youth serving organizations, and schools vulnerable to sex offenders. The need for ongoing parent and staff education about offender behavior and enhancement of practical prevention rules will be covered, as well as safety planning for “known” offenders who attend church services. The speaker will also review a training program that 12 Seventh-day Adventist conferences across North America have undertaken to increase child safety, and confront the growing problems associated with sex offenders in the faith community.

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“...the responsibility for protecting children rests primarily with adults, not children alone”

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SEX OFFENDERS: Keeping Children, Schools, and Churches Safe - 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.

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.

3% | 1 in 20

"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"

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

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.



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SEX OFFENDERS: Keeping Children, Schools, and Churches Safe - Part 1

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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SEX OFFENDERS: Keeping Children, Schools, and Churches Safe - 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 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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SEX OFFENDERS: Keeping Children, Schools, and Churches Safe - 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 them said "we can't believe that people are so gullible that they think that teaching kids junk like that will keep them safe from people like us." The second man nodded in agreement and said "don't they understand that kids are no match for us." Another man who'd been sitting across the room chimed in and said "yea, 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 at the men for making such callous statements but also 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 and all of them agreed that, as they saw it, the problem was that prevention programs targeted only children, who, in their minds, were "the weakest link." One man commented, "this isn't a problem children can handle alone. 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 and 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 and they 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 they "will not get in trouble." We 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 talking about 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"

As one offender said to me, "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." 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.

For more information about providing parent education or to receive a copy of the parent handout that was created for this class, contact Cory Jewell Jensen at cjensen@earthlink.net. ■

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- The ATSA Forum. Vol. XII, No. 3., Winter, 2000. 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.