



What Every Parent
Should Know

How Sex Offenders
Choose Their Victims

Sybil A. Bissell

What Every Parent Needs to Know How Abusers Select Their Victims

By Sybil A. Bissell

As professionals have worked with sex offenders over the years, they have come to learn what these people are looking for when they search for a victim and what steers them away from particular children. Parents are now able to equip themselves with information they can use to help reduce the odds that their child will be targeted by an abuser.

The General Traits of an Adult Male Sex Offender

Sex offenders don't have any particular "look," are not identifiable by any particular profession, and can range in age from 15 to 80.

Some teens sexually touch those younger than them but do not go on to become molesters as adults. These are teens who were not sexually abused themselves (generally), and their touching of youngsters is more about sexual exploration in puberty than the beginnings of a life-long problem as a sex offender. Both male and female teens sometimes abuse children. The high-risk checklist is in Chapter 17.

Life-long sex offenders who are male begin in their youth, driven by inner conflicts and trauma from their own

sexual victimization. These men are driven to sexually touch children and generally have more than 100 victims by the age of 65. Sadly, they don't retire. Some 80-year-old men are abusing their great-grandchildren. They have just moved from one generation to another.

The typical child molester is a timid man, is unassertive with adults, and is quiet, with a lot of fear. He may be outgoing, but he still lives in fear. I have worked with sex offenders who were very colorful and strong-looking. They used their suave, debonair style to seduce children.

Child abusers are child-oriented and are most often known to the children. They want to gain children's trust. They are friendly with the children and their parents. Abusers don't want to alarm children or make them afraid because they will lose their relationship with them. Abusers find it titillating and exciting to go a little further sexually with a child each time. They are working to disarm the family so that alarm bells won't ring. Generally, those who abuse children are nice, friendly people.

A child molester is not just meeting a sexual need or drive when seeking out children for sexual contact. To him, children "feel safer, less threatening, less demanding, less problematic than a relationship with an adult" (*Handbook of Clinical Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse*, Suzanne M. Sgroi, M.D.

Massachusetts: D. C. Health & Company, 1984, pg. 27).

According to the American Association of Pediatrics one of five adult women report having been sexually assaulted as children and one of 10 adult men report having been sexually assaulted in childhood. In 8 out of 10 cases, the victim personally knows their offender who is an authority figure the child knows and trusts. (www.medem.com/MedLB) The U.S. Department of Justice cites that 6 out of 10 rape or sexual assault incidents were perpetrated against them by a friend, relative or neighbor in their own home. (www.usdoj.gov)

Prefers Company of Children Rather Than Adults

At family get-togethers, sex offenders prefer to hang out with children instead of adults. They drift toward wherever the children are. They like to play with the kids, rough-house at times, and have kids sit on their laps. During these rough-housing times, they make their first contact with a child's privates. They pass it off as an accident. When they have kids on their laps, they put their hand on a chest or breast. They begin what looks like inadvertent touches to a child's crotch. They sometimes have an erection while a child is on their lap. Play becomes the means to desensitize a child to touch.

Familiarity and Accessibility

Abusers don't look far for their victims. They choose kids they have regular contact with. Abusers will work on children for up to two years to desensitize them toward advancing sexual touch. If your child is ever sexually abused, the likelihood will be that it will be by someone you know[md]someone you know well.

Abusers will offer to babysit a child or take a child on trips or on outings. Ask yourself why an adult man would want to spend so much time with your child. One family I knew had a friend who offered to take the 10-year-old daughter on drives he made to another city. The parents didn't know that he was fondling her the whole way there and the whole way home. No matter how badly you need a break from your kids, be wary of men who want to spend time alone with them and offer to take them off your hands. If you aren't the one initiating the request for child care, see it as a red flag.

Violent vs. Nonviolent

The majority of sex offenders don't use violence to gain power over their victims. They like to gain power through more implicit means. If they can befriend the children, the kids may feel an allegiance (not telling on a friend). If they can give the children something like candy or toys, the kids may keep quiet to keep getting the treats and may feel that if they tell, they won't get their treats. Kids may also feel that

they are betraying the person who was good to them. If the abuser is doing otherwise good things for the family and the parents really like him, a child may keep quiet because he or she doesn't want to see the parents' friendship upset by telling. If the abuser is a person who just shows the child attention and affection, the child won't tell to avoid losing this, even though he or she feels in the spirit that something is wrong. Sometimes nonviolent abusers threaten a child not to tell, but this is mostly unnecessary.

While some sex offenders are violent, they are by far in the minority. Violent offenders don't consider the personality of the child when choosing one to abuse. They are looking for accessibility alone. These offenders are the ones who might grab a child at a mall or playground and not know the child at all. They go to a place where children are, just to get whatever kid they can get their hands on. Again, this type of abuse is very rare.

Nonviolent offenders need opportunity and accessibility, but they are looking for a particular type of child in a particular type of situation.

Naive, Compliant, Trusting

Nonviolent abusers are looking for children who are sexually naive. They want to teach the child something, show the child something. They will exploit the child's sexual ignorance.

Abusers look for compliant children. They need victims who won't put up a fight or resistance. They look for shyness and timidity.

Abusers look for a child who will trust easily and quickly. Many children are so naive that they trust anyone and go to anyone. Parents can see this as a loving nature, but an abuser will see this as an opportunity. An affectionate child is a more vulnerable child.

The Strong Child

For the most part, child molesters are cowards. Who but a coward would go after a child? Child molesters are afraid of confrontation, even by the child. When a child shows signs of being assertive and verbally capable, offenders shy away.

Most often, if a child looks at the offender and says "Stop it," "Leave me alone," or "I'm telling my Mommy/Daddy on you," the offender will stop. Offenders know they will go to jail for what they are doing. They feel threatened by children who have the guts to tell on them.

Assertive children aren't chosen by most sex offenders (although they may be by a violent offender who just grabs them and runs). Children who appear competent and talkative are avoided.

Incest offenders actually breathe a sigh of relief when a child finally tells on them. Some incest offenders live in a

silent hell with their addiction; when the child tells, it is often the first step of their getting help and being accountable.

The Father

Offenders are afraid of strong men. Remember, internally they are cowards. Children without a strong relationship with their father are more vulnerable than children that have a strong relationship with their father.

One of the things an offender does when scoping out the next victim is to assess the threat of the child's father. If the father-child interactions show that the child is close to the father, the molester will avoid the child. If the father talks with the child, shows interest and affection, and does things with the child, the offender most likely will leave that child alone.

Emotionally distant fathers are no protection for their children. They can be big and strong, but if they have no relationship with their children, they are no protection for their kids. Whether absent emotionally or physically, an absent father leaves his children vulnerable.

What Can You Do?

Parents should be the ones to teach their children about their bodies. They need age-appropriate information about

sexual issues. Refer to Chapter 6 for more information.

Do you have a shy, timid, compliant child? Focus on teaching your child to develop verbal skills. Help your tike learn how to speak up. Pay attention to whether your kids are comfortable around particular people who may be of concern. Ask open-ended questions about how your child's tummy' feels around anyone you may be concerned about. Watch your child's nonverbal language.

If you have such a child, especially if there is a weak relationship with the father, never let this child out of your sight! Leave him or her only with people you know to be safe. Shy, timid children need more protection because they are at greater risk.