The PROSECUTOR Feature

# Selection, Engagement and Seduction of Children and Adults by Child Molesters

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**SEVERAL YEARS AGO,** child advocates, sex offender treatment providers and public health officials began to focus on the continuing rate of sexual crimes against children. Examination revealed several possible explanations for the lack of significant reduction despite more than three decades of attention and intervention. One possible explanation was related to the proliferation of pornography and sexually explicit material available on the Internet. A Canadian expert noted that the "accessibility and availability" of pornography appeared to be "increasing deviant sexual interests and behavior to an unimaginable degree" (Konopasky, 1995). Within a year, other bad news followed. Long-term recidivism studies reported incredibly high reoffense rates among "high risk" offenders, and treatment efficacy studies revealed that treatment was only moderately successful with others (Hanson, 1996). Studies also revealed that children who complete child abuse prevention programs are no less likely to be abused and only slightly more likely to report incidents of sexual abuse (Finkelhor, et al. 1995). In addition, many states have recently experienced radical budget cuts and, as we all know, child protective services are often the first to suffer.

As these complications came to light, child advocates and offender management professionals gained a keener appreciation for the skill with which many offenders were able to outwit the general public and professional systems designed to stop them. A glance at any daily newspaper demonstrates how easily molesters can fool the adults they live and work with for years. Even more surprising was the fact that most communities continued to place the entire burden of self-protection and reporting on children. Eighty eight percent of elementary schools offer prevention programs to children yet fewer that 11 percent had developed components for parents (Kaufman, 1999). In addition to the failure to promote training for adults, many school-based prevention programs continue to rely on the "No, Go, Tell" strategy developed in the early '80s (Fryer, 1987). Even worse, some focus on "Stranger Danger," a concept that, while important, fails to account for the vast majority of abuse, as most offenders are well known to their victims.

The limitations created by these poorly structured prevention training programs for children are compounded by the sophisticated ways in which offenders gain access to children, molest them, prepare for and react to victim disclosures. These strategies allow child molesters to continue offending and avoid detection at an alarming rate.

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### *Child Molesters*

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Once in treatment, molesters admit an average of 119.4 sexual crimes (Weinrott & Saylor, 1991) against numerous children (Abel, et al. 1987). Clearly, reducing child abuse will require increased dedication, expertise and involvement of the general public.

Most of us have had to contend with cases in which sex offenders managed to convince well-meaning adults that they were innocent. In some cases, family and community members were manipulated out of reporting or into publicly defending the offender against "false allegations" or a system that was "just out to get them." This well meaning, albeit undeserved, support cannot only be exasperating to law enforcement but can enable molesters to continue offending as well.

The support offenders receive is easier to understand when you examine public denial about child sexual abuse and the tactics used by most offenders. To most healthy adults, the mere thought of an adult being sexually aroused by a child is both repulsive and incomprehensible. Denial is exacerbated if the accused is someone the adult likes or trusts. When combined, denial and familiarity cause most adults to find another explanation for children's disclosures. Typical comments include "the child must have misinterpreted his behavior" or "it must have been an accident" because, "I know him and he's not that kind of a person." Although understandable, failure to believe a child's disclosure can intensify the offender's denial and increase the likelihood that he will continue to abuse children.

The depth of public denial and the skill with which many offenders avoid being reported is a phenomenon frequently observed by professionals who evaluate sex offenders. More than a third of the child molesters evaluated at the Center for Behavioral Intervention (CBI) between 1998 and 2001 disclosed that they had been "told on" by previous victims. Despite prior allegations, few had been formally reported to law enforcement and others were able to escape prosecution for a variety of reasons. When questioned about their initial ability to avoid sanctions, most boasted that they had been able to convince adults they were innocent by "planning ahead." They stated that they worked hard to create a respectable image, while at the same time, conditioning people to discredit the victims. Some offenders said they offended children who were "too young to testify" or molested children they had total control over. One man reported that he used

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lubricants to avoid tearing his victim's vagina because he heard that genital injuries increased conviction rates.

Probably the most disconcerting reports came from men who had been charged and referred for evaluation but were released after the evaluator "found little to support the allegations." Although some of the evaluators may have been biased, others were just too inexperienced to be evaluating sex offenders. The majority used generic mental health protocols that failed to include arousal assessments or polygraph examinations in the evaluation process. It should be noted that, while arousal assessments and polygraph examinations can provide extremely useful data and result in confessions, they too can be fallible. Several of the men in the CBI sample admitted that they had been able to pass polygraph examinations (while lying) and several others demonstrated "normal arousal patterns" resulting in those cases being "dropped" as well.

The above cases underscore the deficiencies in our mental health and judicial systems and point to the need for public education about the manipulative behavior of perpetrators. Information about child molesters is generally unavailable to the public and most families are ill-prepared to deal with the fact that the majority of victims are molested by relatives, family friends and neighbors, or by people that the family respects (teachers, coaches, priests etc.). Too many parents also believe that their children are capable of protecting themselves and overrate their ability to report.

In order to overcome these obstacles, the public health, educational, social service, law enforcement and judicial systems must develop stronger alliances to improve community education, prevention, treatment, investigation and management efforts. The authors hope this article will provide readers with a basic understanding of the techniques child molesters use and recommend that it be shared with parents and caretakers, child and victim advocates, community groups, educators, law enforcement agencies, child abuse prosecutors and policy makers.

## The Child Molester

While much effort has been devoted to categorize child molesters into discrete subtypes, researchers continue to find more similarities than differences between groups. Predatory pedophiles frequently seek employment or volunteer placement in order to gain access to children while their counterparts are more likely to molest children that wander into their domain. However, opportunistic or "situational" offenders can have more victims than predatory pedophiles and can be just as aroused to children. Both groups abuse more children than initially detected and engage in a series of behaviors to ensure continued access to victims.

Contrary to what offenders usually tell people when they are first confronted, child sexual abuse is never accidental, unplanned or harmless. Once in treatment, child molesters describe a series of specific cognitive and behavioral steps that precede and continue throughout the offending process. These steps include:

- placing themselves in a situation or environment in which they can offend,
- developing an attraction to and selecting a specific child to abuse,
- engaging the child and/or family in a relationship,
- desensitizing and disarming the child and his/her family,
- sexualizing the relationship and abusing the child,
- maintaining the child's cooperation and silence, and
- avoiding discovery and/or prosecution.

Child sexual abuse should not be regarded as an act but rather, as a process, each step of which impacts the victim, family, community and legal system. Once apprehended, offenders should be required to provide specific information about the steps and methods they used to offend. This information should be offered to the victim's therapist and used in the offender's treatment and management. More generally, this kind of information should always be included in public awareness and prevention programs.

## Selection of Community/Family/Child

Prior to selecting any child, an offender must gain access to children. This usually requires being part of a family or community. Although "incest" offenders molest children in their immediate family, they frequently abuse extended family members, their children's friends, neighbor children and other unlucky children. Child molesters abuse children in day care, schools, teams, clubs, churches and other family friendly organizations. Only in rare instances do sexually violent offenders abduct children and forcibly molest, rape and kill them.

Many offenders work to ingratiate or align themselves with a particular family or organization, encouraging trust and admiration while heading off suspicion (van Dam, 1996 & 2000). After familiarizing himself and gaining acceptance, the offender begins to focus on a particular child. Offenders don't randomly select children. They offend specific children for specific reasons. Child molesters tell us that three main factors help them decide which children to target for abuse. These factors involve the:

- level of access they have to a particular child,
- the degree of attraction they feel toward that child, and
- the offender's perception of the child's vulnerability (Jensen, 1999).

Simply put, child molesters abuse children they have

access to, children they can control and children they find physically or emotionally attractive. Some offenders are sexually attracted to very young children while others prefer prepubescent or pubescent children. Other important physical characteristics include body type, hair color, size or that "little kid smell." Emotional attractiveness can relate to the degree of distress, neediness or curiosity the offender perceives in the child. Some child molesters indicate that well-adjusted, well-mannered children are also at risk because of their desire to please and willingness to follow the directions of adults (Conte, J., Wolf, S., & Smith, T., 1989). Offenders prey on the open, loving and trusting nature of children and usually abuse children that they believe they can "safely molest" without getting caught. Children who do not have close relationships with caretakers or children for whom an offender is the primary caretaker are especially vulnerable. Other features that offenders report are attractive to them are related to typical characteristics of childhood, such as innocence, naivete, friendliness or normal sexual curiosity. For some offenders, children are appealing because they rarely challenge adults and lack the sexual experience to be critical of performance.

### Emotional Engagement, Desensitization and Entrapment

Offenders report that they engage in a variety of pre-offense or "grooming" behaviors long before they actually molest a child. The grooming process involves a number of purposeful, calculated behaviors that help the offender promote and continue the abuse. Prior to and while developing a sexual interest in a particular child, offenders cultivate an emotional relationship with both the child and his/her caretakers. The relationships serve four functions.

First, as noted above, the very nature of the situation (family, neighborhood, team, school or church) disarms the child and caretakers. People, especially children, don't usually expect to find peril in their own family or community. The offender's attentive and seemingly benign behavior may charm and immobilize onlookers. Any affectionate or playful touching that occurs in the presence of other adults normalizes the touching to both the child and caretakers. Second, the relationship diminishes the child's defenses and the child begins to trust and rely on the offender. Third, the relationship offers the offender an opportunity to isolate and further groom the child with attention, gifts and special activities. Some abusers engage in peer-like behavior with their victim. This behavior can cause the child to identify and unite with the adult. Other offenders take on an increasing controlling role. Fourth, the offender begins to "test" the child by introducing sexual jokes or discussions, affectionate touching, roughhous-

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ing and inappropriate behavior. Some molesters invade the child's boundaries by "accidentally" walking into the bathroom, exposing themselves or manipulating the child into watching them having sex with an adult partner. The offender watches for signs of discomfort, fear, disgust or curiosity and then reacts accordingly. One offender indicated that he would "back off and try again later" if he sensed that his victim was uncomfortable with his behavior. Many offenders are exceedingly patient and will study and test a particular child for months prior to offending them. Offenders also try to "help" children with personal hygiene, have them sit on their lap or expose them to sexually explicit material.

The above behaviors gradually diminish the child's natural defense mechanisms while at the same time allow the offender to study and become more intimate with the child and family. This enables the offender to introduce more intrusive behavior without raising uneasiness, suspicion or fear. The process fosters comfort, alignment and dependency on the offender. At this stage, the relationship is rarely seen as anything more than "odd," therefore, few caretakers take action. Also, once caretakers have failed to intervene or confront the offender, they are less likely to do so in the future (van Dam, 2000).

For children, the challenge is even tougher. Because the abuse happens in the context of a relationship, the child would have to reject the relationship in order to avoid being abused. Not only are children rarely in a position to extract themselves from a relationship or avoid further contact with a persistent abuser, young children can't differentiate between appropriate and "grooming behaviors" and lack the ability to develop or execute avoidance behaviors. Even children who do feel uncomfortable during this phase of the relationship may be unable to tell anyone how they are feeling because of the relationship that the offender has developed with the child's family or community, especially if telling would cause a disturbance to the family or separation. Likewise, parents may discount any uneasy feelings they may have because it appears to them that the child and everyone else around them is comfortable with the offender. Offenders also report that they support relationships between the child and other people who are supportive of or dependent on the offender. Children who see the offender as popular, important or "in control" may be more afraid that they will not be believed if they do tell. If the child likes the offender or he has provided a source of support, they might decide that they don't want to risk losing their relationship with the offender by telling.

Offenders report that they anticipate the likelihood of a disclosure and take preventative measures throughout the offending process. This may include restricting the child's access to certain people or preparing people to distrust the child (e.g. a stepparent offender reporting a child's "misdeeds" to the mother). Some offenders sabotage the child's relationships with caretakers or other adults in an effort to restrict access to the people who are most likely to become suspicious and intervene. Molesters also say that they prepare people to discredit or blame the child if they do tell. One man said that he told his wife he had "accidentally touched" a young girl's chest and was afraid she might think he was trying to molest her. When the child did disclose, the wife responded by saying "Oh yeah, I know, he already told me about it." The child thought it was taken care of and the wife failed to understand what had happened or report her husband. If an offense is reported and the case is referred for prosecution, sorting out the truth can be difficult, especially in cases where the offender targeted an already troubled child or manipulated adults into mistrusting or blaming the child.

Any child that experiences sexual abuse at the hands of a parent or family friend will have a difficult time understanding what happened and why, let alone how to recover. Although therapists are usually in a good position to help the victim and family put the abuse experience in perspective, many lack information about motivational and behavioral aspects of offending. Even fewer are able to access detailed information about the specific offender's history or grooming patterns. This lack of information can undermine the victim treatment process because the therapist won't know what the offender taught the child, intellectually or sexually. Most children don't communicate this information because they weren't aware of the offender's intentions or manipulations. The void can leave the victim feeling isolated, confused and uncertain. Some children are able to feel angry about their abuse, others feel ambivalent.

Due to the grooming process, some children feel responsible for the abuse and loyal toward the offender. When faced with a strong bond between a victim and an alleged offender, investigators and prosecutors should initially be careful of using language or questions that indicate disapproval toward the offender. Respecting a potentially close tie, interview questions should be based on specific sexual behaviors. Also, interviewers should be very careful when asking children why they didn't tell.

Victim treatment programs would be wise to focus on the development of the relationship between the child and offender because it helps children understand the impact of the engagement and desensitization phase. Identifying the "bribery" and tricks involved may also help victims and their families understand why the child was unable to resist or report sooner. This is significant in reducing feelings of guilt in the victim and misperceptions by family members who may be angry that the victim didn't tell sooner. Prevention programs should incor-

porate information on grooming strategies to help children discriminate between appropriate adult behavior and grooming and help parents become more discerning and protective.

### Sexual Seduction and Abuse

Once an offender has established himself as a "friend" and reinforced non-sexual touching (often through backrubs, hugging and wrestling), the offender advances the contact to include direct sexual touching. Some offenders report that they purposefully "move slowly" and use a "gentle touch." Molesters report that they seduce children into thinking that they are willing partners by making the physical contact feel good, asking the victim for permission to touch them, thanking them for the "special time together" and presenting the image that the child is an equal partner. Some molesters prefer to maintain the child in a "consenting" peer-like mode because it creates the distorted impression that the child is an equal partner and/or enjoys the sexual contact. This can make the experience more arousing for the offender and also decreases anxiety or guilt (if present) over what they are doing. It also lessens the likelihood that the child will be able to report. Sexual contact usually starts with more intimate hugs, kisses and fondling. Some offenders stop there while others go on to incorporate masturbation, digital and penile penetration or oral sex.

Compared to the tactics of the above offenders, other offenders are less concerned about the child's participation, do not talk to the child about the abuse or care if they are physically hurting the child. Less than half use force or threat of force (Christiansen and Blake, 1990). A more violent group is sexually aroused by making children suffer. In these cases, victims feel threatened and are somewhat more likely to report.

In other cases, offenders manage to ensure silence by being more outwardly threatening or physically violent thereby reducing the likelihood of a report. Threats of violence toward another sibling or the non-offending parent place the child in a "no-win" bind to put up with the abuse and thereby "save" the other family members. What victims seldom realize is that the offender is usually molesting other children as well, regardless of their own personal sacrifice.

### Maintaining Cooperation and Silence

Because the offender normalizes loose sexual boundaries or indicates that the behavior is acceptable, many children don't know they are being abused until well into the abusive relationship and have adapted to the abuse or learned to cope with the pressure in other ways. If the behavior is prolonged, the child may feel they cannot tell because they "went along with it" or "didn't stop it" and, therefore, will be blamed. For those children, disclosure may be perceived as more complicated than keeping quiet. While less than half of child molesters directly tell children "not to tell," most use very subtle forms of coercion and manipulation to maintain the child's silence.

Many parents who are molesting their own children purposefully create conflict between the victim, non-offending parent and siblings. They may become the victim's "defender," and help the victim with chores and homework, again decreasing reporting by triangulating the family. Some offenders convince children that they will be put in foster care, blamed and/or rejected by other people if they tell. Offenders frequently imply that both of them will get into trouble if anyone "finds out" about the "special" touching. They make the child feel sorry for them and responsible for the sexual contact. If the abuser has developed a strong connection with the child or offered gifts or favors, the child may also view telling as a potential loss.

Some children are unable to report simply because they lack the knowledge necessary to disclose or are too embarrassed to talk about what is happening. Prevention programs should include rehearsal sessions for children to practice reporting. Offender grooming tactics also highlight the need for prevention programs to use "secret touching" instead of "bad touching," descriptions of specific body parts and sexual acts, and examples of the tricks offenders might use to keep them from telling. This may not truly "prevent" abuse, but children would be more informed and might be able to tell sooner.

When children can accurately label the abuse as "wrong" while at the same time understanding that it is the "adult's fault" and that "the adult has a problem," they may be more likely to seek help and are in a better position to fully recover from the abuse. Talking with victims and their caretakers more directly about the methods child molesters use to seduce children should also be included in any victim treatment regime. Some abusers align themselves with the victim while at the same time, devote energy to isolating the child from sources of protection. This aspect of grooming may be somewhat responsible for the increased risk for future abuse that victims face. In order for children to regain some of what has been lost, they require an increased level of support and protection, a very clear reason for family treatment.

### Avoiding Discovery

Research indicates that one out of every 10 men has molested a child (Lewis, 1985) and that offenders have a three percent chance of getting caught (Abel et al., 1987). In part, the low rate of apprehension is related to the fact that children are the target and they are almost always unable to defend themselves against the complex grooming tactics that ado-

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## Child Molesters

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lescent and adult offenders use. Many molesters' ability to "get away with it" is also linked to the manner in which communities deal with reports. Offenders report that they deliberately dupe their family and community into defending them if a child tells. They align themselves with traditional institutions, excel in their careers, appear to be good parents and try to look just like everyone else.

Some offenders give time and money to community projects, coach children's sports or become actively involved in church. Several offenders in treatment at CBI indicated that they purposefully offended children in church settings because they believed church goers were more gullible and less likely to confront them. One indicated that he knew that, even if the church discovered his crimes, they might agree to handle it "with prayer and church counseling" rather than reporting him to law enforcement. Of course, this offender was able to molest dozens of children before anyone realized he was continuing to exploit the church's forgiving nature and the children in it.

One of the most immobilizing factors is that molesters look and act just like everyone else. The only difference is that they are sexually aroused to children and are willing to abuse them. The "Good Guy," "Successful Executive," "Helpful Dad," "Church Pillar" and "Teacher of the Year," were all believed and supported by friends and family members when their victims reported. Combined with our collective unwillingness to "get involved" or "accuse" someone, grooming tactics work incredibly well for most offenders.

Denial is part of the process of maintaining deviant behavior and avoiding social and criminal sanctions. One study reported that 65 percent of guilty sex offenders totally denied committing any part of the crime when first accused (Wormith, 1983). When they do admit, offenders blame the victim or say they were drunk or "not themselves." They also promise that it was a "one time thing" or describe it as an "accident." Too often, people accept the adult's version over the child's or fail to demand honesty and accountability from offenders.

Regrettably, most, if not all victims suffer greater trauma when the offender does not admit and the family or community is unable to immediately support the victim or unravel the chronology of abuse. Some clinicians believe that the results of grooming and denial can cause as much, if not more, psychological trauma as the actual sexual contact. Understanding the motivation underlying child molestation and the history of their offender's sexual crimes can be very helpful to the victim. When victims and their caretakers learn that the offender had a long standing history of offending (as most do) it helps put into perspective the notion that the problem is the offender's behavior—and not the victim's fault.

Much the same as sending offenders to jail or having them pay for their victim's treatment, the system should work harder to compel offenders to tell the truth and disclose all of the information related to their offenses, including the grooming tactics they used with the child and community. Intensive investigation and comprehensive sex offender evaluation and treatment can, with some offenders, induce honesty and should be facilitated in every community. Sex offender treatment providers and probation/parole workers should work together to assist offenders in providing a complete account of their behavior. This information should be forwarded to the victim's therapist and, when appropriate, shared with the victim and family members. It is especially important that it be used to develop more effective risk management strategies. Polygraph examinations can help identify other victims who may need assistance and arousal assessments can facilitate treatment, assess risk and help those around the offender understand how deep his problems run. In most cases, this information should be shared with the offender's family, extended family, closest friends, employer, church

## NDAA Names in the News

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prison and still has considerable influence? State prisons inmate administrator Calvin Brown said, "We definitely have to come up with special arrangements." According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* newspaper, Dorsey became the 92nd former law enforcement officer in the Georgia prison system.

**DEATHS:**

As a tribute to **Patricia Napp Holsten**, the first woman DA of Delaware County, Pennsylvania, who died during the summer of complications following cancer treatment, her office has established a memorial fund to benefit a second-year law student at Holsten's alma mater (Widener University School of Law) who interns at the Delaware DA's office. Assistant DA **Emily Ryan** said, "It will help keep the memory of Pat here." Various fund-raising events will support the fund.

**Bill M. White**, a former Bexar County (San Antonio) criminal district attorney, former judge on the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, and a former NDAA vice president, died in San Antonio. He was 70. A popular figure among his fellow judges and lawyers, Judge White served as DA from 1977 to 1982. In 1985 he was elected to the State Court of Criminal Appeals, where he served until 1996. At the time of his death he was serving as a visiting judge in San Antonio.

pastor or community. If done consistently enough, communities would become increasingly informed and better prepared to manage their growing population of offenders.

Unfortunately, our current system does not promote offender accountability in a consistent manner or mandate that offenders fully disclose the information related to their crimes to victims, their families or communities. In addition to promoting increased accountability and management of the known offenders, we must expand our current approach to prevention to include adult educational forums on child abuse that focus on the specific methods child molesters use to abuse and exploit both children and adults. Until we join forces to promote community education, the public will continue to miscalculate the malevolence involved in offending, persist in enabling offenders by doubting children and fail to report offenders to law enforcement.

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