



08/14/2008



The Street Survival Newsline
with Calibre Press

Child Sexual Offenders: How they select, manipulate and groom their victims

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It is difficult to develop a universal classification or list of characteristics that will consistently identify a child sexual offender. Child molesters are masters at presenting a facade that makes them indistinguishable from the rest of the population. *"The great fallacy that sex offenders are hiding in bushes or lurking in trees and this kind of stuff is a crock...we're the guy who lives next door, we're the guy that's coaching your kid's baseball team, and we're the priest at the church."*¹

Researchers have developed a variety of classifications such as Fixed vs. Regressed offenders, Situational vs. Preferential offenders, Incestuous vs. Non-incestuous offenders, or Socially competent vs. Socially incompetent offenders, but none of these classifications captures the vast array of individual characteristics or social circumstances of all child sexual offenders. There are, however, patterns of behavior and personality characteristics that have been associated with offenders who are inclined to sexually molest a child. One such pattern of behavior is victim selection and manipulation. Offenders will not only select a victim they are physically attracted to but one who they believe they can control. Offenders exercise great caution when selecting their victims and are very methodical about grooming and manipulating their victims into submission. From the offender's perspective this will reduce the chances of being arrested, prosecuted and jailed for their crime. If the victim does not report the abuse no one will ever know.

Victim Selection and Manipulation

Child sexual offenders function as predators and are very astute at identifying the vulnerabilities of a child. Offenders are able to identify weaknesses in a child's personality or life circumstances and then exploit them. For example, one offender who targeted 9-year-old boys told me that he would look for a boy who came from

a single-parent home. He recognized that this created an emotional void in the child's life and he saw this as a vulnerability that he could manipulate. He would befriend the boy's mother and become the male role model in the boy's life. Once this relationship was established he would begin to sexually molest the child. The offender would manipulate the boy by telling him that if he reported the abuse their friendship would end. The offender said he "used love as a weapon to get what he wanted out of the relationship". The offender rationalized his abusive behavior by telling himself that he "loved" the boys he molested and was filling an emotional void in their lives. This is just one of many examples illustrating the distorted perception offenders have of their abusive behavior.

Other characteristics offenders look for in victims:

- A child who is lonely, quiet, or passive

- A child who is seeking attention

- A child who has no siblings at home so there is no one for them to confide in

- A child who has already been sexually abused and is perceived by the offender as "damaged goods" (this helps to justify the offence in the mind of the offender because the child has already been emotionally scared by someone else)

- A child who comes from a dysfunctional family where they may be subjected to physical abuse, or there is substance abuse (the child will have no one to go to for support)

- Girls who appear to be sexually active or flirtatious

- A child whose credibility is questionable

- Children who are affectionate

- A child with low self esteem and self-confidence (research has shown that 49% of offenders look for this characteristic)²

Victims with these characteristics are vulnerable to the offender's manipulation. Most offenders are very adept at manipulating their victims and will do and say just about anything to achieve their goal. Offenders will make the victim feel as though they are special and shower them with attention. They will appear to be totally interested in them, more so than their parents, siblings, or other friends. Offenders will often develop a non-sexual relationship with their victim before any sexual contact occurs. Some offenders will develop a relationship with a child for as long as six months before they begin to molest them. They are able to connect with a child on their level by familiarizing themselves with the child's interest in video games, TV shows, music, books and movies. Once a friendship or emotional bond is developed between the offender and the child, the offender will begin the grooming behaviors that will lead to the sexual molestation. Children love attention which can make them easy prey. The victim may deplore the sexual abuse but enjoys the other aspects of their relationship with the offender.

Offenders will test the victim's reaction to their touch by engaging in non-sexual contact such as wrestling, tickling, hugging, stroking their hair, etc. Offenders have described this as "covert abuse". Offenders will "inadvertently" touch the victim's private parts to gauge their reaction. If the victim reacted negatively the offender would apologize and tell the victim the touch was accidental. If the victim did not react negatively to the touch offenders perceive this as a "green light" to continue. Some offenders reported that while sexually molesting a child they would talk to the child telling them, "It's okay, this is normal, everyone goes through this," or they may ask the victim if what they were doing was okay or if it felt good. If the victim acknowledged that the sexual touching felt good or that what the offender was doing was okay, the offender used this as part of their justification to continue and also as a manipulation to ensure non-disclosure. Offenders are very adept at making victims feel responsible for the abuse, thereby making it very difficult for the victim to report the abuse. Offenders coerce the victim into believing that if they report the abuse they would get into as much trouble as the offender. Consequently, children are often reluctant to report the abuse because they are afraid that they have done something wrong and will be punished.

Offenders are more likely to use flattery, bargaining or blackmail to control and manipulate victims than they are to use physical force.³ Offenders believe that a child is more apt to report abuse if they experience physical pain. Therefore many offenders avoid causing any physical pain to the victim. Instead, offenders often

use flattery by complimenting the victim on their outfit, their smile, sense of humor or their skill playing video games. Other offenders may bargain with their victims, promising to buy them a special gift if they engage in the sexual behavior. A 13-year-old victim reported that her stepfather who had been sexually molesting her for two years routinely bought her new outfits or music CDs. She reported that even though she did not like the sexual abuse her stepfather subjected her to, she was willing to tolerate it as long as she received the gifts he would buy her. She decided to report the abuse shortly after she started her menstrual cycle because she was afraid of becoming pregnant.

Another form of manipulation is to exploit the troubled relationship some victims have with their parents. The offender will develop a relationship with the victim as someone the victim can discuss personal problems with. The offender will console the victim and further drive a wedge between the victim and their parents. Not only will this create an emotional connection between the victim and offender, but it will also remove the victim's support group, thereby leaving the victim vulnerable to the abusive relationship the offender is cultivating.

During one of my interviews with a convicted child molester I asked him why he thought his victims did not report the abuse and he said, *"I think because for the most part I was very careful. I had a great image with the people wherever I was. They all thought I was a great guy. I didn't hurt them. I didn't abuse them physically at all. I wasn't going to force it. I was very careful about picking victims that were vulnerable. They had nowhere to go with it. Even if they did tell, who would believe them over a teacher who everyone thinks is a great guy? And there was never any physical evidence."*

Child sexual offenders are crafty and manipulative. They know that there is rarely any evidence to identify them and they have gone to great lengths to select and manipulate their victim to further insure non-disclosure. It takes a determined and passionate investigator to resolve child abuse cases. There are many victims who have been spared the trauma of further abuse and the nightmare of testifying in open court because a dedicated and determined investigator resolved the crime by identifying and eliciting a confession from the offender.

For additional information on investigating child abuse offenders visit our web site at www.reid.com, go to the Store and look for the book *'How to Identify, Interview & Interrogate Child Abuse Offenders'* by David M. Buckley.

¹ Statement from a child sexual offender the author interviewed who admitted sexually molesting over 50 pre-pubescent girls.

² Elliot, M., Browne, K., & Kilcoyne, J. (1995). Child sexual abuse prevention: What offenders tell us. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 19, 579-594.

³ Only 33% of offenders reported they would use physical force if a victim resisted. Elliot, M., Browne, K., & Kilcoyne, J. (1995). Child sexual abuse prevention: What offenders tell us. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 19, 579-594.

About the author

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