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Inside the Mind of a Sex Offender

What you need to know about child molesters

What does a sex offender look like? Do you picture an unkempt man with scruffy hair, dirty nails and a raincoat? You'd be wrong. Sex offenders often look just like the guy in the cubicle next to you at work, or the bank teller down the street, and in fact, they are often charming, intelligent and even downright likeable. They can be from any economic group, any race, and religious background, someone the child doesn't know and quite often, someone the child DOES know.

The Minnesota Department of Corrections warns that the misconception of children being nabbed off the street and molested by a stranger is far from the truth. This article in Pathways dispels common myths about sex offenders and delves into the mindframe of a predator.

Offender, Predator, or Molester?

"There is a lot of variation in how a sex offender is classified," explains Dr. Avery Zook, who with Dr. Tracy Dawyduk, runs the sex offender treatment program at Portage Path Behavioral Health. "It's not necessarily about the specific crime, but a variety of factors for the offender. Sexually oriented crimes are the 'lowest'. These offenders don't have to register as often and only for a limited time. However, Habitual Sex Offenders and Predators, the most serious of offenders, must register regularly, some for life." These labels are determined by the justice system and based on how many and type of offenses committed, likelihood to reoffend, risk posed to the community and a variety of other factors.

To further add to the confusion, child molesters are often referred to as pedophiles, but this isn't always an accurate description. "The actual definition is those attracted to prepubescents for more than 6 months," explains Zook. "Everything else falls under paraphilia, which better explains

offenders who molest adolescents and older, or those that haven't been attracted to them for more than six months." Zook continues to warn that with overcrowded prisons and such variation in classifications, some are labeled predator (the worst and emotionally laden distinction) yet aren't a huge threat to the surrounding community, while others could be quite dangerous but have a lesser legal description.

Both Dawyduk and Zook warn that the terms are NOT interchangeable. Words like habitual, predator, and oriented are legal descriptions, while the term pedophilia is a term used in treatment settings. "It can be extremely confusing," Dawyduk maintains.

Correlation, not Causation

"Every offender is highly individualized. Many factors and thinking styles are RELATED to offenses, but every case is different. There is no underlying factor that CAUSES someone to become an offender," Dawyduk maintains. She is quick to correct any type of generalization made about offenders but says that there are predisposing factors that often correlate with future offenses but don't necessarily cause the sexual offense.

There are two areas of risk factors, explains Dawyduk. First is Developmental, where there is a history of abuse, whether it be physical, emotional, or sexual, growing up. The second area consists of Current factors, such as use and availability of pornography, substance abuse, self esteem or control issues, and stress. Not all substance users commit sexual offenses, in the same way that not all offenders abuse substances and not every predator was molested as a child, she points out. Typically, it's not just one thing that leads up to sex offenses, it's a series of decisions and positions that the offender was in that led to this point.

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Hindsight Is 20/20

No matter how impulsive a sex crime may appear, there is a great deal of thought and planning that goes into the crime beforehand, experts agree.

"If you would have told some of the offenders in our program ten years ago that they would eventually commit sex crimes, they'd have said no way," Zook says. "But when you look back at smaller decisions that made them reach that point, you can see the pattern." The decisions that brought the offender to commit the act is called the Spiral Model of Child Sexual Abuse, and unfortunately, explains Zook, you can only look back to see the pattern. You can't start at the beginning and look ahead to predict future abuse.

The Spiral Model of Child Sexual Abuse

The spiral begins with the predisposing factors, both developmental and current. An offender might deal with anger or feelings of inadequacy and stress by fantasizing. During this stage, the offender will fantasize about his perfect victim. One former member of the treatment program was only interested in boys 10

and 11 years old. He had zero interest in younger than ten or older than 11, Zook says. Others aren't that discriminating with their victims. Another offender in the program abused boys and girls, age six months to 17 years old.

Once the impulse to act on the deviant sexual fantasy is determined, the offender will go to great lengths to set up opportunities to meet with victims. Some will "troll" the internet, making friends with kids or posing as kids themselves until they convince the child to meet face to face, or they exchange sexually explicit materials. Others find jobs or volunteer opportunities which put them in contact with children regularly. Others offend based on proximity and availability, such as a child in their own home or family.

Once they have found a potential victim, they often build a rapport with the child. Officials at the FBI

state that offenders use this time to gain the potential victim's trust, exploiting family problems the child may be having at home, and showering the child with gifts, attention, and love, until eventually the offender commits the molestation.

"An offender will rationalize the behavior to himself and others," Zook says. "He'll say things such as, 'Well, it's not really that bad. I didn't actually penetrate her' or 'I only did it a couple of times, at least it wasn't daily for years'. Another method the offender might use is to blame the victim and calmly say 'he was always rubbing up against me, sitting on my lap, what was I supposed to do?', or 'You need to understand this girl's reputation. She wanted it.'" Other methods of rationalization, according to the Spiral Model, include blaming substance abuse, the devil made him do it, and absurdly, some offenders feel they are "teaching the child" about sex .

The child keeps the secret for a number of reasons. The child may feel that no one will believe him. The offender may have verbally threatened him or subtly let him know that harm might come to him or his family if he tells. In many cases, the child feels guilty and doesn't want to get the offender in trouble.

"One offender never forced liquor or porn on the kids that came to his house," Dawyduk remembers one former offender in her program. "But he had it lying around, available so that the kids would ask to use it." In this manner, the offender made the children feel they initiated the situation or somehow caused the abuse to happen. They don't want to tell on the offender because then they'd get themselves in trouble as well for drinking/using drugs/watching pornography. Secrecy is the number one weapon that offenders use to continue committing crimes, experts agree. Once the secret has been kept, the spiral can continue and begin again with the same victim, or new ones.

Common Myths Broken

Only men commit sexual offenses, right? Not necessarily true, says Dawyduk. "Fewer women are identified as offenders simply because they can hide their abuse behind their caretaking role. Also, women offenders are reported less frequently, so fewer instances are prosecuted. Society often looks at women as lacking the power to be anything other than the recipient of sexual offense." She also believes that for boys that are molested by female offenders, it is seen by society more as a conquest, a Mrs. Robinson syndrome. It doesn't have the negative connotations that a 45 year old man being sexual against a high school cheerleader has, but it is still molestation. This discrepancy in society is often confusing for boy victims.

Sexual abuse by a male offender on a boy is not necessarily homosexuality. "Most boys who are abused are abused by straight men," Zook states. Dawyduk believes that it isn't about homosexuality, but rather who the offender is aroused by. Some people in the program are aroused equally by an adult woman and a male child. Others are primarily aroused by children, some only by young children. It all depends on the offender.

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Fast Facts

Compiled by the U.S. Department of Criminal Justice, Senate Judiciary Committee reports, and the F.B.I.

* There are 667 registered sex offenders in Summit County.

* 42 percent of rape victims tell no one.

* 22 percent of sexual predators assault an average of 7 victims before they are caught and convicted.

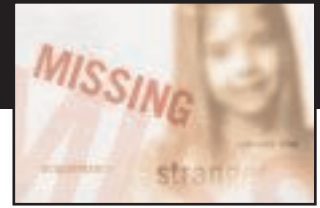
* The United States has a rape rate 13 times higher than Great Britain, almost 4 times higher than Germany, and more than 20 times higher than Japan.

* The offender knew the victim in over 80 percent of rape cases of children under the age of 12.

* *The Seattle Times* reported that by 1998, more than 1,500 suspected pedophiles in 32 states had been identified through various chatrooms on America's most popular Internet service.

Protecting Your Children from Predators

adapted from www.protectionagainstcrime.com



- Always make sure your children carry identification at all times. Provide them with a laminated card that has their full names, ages, address, contact numbers in case of an emergency (home and work), social security numbers, blood type, allergies to medication, physicians name and address and phone number.
- Teach your child how to use 911 and what to say when the dispatcher answers the call.
- Have passwords for your children that are used between you and your family only in emergencies. If someone says that Mom asked him to pick the child up and doesn't know the password, your child will know it's unsafe.
- Tell your children that if they are ever confronted with a dangerous situation, cry out. Yelling "FIRE! FIRE!" instead of "HELP" will bring faster attention and response. People will respond to fire first because it could spread and affect them.
- Do not use scare tactics on children. Statistics prove they do not work. Instead, talk openly about the numerous hazards that are present in our society.
- Explain to your children that they are ultimately responsible for their own safety, especially when you are not around to help. This will help them gain responsibility and assist them in taking control of their own security.
- Make them aware of their own instincts and senses. Children can sense danger at a very young age.
- Show children how to ask for help. Tell them who they can ask for help and that it is always ok to ask for help in any situation. Encourage them to act on instinctual needs to express their feelings.
- Warn your children about strangers and why they are not to interact with them AT ALL. Also discuss that sometimes people the child knows will act inappropriately.
- Predators test children to see how trusting their potential victims might be toward them. Predators can be very patient, talking to a child several times trying to gain their trust before actually committing their crimes. Warn your children about this tactic. Help them understand that predators might ask them for help (such as finding their lost dog) bribe them with candy or toys, act like they are in trouble or need assistance, or anything else to appeal to a child's sincere and helpful nature.
- Explain that when a child offers resistance to an offender, the predator will often use phrases like "I thought you liked me" or "I thought we were friends" to make the child feel guilty.
- Help your children become more observant about how others look - hair color, eye color, body shape, height, tattoos, clothing, etc.
- Explain to your child the difference between good touching (like a non-sexual hug) bad touching (being hit or hurt), and secretive touching (sexual touching that they can't talk about). Be certain that they know that they don't have to be ashamed to tell if they have been touched in a secretive way.
- After abuse, predators will threaten the child that something bad will happen to the child's family if he tells. They will also tell the victim that no one will believe that they were abused and that something bad will happen if the story is told. Make sure they know that nothing bad will happen to them if they report the abuse.
- If your child knows the lies and deceptions that a predator will use to persuade his victim to remain silent beforehand, there is a very good chance the child will not be afraid to report the incident afterward.
- If your children see someone sitting in a parked car, be sure they know to stay away from it and not to stop and talk to anyone near the car.
- Remind your children not to open the door to anyone, or to let anyone on the phone know they are home alone. Teach them what to say to callers in advance, such as "My mom is in the garden right now, may I take a message?"

Inside the mind of a sex offender *(continued)*

Treatment for Offenders

Most experts agree that treatment is extremely important because people can learn to make good choices and minimize their chances of reoffending. At Portage Path, Zook and Dawyduk currently have 35 members enrolled in treatment, most of whom were ordered by the court to attend. The ultimate goal is to prevent the abuse of future victims and provide safety for past and current victims. While sexual offenses DO occur against adults, the treatment program is strictly for offenders who act against children.

"It's not as simple as just saying 'don't touch children anymore'," says Zook. "It's a lot harder. The underlying parts are so powerful, think of what it would take to get you to offend a child. That's how much we have to work to get them to the point where they don't want to molest anymore. Changes happen slowly over time. Even for impulsive people, the deviant thinking did not happen five minutes before the offense."

Treatment includes weekly group sessions, extensive homework and regular check-ins with probation and parole officers and the doctors. The members of the group also have to follow a contract of guidelines and show up on time or risk getting kicked out of the group. Offenders are not permitted to go places where there are crowds of children, such as Cedar Point or ball games.

Members of the program should expect to be in weekly therapy 2 to 4 years, or longer, Zook maintains. "Recovery is a lifelong process. The temptation can be too great, but eventually they can learn to change their thinking and monitor their behavior."



Community Pathways is a publication of **Portage Path Behavioral Health**, with outpatient facilities in Akron, Barberton, and Cuyahoga Falls/Stow, and psychiatric emergency services in Akron.

Portage Path is an affiliate of the **County of Summit Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board**.

For more information about the topics covered in this issue, call (330) 376-6144.

To make a referral, call (330) 253-3100.

For 24-hour/7-day **Psychiatric Emergency Services**, call (330) 762-6110.

To reach the **Support Hotline**, call (330) 434-9144.

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Protect Your Child from Internet Offenders

adapted from the FBI

- Communicate. Talk to your children about potential online danger.
- Spend time with your children on-line. Have them teach you about their favorite online destinations.
- Keep the computer in a common room in the house, not your child's bedroom. It is difficult for a predator to communicate with your child when you can see the monitor.
- Utilize parental controls provided by your internet service provider and use blocking software.
- Always maintain access to your child's online account and randomly check his or her email. Explain to your child why you need access.
- Teach your child the responsible uses of the internet. There is more to the experience than chat rooms.
- Find out what safeguards are used by your child's school and library.
- Understand that even if your child was a willing participant of sexual exploitation, he is not at fault and is a victim.