



Guest Column

A Community-Based Approach to Healing Families

by Stephen Gilbertson

American children and adolescents most often report that their primary source of information about sexuality is media (television, music & the Internet). Certainly we are all aware that the entertainment media, and even the news media, in our country have become increasingly sexualized. Unfortunately, we as parents, the schools and community organizations tend to do little to either insulate our kids from, or prepare them to interpret, the messages with which they are bombarded.

Unfortunately, growing numbers of youth across the country have engaged in illegal sexual acts and have experienced life-altering legal consequences for their sexual behavior. Laws and community practices aimed at preventing known adult sexual offenders from committing further sexual crimes are increasingly being applied to youth, including sex offender registration, community notification and residency restrictions. Within this societal context, it is becoming increasingly critical that once youth are identified as having engaged in inappropriate and/or abusive sexual behavior that appropriate assessment and effective treatment are made available.

Wraparound Milwaukee is a program which serves over 600 families daily. Of those, approximately 120 are families affected by the serious sexual misconduct of their children and adolescents. The “wraparound” approach is aimed at creating comprehensive, highly individualized and tailored care for the whole family when serious sexual misconduct has occurred. While many communities across the country have relied on harsh legal responses and institutional/residential treatment for these youth, Wraparound Milwaukee has worked to promote humane legal responses and holistic and compassionate family education and treatment aimed at healing and prevention.

The respectful partnership between parents and professionals is a key to success.

The wraparound approach involves the development of a “child and family team”. This team most often includes members of the family, treatment professionals, probation officer or child welfare worker, support persons, and a wraparound care coordinator who facilitates the team process. The team meets regularly and works together to insure that the family’s existing strengths, talents, and resources are being utilized and magnified to meet their needs. Working toward healing of the family and the safety of all is a shared mission. The respectful partnership between parents and professionals is a key to success.

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For Children to Recover, the Whole Family Must Heal: One Mother’s Perspective

About 2 years ago I came home from work one day to find police officers in my house talking to my family about sexual interactions between my then 14-yr-old son, J.R. (pseudonym), and his two sisters who were 3 1/2 and 11. I have two boys, now 16 and 15, and two girls, who are now 13 and 5. We live with the father of my youngest one, whose grandmother – trying to find someone for the family to talk to – contacted a police officer, who ended up filing reports with Child Protective Services about J.R.’s sexual behavior towards his sisters.

When I saw certain signs, I had a feeling that something might be going on between my oldest son and my youngest daughter. Maybe it was a mother’s instinct. When I asked her, my little

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About Stop It Now!

Stop It Now! believes that the sexual abuse of children can be stopped when adults accept the responsibility to recognize, acknowledge and confront the behaviors and conditions that lead to abuse. We offer adults tools they can use to prevent sexual abuse – before there’s a victim to heal or an offender to punish. In collaboration with our network of community-based Stop It Now! programs, we reach out to adults who are concerned about their own or others’ sexualized behavior toward children.

About PARENTtalk

This newsletter is designed for parents and caregivers of children and teens with sexual behavior problems. PARENTtalk offers practical information and hopeful perspectives. To break the isolation that caregivers so often face PARENTtalk publishes personal stories from families who have generously shared their experiences as well as updates from some of the leading professionals in the field. Please feel free to view, print, or distribute any of the PARENTtalk newsletters for yourself or someone you care about.

To view archives or subscribe to PARENTtalk go to www.stopitnow.org/parenttalk.



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Often, parents whose child or adolescent has come to the attention of authorities due to sexual misconduct are shocked by both the disclosure of their child's behavior and by the system response and therefore need ongoing support and guidance. Unfortunately, many communities do not yet make available knowledgeable support and guidance for parents faced with such complexity and distress. The Stop It Now! Helpline can be a confidential resource to parents with questions and in need of support in managing this stress.

Parents who are empowered with knowledge about what works are in the best position to advocate for an appropriate response to their child and family.

Parents should immediately consult their family physician and/or local social service agencies to discover resources for addressing sexual behavior problems if they arise. Early detection and intervention can prevent further harm and serious legal outcomes for youth with sexual behavior problems. Most youth, (approximately 90%), and their families, who receive appropriate education and treatment tend *not* to have further problems with sexual misconduct.

If your child comes before the Court for sexual misconduct, advocate for close collaboration between the legal and mental health systems, including a psychosexual assessment of your child by a qualified professional, to fully inform those making decisions. In most cases, institutional placement should not be necessary with creative planning and community-based access to needed services. In many states right now it is possible to avoid or later remove (expunge) the *legal* record of sexual assault if treatment is completed and there are no further problems with the law.

The system should first “*do no harm*” in its response to youth with sexual behavior problems. Parents who are empowered with knowledge about what works are in the best position to advocate for an appropriate response to their child and family.

Stephen Gilbertson, M.S. is the Clinical Program Administrator for Wraparound Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI

Letter from Stop It Now!'s Public Policy Director

Dear Parents,

As I sit down to write to you about the latest news concerning the Adam Walsh Act, I am stopped in my thinking by my frustration and concerns as scenarios of the impact on your lives play in my head.

Many of you may be aware of the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (AWA) passed in July 2006. This new federal law, which includes the Sex Offender Registry and Notification Act (SORNA), expands the definition of sex offender to include certain juveniles in the registry requirements. Specifically, any juvenile 14 or over at the time of the offense who has committed sexual abuse by force or threat or any sex act with a person under the age of 12 must register as a sex offender. Information such as name, address, employer, and school may be included with offense type.

Current state laws are in effect until State Legislatures decide whether or not to comply with AWA. State legislatures across the country are grappling with the requirement to make a decision by July 2009. Some state lawmakers, very concerned about the impact on juveniles previously not subject to registry requirements, are considering the possibility of not complying. Other states, such as Florida and Ohio, have already approved compliance. Expressing your concerns to your state legislators is an important step to take. To easily access their contact information, go to the National Conference of State Legislatures at www.ncsl.org/public/leglinks.cfm.

If your child is court-involved, now is the time to have conversations with the professionals you are currently involved with about the possible impact of this legislation on your family. The National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth website lists existing statutes applied to juveniles by state under the heading “Sex Offender Registry Laws.” Web address: www.ncsby.org or page link www.ncsby.org/pages/registry.htm

The AWA authorized the creation of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) Office within the US Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs. The full AWA and Proposed Guidelines are posted on the SMART website www.ojp.usdoj.gov/smart. To voice your opinion about this legislation, write to the SMART office director at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/smart/about.htm.

Contact your state Attorney General for the most up-to-date information for your state through the National Association of Attorneys General website, www.naag.org.

Look for updates on policies impacting youth at www.stopitnow.org in the News & Information box or check *public policy updates* when you sign up for our newsletter.

Deborah Donovan Rice

(For Children to Recover... from page 1)

one told me the whole story. It happened to me when I was younger, but I really didn't see this coming. I wanted everyone to get help. From then on, the hardest part was protecting both of them in the process.

J.R. was just 14. He was arrested and charged with two counts of first degree sexual assault. When he was sent away I was afraid they would lock him up and I wouldn't see him again until he was an adult. There were times that he didn't think he was going to make it.

***When he felt that he wasn't going to make it through,
I was there to back him up and encourage him.***

It took me a few weeks to really come to terms with what had happened. "Why did he do this?" Everybody had that question. Everyone in the family was actually supportive even though they couldn't understand why he had behaved this way. Maybe he saw something on TV or heard other friends talking about it, and the opportunity was there.

We were referred to a "wraparound" program and they helped put together a "care team" to support everyone in the family. They helped us through the whole legal process and helped us get therapy for my other three children, but especially for my youngest. She was in therapy for about a year and is now doing really well. My older daughter still goes to therapy with J.R. every week, and both of the boys have mentors. J.R. even has a job coach to help him. My role for my son was really to be his supporter. When he felt that he wasn't going to make it through, I was there to back him up and encourage him. I was there for every meeting and every court date. I was there for him.

When all this happened I thought I had dealt with my own abuse issues from my past. But it all came back to me and I realized that I needed some support as well. The program connected me to therapy, and with that care I also got family therapy which helped us all with other situations we were struggling with. I recently went back to school to take classes and have really opened myself up to some new possibilities.

And then at a team meeting about a year ago, they told us J.R. could complete the program within a year and return home! After two years participating in the program, J.R. is really looking forward to coming home. He feels that he's ready. We all do. We've seen so much progress.

The grandmother is also glad that everybody got the help they needed. She is looking forward to J.R. returning to his family. Family is so important. I have to admit that I'm a little anxious, worried that he might relapse, but I'm still very hopeful.

***People say that they can take care of things
on their own. But there's some stuff
that you just can't get through alone.
And I'd say that this is truly one of them.***

The "team" has prepared us for J.R. to return. We'll stay connected to the program for a little while once he is home. Then they'll help us connect to other support services if we need them so that this can be successful for everyone.

I would recommend this family- and community-based approach to others in similar situations. People say that they can take care of things on their own. But there's some stuff you just can't get through alone. And I'd say that this is truly one of them.

Story generously shared by Wraparound program parent.

Note from the Editors: *In this issue of PARENTtalk we have highlighted the Wraparound model – one of many approaches now available to children and families managing sexual behavior concerns in youth. The organizations listed on the next page under "Helpful Resources for Families" offer information on different models of treatment as well as referrals for specialized treatment nationwide. The "wraparound" approach describes the effort to coordinate multiple community-based services for families as an alternative to institutionalized care for youth. To find out about local programs that incorporate the principles and values of "wraparound" please see the links below.*

We hope that these resources assist you in exploring options for your family.

More on Wraparound...

The National Wraparound Initiative publishes the *Wraparound Process User's Guide: A Handbook for Families*: www.rtc.pdx.edu/PDF/pbWraparound_Family_Guide.pdf

To find a program in your state which employs the basic principles of wraparound, contact the National Wraparound Initiative Advisors for assistance. www.rtc.pdx.edu/nwi/NWIRoster.htm.

To find programs involved with the National Wraparound Initiative, consult the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) programs listing through Systems of Care at www.systemsofcare.samhsa.gov/ResourceDir/Comprehensive_home.aspx

“Sometimes it feels like our family lives in a secret world. It is so helpful to have someone outside the family who I can share this with – so helpful to talk to someone who understands.” – Helpline caller

**About the Stop It Now! Helpline
1.888.PREVENT
helpline@stopitnow.org**

If you need additional resources and support, call the Stop It Now! confidential, national toll-free Helpline available Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Eastern time. The Helpline offers support, information and resources to help keep children safe, and to create healthier families and communities.

**PARENTtalk Archives
Offer More Support and Information**

Each newsletter offers valuable information and hopeful perspectives for parents. These below plus all back issues are available free online at www.stopitnow.org/parentalk.

Stronger and Wiser: One mother’s transition from shame to strength. Guest column by: David Prescott, LICSW, *Isolation and Recovery from Abuse* (Spring 2002).

Support Groups for Parents: Four support group experiences from caregivers. Guest column by Dan Knoepfler, MC, and Martha Davis, MSW, *Parent Support Groups: Beating the isolation* (Fall 2004).

Loving Them Both: A mother’s fight to end the cycle of sexual abuse in her family. Guest column by Steve Brown, Psy.D., *Just say KNOW: Promoting Healthy Sexuality in Young People with Sexual Behavior Problems* (Spring 2005).

Helpful Resources for Families

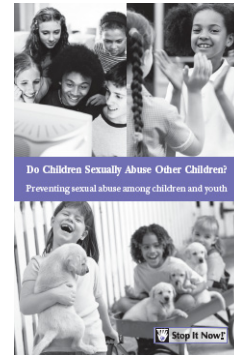
Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA)
Call or email for a referral to a local treatment provider, 503.643.1023, www.atsa.com.

Safer Society Foundation and Press
Call for referral to a treatment provider or to request catalogue of publications, 802.247.3132, www.safersociety.org.

Child Molestation Research and Prevention Institute
Online directory of resources and sex-specific therapists, 404.872.5152, www.childmolestationprevention.org.

New England Adolescent Research Institute and Press
Call or go online for a catalogue of publications for professionals and families addressing treatment for youth with sexual behavior problems, 800.353.3730, www.neari.com.

**Newly Revised and Expanded Guidebook
Now Available from Stop It Now!**



**Do Children Sexually Abuse Other Children?
Preventing sexual abuse among children and youth**

Increasingly harsh child sex abuse laws are sweeping up ever more adolescents and children. But Stop It Now! continues to focus on practical approaches to prevention. This updated and expanded 18-page booklet includes information about children and sexuality; a description of behaviors that may suggest a risk, important ways adults can influence appropriate behaviors and effective responses for everyone involved when concerns arise or harmful sexual behaviors are identified.

A [sample copy](http://www.stopitnow.org/pubs.htm#otherchildren) and ordering instructions are available at www.stopitnow.org/pubs.htm#otherchildren

“You are the first link to anything positive happening for my family. I have talked to so many people, and this is the first time I really feel that somebody understands and is really trying to help.” – Helpline caller

We Rely on Your Support!

We need your ideas, feedback and financial support to keep producing PARENTtalk - and to expand its circulation.

Stop It Now! depends on the generosity of courageous individuals who understand and value our unique resources.

To make a donation in any amount, contact [Stop It Now!](http://www.stopitnow.org) (Tel 413.587.3500) or donate online at www.stopitnow.org.

Be sure to designate your gift for PARENTtalk,.