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CHILD SEX ABUSE: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

By MICHAEL A. STINSON

PHILADELPHIA GOT a wake-up call this week.

The Joseph J. Peters Institute released the results of its just-completed 2006 survey on child sexual abuse. The message is loud and clear. Child sexual abuse isn't just a story we see involving a child and a perpetrator who live far away. Victims and perpetrators aren't so conveniently anonymous. The truth is, they're much, much closer to home.

Our survey found that almost one in four adult Philadelphians (23.7 percent) reported being sexually abused as a child. Using 2000 census figures, that's more than 270,000 adults. And, over the last three years, one in seven adults said, they were concerned that a child they knew was being sexually abused. In that same period, one in 16 adults said, they were concerned that someone they knew exhibited sexual behavior directed at a child. That's more than 26,000 possible child victims and more than 71,000 possible adult perpetrators right here in Philadelphia.

How we got to this unfortunate place isn't easy to pinpoint. We can't put our finger on just one reason that people sexually abuse children. Some genuinely believe that their activities with a child are expressions of love and caring. (They are neither.)

Some abuse children out of a need for power and control. They use their adult status to extract that feeling from a defenseless child.

Some are simply opportunists who satisfy their sexual needs on the easiest target - a child. Some suffer from aberrant emotional development. They mature physically, but not emotionally. When they desire emotional connection through sexual behavior, they turn to someone equally immature emotionally - a child.

Some offenders are sadists. Their sexual excitement is amplified by inflicting physical, sexual and emotional pain on a child. Some were themselves sexually abused as a child. And for some, their behavior just can't be explained. There is simply no single typology for a child sex offender.

Many people who look at the findings from the Peters survey wonder why child sexual abuse is such a large problem today.

IT MAY LOOK like this is a relatively new phenomenon, but we can definitively say it isn't.

It has only been over the last 25 to 30 years that we've even begun to speak openly about sexual abuse, especially child sexual abuse. We have only been asking questions that allow us to compile figures on the scope of the abuse in that same time frame.

The more we speak the words, the more we gain the courage to be open about our experiences with child sexual abuse. The more of our experiences we share with others, the more we are free of the shame and taboo that has often been associated with talking about sexual behavior. The more we find others willing to say that they have been sexually abused as a child, the more likely we are to add our voices to that list of victims. And we end up with figures like the ones reported in this survey - almost one in four Philadelphia adults report being sexually abused as a child.

To complete the picture of child sexual abuse, we need also to speak of environmental factors that contribute to sexually aggressive and abusive behaviors. We know from self-reports of incarcerated child sex-offenders that many began their patterns of behavior in adolescence.

The Philadelphians we surveyed almost without exception believe that children who witness physical and sexual violence between family members translate that imagery into their own behavior. They also believe that sexual imagery in the media is an overwhelming influence on adolescent behavior.

We know that many children who live in sexualized environments react with behavior that is overtly sexual. Studies show that pornography, particularly Internet pornography, can be highly addictive. Pornography may not cause sexually abusive behavior, but it can relax our sense of self-control. The anonymity of the Internet often eliminates the sense of social exposure that would compel most people to behave in acceptable ways.

So when we ask, is child sexual abuse a new phenomenon? - the answer would have to be, no.

We're just getting better at recognizing, talking about, and coming forward to share our experiences with it. As adults, we need to continue to educate ourselves about this abuse and remove the burden of reporting from children.

The Joseph J. Peters Institute Prevention Services program teaches individuals and communities how to recognize the social and behavioral indicators of people who are sexually abusing children or are at risk to do so. We provide training on realistic techniques that can prevent abuse.

We need to start with adult responsibility. When we wait for a child to report sexual abuse, the exposure has already occurred. Adults, not children, need to end the cycle of child sexual abuse - and we can!

Child sexual abuse is not inevitable. It's preventable.

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