

Sandusky Cover-Up? Why People Look the Other Way in Child Sex Abuse

by Stephanie Pappas, Live Science Contributor | July 12, 2012 04:06pm ET

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Most people think they would step in to protect a child being abused, but psychologists say even well-meaning eyewitnesses can freeze up in these crisis situations.

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How could someone not only cast a blind eye but also conceal facts that could help a child being sexually abused? A new report suggesting Penn State officials kept facts about Jerry Sandusky's child-sex abuse from authorities paint a picture of uncaring, and worse, adults.

But how you think you'd react in a child-abuse situation, and how you really would are two different things, psychologists say.

The report is the result of an investigation into the Sandusky [child-sex scandal](#) conducted by the former FBI director and his Special Investigative Counsel for the university. "The most saddening finding by the Special Investigative

Counsel is the total and consistent disregard by the most senior leaders at Penn State for the safety and welfare of Sandusky's child victims," the report reads.

"I think everyone believes that they would go in and break that up," Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett (R) told

NBC's "Meet the Press" on Nov. 13, 2011, when the scandal broke.

But while child-abuse experts say that catching perpetrators in the act is rare, child abuse goes unreported and uninterrupted more often than not. And given the unexpected nature of seeing [a man sexually abusing a child](#), even well-meaning eyewitnesses might freeze up. [[10 Most Destructive Human Behaviors](#)]

Even so, the Sandusky eyewitnesses or their superiors should have immediately contacted the state child abuse hotline, said Jeanetta Issa, the president and chief executive officer of the [Child Abuse Prevention Association](#) (CAPA). And education is critical. There's just not really a clear understanding who should be reporting, who they should report to, or even how they should recognize [child sexual abuse]," Issa told LiveScience today (July 12).

Swept under the rug

As many as one in three girls and one in seven boys experience [sexual abuse](#), according to Stop It Now!, a child sexual abuse prevention organization. By far, most of those [cases go unreported](#). And though statistics vary, studies suggest that only about 12 percent to 30 percent of child sexual abuse cases are reported to the authorities.

Hierarchical organizations such as the [Catholic Church](#) and the Boy Scouts have come under fire for covering up or failing to appropriately deal with the sexual abuse of children. But it's not just organizations like Penn State that turn a blind eye, Issa said. Families frequently deny child abuse in their midst too, Issa told LiveScience in November. In one case Issa was familiar with, an adult woman who had been sexually abused by her brother throughout her youth began to see signs that her niece might have become his next victim. The woman finally spoke out.

"In her whole family, nobody believed her," Issa said. "They tried to have her committed to a mental hospital."

Despite stereotypes of creepy-looking men in white vans, [child abusers](#) are typically the most likeable, gregarious people around, Issa said. They get close to kids not only by charming them, but also by charming the people protecting them.

In the case of a powerful, famous man like Sandusky, it can be even harder to speak up, Elizabeth Saewyc, a nursing professor at the University of British Columbia who specializes in treatment of abused children, told LiveScience in November.

"When someone is a very prominent and powerful figure, it is very difficult for people to feel like they should say bad things about them," Saewyc said. People may also start to doubt themselves, she said, worrying that they'll ruin the suspected abuser's life if they're wrong.

And in the [case of Penn State](#), Saewyc said, people who heard about the alleged abuse may have been blinded by their loyalty to their organization.

"When it's a prominent person in a respected institution, there is going to be damage, not just to that person but to the institution," Saewyc said. "People may pay attention to those consequences."

And, along with loyalty, as it was found in the new report, image can be everything: "... in order to avoid the consequences of bad publicity, the most powerful leaders at the University – [President Graham] Spanier, [VP of Finance Gary] Schultz, [head football coach Joe] Paterno and [athletic director Timothy] Curley – repeatedly concealed critical facts relating to Sandusky's child abuse from the authorities, the University's Board of Trustees, the Penn State community, and the public at large."

Eyewitness inaction

All of these psychological barriers keep people from speaking out, but what's unusual about the Penn State case is that in two separate occasions, witnesses said they saw [obvious abuse occurring](#). In 2000, the janitor cleaning the locker room saw Sandusky performing oral sex on a young boy, according to grand jury testimony. And in 2002,

Mike McQueary, then a graduate student, saw Sandusky assaulting a boy in the showers, before immediately leaving the room, according to the grand jury report.

That Sandusky allegedly got caught in the act even once is rare, Issa said.

"We see 12,000 clients a year," she said. "In all of that, very seldom does anybody actually walk in and actually witness the abuse."

The very rarity of the situation may have made it difficult to react, said Peter Ditto, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Irvine, who studies moral decision-making. People often have very strong ideas about what they'd do in a situation — stop the rape, save the child — but crises can cause the mind to freeze, Ditto told LiveScience in November when the case was made public. [[Top 10 Mysteries of the Mind](#)]

Research on the "bystander effect," the surprising fact that many people will stand by while terrible things happen suggests that when something horrible occurs, people often go into a kind of denial, thinking that if it were really this bad, somebody else would be stopping it, Ditto said. (Involving other people makes the bystander effect worse, in fact, by diffusing the sense of responsibility to do something.)

"It's that crisis, split-second sort of quality," Ditto said. "Here this thing happens that's almost impossible to believe, and you're paralyzed for a while as to what to do. ... In these kinds of crisis situations, delay is tantamount to not helping. Your opportunity is right there, to help, to stop it, and then you delay, you walk out and it's all kind of over."

A 1985 study found that the bystander effect influences people with more masculine personalities the most. In the research, 20 students took part in a group discussion via headphones in which one participant pretended to start choking. Actual gender didn't influence which people called for help, but those whose personalities were higher in [stereotypically masculine traits](#) such as "athleticism" and "aggressiveness" were more likely to sit idly by. Reporting in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the researchers speculated that highly masculine people feared potential embarrassment and "loss of poise" and thus hesitated longer before reacting.

While fire drills and [emergency simulations](#) can prepare people for disasters and prevent the "freeze" response to crisis, it's tougher to run through potential scenarios in which you walk in on a respected figure abusing a child, Ditto said.

"People misunderstand how ambiguous situations are, just the uncertainty, you don't know quite what's happening," he said. "It's hard to know how to get out of that delay."

Sandusky's reputation probably contributed to the continued silence, Saewyc said.

"It would take a remarkably self-confident person to say something, step in and do something, in the face of one of the most powerful people on campus and someone who is famous," she said.

But both Saewyc and Issa said that no matter the hurdles to reporting, doing so is crucial. "If they can't get their hands on that number, by golly, law enforcement would be fine," Issa said. And that goes for janitors and passersby, not just educators and other legally mandated reporters.

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