

## THE CAUSES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE<sup>1/</sup>

Throughout most of history women and children have been treated in similar ways by society and in particular by its legal systems. The social order has been governed almost exclusively by adult males (patriarchy), and all others, whether children or women, who do not belong to this class, have tended to be dominated by it in a similar way. The historical origins of society have played a significant role in determining what society is today. About sexual abuse, history reveals three important themes:

- Abusive practices toward children have long existed, in varying degrees, within ordinary, accepted social behavior.
- Denial of child sexual abuse has persisted throughout history.
- The dominance of patriarchal values throughout history has denigrated the rights of both women and children.

Child sexual abuse began to surface as a real issue of public concern only during the 1940s, and then it was deemed as an aberration proceeding from the loosening of sexual values and the disruptiveness of the two world wars. It was not considered a problem of major concern within the family. It was believed that abusers were primarily strangers, not parents, trusted friends or respected members of the community. Although it has happened slowly, attitudes about children's worth, status and rights have changed considerably throughout history. Attitudes toward children have become more humane; practices such as institutional corporal punishment and child labor have been eliminated or reduced in many cultures. Because energies have so often been taken up in other basic issues concerning the welfare of children, most societies have failed to recognize the pervasiveness of the more hidden problems of child sexual abuse, child pornography and child prostitution.

Child sexual abuse is a social phenomenon linked to general attitudes and practices toward children and also to the ways sexual relationships are organized and regulated in and particular society. These attitudes and behaviors arise out of the process of socialization, the way individuals learn about group standards, acceptable behaviors and norms. Because families are the primary socializing agents in our culture, the child rearing practices that prevail generally reflect and inform the attitudes and values of the wider society. Today, there is the recognition that a dramatically accelerated rate of social change has been occurring throughout western civilization during the last half century. Such change has destabilized the family and has required alteration of the traditional family model. More children are being raised in one-parent families, the majority of which are headed by young women. In recent years more marriages are breaking down when a couple reach their forties, and this significantly affects the value formation of both young and adolescent children.

The Roman Catholic Church has always had an interest in family life, but that influence has been waning as more people find it difficult to accept the Church's stand on the permanence of the bond of marriage. While many individuals have positive experiences because they belong to a religious community, there are values and attitude transmitted by the organization and teachings of churches that may actually create, influence and perpetuate abusive relationships. Unquestioning obedience to authority figures, viewing suffering as desirous and unavoidable, and emphasis on inherent sinfulness can have negative effects on those who are victimized by sexual abuse because they reinforce both guilty and responsibility. With the Church, the emphasis on unlimited and unconditional forgiveness and the requirement to keep the family intact, no matter what the cost, perpetuates the abuse because it discourages the victim from escaping the abuser.

Religious systems have also imparted negative attitudes about sexuality issues and have suppressed discussion of sex and sexuality, a situation that makes disclosure of sexual abuse all the more difficult. Traditional Catholic education, obsessed with how sinful Catholics are as human beings, taught the ordinary Catholic to distrust his or her sexual feelings and all erotic behavior. Catholicism tended to keep people passive and receptive. Catholicism did little to help Catholics think for themselves. Catholics became conditioned because of the massive use of fear. It is in this context that sex became a corrosive element in Catholic life. It is also in this atmosphere that so much obsessive-compulsive

behavior developed in the name of religion and sex. Catholics were not encouraged to love themselves when all their energy was enjoined so rigorously to chain the evil beast of sex within themselves. That this methodology was unhealthy is now unquestionable, but that it was used extensively is undeniable. The consequences for people who were given a distorted sense of themselves and their humanity over sex and religion are difficult if not impossible to measure fully.

Schools continue the process of socialization begun in the family and Church. The separate denominational education system may further influence the attitudes and socialization of children. One of the significant socialization effects is sexual stereotyping and the reinforcement of traditional male dominated roles. The problem of stereotyping in the school system is present in the classroom but also extends to textbooks. The subtle, almost subliminal message of these texts is that women are secondary and less effective participants in life's important events, while men must always be competent, knowledgeable and strong. Awareness of stereotyping of male bias in curriculum materials is growing as educational systems have begun to examine the values and attitudes they bring to their work and to their pupils.

Television, music, music videos and advertising are powerful and insidious contributors to social learning. On TV and in motion pictures males are portrayed in dominant roles while women are depicted as victims of violence. Music videos are especially culpable in this regard. Their emotional messages are directed to a juvenile audience that is highly susceptible to their violent imagery. Advertising is also a powerful means of communication that influences values and standards as well as shopping preferences. The sexualization of children in fashion promotion is an example of the exploitive role that advertising can assume.

Although writers and professionals stand by the premise that families can be the most satisfactory environment for children, they do question the assumption that the family is always a safe haven, that families always know best when it comes to children, and that families can do everything for the child on their own. They suggest that families need to examine their roles in the socialization of children by scrutinizing values and attitudes that are transmitted even within socially acceptable approaches to child rearing.

The division of our society into male and female roles and institutions amounts to sexual stereotyping which may be perpetuated by all those involved in raising children – the family, the Church and the school. This restriction is detrimental to both sexes. Boys who are not allowed to display feelings and emotions may turn away from intimacy. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to be emotional, understanding and forgiving. Girls learn to desire romantic, sentimental love relationships, but also to expect a sexually aggressive male who is in control of the social and sexual interaction.

Traditional masculinity focuses on dominance and independence, an orientation to the world which is active and assertive, which valorizes competitiveness and turns its face from intimacy, achieving esteem in the glorification of force. The fear at the heart of this image is of emotion – that which makes people vulnerable and womanly; emotion is dangerous not only because it implies dependence, but also because it is alien, a representation of all that masculinity rejects. This fear of emotion in turn makes sex both over and under invested in by men. Sex is one of the few socially acceptable ways in which men can aspire to closeness with others, and as such it becomes the carrier of all the unexpressed desires that men's emotional illiteracy produces. This same power of sex to produce emotionally makes it dangerous to men whose identity is built upon the rejection of emotion; sex then becomes split off, limited to the activity of the penis, an act rather than an encounter. Sexual conquest becomes a symbol of male prowess. The link between such a form of masculinity and sexual abuse is apparent; it is not just present, but inherent in a mode of personality organization that rejects intimacy. Sex as triumph and achievement slides naturally into sex as rejection and degradation of the other.

Women learn earlier and much more completely to distinguish between sexual and nonsexual forms of affection. Women are sensitized to appreciate affection without a sexual component while men, from the time they were young, are not given many opportunities to practice nurturing and express affection. Men, however, grow up seeing heterosexual success as much more important to their identity

as much more important to their identity as men, and sex is often used as a way of reconfirming their adequacy on other issues. Men are socialized so that they focus their sexual interest on sexual acts isolated from the context of a relationship, while women are taught to focus on whole relationships. The ability of men to relate more concretely to sexual acts is illustrated in their greater interest in pornography as well as their ability to be aroused by children. Men are socialized to see as their appropriate sexual partners persons who are younger and smaller than themselves, while women are socialized to see as their appropriate sexual partners as older and larger.

Our culture places a positive value on obedience and even condones the use of physical punishment to enforce it. Children are taught to respect adults and their authority simply because they are adults who supposedly know what is best. Such emphasis on obedience and deference to authority because of position has obvious implications for child sexual abuse. Children who are unable to question the behavior of an adult because they believe they have no right to do so are vulnerable to that adult, and to adults in general.

While sexuality is a positive and necessary part of both self and society, sometimes the expression of that sexuality has become distorted and destructive. People may confuse intimacy and sex, equate sexual activity with sexual violence, establish unequal relationships and then abuse the resulting power imbalance through emotional and physical violence. The sexual abuse of children is one extreme example of this kind of distortion and confusion.

Today, young people obtain most of their information about sex and sexuality from magazines, movies and their friends, rather than from their parents. Many young people find it difficult to ask intimate and troubling questions because they sense, and are put off by, the discomfort felt by their parents. Parents may not believe they know enough and do not wish to display their own uncertainties and confusion. Another is mutual denial of, and discomfort with, each other sexuality; young people find it difficult to see their parents as sexual beings like themselves, while parents find it difficult to see adolescents as anything but sexual.

### The Victim

Since child sexual abuse does not usually involve physical violence or physical force, it seems difficult to understand the vulnerability of the victim or the powerlessness to repel a skilled seducer. Below are five characteristics that make children ideal victims from the offender's perspective:

- *Natural curiosity.* Children are naturally curious about sex. Most male adolescents receive their information about sexual matters from their peers. Thus, natural curiosity and the lack of information can be exploited by a sex offender to lower a victim's inhibitions and gradually seduce him into sexual activity.
- *Easily led by adults.* Children are taught to respect and obey adults. Children are taught to believe that adults know what is best for them and would not ask them to do something that is wrong or harmful. Some children are also instilled with a fear of adults, especially those in extra powerful positions, e.g.: clergy, police officers and teachers.
- *Need for attention and affection.* This characteristic is a very significant one in making children and adolescents ideal victims. Even when children receive attention and affection at home, children still crave it from other significant people in their lives.
- *Need to defy parents.* Some sex offenders may exploit children, especially adolescents, by taking advantage of a period when they are seeking independence from their parents. This succeeds particularly well in silencing victims. Adolescent boys in particular may believe that they will lose some of their freedom if they reveal their victimization.
- *View of children as fantasizers and liars.* The criminal justice system views the testimony of children as frequently a lie or that children cannot distinguish reality from fantasy. From the offender's point of view, this certainly contributes to the child's being an ideal victim.

The relationship of the offender to the victim will also influence the vulnerability of the victim. If the offender is an important authority figure, such as a priest, the relationship is complicated by issues of authority, trust, dependency, caring and love. Many victims give strong indications of positive feelings toward their abusers within the context of highly dependent relationships.

While child sexual abuse of both males and females has been under reported, the sexual victimization of males has been especially ignored. This situation has been evident in the Church. Some current charges against convicted priests relate to incidents that occurred about twenty years ago. This reluctance of males to disclose may be the result of the socialization of males which expects them to be strong and forceful, and which presents the notion that 'boys will be boys' and always 'fool around' sexually. Male victims often have difficulty identifying that the abuse was coercive.

Although children are not responsible for their own victimization, child sexual abuse offers many opportunities for "victim blaming." People who are not offenders have sometimes said, "He must have known what he was doing or he would have told someone." Such comments and actions constitute re-victimization and reveal the lack of public awareness about the imbalance of power, betrayal of trust and inability to give informed consent that are critical elements in child sexual abuse. The guilt, shame and self-blame experienced by the victim often prevent disclosure. Sometimes the consequences of believing a child are too great for people to face: a family member could go to jail, or faith in a revered leader could be shattered. The easier response is to blame the victim for his own victimization.

### The Offender

The great majority of sex offenders are male. Discovering and understanding more than this – who he is, why he offends and where his life should and will proceed – is a complicated and challenging task. However, it is important that the challenge be accepted so that society can recognize why the offender does what he does and thus prevent the abuse, assess treatment plans, and determine the risk of the offender's repeating the offense after treatment

Summaries of two classification systems have been identified by the justice system:

- *Regressed and fixated offenders.* The regressed offender prefers adult partners but, because of precipitating stress, turns to children for gratification. A fixated offender will have been, from adolescence, primarily or exclusively attracted to children. Fixated offenders can be further sub-divided into four types:
  - *Pseudo-affective.* This offender uses seduction or persuasion to approach a child. The offender will pick a child who is vulnerable in some way.
  - *Dominating.* This type of offender does not want to pursue his contacts with the child beyond the sexual encounters. His approach varies from paying the child to abduction and physical coercion.
  - *Sadistic.* This type of offender has strong preferences for children. In order to for the offender to be aroused, he needs to inflict pain on the child, even murder.
  - *Aggressive.* For this type of offender the aggressive components of the act are more important than the sexual. The overriding emotion is anger.
- *Situational child molesters.*
  - *Regressed.* This kind of behavior is exhibited by what appears to be a normal individual who turns to children as a sexual substitute for preferred, peer sex partners. Many of these offenders molest their own children.
  - *Morally indiscriminate.* Children are molested because of their vulnerability and availability. This type of offender uses force, lures and manipulation.
  - *Sexually indiscriminate.* This individual appears to be discriminating in his behavior except when it comes to sex. He likes to experiment sexually and is motivated toward sex with children out of boredom.
  - *Inadequate.* This includes misfits, those suffering from personality disorders, mental retardation or senility. The individual becomes sexually involved with children out of insecurity or curiosity.

- *Preferential child molesters.* These individuals focus their sexual fantasies and erotic imagery on children and can be associated with one of the three following subdivisions:
  - *Seductive.* The offender engages children in sexual activity by seducing them as adults seduce each other – with attention, affection and gifts. His goal is to lower the child's sexual inhibitions over time.
  - *Introverted.* The offender has the preference for children but lacks the interpersonal skills to seduce them. He usually molests strangers or very young children and engages in a minimal amount of oral communication with his victims.
  - *Sadistic.* This type of offender has a sexual preference for children but, in order to be aroused or be gratified, he must inflict pain or suffering on the child victim. He uses force or lures to gain access to his victims and may abduct or murder them.

Most of the sex offenders are men. Less than 3% are women. Most offenders are between the ages of 20 and 40. Sex offenders usually come from broken or disrupted families. The childhood backgrounds of offenders tend to involve double bind parenting, where conflicting or opposing messages are given to a child regarding the appropriateness of certain behaviors and the acceptance of certain emotions. Offenders tend to come from homes where an authoritarian style of parenting was practiced, where emotions were closely monitored and suppressed, and where verbal and non-verbal behavioral controls were frequent.

Offenders are often very self-centered. They may be so insecure and immature emotionally that they do not see past their own needs. The majority of sex offenders initially deny their behavior. There is usually a denial of guilt and a denial of responsibility. Most of these men are married, but their sexual relations with their wives were unsatisfactory. These men hide their sexual orientation from their family and friends and target boys. Many individuals' knowledge of sexuality is limited because of a lack of open discussion in our society; but sex offenders, in particular, have a very confined and inadequate knowledge of sexuality, though they are afraid to acknowledge their ignorance. Offenders have difficulty with intimacy and generally do not know how to relate with affection to adults. Few sex offenders suffer from actual sex dysfunction.

### Conclusion

The problem of child sex abuse involves characteristics of both the individual offender and of our society. The analysis suggests that abusive behavior evolves over time as well as being a particular event or action having certain specific characteristics and consequences.

The evidence available indicates that the pattern of sexual assault by these offenders indicates that a pattern of sexual assault by these offenders always involved boys of at least 12 years of age at the onset of contact sexual abuse; so there is no compelling evidence of classical pedophilia, which involves a preference for pre-pubescent males. Some of these men were sexually active with a number of adolescent male partners at any given time. They also appear to be homosexual. There is no recorded history in any of these offenders' priesthood years of sexual involvement with female partners.

Sexual abuse of children is not simply a consequence of homosexuality or homosexual behavior. However, the offenders studied were for the most part regressed homosexuals.

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<sup>1/</sup> Adapted from *The Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy* conducted by the Archdiocese of St. John's Newfoundland, 1989.