

# Understanding and Protecting Your Children From Child Molesters and Predators

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*The FBI estimates that there is a sex offender living in every square mile of the United States. One in ten men has molested children. Most child molesters are able to molest dozens of children before they are caught and have a three percent (3%) chance of being apprehended for their crimes. Boys and girls are at nearly equal risk to be abused and almost a quarter will be molested sometime before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Fewer than five percent (5%) will tell anyone. The overwhelming majority of child victims are abused by someone they know and trust, someone most parents would never suspect. No one can protect your children but you. Educate yourself and your family about child sexual abuse. Don't let a child molester do it for you!*

## **Dear Parents, Caretakers and Community Members,**

During the past several years, many of us have begun to realize how many child molesters are living in our communities and how incredibly skillful they are when it comes to molesting children and getting away with it. Facing this information has forced many of us to take a hard look at our current child abuse prevention programs. The majority of programs try to teach children to protect themselves and to tell an adult if someone abuses them. Unfortunately, these programs have not been successful in reducing child sexual abuse and most children still don't tell anyone when they are being abused. One study suggested that the average child victim must tell nine different people about their abuse before someone actually calls the police. Clearly, children are no match for child molesters and parents should never assume that children can protect themselves or be able to report abuse when it happens. Parents and other adults need to acquire the education and skills necessary to protect children and create opportunities for them to report abusive experiences. As parents, adults and community members, we all need to put more effort into learning about child molesters and child abuse instead of placing all of the responsibility for safety on our children.

This packet provides information about child molesters and some of the things you, your family and community can do to help keep children safe. We encourage you and your own community of family and friends to get involved in prevention efforts by learning everything you can about molesters and taking a pro-active stance against child sexual abuse. As you become better educated about this problem, you may want to contact your local school, church, neighborhood association or community organization about sponsoring a workshop in your community. Most law enforcement and child advocacy programs have a lot of information they are anxious to share. We recommend that you call your local agencies to find out what they offer and when they can provide a presentation for your group. Although it takes a lot of hard work and education to protect children from predators, our children will be safer if we all work together.

This packet includes only a summary of what is known about child molesters and prevention techniques. For more detailed information, read the books that are listed at the end of this packet. We've included the three best books on child molesters and predators and our favorite prevention book for children.

## This packet addresses:

- The Different Types of Sex Offenders.
- Why and How People Molest Children.
- Defining Child Sexual Abuse.
- How to Protect Your Children:
  - Talking to Your Children About Sexual Abuse.
  - What to do if Your Child Gets Abused.
  - Safety Tips for Supervision
  - Sexual Development and Behavior Between Children
  - Factors that Place Children at High Risk for Abuse
  - Offender Traits
- Resources and Bibliography

## Child Molesters, Pedophiles, Predators, Incest Offenders and Sex Offenders

While the above terms are used interchangeably, the terms “sex offender” and “child molester” are more of a legal and social definition than a clinical one. The term “incest” is used when the offender has molested someone they are related to. “Pedophile” refers to a diagnostic category of child molesters and “Predator” has more to do with the manner in which offenders gain access to children. However, these groups can overlap. For example some “incest” offenders also molest children outside of their family and some even become predatory. Not all child molesters are pedophiles and not all pedophiles molest children. Offenders are also categorized by how dangerous they are and how likely they are to re-offend. Most of us have many misconceptions about these groups of offenders. The below information may help dispel some of those myths.

**“INCEST OFFENDERS”** - Sexually abuse their own children but can also abuse other relatives and neighbors. They can be sexually attracted to children or offend because they are seeking “intimate” contact with another person regardless of relationship, age or vulnerability. Some don’t understand and others don’t care that they are hurting the child.

- Most have multiple victims both inside and outside of their immediate family.
- Some abuse both boys and girls in various age groups.
- Most appear normal and demonstrate no noticeable pathology.
- Few have criminal records.
- Most report that they were repeatedly able to talk family and friends out of reporting them and continued to offend.
- Many are likely to re-offend without “treatment.”

**“PEDOPHILES”** - Are adults who are sexually attracted to children and have a primary or strong interest in children. They offend children because they desire sexual contact with children.

- Most hold responsible jobs and frequently align themselves with reputable organizations, sports leagues and churches.
- They may work or volunteer with children.
- They are likely to be single or live with their parents or have a dysfunctional marriage.
- Some appear socially inhibited while others can be extremely charming.
- Many target pre-pubescent boys.
- Most do not have a criminal record.
- Most have molested many children before they are effectively reported to law enforcement.
- The majority are highly likely to re-offend.

**“SEXUALLY VIOLENT OFFENDERS”** - Includes the group of offenders who kidnap, rape and even murder some children. This group constitutes the smallest, but most dangerous group of child molesters.

- They frequently assault their victims physically.
- In addition to abusing children, many have committed adult rapes, assaulted spouses, engaged in burglaries, been chronic drug users, are frequently unemployed and have led a parasitic lifestyle.
- Criminal record checks usually reveal a lengthy record of versatile criminality, incarcerations, probation violations and failed attempts at treatment.
- They have high re-offense rates for both sexual and generic criminal behavior.

### **METHODS OFFENDERS USE TO GAIN ACCESS TO CHILDREN.**

As noted above, offenders can be categorized by the way in which they gain access to victims. The majority of molesters abuse children they are related to or have regular access to by virtue of their position as a parent, step-parent, mother’s boyfriend, uncle, grandfather, neighbor, babysitter and so on. They frequently molest children both in and outside of the home and can abuse girls as well as boys. Because of family ties, close friendships and long-term relationships, people sometimes have a hard time believing these people are guilty and fail to report them to the police. It is always hard to turn a loved one in but it is something even the offender needs to have happen.

Another common group of offenders includes the molesters who work or volunteer in settings where they can purposefully obtain regular access to children. This group includes coaches, teachers, Boy Scout leaders, ministers/priests, school bus drivers, day care providers and other people whose professions or “community service” puts them in contact with children. Like the first group, these people molest boys and girls and usually offend many children before they get caught. Their profession or the appearance of “altruism” makes it harder for people to believe they are capable of these crimes. They can be some of the slickest and most charming people we know and, because of this, people fail to believe they are guilty and, again fail to report them to police. When people finally discover that they have molested dozens of children, they are shocked. There are also adult offenders who may not fit in the above groups but still abuse children. This group includes exhibitionists who expose to children, “computer travelers” who contact and solicit children over the Internet and child pornographers. Some of these people exploit and abuse children in a variety of ways. They are our neighbors, friends and relatives. Some are “loners,” while others look just like the above groups. Females account for ten to twenty percent (10-20%) of child molesters.

### **Why Do Adults Molest Children?**

Most child molesters abuse children for a number of reasons. The two most common reasons are: a) a sexual interest/preference for children and b), a belief system that encourages, allows and supports sexual contact with children. In other words, child molesters are sexually aroused to children and do not understand or care that sexual contact between adults and children is harmful to the child. Some molesters mistakenly believe that they are showing love and affection to the child. Nonetheless, the vast majority know that what they are doing is wrong and illegal and do their best to keep their offenses a secret. Secrecy enables them to continue abusing children and to avoid rejection, prosecution and incarceration.

Many offenders become expert liars, even to the point of convincing well-meaning adults that the child was “mistaken ” or “confused” about what happened. Even worse, some molesters convince other adults that the child made it up or lied. When the number of separate sexual crimes committed by the average child molester is compared to the low rate of reporting among child victims, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that children rarely mis-perceive, make up or lie about being sexually abused. If a child says he or she has been molested, the probability is high that it really happened and was probably more frequent and invasive than the child reported. Also, the odds are high that we all know at least one or two child molesters and don't even know it.

### **Why do Molesters Abuse Certain Children?**

Molesters abuse children they are sexually and emotionally attracted to, children they feel are vulnerable and needy, and children they feel that they can control and manipulate into keeping the abuse a secret.

## **How Do Molesters Keep Children From Telling?**

Most child molesters are in a position of trust and are usually able to molest children in a manner that undermines the child's ability to accurately perceive the behavior as abusive or report them. Most molesters are also able to convince other adults that "it never happened" or that "the child misunderstood." When they are successful, they obstruct children and adults from reporting them to law enforcement and are able to continue molesting children even longer. So, it's very important to understand how they manipulate both children and adults.

After the offender has selected a child to molest, the offender begins to develop a close relationship with the child and his/her family. If the offender is a parent or someone the child depends on, it's very easy to manipulate the situation and repeatedly molest the child without getting caught. If the offender is in a position of trust or authority, (as is the case with teachers, coaches and priests who molest) the offender may pay special attention to the child, take them places, buy them gifts or give them extra support and encouragement. They also might threaten the child to keep them quiet.

After the offender starts to develop the relationships, he/she may begin to isolate the child from his/her family and friends. This may include fueling conflicts within the family, alienating the child from friends or family or simply being available to "help out" with babysitting, special outings, rides home, etc. Molesters also test and desensitize children by telling dirty jokes, talking about sexual things and engaging in non-sexual physical contact like back-rubs, wrestling, hugging and horseplay. This behavior generally starts long before the sexual touching starts and serves to normalize contact and trust. The increased physical relationship and intimate talk between the child and offender makes it easier for the offender to introduce sexual behavior into the relationship. If the child's parent has been present when some of the close physical contact or joking has occurred, it also makes the child think it must be ok.

Another thing that interferes with children's ability to tell is that many children don't even know that the contact has changed and is becoming increasingly intimate and sexual. Some offenders try to make it feel good to the child because they know if they hurt or scare the child, they are more likely to tell. Also, children become fearful that they will get into trouble for not telling sooner and become increasing guilt ridden about what is happening. Offenders know these things and caution children that "they will get in trouble too" if they tell. Some offenders are so good at developing dependent relationships that their victims feel obligated and may even feel protective of the offender. This phenomenon is especially pronounced when the offender is a parent, relative, admired family friend, teacher, coach or priest. Some offenders choose careers or volunteer with youth organizations because they "like" children and these settings provide increased access and control over children. It is extremely important to remember that offenders spend time and energy manipulating children into "cooperating" with the abuse and keeping it a secret. Some of them spend hours and hours thinking about what they will say if a child ever tells on them. Because they have been engaged in a covert behavior, sometimes for many years at a time, they have usually become very skilled at lying and manipulating people and situations.

## **Do Offenders Manipulate Adults Too?**

Many molesters work just as hard to seduce and manipulate adults as they do to trick children. Some tell people they think “child molesters should be shot” while others work very hard to present themselves as a concerned citizen and “pillar of the community.” Some of their “good works” are performed out of guilt, while others are intended to throw off suspicion if a child ever tells on them.

Most molesters spend time thinking of ways to talk people out of reporting them to law enforcement and are able to come up with very creative excuses or rationalizations about what happened. In addition to telling people “it was an accident” or that the child must have “misinterpreted” the situation, some make sure that people know the child has lied about things in the past, been “in trouble” or sexually promiscuous. Most professional forensic experts can’t tell when people are lying, so regular people shouldn’t expect to do any better. The best thing all of us can do if a child says they have been abused is to call the police and report the situation. The worse thing we can do is to accept the explanation of an adult. If the adult is lying and talks you out of reporting, he/she will probably go on to molest more children. Different offenders use different tactics. This paper only covers some of those tactics. For more detailed information about how child molesters operate, read the books listed in the bibliography.

## **Defining Child Sexual Abuse:**

The potential for abuse exists when power and control are not equal in a relationship. Sexual abuse includes any sexual behavior or activity that is abusive toward another person or prohibited by state or federal law. Fondling, oral sex, simulated or actual intercourse, exhibitionism, taking sexually explicit pictures of children, showing sexually explicit material to children or having sex in front of a child are all considered child sexual abuse. According to Dr. Carla van Dam, child sexual abuse occurs when a) “there is a violation of a trust relationship with unequal power and/or advanced knowledge and, b) the need for secrecy and, c) sexual activity.”

The following pages provide information specifically for you and your family to talk about and watch out for. Again, we strongly recommend that you read the books listed at the back of this packet in order to fully understand how child molesters operate.

# Protecting Your Children From Sexual Abuse

**“No one wants to have to tell their children about sexual abuse. On the other hand, do you want your child to learn about it from a molester?”**

## TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

- Talk openly with your children about sexual development, behavior and abuse.
- Use proper or semi proper names for body parts (penis and vagina), and phrases like; private parts are “private and special”.
- Tell your children that, if anyone touches or tries to see their private parts, tries to get them to touch or look at another person’s private parts, shows them pictures of or tries to take pictures of their private parts, talks to them about sex, walks in on them in the bathroom or does anything that makes them feel uncomfortable to tell you or a “support person” as soon as they can or the next time they see you.
- Tell your children that some children and adults have “touching problems”. These people can make “secret touching” look accidental and they should still tell you even if they think it might have been an accident.
- Tell your children that touching problems are kind of like stealing or lying and that the people who have those kinds of problems need special help so they don’t continue to have problems or get into trouble. Don’t describe it as a “sickness.”
- Tell your children that some people try to trick kids into keeping the touching a secret. Tell your children, “We don’t want those kinds of secrets in our family.”
- Give your children examples of things that someone might use to try to get them to keep it a secret; candy, money, special privileges, threats, subtle fear of loss, separation or punishment etc.
- Tell your children that touching other people’s private parts is not ok for children to do or for adults to do with children. Tell them that you do not want them to do “secret touching” with other people but that you will not be mad at them if they do come and tell you it has happened. Even if it has been happening a lot.
- Talk to your children about safety issues at least two or three times a year. Develop a family plan for answering the phone, fire safety, getting lost and “secret touching”. Play “what if” games with them on a regular basis (monthly).
- Make sure they have support people they can talk to at home, at school, in their extended family, neighborhood or church. Have them pick out three people and tell you who they are. Put the phone numbers next to your phone and let them know that, if for any reason, they cannot talk to you - that they should call/or go see another support person.

## WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD GETS ABUSED

- If your child tells you that he or she has been touched inappropriately, stay calm. Your reaction may make your child feel more guilty or afraid and they might have a harder time talking about what happened.
- Tell your child you are glad they told you about it. Telling was a good way to take care of themselves and also, the person who touched them. That person needs help with their “touching problem”. Tell your child that you will take care of things. Tell your child that you will need to talk to someone to figure out what to do next. Be careful to not make promises you can’t keep.
- Seek support and comfort for yourself where the child can’t see or hear what you say.
- In order to avoid confusion, anxiety or guilt, children should not overhear conversations about their disclosure. Too much information/discussion can also interfere with the police investigation or prosecution.
- Call your local child abuse hotline or local police department and report the abuse. Failing to report the abuse ASAP may mean that other children might get abused too. Don’t try to handle the situation yourself.
- The prognosis for healing after being molested is better for children who are supported and believed when they disclose.
- Don’t allow any further contact between your child and the alleged offender. Don’t confront the offender yourself.

## SAFETY TIPS FOR SUPERVISION OF CHILDREN

- Trust your instincts. “Perception and not worry is what serves safety”. (de Becker, 1999)
- Don’t let young male children go into a men’s public restroom by themselves.
- Be cautious about who you allow to baby-sit or spend time alone with your children. Get references. Try to bathe and dress your own children. Routinely quiz your children about what happens while you are gone. Ask questions like “What did you do that was fun?” or “Was there anything that happened while I was gone that worried you or that I should know about?” Don’t always tell your children to mind the babysitter. Avoid having young male babysitters.
- Get to know the people and homes where your children play.
- Periodically check on your children, especially when they are playing with other kids in your home. If you know that one of your children’s friends has been sexually abused, be more attentive to their playtime.
- Don’t let your children walk or ride their bike to school or to a friend’s home alone. Children should travel in groups or with an adult.

- Know your neighbors. Develop a Neighborhood Watch or Block House program.
- Supervise all Internet activities closely. Consider subscribing to an ISP that screens for obscenity and pornography. Make a “family agreement” about conversations before allowing your children to go into “chat rooms.” Children should never give out their phone number, address or school name to anyone they meet over the Internet. Periodically, ask your children to see the kinds of “chat room” conversations that take place. Warn them about “what lurks on the Internet.”
- Develop the kind of relationship that would allow your child to come to you for help or support for any kind of problem they might need help with, for themselves or a friend.

## **SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIOR BETWEEN CHILDREN**

- Many forms of sexual play or experimentation are normal and developmentally appropriate. However, when one child is three or more years older, significantly larger, more powerful (physically or emotionally), more sexually sophisticated or uses bribes, threats or intimidation to be sexual with another child, sexual contact falls under a legal definition of abuse. If oral sex, simulated or actual intercourse, French kissing or penetration are involved, the situation warrants immediate investigation. Parents should not attempt to resolve these issues alone and should seek outside, professional guidance.
- If your child engages in any type of sexually inappropriate behavior, get professional help right away. Try not to become overly defensive of your child or reject the notion that your child could have done something sexually inappropriate. If your child does have a problem that goes untreated, it may become worse and create many more problems for your child, family, school and community. This includes date rape or sexual assault between preteens and teenagers. Boys who sexually assault girls frequently grow up to molest their own children or engage in domestic violence.
- If another child engages your child in sexually inappropriate behavior or talk, tell their parents what happened so that they can get help before it’s too late. If you do not think that the family is seeking professional help, contact your local child abuse hotline.
- Buy or borrow books like “Where Did I Come From,” “It’s My Body” and “What’s Happening to My Body” or “A Very Touching Book” for your family to read together. Do it before your children become embarrassed about sexuality or they start developing. Talk to your children about appropriate sexuality. Emphasize consent, birth control and STDs.
- Demonstrate loving, respectful intimate relationships in your home. Children should not observe direct sexual contact or any type of pornography.

## **FACTORS THAT PLACE CHILDREN AT A HIGHER RISK FOR ABUSE**

- Age, friendliness, shyness, good manners, naivety, curiosity, or isolation.
- Living in a single parent home.
- Drug or alcohol abuse by parents.
- Parental illness or emotional unavailability.
- Severe marital conflict or domestic violence in the home.
- Living in a home with a stepfather or a mother's boyfriend.
- Previous abuse.
- Having an unemployed father or parents that work different shifts.
- Parents who are sexually preoccupied, use pornography or have pornography in the home.
- Inadequate parental supervision of children.

## **OFFENDER TRAITS**

- Adults who seem preoccupied with children.
- Single adults who work or volunteer with children's clubs/activities.
- Adults who work with children and also frequently spend their free time doing "special" things with kids.
- Adults who spend time volunteering with youth groups who do not have children in those groups.
- Adults who seem to engage in frequent contact with children, i.e., casual touching, caressing, wrestling, tickling, combing hair or having children sit on their lap.
- Adults who act like children with children or who allow children to do questionable or inappropriate things.
- Adults who want to take your children on special outings too frequently or plan activities that would include being alone with your child.
- Adults who do not have children and seem to know too much about the current fads or music popular with children.
- Adults that your children seem to like for reasons you don't understand.
- Adults who seem able to infiltrate family/social functions or are "always available" to watch your kids.

**Please note, not all offenders will demonstrate the above characteristics.**

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## The Best Books About Child Molesters, Predators and Prevention.

1. *Identifying Child Molesters: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse by Recognizing the Patterns of the Offenders* Written by Carla van Dam, Ph.D.  
Available through Haworth Press, Inc. 1-800-895-429-6784 (\$24.95)  
The first book of its kind, this book provides readers with a detailed understanding of the history and impact of child sexual abuse. Dr. van Dam provides a glimpse into our failure to confront child abuse in an effective manner and does an excellent job of helping lay people understand the “grooming” tactics that offenders use on children and adults. It offers practical strategies to identify and confront child molesters. One of my top picks! I’ve personally ordered 40 copies to give to family and friends.
2. *A Very Touching Book.... For Little People and Big People.* Written by Jan Hindman. Available through Alexandria and Associates. [www.janhindman.com](http://www.janhindman.com) (\$11.95)  
Most parents haven’t got the foggiest idea about how to start talking to their children about private parts or sexual abuse. For those of us who get “purple faces” when our kids say “penis” in the grocery store, this book is the ticket. Great artwork and an entertaining approach to prevention education for children. If I had my way, this book would be on the bookshelf or coffee table of every home in America. Most appropriate for families with children ages 4-10. Takes the pain out of prevention talks at home!!!
3. *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of Psychopaths Among Us.* Written by Robert D. Hare, Ph.D. Available through The Guilford Press, [www.guilford.com](http://www.guilford.com) (\$16.95)  
This book focuses on predators, psychopaths and criminals. Although fairly clinical and a bit academic, it is the first, and most straightforward book about this highly dangerous population. Disturbing yet relevant to all of us. Fascinating and well written. Even my elderly mother loved it!
4. The last of my favorite books is due out some time early next year. It’s called *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders – Who They Are, How They Operate and How We Can Protect Our Children.* It’s by Anna Salter and can be obtained through Basic Books at [www.basicbooks.com](http://www.basicbooks.com) in 2003. (\$26)  
Every parent, volunteer coordinator, human resources director and church and community member should read this book! The book explains how predators trick and manipulate normal people and why we aren’t able to spot them. Dr. Salter offers tips on prevention for parents, lay people and organizations that focus on delivering services to children and the public. This book will help all of us do a better job of protecting our children and communities.