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CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION: WHAT OFFENDERS TELL US

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Abstract—Ninety-one child sex offenders were interviewed about the methods they used to target children, the age range of their victims, how they selected children and maintained them as victims, and what suggestions they had for preventing child sexual abuse. Offenders were selected from treatment programs, probation, special hospitals, and prisons. They were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. Results indicate that offenders gained access to children through caretaking, such as babysitting; targeted children by using bribes, gifts and games; used force, anger, threats, and bribes to ensure their continuing compliance; and systematically desensitized children through touch, talk about sex, and persuasion. Nearly half the offenders had no bad feelings about sexually abusing children. The implications for prevention programs are discussed.

Key Words—Child sex abuse, Prevention, Offender survey, Victim grooming.

INTRODUCTION

AS THE PROBLEM of child sexual abuse has become more widely acknowledged, so have the efforts to protect children from abuse. Prevention programs designed to teach children ways to keep safe have proliferated. Many of the programs have been evaluated via pre- and post-testing, role play, and discussion, indicating that some children can learn and act on the information presented (Conte, 1988; Fryer, Kraizer, & Miyoshi, 1987; Hazzard, Webb, Kleemeier, Angert, & Pohl, 1991; Tutty, 1992; Wurtele, Gillispie, Currier, & Franklin, 1992).

Less has been done about the issue of how the offenders actually target children and maintain them as victims. This information is vital to prevention work with children if the programs are to effectively counteract the methods used by offenders to gain access to children and to ensure their silence. The very helpful previous studies, which linked offender information to prevention programs differ from this study in that they deal only with female victims (Lang & Frenzel, 1988); or have a relatively small sample (Conte & Smith, 1989); or deal only with incarcerated offenders (Budin & Johnson, 1989). Nonetheless, these studies provided valuable information for this study and the basis for the interview schedule discussed below.

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METHOD

Ninety-one men convicted of sex offenses against children were chosen for the study. Fifteen were attending a community-based sex offender treatment program; 15 were community-based, on probation orders; 22 were in special hospitals; 39 in prisons. The prisoners had sentences ranging from 9 months to life. Sex offenders with mental illnesses were not considered suitable for the study. The men were all convicted of "hands-on" assaults, including indecent assault, unlawful intercourse, rape, and buggery against children under the age of 18. They had received therapy regarding their sexual offending, either in groups or as individuals.

Although the quality and intensity of the treatment programs were varied, therapy was considered a criterion for selection. These individuals were expected to give a more accurate and less defensive account than those who had not, through therapy, confronted their offending or taken responsibility for it.

Following consent from staff and custodians, the selected men were given a preliminary interview for 15 minutes to outline the purpose of the research and to ask them to join the study. It was explained that their information might prove helpful to offender treatment, prevention programs, and for police investigations. The men were also told that the study was completely voluntary and would in no way influence their progress through institutions or treatment programs. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, unless they disclosed specific information about a current victim of child abuse. All the men who were approached filled in a consent form.

The final interview was conducted in one session lasting from 1.5 to 3 hours. The interview consisted of semi-structured interview schedule of questions. At the end of the interview, the men were debriefed to counteract any possible sexual arousal that might have resulted from answering the questions.

The interview schedule was designed to gather information about the following areas:

- Basic information on offenses: that is, age, gender, number of, and relationship to victims.
- Selection of victims: that is, how they selected vulnerable children.
- Recruitment of victims: that is, how they found and approached victims.
- Location of abuse: that is, places most often used to sexually abuse children, where did abuse happen.
- Strategies used: that is, what strategies were used and which were most and least successful.
- The first move made: that is, the first thing done to the child, the first sexual contact and what happens if the child shows fear or resists.
- Maintenance of victims: that is, how they prevent disclosure, encourage secrecy and further meetings.
- Offender preparation for the abuse: that is, use of alcohol, pornography, fantasies leading up to the offense.
- Offenders feelings and concerns about the abuse: that is, reasons for child sex, worries about victim, getting caught and seeking help.
- Offender's own history: sexual experiences as a child, age first attracted to children and age at first offense.
- Offenders comments relevant to prevention: that is, quotes that might help identify how to prevent children being sexually abused in future.

In total there were 72 questions. Interviews were conducted by a female research psychologist. Within the interview, certain questions were cross-referenced to determine intra-rater consistency. On average, the interviewed offenders showed a 90% consistency in the way they responded to questions throughout the interview. Interview results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Results from Interviews with Child Sex Offenders

	Yes %	No %
Basic Information on Offenders:		
Professional employment background	35	65
Married at some time	48	52
Child victims only (under 18 yrs)	93.4	6.6
Ten victims or more	30	70
Gender of Victim		
Only girls targeted	58	—
Only boys targeted	14	—
Both boys and girls targeted	28	—
Relationship to Victim		
Stranger	34	—
Acquainted	34	—
Parent	32	—
The Offenses		
Indecent assault	100	0
Masturbation	72	28
Sexual intercourse (attempted or actual)	57	43
Oral sex	31	69
Child murdered	8	92
Multiple perpetrators	7	93
Multiple victims	15	85
Selection of Victims Because:		
Based on:		
Pretty child	42	—
Way the child dressed	27	—
Being young or small	17	—
Innocent and trusting	13	—
Influenced by:		
Child's lack of confidence and self-esteem	49	51
"Special relationship" with victim	46	54
Recruitment of Victims		
From public places frequented by children	35	—
By becoming welcome in child's home	33	—
Recruited when child approached them	14	—
Victims recruited other children	18	—
Location of Abuse		
Abused in offender's home	61	39
Abused in child's home	49	51
Abused in in the outdoors	44	56
Abused in home of offenders/friend	13	87
Vicinity of offender's home	6	94
In a car or other vehicle	4	96
Strategies Used		
Used play or teaching activities	53	47
Isolated through "babysitting"	48	52
Used bribe, outing, or lift home	46	54
Used affection, understand and love	30	70
Gained trust of whole family	20	80
Used stories, lies, magic, treasure hunts	14	86
Asked child for help	9	91
Consistent use of one or two strategies	84	16
Offending Strategy was Influenced by:		
Own experience	30	—
The media (TV, films, newspapers)	14	—
No idea	56	—
The First Move Made		
Genital touching and kissing	40	—
Asked child to get undressed and/or lie down	32	—
Slowly desensitised child with sex talk	28	—

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	Yes %	No %
During First Sexual Contact		
Continued to talk about sex	49	51
Used Accidental touches	47	53
Used bribery and gifts	46	54
Used coercion and persuasion	44	56
Used physical force straight away	19	81
Child Showed Fear or Resistance		
Stopped the abuse, pause and start again	61	—
Used violence or threats	39	—
Maintenance of Victims		
None—moved on to another victim	33	67
Portrayed abuse as education or game	42	58
Threatened dire consequences	24	76
Used Anger or threat of harm	24	76
Threatened to blame victim	20	80
Threatened loss of relationship	20	80
Offenders' Preparation for the Abuse		
Personal stress precipitated abuse	66	34
Disinhibition Through		
Drugs or alcohol	22	—
Pornography	21	—
Own fantasy about previous victims	49	—
Talk with other offenders	8	—
Offender keeps in regular contact with other child sex offenders	8	92
Offender knew where to obtain child prostitutes and child pornography	20	80
Offenders' Feelings and Concerns About the Abuse		
Child Sex		
Less threatening	41	—
A "new" experience	25	—
Meeting offender's needs	18	—
More sexually attractive than adult sex	16	—
Victim Distress		
Saw no distress in victim	49	—
Continued with abuse regardless	25	—
Stopped the abuse when victim distressed	26	—
Felt uncomfortable with victim's distress	51	49
Worried about child disclosing	61	39
After Committing Offense (when not caught):		
Feelings of Anxiety	44	—
Very little emotion	39	—
Needed to justify actions	17	—
Failure to Seek Help Because		
No help was available	46	—
Help ineffective	17	—
Didn't realise they needed help	37	—
Offender's Own History		
Negative experience as child or adolescent	67	33
Under 16 years when first attracted to children	34	66
First offense committed as a juvenile	34	66
Offenses became more serious with time	55	45
Victim of contact sexual abuse as a child	59	41

* Denotes that categories are mutually exclusive and these figures total 100%.

The reliability of the answers to the semi-structured interview was assessed by intra-rater comparisons. This was done by interviewing 12 subjects from the special hospital sample twice, with a 6-month interval. The data from two female interviewers was cross-checked, and on average there was a respectable agreement for each of the 72 questions (mean of Kappa's $K = .67$). Some questions about numbers of victims (i.e., "How many children have

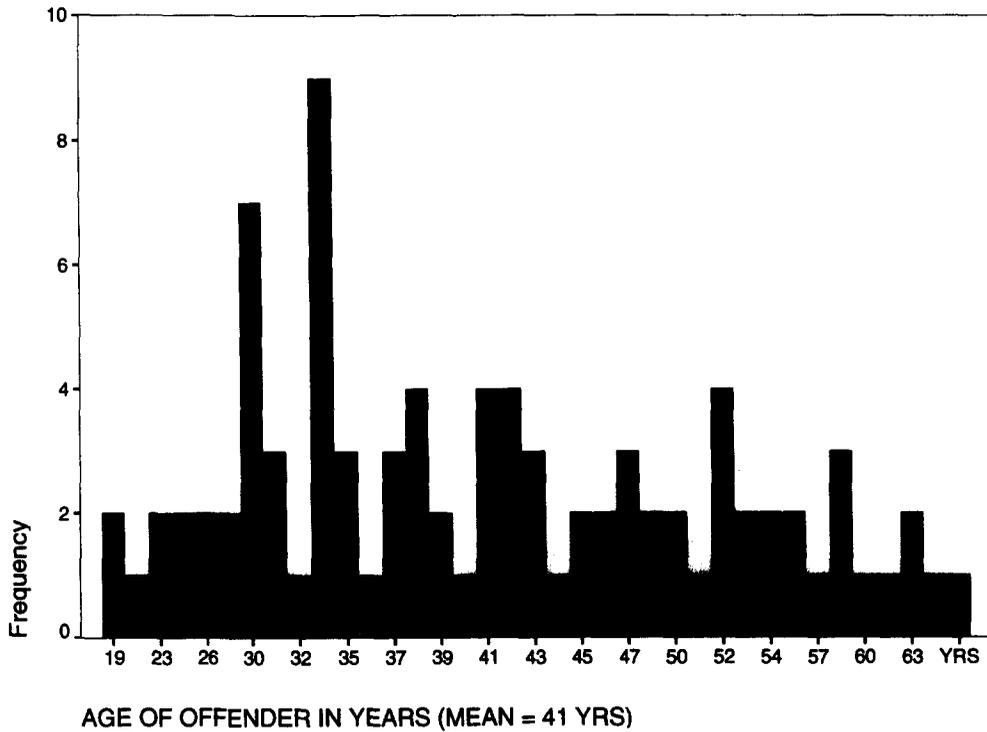


Figure 1. Age of child sex offender at time of interview (N=91).

you offended against?’), elicited a weak correlation (.49 Pearsons *R*), whereas other questions, such as those about age range (.88 Pearsons *R*) and sex of victim (Kappa’s *K* = .74) elicited a strong correlation. Answers to questions on finding and using alcohol/drugs, child pornography, and child prostitutes showed complete agreement (Kappa’s *K* = 1.0). Those few answers that were considered to be unreliable on an inter-rater reliability check or showed intra-rater inconsistency were deleted from the analyses.

RESULTS

Results Will be Presented and Discussed in the Order in Which the Semi-Structured Interview was Carried Out

Basic Information on Offenders

The men ranged from age 19 to 74, with a mean age of 41 years (see Figure 1). The majority were between the ages of 30 and 42 years. Thirty-five percent of the offenders were from a professional background; 31% were skilled or semi-skilled manual workers, 44% were unskilled workers or soldiers. At the time of the offense 48% had been or were still married; 52% were single.

The offenders generally had a preference for the gender of their victims: 58% targeted girls, 14% preferred boys, 28% targeted both boys and girls. Their child victims ranged in age from 1 to 18. The mean age of the youngest victims was 8.5 years; the mean age of the eldest

victims was 13 years. Six offenders (6.6%) also sexually assaulted victims aged 19 to 45; one offender abused a 65-year-old victim.

The number of victims was alarming; 70% of the men had committed offenses against 1 to 9 victims, 23% had committed offenses against 10 to 40 children, 7% had committed offenses against 41 to 450 children. However, it should be pointed out that the 7% of offenders who reported a high number of victims gave a different high figure when interviewed 6 months later.

Two-thirds (66%) of the offenders knew their victims, through family or friends or caretaking (e.g., babysitting); one-third (34%) were strangers. Of those who knew their victims, 32% were parents or stepparents who had sexually abused their own children, 34% were not parents. Of those who were in the parental role, 23% exclusively abused their own children, 9% abused their own and other children.

All the offenders indecently assaulted their victims, that is, touched the child's sexual parts, sometimes in more than one way. Over two-thirds (72%) of the offenders reported that this included masturbating the child and being masturbated by the child. Nearly a third (31%) engaged in mutual oral sex and just over half (57%) attempted or actually engaged in full sexual intercourse, either vaginal or anal. Disturbingly, 8% of the offenders murdered or attempted to murder the child victim during or after the sexual assault.

The majority of the offenders (85%) committed sexual acts with one victim at a time although a significant minority (15%) had multiple victims present. Most of the offenders (93%) acted alone, only 7% had a least one co-perpetrator.

Selection of Victims

In selecting a victim, the child being pretty was important to 42% of the offenders, and the way the child dressed was cited by 27% of the men; for example, one man said, *"I am turned on by little girls wearing tights and mini skirts."* Being young or small were also significant factors for 18% of offenders. Hence, the physical characteristics of the child were important, but not as important as the way the child behaved; one in eight (13%) focused on innocent or trusting children and nearly half (49%) of the offenders reported they were attracted to children who seemed to lack confidence or had low self-esteem. As one man commented, *"you can spot the child who is unsure of himself and target him with compliments and positive attention."*

Just under half the offenders (46%) felt that a "special relationship" with the child was vital (54% did not). At the beginning of treatment, one man said *"Unless the child and I like each other and find each other attractive, it doesn't work. I have to feel as if I am important and special to the child and giving the child the love she needs and isn't getting."*

Overall, according to the offender's perceptions, the child who was most vulnerable had family problems, was alone, was nonconfident, curious, pretty, "provocatively" dressed, trusting, and young or small.

Recruitment of Victims

Offenders who found child victims outside their immediate families had various strategies: 35% of the men frequented places where children were likely to go to such as schools, shopping centers, arcades, amusement/theme parks, playgrounds, parks, beaches, swimming baths, fairs, and so forth; 33% worked on becoming welcome in the child's home; 14% "took the chance" when a child approached them, perhaps to ask a question and 18% of the men tried to get more children by having their victims recruit other children. They did this by offering incentives to or by threatening the victim and by giving bribes and gifts to the children recruited.

Location of Abuse

Offenders often used more than one location to abuse children. Most said that sexual abuse took place in the offender's home (61%) or in the child's home (49%). However, 44% of the offenders also stated they abused in public places, such as toilets or in tents when children were on outdoor activities, or in secluded parks or woodlands. Less common were offenses in the home of friends (13%), in the vicinity of the offender's home (6%) and in a car (4%).

Strategies Used

The offenders used more than one type of strategy to approach the children or their families. Most often they offered to play games with the children, or teach them a sport, or how to play a musical instrument (53%). Many also gave bribes, took them for an outing, or gave them a lift home (46%). Some used affection, understanding, and love (30%) and some told stories involving lies, magic, or treasure hunts (14%). A few offenders simply just asked a child for help (9%). One man, for example, used his disability to ask children for help and gain their sympathy before going on to sexually abuse them.

One in five offenders claimed they had gained the trust of the victim's whole family in order to be able to abuse the child.

It is highly significant that 48% of the offenders isolated their victims through babysitting. On these occasions, the offenders started by talking about sex (27%), offering to bath or dress the child (20%), and/or using coercion by misrepresenting the abuse as having a different purpose (21%), such as "it would be good for you to do this for your education" or "this is what people do who love each other."

It appeared that convicted child abusers were very much creatures of habit. Eighty-four percent of the men said that once they had developed a series of successful strategies, they approached children with that same method every time; 16% were inconsistent in their approaches and changed their strategies over time. When asked what had influenced their choice of strategies, 56% of the offenders had no idea, 30% had been reinforced by their own experiences, 14% said that pornography, television programs, films, or media played some part.

The First Move Made

The first abusive action with the child often involved one or two immediate sexual acts. Forty percent of the abusers said that one of the first things they had done with the child was to engage in sexual activity such as sexual touching or genital kissing, 28% slowly desensitized the child into sexual activities, and 32% asked the child to do something that would help the offender, such as undressing or lying down.

During the first sexual contact some men tried other methods or a combination of methods: 19% used physical force with the child, 44% of the men used coercion and persuasion, 49% talked about sexual matters, 47% used accidental touch as a ploy, and 46% used bribery and gifts in exchange for sexual touches.

If the child resisted or was fearful, 39% of the offenders were prepared to use threats or violence to control the child as a way of overcoming the child's anxieties. The other offenders (61%) used passive methods of control such as stopping the abuse and then coercing and persuading once again.

Therefore, the majority of offenders coerced children by carefully testing the child's reaction to sex, by bringing up sexual matters or having sexual materials around, and by subtly increasing sexual touching. This was most often achieved in the offender's own home where he created

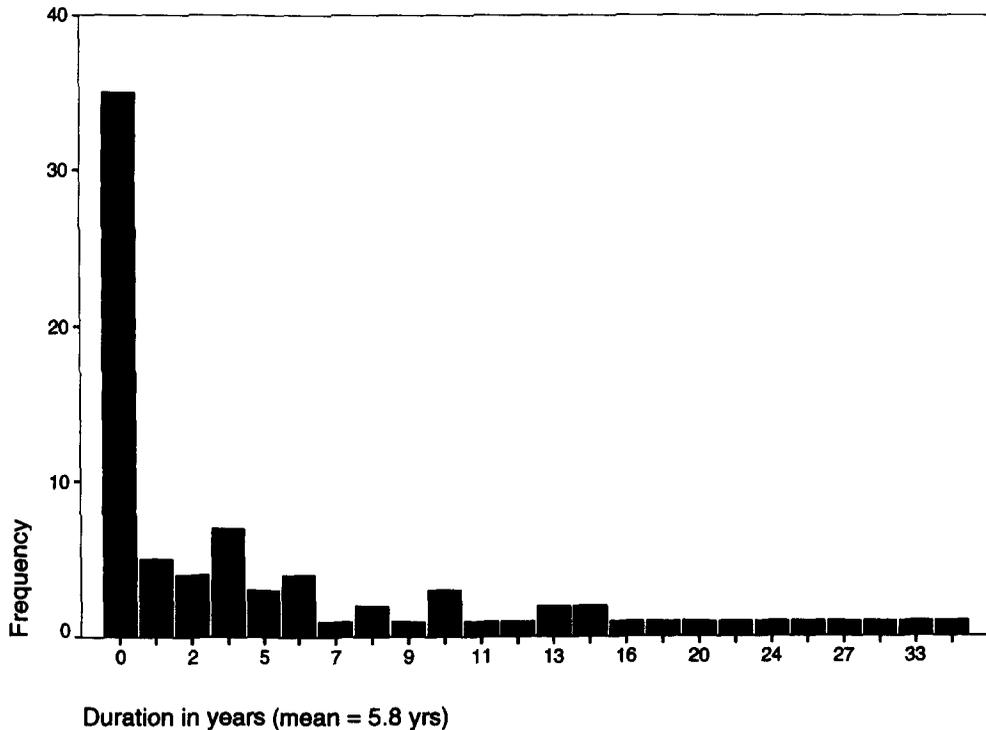


Figure 2. Duration of undetected offenses (age on conviction minus age at offense).

a “normalized” sexual setting, including sexually explicit videos and magazines (33%), and sexualized talking (28%) to seduce children into sexual behavior with them.

Maintenance of Victims

One-third of the offenders abused a child on only one occasion and then moved on to another victim; two-thirds of the offenders encouraged the child’s compliance and maintained the abusive relationship by using a variety and combination of methods. Thirty-three percent specifically told the child not to tell; 42% portrayed the abuse as education or as a game, 24% used threats of dire consequences, 24% used anger and the threat of physical force, 20% threatened loss of love or said that the child was to blame. One man said he told children that they would both be in trouble if the child told.

Offenders Preparation For The Abuse

Immediately prior to offending, 22% of the men used drugs or alcohol, 21% used pornography, and 49% used fantasies about previous victims to disinhibit themselves. The other 8% contacted and talked to other offenders. One in five offenders knew where to obtain child prostitutes and illegal child pornography (videos and magazines). One in 12 kept in regular contact with other child sex offenders. Two-thirds of offenders claimed that stress of some sort precipitated their offenses. The stress was related to work, sexual or domestic problems, or to psychological problems, but one-third indicated no such stress.

Offenders Feelings and Concerns About The Abuse

From the offender’s point of view, 41% had found sex with children less threatening than sex with an adult and 25% felt that sex with children gave them a new and positive experience,

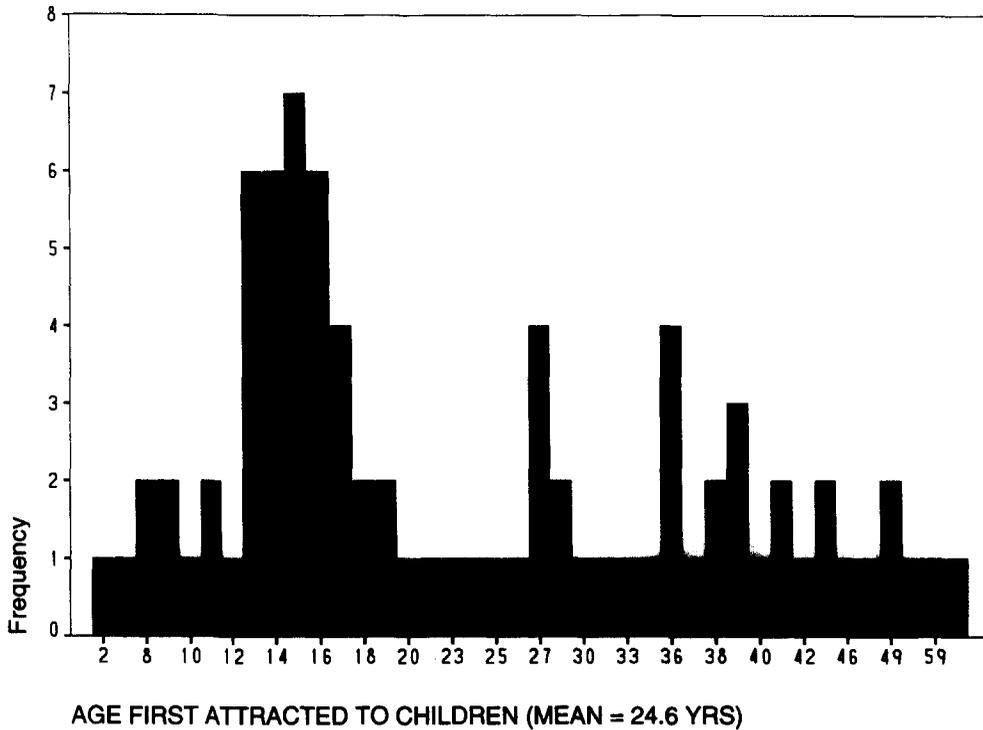


Figure 3. Child sex offenders reported age when first attracted to children.

after having had bad sexual experiences with peers. Some 18% felt the child met the offender's needs and 16% stated that children were more sexually attractive than adults.

The majority of the abusers (61%) worried about the child disclosing. Thirty-nine percent of offenders said they never worried about disclosure. Five out of six of those offenders who worried about disclosure said that the child saying no or displaying fear, crying, being sad, or in pain or distress would make them uncomfortable.

However, only 26% said that they would stop the abuse. The rest claimed that either no child had displayed any distress (49%) or that they continued with the abuse regardless (25%).

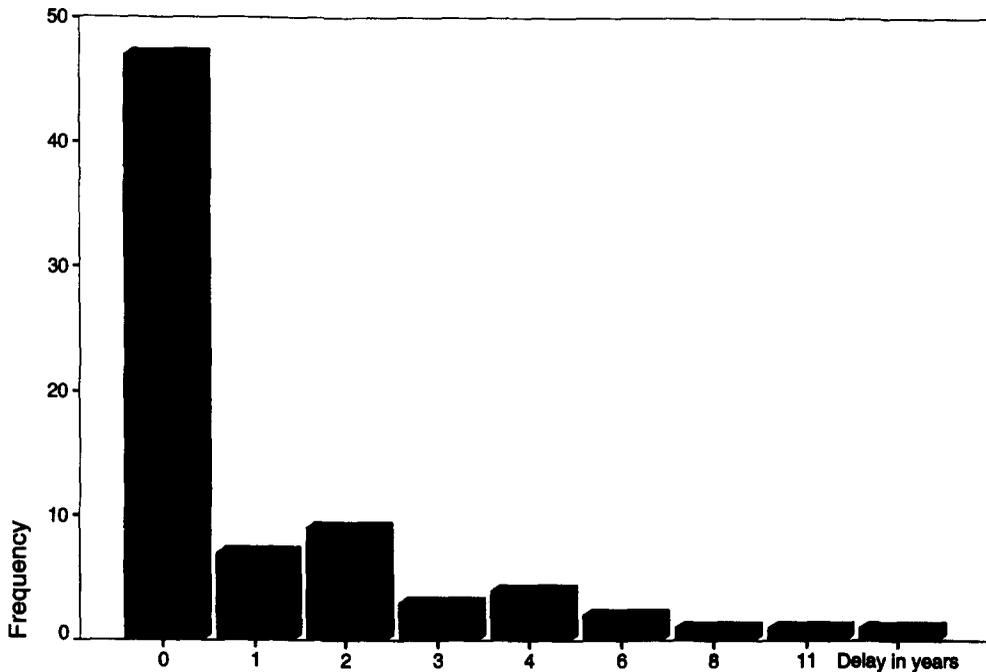
Many men kept their offenses hidden for more than 2 years (mean = 5.8 years) some for more than 10 years (see figure 2). When they were not caught, 44% felt anxiety (half of these men later overcame their bad feelings, half did not), 39% felt nothing or couldn't express what they felt, and 17% justified their actions to themselves.

What kept them from seeking help was the realization that there was no help available (46%), or that whatever they had tried hadn't helped (17%). Some had not considered getting help prior to being caught because they had not, in their opinion, had a problem (37%).

Offenders Own History

In the last part of the interview, the men were asked about their own sexual experiences. Two-thirds had at least one negative sexual experience as a child or adolescent. The mean age for this negative sexual experience was 12.5 years. In contrast, the mean age for their first positive sexual experience was 16 years.

A third of the men were under the age of 16 when first attracted sexually to children (see Figure 3). All of these men committed their first offense as juveniles, 1 to 3 years after



Age first attracted to children minus age of first offence (mean=1.3yrs)

Figure 4. Delay in years from attraction to first offence reported by offenders.

becoming sexually attracted to children (see Figure 4). The mean age of first conviction, however, was 31 years. Fifty-five percent of the abusers said that their offenses became more serious over time.

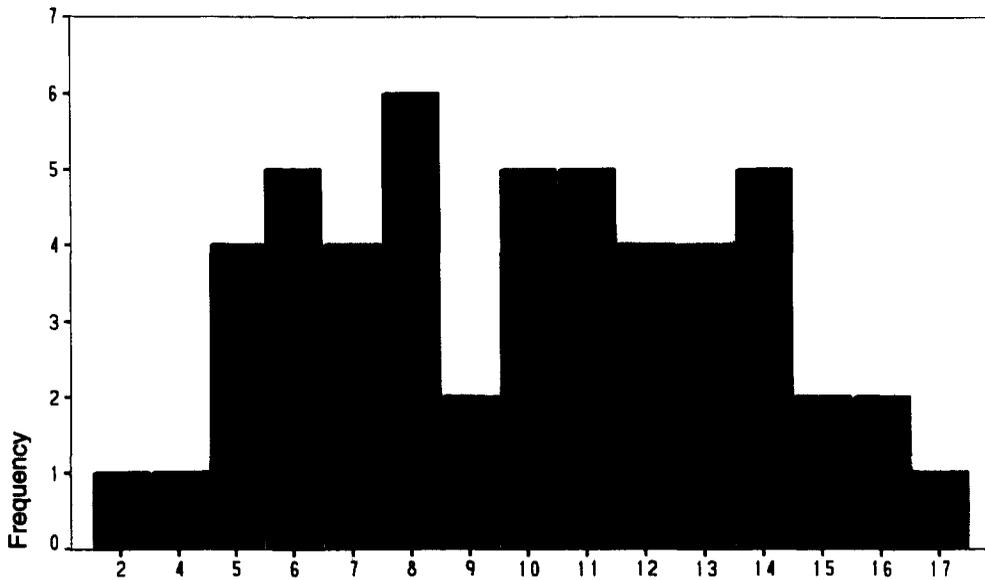
Information was collected on 87 of the offenders in relation to their own sexual experiences as children. Two-thirds of the men (68%) said that they had been sexually abused as children. Fifty-nine percent of the offenders described some form of contact sexual abuse during their victimization. The mean age of their own sexual abuse was 9.75 years (see Figure 5). The links between the offender's own experiences and their methods of abuse are to be explored in a follow up article.

Offender's Comments Relevant To Prevention

When asked what comments they had for children and parents about preventing child sexual abuse, their responses most frequently support the following ideas for children, parents, and teachers.

Children:

- need a guidebook and programs to give them information about prevention—'kids are easy to trick when they don't have a clue about what I'm trying to do.'
- should avoid secluded, remote places—children place themselves at risk by playing in quiet places; don't play in deserted stairways or streets at night; don't ever play hide and seek alone—hide in groups.
- are too trusting and need to be told that not everyone is trustworthy—'it is probably the last person you would suspect.'



AGE OFFENDER ABUSED (MEAN = 9.75 YRS)

*A further 8 offenders reported non-contact sexually abusive experiences

In total 68% of offenders were sexually maltreated as children

Figure 5. Child sex offender as victim. Age at first contact sex abuse (N=51, 59%).

- should tell if anyone tries to trick them or “makes strange suggestions or talks about sexual things or seems to touch or brush up against them accidentally.”
- should make up a fib and get away to tell a neighbor or someone if a babysitter tries or suggests anything—“children always fall for the idea that you will let them stay up late if they’ll play a secret game with you. Parents should tell kids that if the babysitter tries to do them a special favor, they should not be fooled.”
- try to go out with other children—“I never approach children in groups; there are plenty of children on their own. It just isn’t worth the risk when there are several kids together because you can’t control them all.”
- should be wary of public toilets and never go into them alone—“a great place to hang out is in a toilet in a kiddies hamburger-type restaurant. Little boys, especially, go into the toilets alone and they aren’t expecting someone to try to touch them. Most of the time they are too embarrassed even to shout. I would teach kids to run out of the toilets yelling the minute anyone tries to help them zip up or touch them.”
- should walk to school with other people—“the best time of the day to get at children is when they are walking home from school alone.”
- should never accept lifts or talk to anyone who comes up to them—“children are so trusting. A good way to approach is to ask the time. Seems innocent enough, but once you get them in conversation, it’s hard for them to get away. If you look respectable, they figure you can’t be a nasty stranger.”
- if they are being followed, should knock on the door of a nearby house—“this really put me off following the child, so that child didn’t get abused.”
- should always tell parents where they were going.
- should tell if anyone, including a relative, is abusing them—“don’t pretend that nothing is happening and hide it from everyone, it will only get worse. That’s what happened to me.”

- should tell a friend—“sometimes kids don’t have a grown up to trust, so they can have the friend come with them to tell a teacher or a school nurse or someone else.”
- need to be especially wary if a man on his own tries to approach—in light of the information that 93% of the abusers operate alone, children should be warned that this kind of approach is particularly dangerous.

Parents need to:

- be suspicious if someone seems more interested in their children than in the parents. “Watch out for someone who offers to take your child on holiday or who tells you to take a break while they watch the kids—why would this man want to hang around your children?”
- be aware that “over-loving or over-affectionate type people are potentially dangerous.”
- be told that “our offenses can occur gently and subtly and that children need to be prompted to get help early.”
- realize that there are some people, even family members and friends who could ask their children to do something sexual—“parents are so naive—they’re worried about strangers and should be worried about their brother-in-law. They just don’t realize how devious we can be. I used to abuse children in the same room with their parents and they couldn’t see it or didn’t seem to know it was happening.”
- know that we will use any way we can to get to children—“I was disabled and spent months grooming the parents, so they would tell their child to take me out and help me. No one thought that disabled people could be abusers.”
- teach their children that they should never keep secrets or feel they are to blame if they are abused—“secrecy and blame were my best weapons. Most kids worry that they are to blame for the abuse and that they should keep it a secret.” Indeed, parents should emphasize openness and a “no secrets” attitude throughout their children’s upbringing.
- teach children about sex, different parts of the body and “right and wrong” touches—“parents are partly to blame if they don’t tell their children about these things (sexual matters)—I used it to my advantage by teaching the child myself.”
- know that children hold adults in high esteem and will do what they say—“don’t teach your kids to do everything adults tell them, otherwise they’ll be too frightened of adult status.”
- have family discussions about preventing abuse—“parents shouldn’t be embarrassed to talk about things like this—it’s harder to abuse or trick a child who knows what you’re up to.”
- tell children they have rights and if the child “isn’t comfortable with someone, they don’t have to be with him.”
- know that it is a dangerous age when girls are “transforming into women and might be sexually curious—I used that curiosity to trap them into sex.”
- be aware of children’s behavior changing—“notice if your child becomes different or seems to feel bad or is withdrawn, ask why, examine small children for physical signs.”
- not be too hard on children—“kids who felt unloved or not appreciated were easiest to victimize, they needed the *love* I gave.”
- realize that single parent families are a good target for paedophiles—“the mothers are stressed, overworked and are grateful for someone taking one of the children out for a while.”

Teachers and schools should:

- have prevention programs for all kids from a very young age—“in the same way that we groom children from a young age to be victims, schools should groom them to tell automatically.”

- have the children role play what to do—“it’s no good just lecturing to kids, they probably aren’t paying attention. Get them to run and yell, so they’ll do it automatically.”
- go on courses to learn the signs of abuse—“teachers think the child is just messing around, when they might be crying for help. I was and no one saw it. In the past people didn’t want to know and didn’t have the experience to understand what kids were going through.”
- make sure the programs don’t concentrate on stranger danger and stereotypes—“children never considered me a stranger if I dressed alright and seemed nice. Stereotyping people as bad, mean strangers makes kids more at risks from people like us.”
- have discussions in school to prompt children to tell—“kids who are being abused sometimes need to tell someone outside the family, like a teacher or nurse.”
- believe children if they say abuse is happening—“children need to feel confident that someone will do something before they will tell.”
- have adverts in school about being safe—“the abuse is happening anyway—it should be publicized.”
- teach sex education—“make sure children have sex education which makes them aware of the emotional and physical side of sex. They need information to know what’s happening.”

The offenders suggested that safety messages to children should start from the age of 3 and continue until the age of 16. They said that parents and teachers should give and reinforce the messages. There was a caution from one abuser about publicity—“too much detailed publicity might be used by sex offenders to change their method.” This same man felt that publicity was good, but should be kept from sex abusers themselves.

Telephone help lines for children to call were seen as a good protection. Some of the abusers wanted help lines for people who abuse to help them get advice about counselling and therapy groups. “Just banging us into prison doesn’t protect kids in the long run—we’ll only come out and do it again if we don’t get help to change.”

There were also suggestions that security in public places like shopping centers and toilets and arcades should be increased as the men spent a lot of time in amusement arcades, cafes, and discos. They would offer the children or young people money to do an errand or job. This seemingly innocent relationship was then gradually turned into a sexually abusive one.

DISCUSSION

People who abuse children provide a unique source of information for child protection programs and agencies. Since many of them have both a perpetrator and victim perspective (Browne, 1994), they can give valuable insights that will enable adults to help children stay safe. There are, of course, limitations to any study of abusers; they may lie or exaggerate, or their methods may be different from the vast majority of abusers who are not caught and convicted (Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, & Murphy, 1987). The men who took part in this study knew they would not be given any special consideration in either reducing their sentence or in their treatment programs. Inappropriately, they may have possibly enjoyed the idea of talking about their abuse of children but this was dealt with by a debriefing at the end of the interview.

While keeping these limitations in mind, studying the strategies of perpetrators does provide us with vital information when designing programs intended to prevent child sexual abuse. This study indicates that it may be desirable to include information in prevention programs for children about the specific ways child molesters operate. Children need to know that they are at risks in places that attract children, including shopping centers, amusement/theme parks, arcades, discos, parks, and school grounds.

Children should be particularly concerned about being approached by a man on his own,

known or unknown. Most of the offenders (93%) acted alone, only 7% had at least one co-perpetrator. This confirms earlier studies by Groth (1985), who found that 95% of his prison population of child molesters had no co-perpetrators in regard to their assaults. Being invited to visit a person's house is also cause for concern, as nearly two-thirds of offenders assault in their own home. If anyone invites a child to his house or offers gifts to a child, the child should always check it out first. No well-intentioned person would mind a child checking.

If anyone a child knows has sexual materials lying around the house or talks in a sexual manner or shows sexy videos, the child should get away, if they can, and tell an adult they trust as soon as possible. In several prevention books and programs, children are warned about people taking photographs. Since only 4% of the offenders in this study took photographs, this may not be important advice for children when compared with other strategies.

There are potentially dangerous strategies which children are now being taught in some programs and which are stated in at least one leaflet, that is: "tell the abuser you are going to tell." Once the abuse has started, children should not try saying no, nor threaten the offender with telling. This places them at greater risk, as 39% of the abusers were prepared to threaten or use force. Children need to know that shouting "No" can be used when they are not alone with the offender or when first approached, and that they should tell but not say this to the offender.

However, because secrecy is such a vital part of the offenders' strategies, children need to be taught that should anyone ask them to keep a secret, they should automatically reply that they "don't keep secrets." This could be quite an important safeguard for children. In fact, many prevention programs suggest teaching children that there are surprises (which will be told eventually, such as a birthday gift) and secrets (which are never told). Offenders often test a child's willingness to keep secrets by creating a fun "secret" shared by the child and the offender. This creation of secrecy at the start of a relationship may appear to be quite innocent—perhaps the offender giving the child a sweet and telling the child not to tell "because other children will be jealous" or "your mother wouldn't like it." Obviously not a threat, this "secrecy" ploy is the start of enticing the child further into the seductive web of abuse.

Another similar ploy is the offender testing children's reactions by "accidentally" touching them. Children also need to know that this, like asking for secrecy, is a warning sign and that they should move away from that person, if possible, and tell someone what happened.

There is a vital distinction here between the child telling someone who approaches them that they don't keep secrets, telling an adult if someone seems to be accidentally touching them, and a child threatening an offender with disclosure. Telling should not place them in danger, threatening does.

Parents need to be aware that abusers are evenly divided across the social classes and may or may not be married. There is no foolproof "profile" that will help them recognize a "typical" offender. They can, however, be aware of the ways abusers operate and to give their children specific advice, as outlined above. The abuser will most likely be known and trusted by the family, either as a relative or as someone who has become a good friend.

All parents must be alert to men who attached themselves to their families and who offer to take their children off with them or teach the children games or sports, or offer to babysit. Single parents may be particularly vulnerable to this approach, as many offenders seem to target single-parent families. The dilemma for parents is that there are many well-intentioned individuals who may become friends of the family and who may become a positive and significant factor in their children's lives. However, if children are taught to tell at the first warning sign and parents are aware of possible dangers, these positive and innocent men should be allowed to provide a good role model for children.

All children should be told that a babysitter should not give them "special" privileges like

staying up late. If the babysitter asks them to do anything different or unusual, they should tell their parents.

Whenever possible, children should go together in groups, as abusers usually target children who are alone.

Parents need to ensure that their children feel they can tell if anything happens—61% of the abusers were worried about children disclosing because they knew this would not only get them into trouble, but also put them out of contact with children should they be convicted. Telling may, at the very least, stop the abuse for the child and remove the abuser so he cannot offend.

Since low self-confidence is an attraction to abusers, one of the most important things we can encourage with children is for them to be self-confident and assertive. Perhaps raising children with a belief in their own self-worth, nurturing them and giving them a sense of being valued and loved, is one of the best ways of protecting them against the efforts of the child sex offender.

CONCLUSION

Increased awareness and understanding of how and why child sex abusers target their victims is vital for helping children to prevent abuse or at least to try to tell and get help. From the information supplied by sex abusers, there are some aspects of personal safety programs which are well founded and should be continued, such as teaching children that anyone, even someone they know, could harm them; to tell if anyone asks them to keep touching a secret; to go out in groups and to get away as quickly possible from any worrying situation. There are some potentially dangerous suggestions currently being given to children, such as threatening the abuser with telling and perhaps shouting *no* once the abuse has started. Child Safety Programs need to be re-evaluated in light of what the offenders have said.

The offenders in this study indicated that children are most vulnerable to sexual abuse when they have family problems, are alone, lack confidence, and are indiscriminate in their trust of others. This is especially the case when these children are also seen by the perpetrator to be pretty, “provocatively” dressed, young, or small.

It is evident that parents are not given enough information to keep their children safe, especially when they leave them in the care of others. Parents, teachers and other professionals need leaflets with specific suggestions, given out freely in schools, libraries, GP’s surgeries (doctor’s offices), shopping malls, and other public places. Without good safety programs and informed adults, children will continue to be vulnerable to the sexual abuser. The first major study of how abusers target children gives us an opportunity to reduce that vulnerability.

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Résumé—Dans cette étude, 91 agresseurs sexuels d'enfants ont été interviewés afin de connaître l'âge de leurs victimes, les méthodes qu'ils utilisent pour cibler les enfants, comment ils les ont choisis, comment ils ont réussi à les garder sous leur joug et quelles recommandations ils feraient pour prévenir les mauvais traitements. Les agresseurs venaient de plusieurs sources : programmes de traitement, probation, hôpitaux spéciaux et pénitenciers. Les entrevues ont été menées à partir d'un questionnaire semi-structuré. Les résultats indiquent que les agresseurs avaient accès aux enfants parce qu'on leur en confie la garde, par exemple lorsque les parents font une sortie. Ils attirait les enfants en les soudoyant, en leur promettant des cadeaux et en les attirant au moyen de jeux. Parfois ils avaient recours à la force, se fâchaient, les menaçaient et les leuraient pour assurer leur collaboration à long terme. Enfin, ils désensibilisaient les enfants par le toucher, par des conversations à caractère sexuel et par la persuasion. Presque la moitié des agresseurs ne se sentaient pas mal à l'aise vis-à-vis de leur comportement. Les auteurs discutent des conséquences de leurs constats par rapport à la prévention.

Resumen—Se entrevistó a 91 adultos que habían abusado sexualmente de niños, respecto a los métodos que utilizaban para acceder a los niños, el rango de edad de sus víctimas, cómo seleccionaban a los niños y les mantenían como víctimas, y qué sugerencias tenían para prevenir el abuso sexual infantil. Los abusadores fueron seleccionados de programas de tratamiento, en libertad condicional, hospitales especiales, y prisiones. Fueron entrevistados utilizando un cuestionario semi-estructurado. Los resultados indican que los abusadores accedían a los niños ejerciendo tareas de cuidado infantil, como, por ejemplo, haciendo de canguros; seleccionaban a los niños usando sobornos, regalos y juegos; utilizaban la fuerza, la cólera, amenazas y sobornos para asegurar el mantenimiento de su obediencia; y, de manera sistemática, desensibilizaban a los niños mediante el contacto físico, hablándoles de sexo y utilizando la persuasión. Cerca de la mitad de los abusadores no tenían sentimientos negativos en relación al abuso sexual de niños. Se discuten las implicaciones para los programas de prevención.