

WHAT SEXUAL OFFENDERS TELL US ABOUT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

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Abstract—A sample of 20 adult sexual offenders were interviewed about the process whereby they selected, recruited, and maintained children in a sexual abuse situation. Offenders were selected if they were making "successful" progress in treatment in order that they might be less likely to distort their descriptions. Offenders were interviewed by their therapist in a community treatment program using a semistructured interview guide. Results suggest that this sample of offenders claim a special ability to identify vulnerable children, to use that vulnerability to sexually use a child, that sexual abuse is inherently coercive, even though many offender statements minimize the level of coercion and violence, and that offenders systematically desensitize children to touch. Implications for prevention of sexual abuse are highlighted.

AS PUBLIC AND PROFESSIONAL AWARENESS has increased that sexual abuse of children is a common experience of large numbers of children, so has interest in programs to prevent sexual abuse. Programs designed to teach children to protect themselves in abusive and high-risk situations have been developed for a number of formats, including audio and videotape, 16 mm films, plays, coloring books, story books, and dyadic instruction from an adult (Conte, Rosen, & Saperstein, 1986). Evaluative data are becoming available which indicate that most children can successfully learn most prevention content (Conte, 1988; Finkelhor & Strapko, in press; Wurtele, 1987). Evidence regarding children's actual skill development is only now becoming available (Fryer, Kraizer, & Miyoshi, 1987). The content of most prevention programs assumes that children are abused because they lack certain knowledge and skills (e.g., an understanding that sexual touching, i.e., abuse, need not be tolerated or how to say "no" assertively to an adult). Inherent in this set of assumptions is the belief that

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all children are at risk for abuse because children are inherently unequal when compared to adults.

Although many prevention programs and materials were initially developed by individuals with clinical experience with victims and/or offenders, there has been little systematic study of the process whereby adults identify, recruit, and maintain the compliance of child victims. Such information might be helpful in understanding the factors which increase risk for victimization or which keep children in abusive situations for extended periods of time.

The data reported below are part of a larger project designed to investigate the victimization process as described by a sample of child victims (Berliner & Conte, 1988) and adults who sexually abuse children. This paper presents information obtained from 20 interviews with adult offenders. While this is a small sample and the data should be viewed with all caution due data generated from potentially unrepresentative samples, nevertheless we feel the results deal with a problem of sufficient importance that their presentation is justified.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were selected from the treatment population at Northwest Treatment Associates-Mercer, a large, community-based, specialized sex offender treatment program in Seattle. Subjects were recruited from recent graduates identified by their primary therapist as "successful" or from clients currently in treatment who were judged to be making successful progress. Success was based on the primary therapist's judgment that the client was actively involved in treatment or had terminated from treatment with approval of the program, had begun to or had successfully dismantled the elaborate belief system that supports sexual deviancy (e.g., touching a child's genitals is not sexual abuse), and were therefore likely to provide accurate information in response to the questionnaire. When possible, subjects were also selected to maximize the amount of information (i.e., history of deviancy) which the primary therapist had obtained from the offender's family or collateral contacts. All subjects had successfully passed a clinical polygraph which assesses the accuracy of information provided by the client at several points throughout treatment (Wolf, Conte, & Menig, 1988).

Interview

An interview guide was developed to obtain information in the following general areas: summary of offense pattern (e.g., number and sex of victims, age of onset); how victims were selected; the offender's assessment of the risk of being apprehended; the process used by the offender to engage the child in abuse; measures used to maintain the victim's involvement and secrecy; how the offender was finally detected; and the offender's evaluation of certain child protection concepts and techniques.

In all there were 69 questions covering the topics outlined above. Interviews were conducted by the therapist who had seen the offender in individual treatment. Interviews were conducted at the agency and ranged in length from 40 to 90 minutes. Subjects were reimbursed for their transportation and time involvement in the study. All interviews were audiotaped, and summary transcriptions were made. The therapists had no role in analyzing the transcripts. Several factors about the treatment program and research procedure should be kept in mind. By policy, Northwest Treatment Associates-Mercer reports all incidents of sexual abuse to authorities. Clients sign a written agreement acknowledging the fact that information obtained during treatment about previously unidentified victims will be reported. Although sub-

Table 1. Offender Characteristics

Subject No.	Age	Education	Occupation	Primary Deviancy*	Secondary Deviancy*	No. Victims	Age At 1st Offense
101	66	GED	Equip oper.	Hetero ped.	Incest*	7 (F)	26
102	44	BA +2	Computer tech.	Hetero child*	Incest	14 (F)	11
103	35	12+	Cable TV tech.	Hetero ped.	Incest*	12 (F)	12
104	39	BA	Guard	Homo child*	Prostitution	7 (M)	34
105	29	13	Tilesetter	Bisex ped.*	Incest	1 (M) 10 (F)	5
106	54	14	Telephone tech.	Hetero ped.	Incest*	3 (F)	22
107	42	14	Carpenter	Hetero ped.	Incest*	4 (F)	24
108	37	12	Vac trk. driver	Incest*	Rape	1 (M) 4 (F)	20
109	40	12	Auto parts sales	Incest*	Hetero Child	2 (F)	18
110	68	12	Carpenter	Bisex ped.*	Incest	1 (M) 10 (F)	22
111	35	12	Phone repair	Hetero ped.*	Physical Abuse	7 (F)	10
112	63	12	Fish biologist	Incest*	Zoophilia	1 (F)	48
113	38	BA	Computer progrmr	Incest*	Paraphilia	1 (F)	31
114	40	13	Carpenter	Bisex ped.*	Incest	20 (M) 20 (F)	14
115	37	13	Shipwright	Homo ped.*	Peeping	1 (F) 1 (M)	31
116	40	12	Painter	Hetero child	Incest*	3 (F)	33
117	42	GED	Gen labor	Hetero ped.	Incest*	5 (F)	10
118	38	12	Machinist	Hetero child*	0	1 (F)	14
119	41	12	Logger	Hetero child	Incest*	2 (F)	33
120	20	11	Warehouse man	Bisex ped.	Incest	3 (M) 5 (F)	7

* DSM-III diagnostic criteria.

* Indicates behavior for which client was referred.

jects were not asked questions about the identity of any victims, they were told as part of the consent process that new reportable information would be reported.

While a great deal of information about offense patterns and history was known by the therapist who conducted the interview, nevertheless it is possible that the respondents may have minimized, distorted, or underreported their actions. Indeed, such might be expected, given the importance of denial and distortion in sexual deviancy (Conte, 1985). Therefore when responses presented below serve to place the respondent in a more positive light or tend to minimize what he did or said, the responses should be viewed as possibly biased. However, given that many of the key statements made by these respondents seem to place them in a more negative light, relatively less concern for the valid nature of the data seems appropriate.

RESULTS

Information on selected key questions answered by the offenders will be presented below. Given the small sample size and the exploratory nature of these data, trends in the offender's responses will be reported rather than the specific proportion of offenders making each response. The presentation of specific proportions of respondents who made each statement might tend to disguise the preliminary nature of the information provided by these 20 sexual offenders.

Table 1 presents descriptive information about this sample of 20 respondents. Two were Hawaiians; one, Hispanic; and one, Peruvian Indian; the remainder were Caucasian.

Key Questions

How many victims have you had? Offenders abused between 1 and 40 children, with an average per offender of 7.3. The youngest victim was an 18-month-old infant. Female children

were more often targeted than males, although some offenders abused both males and females. Most offenders targeted both children who were related to them and unrelated children. A few abused only one type (relationship) of child. Rarely did an offender abuse a child who was not related or not known to the offender.

Was there something about the child's appearance which attracted you to the child? Most of the offenders interviewed expressed a preference for specific physical characteristics (e.g., generally smooth skin, long hair, dresses; or slim body, darker skinned, darker hair, a cute face, and not particularly boyish). A number of offenders described a markedly similar behavioral characteristic of a preferred victim in their responses to this appearance questionnaire. This characteristic seems to describe a friendly, open child:

Mostly vivaciousness, friendliness, proximity, close to me. No physical characteristics. I felt they would be victims willingly because they were being overly friendly with me.

The look in their eyes. It's a look of trust. They like you. If they are going to show resistance, they'll look away.

Has a look of being vulnerable in some way. May not be assertive; may not be outgoing. Trusts adults. You can see this in their body language, the way they look with their eyes. The way they hold themselves.

If there were more than one child with this physical appearance available, why did you select one over the other? Although most offenders used different ways to describe it, their responses to this question suggest a capacity to target vulnerable children. One offender indicated he would select the child who was the most friendly, the most receptive, and the child who would respond back to him. Such a child would be targeted even if her physical appearance did not fit his preference:

I would choose the youngest one or the one whom I thought would not talk about it.

I would probably pick the one who appeared more needy, the child hanging back from others or feeling picked on by brothers or sisters. The one who liked to sit in my lap. The one who likes attention and stroking.

Was there something about the child's behavior which attracted you to the child? The responses to this question were markedly similar to the child described in previous questions. This is the warm and friendly child or the vulnerable child:

Friendly, showed me their panties.

The way the child would look at me, trustingly. The child who was teasing me, smiling at me, asking me to do favors.

Someone who had been a victim before; quiet, withdrawn, compliant. Someone who had not been a victim would be more nonaccepting of the sexual language or stepping over the boundaries of modesty.

Quieter, easier to manipulate, less likely to object or put up a fight, goes along with things.

After you had identified a potential victim, did you think about the possibility of getting caught? Most of the offenders indicated that they thought about getting caught, and many indicated that this fear was taken into account in how and when they victimized children:

In general, no. I selected victims that I thought wouldn't report me.

Yes, this would be a primary part of my strategy in picking the time and place and victim. That's why most of my victims were 7 and below. Some were even 3 years old, and I don't think they knew what was going on. I went after the victims that had a low potential for telling someone.

Yes, but I excused myself by telling myself that I wasn't really molesting her. I was just being curious.

Yes, it was a fear the entire time I was molesting her. Toward the end, it got to be a contest to see if I could get away with it.

After you had identified a potential victim, what did you do to engage the child into sexual

contact? A few offenders describe offering material enticements (e.g., purchases from the store) to engage the child in sexual abuse. Others described no engagement process (e.g., "I didn't say anything. It was at night, and she was in bed asleep.") The majority of offenders described a process of engaging the child in a relationship prior to beginning sexual contact:

Talking, spending time with them, being around them at bedtime, being around them in my underwear, sitting down on the bed with them. Constantly evaluating the child's reaction. A lot of touching, hugging, kissing, snuggling.

Play, talking, giving special attention, trying to get the child to initiate contact with me. Get the child to feel safe to talk with me. From here I would initiate different kinds of contact, such as touching the child's back, head. Testing the child to see how much she would take before she would pull away.

Isolate them from any other people. Once alone, I would make a game of it (e.g., red light, green light with touching up their leg until they said stop. Making it sound fun.

Getting comfortable with the child. Doing things that they liked. Making them feel comfortable with me. Make them laugh and have a good time. When they give an outward sign that they like you, like a hug, start touching their arms, legs, hugging them.

Most of the time I would start by giving them a rub down. When I got them aroused, I would take the chance and place my hand on their penis to masturbate them. If they would not object, I would take this to mean it was OK. I would isolate them. I might spend the night with them. Physical isolation, closeness, contact are more important than verbal seduction.

After you identified a potential victim, what did you say to engage the child into sexual contact? Information on what the offenders said to engage their victims is missing for most offenders. What is available suggests two strategies: talking about sex or making sexual jokes or conversation intended to further develop a relationship.

Certainly a lot of off color jokes. There are different categories for different kinds of jokes. With younger kids you don't have to say anything. With older kids you have to use a lot of verbal seduction.

Use a very smooth voice, very nicely and nonthreatening. Get on their level, ask how their day was going, what did they like, listen to the children. When with a group of kids and adults, sit with the adults, and let them know you are interested in them.

With the 15 year old, I told her I loved her and if she loved me she would let me do it.

How did you gain control over the victim? Offenders describe the use of adult authority, adult physical presence, and efforts to isolate the victim from others as means of controlling the victim.

Generally they would be under my care. In most cases they would be over at my place.

All force. I was stronger than her.

Early on during the grooming process I used a lot of conversation with my daughter and spent time alone with her. I kept telling her how proud I was of her and how special she was.

I would go along with anything she (stepdaughter) wanted, even my wife thought we were getting along.

Heavy handed discipline. I wouldn't encourage her or my wife to make friends outside of the house. This kept the family isolated, and there was less chance of getting caught.

I think they were confused because I was appearing to be someone they could trust, but I was doing something they didn't like. I would continue in a playful way to pretend that what I was doing was not sexual.

By buying her presents, letting her stay at her girl friends, letting her have favors, buying her things that I didn't buy other kids.

Did you threaten the victim? The majority of offenders responded to this question with a response indicating that they had not threatened their victim. The majority of offenders then proceeded to describe specific ways that they threatened their victims by use of their superior size and strength, the authority they had over the victims, or by suggesting that they (the offenders), the victim, or others would be hurt by knowledge of the abuse.

Not threatening her, never hurt any of them. Did tell L. that if she said anything, her girl friends are not going to like her. Also said I would go to jail.

No, but the kids had seen me be physically violent with my wife at least twice.

No. Certainly with my physical size, but never verbally. I did hold her arms tight so she couldn't get away, but not in a power sense.

No. I might have said to be careful not to tell anyone.

I would withdraw my affection.

No, but I think they were threatened because I was their parents' age, and I commanded respect. I focus in on a lot of eye contact.

I told her that if her mom found out she would be real mad, and I would have to move out of the house.

If your mom finds out, she will probably kill me and beat you. This really made her afraid of her mom.

The only force I really showed was with the younger kids who couldn't vocalize. They would show resistance, and I would stop, then go back. I did use force of just holding them still so that they couldn't squirm around.

Write a manual on how to sexually abuse a child. In response to this question, the offenders described a range of activities intended to befriend needy children, gradually desensitize children to sexual behaviors, or frighten and intimidate them.

Some way to get a child living with you. If you have a repertoire of jokes that move from risky to pornographic, have porn magazines lying around. Talk about sex. Watch the kids' reactions. Stick your head in their bedrooms while they are in their bedclothes. Act like it's a natural thing. Be sympathetic. Try a lot of compliments. Have accidental contact with their breasts.

Befriend them, be nice to them. Target children who appear to be not close to their parents or children who have already been victimized. Look for some kind of deficiency.

I would find a child who doesn't have a happy home life, because it would be easier to groom them and to gain their confidence.

I would find a child that didn't have very many friends, because it would be easier for me to gain their friendship. Look for a kid who is easy to manipulate. They will go along with anything you say. I would approach them by being friendly, letting them think I was someone they could confide in and talk to.

Be in a position where you are a close friend with someone who is involved with alcohol and drugs and probably has the attitude that kids are like dogs, just around the house. Someone who has a tight control over kids and where if the kid does anything wrong he'll be severely punished. Being a molester, you can pick on that and start showing the kids extra attention. They'll thrive on it and will become easily manipulated to your control. You can also set it up when the parents trust you and use you as a babysitter. You'll be alone with the kid, and the kid doesn't like his parents.

Choose children who have been unloved. Try to be nice to them until they trust you very much and give you the impression that they will participate with you willingly. Use love as bait. . . . Never threaten her. Give her the illusion that she is free to choose to go with it or not. Tell her she is special. Choose a kid who has been abused. Your victim will think that this time is not as bad.

Identify a child that would be looking for help, who is vulnerable. . . . feed the positive things, like she looks real good. If she didn't have any boy friends, tell her why not; be interested in her. Get the parents to trust the offender. Work slowly. Get as many people who are close to the victim to trust you.

Observe the victim, if he/she is friendly, if they come to like me a lot, it would be safe to try to touch them. . . . under these conditions I don't think the kids are apt to tell.

Select an isolated and quiet child. They want somebody and need someone.

First you would groom your victim by heavy handedness promoting fear. . . . then isolate the victim so that no one else would be around. The next step would involve making the child think that everything is OK so they wouldn't run and tell. You could convince them there is nothing wrong with it or pressure a child not to tell. . . . using force or coercion.

DISCUSSION

Although preliminary and based on one relatively small study of unknown representatives, the qualitative data presented above raise a number of issues which workers in prevention and other professionals should consider.

Punitive Reactions Towards Offenders

Even after multiple readings of the words of these adult sexual offenders, the impact of their words is not lessened. Their words describe a deliberate process which inflicts pain and other consequences on young children. This is not the place to argue for an approach to adults who sexually abuse children which is both rehabilitative and places strong enough controls on their behavior that children will not be hurt during the rehabilitation process. However, this is our strong belief, and we urge calm and reasoned reactions to the data presented in this paper.

Identifying Vulnerable Children

The offenders we interviewed claimed a special ability to identify vulnerable children. Vulnerability was defined both in terms of children's status (e.g., living in a divorced home or being young) and in terms of emotional or psychological state (e.g., a needy child, a depressed or unhappy child). There is a developing research literature which has sought to identify status factors associated with an increased risk for sexual victimization (see for example, Finkelhor, 1980; Russell, 1986). Current research has not documented that children are abused because of emotional or psychological vulnerabilities. Indeed, such research would be quite difficult to conduct since without measures of pre- and post-abuse functioning (e.g., depression, emotional well-being), it would be virtually impossible to determine what is a risk factor for abuse and what is an emotional consequence of being abused.

It may be that any adult who cares to, has a capacity to identify vulnerable children by observing behavioral and other cues (e.g., child's dress or social class). A comparison of the capacity of offenders and nonoffending adults to accurately identify emotionally or psychologically vulnerable children could be important data for future prevention efforts, as would continued efforts to identify factors which increase a child's risk for victimization.

At a minimum, adults who care for children should be aware that offenders claim a special ability to identify vulnerable children and to manipulate that vulnerability as a means of gaining sexual access to children. Identifying those same vulnerabilities, paying special attention to the protection of those children, and efforts to alter the conditions which make children vulnerable are prevention strategies. One of the difficulties, well recognized by prevention professionals, is that in some cases vulnerabilities are inherent in childhood (e.g., being small, not having the language to tell others what is happening to one).

Coercion is Inherent

Even in this sample of offenders judged to be relatively nonviolent and therefore appropriate for community treatment and who may have been likely to underestimate any violence or coercion in their behavior, it is clear that they employed a range of coercive behaviors. These involved efforts to separate children from other adults who might protect them, conditioning through the use of reward and punishment, or letting the child view violence directed against the child's mother.

Protection of children will require adults who have the resources and care to make children less vulnerable. The verbal threats which may accompany these behaviors are based on an understanding of the child and therefore what will be an effective threat. Clearly, the struggle between sexual offender and potential victim is one in which most factors are weighted on the side of the adult. Superior knowledge, strength, and skill will not easily be overcome by children. This fact should serve both to revitalize prevention efforts, but also alert prevention professionals of the complexity of the task. Many communities and parents often appear to act if prevention is simply a matter of a short presentation in which children are taught to say

no, run, and tell. Just how complex the prevention task really is should be no surprise to prevention professionals.

Debunking adult statements before the child has been exposed to them or when the child might have witnessed demonstrations of the adult's power (e.g., when her mother was beaten up) is a difficult task. How children can be prepared ahead of time, without frightening them, to identify coercive and manipulative actions of adults and to cope with them so that they will escape or get help will require further innovation and test.

Offender Efforts to Desensitize Children

We are struck by the sophistication of offender efforts to desensitize children to touch through progressing from nonsexual touch (e.g., touching a leg or back) to sexual touch and through the gradual development of a relationship with the child. We speculate that for the child one of the consequences of this desensitization and relationship building process is that by the time the child knows that abuse is taking place (perhaps because a prevention program has taught her) the child may feel she has given consent (e.g., because she did not say no when the back of her head was rubbed) to the abuse.

Teaching children that they can withdraw consent or that consenting to one action is not consenting to another, even similar action, is one approach. Again, these are obviously complex concepts for children, especially young children, to grasp. More information about how children view consent, responsibility for events and actions, and how alternative beliefs can be taught will be helpful to the field.

Teaching children that potential offenders may be of any relationship to a child is a current strategy that some programs use to deal with the fact that so many children are abused within the ongoing relationships they have with adults. This knowledge likely will not mean much to children who have not been abused. It is not clear how children process this knowledge until they are in fact abused by an adult and they then have the experience to make a connection between their experience and that knowledge. Teaching children about the relationship warning signs so that they can identify risk situations seems virtually impossible, since so many of the relationship risk factors are normal, and often positive aspects (e.g., an adult paying attention to a child) of adult-child relationships.

CONCLUSION

The data presented above beg for replication (interview guides are available from the first author). Although preliminary, the results of the interviews described above are the first systematic description of the process adults use to identify, recruit, and maintain children in abusive relationships. Increased understanding about this process is a vital aspect of efforts to help children prevent or escape their own abuse.

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Résumé—Les auteurs ont interviewé un collectif de 20 délinquants sexuels adultes. Ils leur ont demandé de décrire par quel moyen ils avaient sélectionnés, recruté et maintenu des enfants en situation de sévices sexuels. Ces délinquants ont été sélectionnés sur la base d'une thérapie qui progressait de façon satisfaisante; ainsi, ils étaient moins susceptibles de mentir dans leur description. Ils ont été interrogés par leur thérapeute dans un programme communautaire de traitement à l'aide d'un guide d'interviews semi-structuré. D'après les résultats, il semble que ce collectif de délinquants prétend être capable d'identifier les enfants vulnérables et d'utiliser cette vulnérabilité pour les abuser sexuellement. Les résultats montrent d'une part que les sévices sexuels sont forcément de nature coercitive; même si dans leurs affirmations, les délinquants tentent à minimiser le niveau de coercibilité et de violence, et d'autre part que les délinquants désensibilisent systématiquement les enfants aux attouchements. Les auteurs soulignent les conclusions à tirer de ces observations pour la prévention.

Resumen—Una muestra de veinte delincuentes sexuales adultos fueron interrogados acerca del proceso a través del cual seleccionaron, obtuvieron y mantuvieron a menores en una situación sexual abusiva. Se seleccionó a delincuentes que estaban haciendo "progreso" en su tratamiento, con la esperanza de que sus descripciones fueran más "objetivas." Los delincuentes fueron interrogados por su terapeuta en un programa comunitario de tratamiento, utilizando una entrevista semi-estructurada. Los resultados sugieren que esta muestra de delincuentes mantiene tener una capacidad especial para identificar a menores vulnerables, para utilizar esa vulnerabilidad para usar a un menor sexualmente, que el abuso sexual es inherentemente coercitivo, a pesar de que muchos delincuentes minimizan el nivel de coerción y violencia, y que los delincuentes sistemáticamente desensibilizan los menores al toque. Se subrayan las implicaciones para la prevención del abuso sexual.

