



# JACOB'S HOPE

A NEWSLETTER OF THE  
JACOB WETTERLING RESOURCE CENTER  
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## UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: A PRIMER FOR PARENTS AND CARETAKERS



***JWRC maintains hope that through quality programming and services provided to communities, adults can help protect children from victimization by giving them positive identities and values, appropriate boundaries and expectations, and the support they need to flourish.***

**By: Victor I. Vieth<sup>1</sup> and Alison Feigh<sup>2</sup>**

The trial of Jerry Sandusky has caused parents and others entrusted with the care of children to ask a number of questions about child sexual abuse and about the role of parents in keeping children safe. Some of the common questions parents have asked the National Child Protection Training Center, and our answers, are below.

### **1. How do children disclose sexual abuse?**

Generally speaking, children *don't* intentionally disclose their victimization.<sup>3</sup> There are many reasons for this. As adults, we would feel uncomfortable publicly disclosing even positive sexual experiences with our marriage partners. In the same way, children are understandably reluctant to disclose their sexual experiences—particularly when the experiences are negative. Since most abuse is at the hands of a loved one, the child may be worried what will happen to their parent, and to them, if the parent is removed from the home. A boy may be worried that disclosure will cause him to be labeled as weak or that it will say something about his sexual orientation. Children who have a biological reaction to sexual abuse may blame themselves for the abuse. If a child didn't say no because they were confused or afraid, they may blame themselves for not being able to get away. Some children

have been threatened or had their pets threatened as a means of coercing them to maintain the secret. One survivor of abuse told how her father tortured her cat as a means of keeping her quiet. Children who have been photographed may be scared that the images of them being sexually assaulted by a loved one will be shown on television or on the Internet. As a result of these and other dynamics, many victims carry their secrets into adulthood, even to the grave.

### **2. If children seldom intentionally disclose child sexual abuse, how does the victimization come to light?**

In many cases, the child makes an accidental disclosure. In one school, for example, the children were asked to keep a journal as a means of encouraging them to write. One of the children wrote in her journal about her father sexually abusing her, unaware that the teacher would be collecting the journals. In another case, a girl was staying over at a friend's house and the mother of her friend overheard her bedtime prayer: "Dear God, please don't let dad have sex with me on my birthday." Sometimes, older children disclose abuse as part of an angry outburst. In one case, a father denied his teenage daughter the keys to the car and, at a family reunion, the daughter angrily denounced her dad and called him a child molester.



Sometimes, a child will tell a best friend who discloses the abuse to an authority figure. In one case, a 14 year old rape victim detailed the abuse in a letter to her best friend in northern Minnesota. The letter was discovered by the mother of the victim's friend.

Sometimes a child may present to the doctor with a sexually transmitted disease or perhaps a parent or other party will walk in on the abuse. In one study, 54% of child molesters admitted that, on one or more occasions, they had sexually abused a child with another child in the room and 23% had molested a child with another adult in the room.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the increased risk of getting caught enhanced their excitement. Moreover, if they could abuse the child with others in the room, this would increase the child's feeling of helplessness. Perpetrators might do this by abusing a child while a spouse is also in the bed sleeping or may begin to fondle her or him while watching TV under the same blanket with a child.

Children or teens may disclose following a training on personal body safety. Abuse may also come to light after adults have received training on warning signs and how to talk about abuse prevention to the children in their care. Even with training, children may not disclose and adults must remain the primary protectors of children.

### 3. Are certain behaviors indicative of being a child sexual abuse victim?

Most behaviors consistent with being abused are equally consistent with other causes. A child experiencing nightmares could be a victim of abuse or could simply be a child who watched a scary movie. However, research from William Freidrich of the Mayo Clinic has identified sexual behaviors in young children that are not diagnostic but have a correlation to that child being victimized sexually.<sup>5</sup> When these behaviors are observed in children below the age of 12 there is a chance that child has been victimized sexually or has been exposed to pornography or other sexually inappropriate activity. These behaviors include inserting objects in their body cavities, manipulating genitals with an object, acts of oral sex, and imitating sexual behavior with dolls. In one school, the after-school worker discovered a 7 year old girl performing cunnilingus on a 5 year old girl. The fact that such a young child is

aware of this sexual act, much less performing it, is suggestive of sexual abuse or exposure to developmentally inappropriate sexual material. Simply stated, the child did not acquire this knowledge by watching Sesame Street.

If a child demonstrates a shift of behavior, suddenly has difficulty concentrating, or suddenly wants to disengage from activities that they liked in the past, those are signs for a caregiver to engage. The signs may not indicate abuse, but they do present opportunities for parents to connect with their children.

If the child doesn't want to talk about the issue with a parent, brainstorm together other adults that both the parent and child trust who can be asked to check in about the problem. Every child should have five adults whom they can talk to about problems. Asking one of the five adults to check-in can serve as a powerful reminder that the world is full of adults who want children to grow up healthy, safe, and strong.

### 4. If the day care, school, summer camp, or church my child attends conducts a criminal background check on workers and volunteers, is that enough to make sure my children are safe?

Although a criminal history check may satisfy the school or camp insurance company, it does little in identifying a potential predator. Most predators do not have a criminal history. Studies indicate there is no better than a 3% chance a sexual predator will ever be apprehended.<sup>6</sup> When predators are apprehended, many have accumulated hundreds of victims. There is in the Wisconsin prison system a predator who has confessed to sexually abusing more than 1,200 children.<sup>7</sup> A study of 561 non-incarcerated sex offenders concluded these men sexually abused 195,000 victims.<sup>8</sup> Simply stated, a criminal history check is a good first step, but it is not meant to stand alone.

### 5. If a background check, by itself, is not enough, what sort of policies should I make sure are in place at the schools or camps my child attends?

At a minimum, parents should look for the following policies:

- **Two-deep leadership.** If at all possible, children should always be in the care of at least two workers. Even if a worker or volunteer has to remove a child from the group for a legitimate reason, the child and the worker should always be in the eyesight of at least one additional worker

or volunteer. When developing two-deep leadership teams, it may be wise to avoid placing close family members or friends as teams. This is because a spouse or other close family member is more likely to protect a loved one who violates church rules or engages in concerning behavior with a youth.

- **Respect the child's privacy.** Sex offenders like to see children undressing or otherwise seek an opportunity to initiate conversation about sexual topics. Accordingly, workers and volunteers should avoid watching children undress in locker rooms, showers, or bathrooms.
- **Separate sleeping accommodations.** At boarding schools, camps, or other overnight settings, there should be separate sleeping accommodations for children and the adults. If there is a reason for an adult to enter the sleeping accommodations of children at night (i.e., a child has become ill), the exception should be well documented and, if at all possible, two adults should be entering the sleeping area. When requiring separate sleeping accommodations, make it clear this means truly separate. In one case, an offender arranged an overnight with youth during which he had an adjoining room door he could easily open and otherwise gain access to the children he molested.
- **Limit, if not prohibit, events at a worker's home.** In one case, a youth minister had the children he was working with over to his house for a party in which all the children joined him in a hot tub where he instructed some of the children how to masturbate with the jets. Again, sex offenders seek private access to children and allowing a worker to be alone with children at his or her house increases the risk. If there is a legitimate reason for hosting an event at the worker's home, have some rules around such activities—such as an additional worker present. In the same vein, there should be regulations on workers visiting the homes of children. In more than one case, church or other workers have visited children at their homes and have molested them there.<sup>9</sup>
- **Appropriate attire.** Adult workers and volunteers should wear appropriate clothing at all times. Activities such as skinny dipping should always be prohibited. Again, offenders look for opportunities to initiate inappropriate sexual conversations with their potential victims. Accordingly, sexually suggestive or otherwise inappropriate apparel or behaviors should be prohibited.





- *Sexual jokes, comments, or behaviors around children should be strictly prohibited.* In one case, a “Christian” teacher told the boys in his care about the frequency he had sex with his wife on his honeymoon. The same teacher would slam on the brakes when driving the school van and comment to the boys this was merely a “ball busting exercise.” A worker at a church boarding school hosted a pizza party where the invited adolescent girls were “accidentally exposed” to his pornography collection.
- *Open windows and open doors.* There may be times when a teacher or other adult will need to be alone with a child, such as a teacher giving a child a music lesson. In such a scenario, it is important to have an open-door policy where fellow teachers or others can enter unexpectedly and to have windows on doors so others can see what is happening in a particular room. Again, sex offenders look for opportunities to abuse children and it is the responsibility of a youth-serving organization to limit these opportunities.<sup>10</sup>
- *Prohibiting corporal punishment.* Corporal punishment of children is prohibited in most schools, day cares, and other settings.<sup>11</sup> There is a large body of medical and mental health research documenting that corporal punishment does very little good and is often harmful to children.<sup>12</sup> In settings where corporal punishment is allowed, children get mixed messages about telling. A child telling when someone hurts them is then discounted and told to ignore that feeling if the behavior is allowed. As an additional concern, sex offenders may view corporal punishment as a socially permissible means to touch a child’s buttocks or other intimate parts of the body.<sup>13</sup>

## 6. How do I speak with my child about personal safety?

There are number of books and materials that parents can use in speaking with their children.

about personal safety. Some parents worry that personal safety is frightening or involves sex education. This is not the case. You are simply telling children that the parts of their body covered by bathing suits are not supposed to be touched by others and, when they are, they should tell someone. If the person they tell doesn’t believe them, they should keep on telling until they are believed.

Children should be encouraged to tell the person taking care of them if anyone is acting in a way that makes them feel confused or scared. Parents and caregivers can stress that even if the person giving them the “uh-oh feeling” or trying to get them to break their safety rules is someone that they know, they can still tell and it isn’t their fault. The greater risk to children is people that they already know, but that relationship often makes it harder to tell.

Some professionals are opposed to personal safety classes because they believe the classes put the burden on the child to protect themselves. If this logic is carried to the extreme, we would stop teaching children not to play with matches. We want a child to know what to do if they see a matchbook without assuming they would know what steps to take to fireproof a home. Children who have been sexually abused have often been led by their perpetrators to believe there is nothing they can do to stop the abuse. A personal safety program may give them a way out. The responsibility for personal safety should not rest solely on the shoulders of a child, but giving children good information can help start important conversations and keep them safer.

## 7. How will I know when my child is trying to tell me about child sexual abuse?

Recognize that a child making a disclosure of abuse may do it piece-meal or in a manner that distances him or herself from the abuse. For example, a child may approach a parent after a personal safety lesson and ask him/her “if something like that happened to my friend, who should she tell?” The child may have a friend who has been victimized or she may be seeking more information before deciding if she wants to disclose her own abuse. An appropriate response may be to reiterate the importance of telling and then ask the child directly if anything has happened to them. Many children will not disclose unless directly asked. This is particularly true given that most child sexual abuse is at the hands of someone the child is close to and may love.

Starting “What if” games with a child when the child is young is a good way to begin these

important conversations about safety. Allowing your child a chance to problem solve with a “What if” can increase their confidence on these subjects. Thinking through a “What if” scenario and coming up with good solutions can make it easier to make those same choices if the actual scenario presents itself. It also allows the caregiver to reinforce important messages.

Parent : “What if an older child asked you to play a secret touching game with them for \$5?”

Child: “I know that we talk about touches in our family. I would not take the money and would come and tell you about it.”

“Great answer! You know that your safety is worth more than any amount of money, right?”

## 8. What should I know about how sexual predators select children?

Many predators put a great deal of thought into selecting, grooming, and abusing their victims. They often look for children whom they believe will fall into their attention/affection trap. Consider this report from a predator targeting church children:

First of all, you start the grooming process from day one...the children that you’re interested in.... You find a child you might be attracted to.... For me, it might be nobody fat. It had to be a you know, a nice-looking child.... You maybe look at a kid that doesn’t have a father image at home. You know, you start deducting. Well, this kid may not have a father, or a father that cares about him. Some kids have fathers but they’re not there with them.... Say if you’ve got a group of twenty-five kids, you might find nine that are appealing.... Then you start looking at their family backgrounds.... Then you find out which ones are most accessible. Then eventually you get it down to the one you think is the easiest target, and that’s the one you do.<sup>14</sup>

Since predators seek vulnerable children, it is wise to pay attention to children at greatest risk. Children and adults who are physically or mentally disabled, children engaging in delinquent behavior or who are having trouble with drugs or alcohol, or simply children of a single parent may be an easy target for predators.



## 9. Will being engaged in my child's life and proactive in monitoring my child's activities deter a potential predator?

Parents who understand that a predator may look for the one child at basketball games, band concerts, or other school events that never has a parent attend or otherwise demonstrate interest in their son or daughter may choose to take a greater interest in their child's life. Parents must also understand the dangers of the Internet. A University of New Hampshire study found that 20% of children between the ages of 10-17 have been solicited for sexual purposes.<sup>15</sup> If a parent would not allow an unsupervised adult to enter the child's bedroom, then a parent should not allow Internet accessible computers in a child's room or even allow the child to enter chat rooms where predators abound. Tell your child to save their questions about their bodies and sex to ask you or another approved adult in person and not to seek out those answers from people wanting to chat online.

## 10. What sort of therapy should I refer my child to if he or she has been victimized?

It is essential that the counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist be experienced in working with victims of sexual abuse and be well versed in the abundant research on treating children suffering from trauma. Keep in mind that most psychologists received little, if any training at the undergraduate or graduate level on child sexual abuse.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, if a given therapist has not taken the initiative to master the literature in this area and is not experienced in working with this issue, he or she is simply not competent to work these cases. If your community has a child advocacy center certified by the National Children's Alliance, contact that center for a referral.<sup>17</sup>

## Where can I acquire additional information?

The Jacob Wetterling Resource Center (JWRC) is a program of the National Child Protection Training Center. JWRC has numerous resources for parents on speaking with their children about safety and keeping children safe when out of a parent's care, including a class on how to talk to children about body safety in a positive and empowering way. To learn more, visit JWRC at [www.jwrc.org](http://www.jwrc.org).

JWRC employees and volunteers train parents, children, caregivers, and professionals about personal safety. Recently, one of our speakers was working with children on writing out

individual lists of each child's five trusted adults. Children were offering plenty of examples of the people in their lives they can go to if they have a problem. Children were taught that we have five adults in case the first adult doesn't know what to do, isn't around at the time of the question, and that sometimes it is the adult on their list that is trying to get them to break a rule or is giving them the "uh-oh" feeling. The children were told if the first person on the list can't help, move on to one of the other 4 adults. The room was full of positive energy as children were making lists of 5, 10, and even 15 adults in their lives that they could approach for help. One little girl looked up with wide eyes and said, "Isn't it great that there are so many good guys in the world!" That is the good news. There are so many people in the world who want to do their part to create safe childhoods for children. How would our world be different if people protested in the streets anytime a child was hurt? Our best protest is prevention.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Vieth is Director of the National Child Protection Training Center. Mr. Vieth prosecuted child abuse cases in the state of Minnesota from 1988-1997. Since that time, he has provided training and technical assistance to child abuse investigators and prosecutors from around the country. He is the author of numerous scholarly works on the subject of child abuse and currently directs two national, federally funded child protection programs.

<sup>2</sup> Ms. Feigh is the Program Coordinator for the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center, a program of the National Child Protection Training Center. She has been working professionally in missing and exploited children prevention and advocacy since 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See generally, Roland C. Summit, MD, *The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome*, 7 CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT 177-193 (1983); Teena Sorenson & Barbara Snow, *How Children Tell: The Process of Disclosure in Child Sexual Abuse*, 50 CHILD WELFARE 3 (1991).

<sup>4</sup> Rocky C. Underwood, Peter C. Patch, Gordon G. Cappelletty, and Roger W. Wolfe, *Do Sexual Offenders Molest When Other Persons Are Present? A Preliminary Investigation*, 11(3) SEXUAL ABUSE: A JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND TREATMENT 263 (1999).

<sup>5</sup> See William N. Friedrich, *Sexual Victimization and Sexual Behavior in Children: A Review of Recent Literature*, 17 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 59-66 (1993).

<sup>6</sup> Gene Abel, et al *Self-Reported Sex Crimes of Non-incarcerated Paraphiliacs*, 2(1) JOURNAL OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE 3-25 (1987)

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Anna C. Salter, *PREDATORS* 57, (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Abel, note 6.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g., Britt Johnsen, *Sunday School Teacher Pleads Guilty to Criminal Sex Charge*, WINONA DAILY NEWS, February 17, 2007, available online at [http://www.winonadailynews.com/news/article\\_7492e940-986d-55ce-8c8d-9513de50e9fd.html](http://www.winonadailynews.com/news/article_7492e940-986d-55ce-8c8d-9513de50e9fd.html) (last visited June 2, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> According to a report issued by the United States Department of Education, certain types of educators, such as coaches or music instructors, are more likely to sexually abuse children simply because these educators will have an easier time being alone with a boy or girl. Carol Shakeshaft, *Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature* 22 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> For a listing of state and national laws prohibiting corporal punishment, visit the website of the Center for Effective Discipline at [www.stophitting.com](http://www.stophitting.com).

<sup>12</sup> See Elizabeth T. Gershoff, *Report on Physical Punishment in the United States: What Research Tells Us About its Effects on Children* (Phoenix Children's Hospital, 2008) available online at [www.phoenixchildrens.com](http://www.phoenixchildrens.com). There is also very little theological support for the practice of corporal punishment. See generally, Meir Munk, *SPARING THE ROD: A TORAH PERSPECTIVE ON REWARD AND PUNISHMENT IN EDUCATION* (1989); Benjamin Shmueli, *Corporal Punishment in Jewish Law*, 18 THE JEWISH LAW ANNUAL, 137, 209 (2004) (concluding "it is generally agreed that corporal punishment is not required, but merely permitted in principle"); William J. Webb, *CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN THE BIBLE* (2011); Samuel Martin, *Thy Rod and Thy Staff They Comfort Me: Christians and the Spanking Controversy* (2006); CONCORDIA SELF STUDY BIBLE 965 (NIV 1984) (noting the handful of references to "rod" in the book of proverbs are best read as simply a "figure of speech for discipline of any kind"). Another Bible commentary similarly notes the term "rod" is referencing the type of governmental punishment used at the time the proverbs were written and should not be taken literally. Specifically, the commentators conclude: "Flogging was a common form of punishment. The ceremonial scepter held by rulers symbolized their authority to judge and discipline. Children are best 'trained with kindness and delight. For children who must be forced with rods and blows will not develop into a good generation.'" THE LUTHERAN STUDY BIBLE 1010 (2009 Concordia Publishing House) (citing Martin Luther's Large Catechism).

<sup>13</sup> As one example, Terence Michael Lynch was a school headmaster convicted of sexually abusing 12 boys. Among his atrocities, Lynch lined boys up naked after their showers and would inflict corporal punishment on their bare buttocks for a variety of infractions. Lynch also checked the boys' genitals to assess their "sexual maturity" and encouraged some boys to watch TV with him in his bedroom. Peggy Wright, *Spanking Horrors Detailed: Ex-Headmaster's Arrest Opens Old Wounds, Say Former Morris Students*, DAILY RECORD, February 16, 2006, available online at: <http://www.nospank.net/lynch.htm> (last visited June 2, 2011). Sexual sadism "involves acts (real, not simulated) in which the individual derives sexual excitement from the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim" and may include acts of "spanking" or "padding." American Psychiatric Association, *DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS* Fourth Edition Text Revision, Section 302.84 (2000).

<sup>14</sup> Salter, supra note 7 at 42-43.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Medaris & Cathy Girouard, *Protecting Children in Cyberspace: The ICAC Task Force Program* (Washington, D.C. Office of Justice and Juvenile Delinquency Prevention, January 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Kelly M. Champion, Kimberly Shipman, Barbara L. Bonner, Lisa Hensley, and Allison C. Howe, *Child Maltreatment Training in Doctoral Programs in Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychology, Where do we go From Here?*, 8 CHILD MALTREATMENT 211, 215 (August 2003).

<sup>17</sup> The National Children's Alliance web site can be accessed at: [www.nca-online.org](http://www.nca-online.org).





***"FAMILIES ARE FAMILIES, NOT JUST NEWS STORIES."***

– BOB JADER

***"I STILL REMEMBER THE NAMES OF THE GOOD REPORTERS."***

– JEANNE HUSSEY



In 1993 Grant Hussey was tragically abducted and murdered by a neighbor in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. The Hussey family lost a wonderful son and brother. The world lost a shining light.

The family's loss was compounded by reporters rushing to print stories without checking facts and questionable journalism ethics demonstrated by several Minnesota news organizations. JWRC staff recently re-interviewed Grant's mother, Jeanne, and the family spokesperson at the time of the case, Bob Jader, to get first-hand thoughts to help families facing intense media

pressure for future cases. The lessons we learned from Grant's case are used in our current trainings both in "Reporting without Revictimizing" and "Minnesota Cases: Learning from Our Mistakes."

JWRC's work in prevention and advocacy is rooted in our 20+ years of working with families in crisis. We continue to tell the stories to give a voice to the children who are no longer able to tell their own stories. Remember their faces. Work for change.



## JWRC Outreach for the 2011-2012 School Year

**September 1, 2011 – June 1, 2012**

80 Speaking Events

Audience reach of 4,549

10 Community Notification Events

Audience reach of 282

12 Safety Fairs/Literature Events

Audience reach of 2,917

102 Total Outreach Events

Total Audience Reach of 7748

## FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT JWRC AND NCPTC:

The Jacob Wetterling Resource Center merged with the National Child Protection Training Center in February 2010. The merger is an effort to combine the groups' resources and strengthen common efforts to ensure every child grows up in a healthy, safe world free from abuse, exploitation and abduction. Please visit [www.jwrc.org](http://www.jwrc.org) to learn more about JWRC, a program of the National Child Protection Training Center. For information about NCPTC, please visit [www.ncptc.org](http://www.ncptc.org).

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