

UNDERSTANDING SEX OFFENDERS: **WHAT THE SEX OFFENDER TELLS US**

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There are approximately 20,000 registered sex offenders currently residing within Washington State. Although most media attention is given to known sex offenders moving into the area, the majority of sex offenders are unknown to the general public. The typical sex offender is male, at least a high school graduate, is more likely than other criminals to be employed and typically do not have criminal records. Although many believe offenders are dirty old men in trench coats lurking in the bushes around schools, in fact 85%-90% of child sexual abusers are known to the family. Sex offenders most often are family members, friends, and other adults with significant relationships with children who rely on secrecy and manipulative behavior patterns to identify and target their victims. Additionally, while most other criminals decrease their criminal activity as they age, sex offenders typically do not. Instead, most sex offenders continue to offend against their targeted populations until they are physically incapable.

Child sexual abuse usually begins with a sex offender gaining both the parent's and the child's trust and friendship, becoming a valuable and indispensable part of the family. Once a relationship has been established, the offender will begin to test the child's knowledge and ability to protect themselves. Sexual jokes, back rubs, "accidental" sexual touching, and hugging, often done in the presence of the parent, are utilized to "test the waters". If these behaviors are not received with alarm, the offender will increase the amount and type of sexual exposure. To adjust the child to sexual activity, offenders commonly utilize casual or accidental exposure to pornography.

Offenders also take great precautions to avoid causing physical pain or injury to their victims because injury sharply increases the likelihood the child will disclose the behavior. Most sex offenders of children are content with self-exposure, fondling, masturbation, and oral sex. Penile penetration is rare. This preparation, or grooming process, is often so sly that children are not even aware that these behaviors violate the "good touch, bad touch" philosophy that is the current gold standard for education. The emphasis on "stranger danger" is not applicable within this criminal act. By creating an environment that isolates the child from their peers and other family members, the offenders often instill a sense of responsibility for the sexual behavior on the child.

What do the offenders tell us about prevention? Turning to convicted offenders has generated concrete suggestions to decrease the risk of child sexual assault.

- *Secrets*: Offenders tell us that teaching the dangers of secret friendships, secret gifts, secret behavior, and secret places is more valuable than any other educational format.
- *Believe*: Listen and trust your child. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse.
- *Education*: Teach accurate and healthy values about sexuality. If we don't teach our children about sex, the offenders will.
- *Remind*: Frequently remind your child about when and where people can touch their bodies.
- *Monitor*: Get to know your child's friends and peers, as well as adults that have contact with your child. Be wary of older children and adults who want to spend a lot of time alone with your child. Are the gifts or privileges your child receives appropriate?

Increased awareness and understanding of how offenders target and maintain their victims is vital to effective prevention. From information supplied by convicted offenders, programs can be developed that effectively counteract the methods utilized by offenders. Without good safety programs and informed professionals and parents, children will continue to be vulnerable and sexually victimized.