

The Socially Skilled Child Molester and the Role of Education

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What is it like to interact with someone who is a “socially skilled” child molester? Put simply, if we don’t know he or she is a sexual offender, most of us are going to like this person. We tend to like people who make us feel comfortable, who know what to say in social situations, and who show that they are kind in a variety of ways. Over the past 18 years, I have found that in many situations we may underestimate just how powerful these social skills are in the repertoire of a sexual offender. How social skills help a sexual offender gain trust and combat suspicion is a dimension of the problem that is difficult to consider for precisely the same reasons that it works so well. Consider the following:

1. We tend to believe that if someone were sexually attracted to children our “sixth sense” would signal us. Therefore, if we are not getting a negative internal feeling the individual must be “safe.”
2. We tend to believe that adults who are sexually attracted to children do not get along very well with adults. Therefore, if an adult has many friends and socializes with adults, it may seem that he or she could not abuse.
3. We tend to believe that if we confront an adult about inappropriate behavior and he or she provides a calm, reasonable explanation, the individual could not be “guilty.”
4. We tend to believe that people are either kind or abusive. Therefore, when we see acts of kindness we may assume the individual cannot also be involved in abusive behavior.

In reality, each of these dimensions has little to do with an individual’s propensity to be involved in sexual contact with children and more to do with the individual’s set of *social skills*. Social skills such as being able to carry on conversations, answer difficult questions, engage in acts of kindness and get along well with other people are common among adults who sexually offend against children and may even be cultivated skills used to groom individuals and communities.

Educating ourselves about the warning signs of sexual abuse is the key to prevention and detection, but knowing the warning signs only works when we hold all adults to the same behavioral standards. Policies regarding interactions with children and youths should not apply only to the socially awkward or the person who lacks social graces. Bright, articulate, and likeable people are also capable of crossing boundaries with children and young people and may need to know that the rules that apply to everyone else also apply to the socially skilled.

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