

## Do Children Really Sexually Abuse Other Children?

Do children really sexually abuse other children? Unfortunately, the simple answer is yes. However, nothing is ever simple when talking about the factors and issues surrounding the sexual abuse of children. The abuse of children by other children is no exception.

One of the most startling realizations about the problem of child sexual abuse is the number of children and young people who commit these offenses. Children of all ages, even as young as 3 years old, have exhibited sexual aggression toward other children. Furthermore, FBI statistical reports from 1995 showed that almost 16 percent of the arrests for forcible rape and 17 percent of the arrests for all other sex offenses involved offenders who were minors—people under the age of 18.

There are two difficult questions that arise when adults begin to deal with the problem of juvenile sex offenders. We want to know whether the warning signs that apply to juvenile offenders are the same as those that apply to adult offenders. We also want to know what to do to stop juvenile sex offenders before they carry this abusive behavior into their adult lives.

There does not appear to be any definitive research on “warning signs” that a juvenile is a potential sex offender. However, because there are some similarities between adult offenders and juvenile offenders, we should look for some of the same warning signs. For example, victims of both juvenile and adult offenders are usually family or acquaintances. Therefore, for example, it is important to notice if someone always wants to be alone with the smaller children and discourages others from participating.

Other warning signs may not apply. It is part of the “growing up” process for young people to exclude adults from their “peer” or private meetings, and they often give gifts to each other without permission. It is also “normal” for kids to try to circumvent the rules or to do things together that their parents don’t approve of.

Warning signs of adult child molesters do not seem to help much with identifying potential juvenile sex offenders. Perhaps the most effective way to deal with juvenile sex offenders is to try to understand the environmental and emotional factors that can trigger this behavior and to continuously monitor the behavior of children with whom we interact. If we notice that a child is in a risky situation and is exhibiting some of the signs of a potential offender we have an opportunity to intervene and to help prevent abuse from occurring.

According to the research on juvenile sex offenders, many of the young people who commit these offenses share a number of common characteristics. For example, most children who sexually abuse others were also victims of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or neglect. It also appears that girls who commit sexual offenses more often were victims of sexual abuse, while male juvenile sex offenders were more often victims of physical and emotional abuse and neglect.

One study found that juvenile offenders who, themselves, were sexually or physically abused, started abusing others at an earlier age than those who were not, themselves, abused. Those who, themselves, had been abused, also had twice as many victims, were more likely to have female and male victims, and were more likely to expand their victimization to children outside the family.

One of the most effective prevention tools we have with juvenile offenders is our willingness to report potentially abusive situations or suspected abuse. If we can stop the abuse they are suffering, they are less likely to relate to abuse as the appropriate way to deal with life’s challenges.

Another “red flag” is children who don’t seem to fit in well. Children and young people who sexually abuse others generally have poor social skills. They don’t get along well with peers and often experience social isolation. Many have experienced physical or emotional separation from at least one parent, or lived in unstable family situations.

So, you might ask, “What’s the point of identifying the children who are at risk of being sex offenders if there is no ‘cure’ for this behavior?” Well, the rate of recovery information we have on adults is not the same as for juveniles. There is one finding in the research on juvenile offenders that gives us hope—hope that should reinforce our commitment to identify and report juvenile offenders. Studies show that once a juvenile sex offender is identified and provided with appropriate intervention, the rate of recidivism is very, very low. For example, in one major study, only 9.7 percent of juvenile offenders were subsequently arrested for sexual assault as an adult.

These findings may be significant in the “big picture.” Consider the findings of another study—that only approximately one-third of juvenile sex offenders saw sex as a demonstration of love and caring for another person. Meanwhile, others saw sex as a way to feel power and control, to degrade, punish, or control another, or as a way to deal with their own pent-up anger.

It appears that when the treatment for juvenile sex offenders focuses on issues such as anger and a deficiency in social skills, power, and control, such treatment can significantly diminish the potential for future acts of sexual violence.

If there is any “good news” in this article about juvenile sex offenders, it is that reporting juvenile sex offenders can stop future abuse. It may be more difficult to prevent it from occurring the first time, but we can interrupt the behavior before it becomes a pattern, we can prevent future abuse from occurring.

Therefore, it is our job as protectors of children to notice the children who are at risk of committing abuse as well those who are at risk of being victims, and to intervene to make sure that everyone gets the support needed to create a future free from sexual abuse.

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