

Don't Let Fear Work to a Perpetrator's Advantage

September 11, 2001, is a date that each American will remember in his or her own, unique way. For most, the anniversary will revive emotions of sadness, anger, and fear. For others, September 11 will reawaken more intense emotions—especially in those more directly traumatized by the terrorist attacks.

If we know people who worked near the World Trade Center or lost loved ones in the attack, it's a good bet that they have experienced, and are continuing to experience, a great deal of trauma. Recognizing this, we are better able to show them appropriate support during this time of memorial. Not all forms of trauma lend themselves so neatly to a well-choreographed support structure. The difficulty with child sexual abuse, for example, is that the trauma remains hidden—largely because of silence. This is a common problem with crimes involving sex or gender.

Adult victims of sexual harassment rarely report the harassment. When victims do report harassment, they frequently report it to a coworker or a family member—a “third party” who then finds the courage to report the incident to someone in a position of authority. If it is difficult for an adult to report sexual harassment, imagine how difficult it is for a child to report sexual abuse—especially if the abuser is someone they know—a friend, relative, or immediate member of the family.

To understand why it is so difficult to report abuse one should remember a few important notes from the Protecting God's Children™ awareness and training sessions.

Perpetrators often groom their victims by providing things their victims want or need. A clever perpetrator may provide something as simple as listening to a child discuss his or her problems. In the process, the perpetrator may assume the role more properly reserved for a parent or guardian. The perpetrator may provide more tangible support as well—gifts, entertainment, money, or other items that the child particularly enjoys. All the while, fear—fear of parental reaction or fear of losing something important to them—keeps children quiet.

Once the abuse begins fear works in the perpetrator's favor. Abusers often explain to the victim, particularly younger victims, that if they reveal the abuse harm might come to family members, pets, or friends. Perpetrators also exploit the children's feelings of having no power to stop the abuse and no credibility to be believed—they convince their victims that nobody will believe the stories of abuse.

Randy, a victim molested at a camp, said “It's bad enough being molested, but then having to tell someone about it—I just thought it would be better to keep it to myself and not tell anyone. Plus, I really didn't have anyone to tell. I was afraid I would get in trouble. I couldn't tell my mom because I was afraid she might be mad at me.”

Children also fail to report abuse because they're afraid nobody will believe them. In these cases, the perpetrator has created a grooming process that gives the perpetrator some level of deniability while pointing blame (at least in the child's mind) at the child victim. On one of the training videos, a victim named Deborah talked of being victimized by a female teacher: “One time, I told her [the offending teacher] that I didn't want to go to tutoring after school anymore. And she told me that I better not tell my parents any lies about her. I knew my parents were gonna' believe her over me because she was a teacher, and she was just helping me with my school work, and she was so nice to them.”

Offenders often incorporate pornography and drugs or alcohol into the process of grooming the victim. The child victim fears that if he or she reports the abuse to his or her parents or guardians, the child will be punished for viewing pornography, taking drugs, or drinking alcohol. A victim named Roberto recalled that the perpetrator left “dirty magazines out for me to look at” even though he *knew* that such material was inappropriate according to his religion.

It is important for us to make sure that our children *know* that they can tell us anything and that there is nothing to fear. Explain to your children that you will not get angry—no matter what happened—that to be good parents and guardians, we need to know when someone says or does something inappropriate that affects our children. Only when we know about abuse can we begin to address the trauma and initiate the healing process.

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