

## How Can We Recognize a Typical Child Molester?

Many of us like to think that we would recognize a potential child molester if he or she were walking toward us on the street. We like to think that the people who sexually molest children are easily identifiable by some special characteristics—some demented look in their eyes, or the crazy way they dress or act.

For the general public, child molesters are perverts, monsters, or disgusting creeps—at least until the person accused is *their* neighbor, *their* minister, or a trusted member of *their* family. When the person accused is clearly not the stereotypical monster, pervert, or disgusting creep, many would rather believe that the child is lying or confused rather than to confront the truth about child molesters.

Unfortunately, most child molesters look just like the person next door, the coach, the teacher, the minister, or a trusted member of the family. They don't seem to be different from the rest of us. They can be valued employees, trusted volunteers, loyal friends, and responsible members of the community. Aside from their propensity to have sex with children, they otherwise may be law abiding, responsible citizens who make a difference in other people's lives through many aspects of their own lives.

They may have a spouse and children of their own. They may be well liked and respected in the community. They have genuine skills working with people and, particularly, working with children. They may be kind and generous and able to inspire trust from the adults around them.

The problem is that these people are not like other people—they have sex with children. We must learn to recognize the traits of child molesters so that we have a fighting chance in the effort to protect our children from abuse.

Child molesters are consummate liars. They know how to manipulate the conversation and the situation so that they dispel any concerns about their behavior. They use their manipulation skills to groom children, parents, and the community. They convince others that concerns about their behavior are insignificant and unimportant.

In order to recognize a typical child molester, adults in the community must develop a healthy suspicion about each and every adult who spends time with children. We must be alert to the signs that some adults might represent a risk to the children in their care.

Adults must be willing to speak up when they notice that an adult:

- Always wants to be alone with children.
- Always seems more excited to be with children than adults.
- Gives gifts to children without permission, and encourages them to keep secrets from their parents and guardians.
- Lets children do things their parents would not allow them to do.
- Thinks rules don't apply to them.

The typical molester is no easier to identify by sight than the typical doctor or the typical parent. Because there is no "typical" child molester, adults must be alert to the warning signs that indicate they are potential risks to children.

There are no easy answers. Preventing child sexual abuse demands much of us. It requires that we know the warning signs and take action to intervene when we have concerns about the safety of a child.

*Brought to you through the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. and its VIRTUS® programs with the goal to help prevent, address, and mitigate wrongdoing in the community of faith and to help adults become protectors of children and to help communities become safe havens for children.*