

## ***Broad-scale Awareness and Today's Standards of Care***

*By Monica Applewhite, PhD., Consultant to the VIRTUS® Programs*

Since 2002, public awareness of sexual abuse has grown exponentially. Popular television, books, and magazine articles all describe in detail the methods of deception and manipulation utilized by grooming-type acquaintance sexual offenders. Most importantly for prevention, the warning signs of sexual abuse are beginning to be known by many adults in the United States as well as the fact that most children have trouble reporting.

In addition to improved forensic techniques for investigating crimes, law enforcement officers and leaders in child-serving organizations today have available a wealth of information about the dynamics of child sexual abuse that was not known before acquaintance abuse research results first emerged in the 1980's. Below are some of the major developments that shape the standards of care today versus those of the 1980's and before.

### **Clear Articulation of the Priority to Protect Children**

Prior to the 1980's in the United States, the rights of an accused adult were clearly given equal, and most times, greater priority than the rights of children in matters of sexual abuse. Since the early 1980's, the pendulum has swung back and forth regarding the need to protect children from abuse versus the need to protect adults from false allegations, but one clear standard has since emerged. That is, the need to protect children from abuse is clearly of greater importance to the American public than the protection of privacy for anyone accused or convicted of sexual abuse. In the criminal justice system, this standard is most clearly demonstrated in the current practice of disseminating information about arrests, charges, and convictions of sexual offenders to private organizations, communities, and in some cases, to the public as a whole—a practice that was not legal in most states until the mid-1990's.

### **Need for Internal Investigations in Organizations**

While organizations have latitude to prohibit an individual from working with children and are able to err to the side of protecting children, the criminal justice system is still held to the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard. Proving sexual abuse to this level remains difficult. Because of the standard of proof needed for decision-making in private organizations is different than the standard for a criminal conviction, it is necessary for private organizations to implement and maintain systems for conducting their own internal investigations. These systems must not interfere with any police investigation, but once the police and/or child protection agency have concluded their investigation and concluded there is insufficient evidence to move forward with a criminal prosecution, the organization may still have an obligation to determine whether the accused is fit for a position of trust or responsibility with minors.

### **Distinction Between Forensic Investigation and Psychological Evaluation**

An additional development in the standard of care has been the finding that psychological evaluations are notoriously unhelpful in evaluations of acquaintance offenders. Early studies of child sexual offenders indicated that the offenders of children were psychologically very much like other criminals. Subsequent analysis of these findings reflected the fact that most of the studies were conducted with incarcerated sexual offenders. Today, we know that most acquaintance offenders are never incarcerated and do not have the psychological

profile of a criminal (Marshall & Laws, 2003). The fact is, most acquaintance offenders are not psychologically distinguishable from other people and so using clinical evaluations or psychological testing to determine whether or not an individual is “capable” of sexual abuse, instead of conducting investigations, simply does not work.

### **Understanding the Pattern of Grooming**

When acquaintance abuse first emerged, inappropriate behavior with minors was not addressed as part of a larger pattern of sexual abuse. The concept of grooming—using a slow process of preparing a child to be abused—was not recognized as potentially associated with sexual contact with children. Acquaintance sexual offenders take steps to ensure that children feel comfortable with them physically and emotionally before the contact ever becomes sexual. Grooming most often consists of gaining the trust of children and their parents through friendship, kindness, and consistency in the relationship. They slowly increase physical contact and affection, making physical contact the norm, rather than the exception. “Accidental” touching of private body parts are often part of the boundary testing. Acquaintance offenders also test the child’s ability to keep secrets by involving the child in using alcohol, pornography, or cigarettes and then asking the child not to tell. During the 1980’s and 1990’s, behaviors such as these were often viewed in isolation instead of as part of a pattern: they were not understood as the part of sexual abuse we *can* see.

### **Recognizing the Complexity of the Experience for Those Who are Abused**

One of the most difficult aspects of acquaintance sexual abuse is understanding the complexity of the experiences for the individual who is abused and how these experiences affect their presentation of information during investigations. We have learned two important lessons over the past twenty years with respect to evidence and testimony from alleged victims. First, today we understand that for the acquaintance offender, the child who has behavioral problems, difficulty communicating, previous abuse experiences, trouble at school, and problematic relationships with family may be considered a more accessible “target” than a child who does not have problems. Not only is he or she often more emotionally available and less protected by other adults, but in the past, a child with problems was also less likely to be believed if he or she did decide to disclose. Second, while we have long understood that some victims of sexual abuse may deny abuse or disclose and later recant, it has taken professionals a long time to understand what to do with this information.

Today, our standards dictate that the content of an allegation be investigated independently of initial denial, reluctance in disclosing, or subsequent recanting. While coercive interview techniques are clearly not indicated, we recognize that in relationship-based sexual abuse of children, victims most often have many different emotions regarding the offender and the experience and that these conflicting emotions may result in changes to stories, withholding of information, protection of the offender, exaggeration of the physical coercion involved, minimizing of the sexual activity, or even complete denial of abuse or inappropriate behavior.

### **Conclusion**

We have learned a great deal about relationship-based acquaintance abuse since the first reports emerged in the 1980’s. The greatest leaps have occurred since 2002, when the spotlight on this form of offense became focused so intently on acquaintance abuse within the Catholic Church and other organizations that serve children and youth. Because of the relationships involved and the esteem with which offenders are often held, this remains one of the most difficult areas of prevention and response. The hope and promise of our new

understanding is that we will take what we have learned and apply a new wisdom to the next opportunity we have to protect a child.

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