

# The Sometimes Hostile Community Response Regarding the Allegation of Child Sexual Abuse

By Robert Hugh Farley, M.S., Consultant to the VIRTUS® Programs

On November 11, 2011, the Associated Press reported that “**Penn State Trustees Promise to Search for Truth in Child Sex Abuse Scandal.**”

The allegation of child sexual abuse involving multiple victims is a highly charged and emotional issue that today is often played out in the media. Additionally, when the alleged offender is a highly respected individual within an organization or the community the issues involved can often polarize public opinion.

## The Allegation

Once an allegation of child sexual abuse against a “high profile” individual has been reported to the authorities, the public tends to take opposing sides. On one side are the defenders of the alleged victims. On the other side are the defenders of the alleged offender. There is often no middle ground.

Both sides will frequently take an all or nothing approach when discussing or defending their respective side. In some controversial cases, the defenders of the alleged offender will emphasize prior media accounts of false or unsubstantiated allegations or will, in some cases, paint the victims as “money hungry” litigants. Conversely the defenders of the victims will quickly and simplistically claim that, “children don’t lie about sexual abuse.” “Experts” will use the media to spin each side’s opinion or belief. In some cases these so-called experts will cite information taken out of context or will quote only a small portion of a publication that supports their view.

## Child Sexual Abuse Issues

Unfortunately during this banter each side tends to focus on the character of the alleged offender or the character of the victim rather than the complex issues involved in child sexual abuse.

Law enforcement has found that **preferential child molesters** tend to be the multiple-victim-offenders and are often described as nice guys or “pillars of the community.” This type of molester often has access to their victims through their occupation or through their volunteer work. This method of contact allows them to center their life around their sexual interest in children.

Children who have been sexually abused, in some cases, can be poor witnesses or are even unsympathetic victims. For example, the victim may use drugs, may have a sexually promiscuous lifestyle, or may present with unconventional clothing or numerous tattoos and piercings. During the investigative forensic interviews of these types of victims, some of what they allege may be accurate and some of what they allege may actually be distorted.

The victim’s unsympathetic public face or the distortion of facts can often be explained by the mental health component of a Multi-Disciplinary Investigative Team. Extensive research has

long indicated that child sexual abuse is associated with multiple short and long term psychological difficulties for both male and female victims. Among the problems that have been associated repeatedly with childhood sexual abuse are post-traumatic stress, low self-esteem, guilt, anxiety, depression, dissociation, interpersonal dysfunction, eating disorders, sexual problems, substance abuse, and suicide. (Briere, 1989; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986)

## **Finding the Truth**

In the United States allegations of multiple-victim child sexual abuse are normally investigated by Multi-Disciplinary Teams. The core members of the Multi-Disciplinary Team are:

- Law enforcement
- Child Protective Services or CPS
- The medical community such as Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners
- The prosecutor
- A child advocacy center or CAC
- Mental health professionals

An example of this type of Multi-Disciplinary Team is the Cook County State's Attorney's Mass Molestation Task Force of which I was a member. When a report of multiple-victim child sexual abuse was made anywhere in Cook County, including the City of Chicago, our team would take over the investigation.

Following an allegation of child sexual abuse, how does a multiple-victim investigation determine the truth?

Typically in situations of multiple-victim child sexual abuse, the victims have been "groomed" by the offender. Child grooming refers to an act of deliberately establishing an emotional and psychological connection with a child in order to prepare the child for child sexual abuse.

Types of child grooming can include:

- The molester will take an undue interest in someone else's child, to be the child's "special" friend in order to gain the child's trust.
- The molester will give money or gifts to the child for no apparent reason.
- The molester will take the child on day trips or vacations.
- The molester might talk about problems that normally are discussed between adults, or at least people of the same age.
- The molester may show pornography—videos or photographs—to the child, hoping to make it easy for the child to accept such acts, thus normalizing the behavior.

- The molester may use sports as a pretense for physical contact or touching, even when the child does not want it.

By identifying similar “grooming patterns” between multiple-victims, law enforcement can establish a *modus operandi* or what is commonly referred to as an M.O. Identifying the modus operandi of a crime can often help the prosecution prove that the defendant committed the crime charged.

## **Conclusion**

Allegations of child sexual abuse involving multiple victims spur highly charged, emotional reactions. While public outcry is expected and inevitable, it is crucial for a Multi-Disciplinary Team to respond professionally. Each discipline or member of the investigative team must be objectively searching for the truth and should not be influenced by the emotions of the general public or the media.

Most child abuse professionals believe that Multi-Disciplinary Team child abuse investigations conducted today result in a more accurate assessment of the allegation and in the identification of corroborating evidence for potential criminal prosecution.

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