

# Sexual Abuse – Two Sides of the Same Coin

By Detective Don Howell

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The daily news is filled with stories documenting a wide variety of sexual abuse. Most focus on the age of the victim, the relationship between involved parties or the potential prison time for the offender. If the assault involves a teacher, priest, celebrity or government official the story becomes headline news. American society seems to be mesmerized by these tales of infidelity and perversion. Rarely, though, does anyone look past the headlines and ask, “Why is this happening?” After decades of “Stranger Danger” and “Just say no”, why does sex abuse persist? Haven’t we pushed for harsher laws and attempted to regulate where offenders can live to keep this from happening? What society doesn’t “get”, is the futility of trying to control the behavior without understanding its source. If we can understand the source, we have a better chance of preventing the behavior.

Think of child molestation as being two sides of the same coin. On each side you have a child, living with his/her parents. Both have the potential to be perfectly healthy and happy children. As long as there is a strong, supportive connection between the parents and child, the coin is in balance, supported, falling to neither side. Now, consider a break in this connection – a disconnect occurring for some reason that creates the opportunity

for the coin to fall over, opening the door for sexual abuse.

To help clarify the point, I’ll refer to the victim side of the coin as being a female child and the offender side as being male. On the victim side of the coin, if the disconnect grows too large it creates an opportunity for someone or something to step in and fill the gap between the child and parents. This normally happens when one or both parents are emotionally absent from the life of the child. This can happen for a number of reasons. Divorce is perhaps the easiest to understand. When one parent is physically removed from the family, the disconnect can be 100% from this parent. Apathy, alcoholism or drug use, being workaholics, or simply not knowing how to be a parent, round out the top reasons for the disconnection process. When absent a connection, the child is set up for victimization. Drugs, alcohol, gangs, hanging out with the wrong crowd, defiant behaviors or, getting involved with a sexual partner, be it an age mate or someone much older, are the most common symptoms. In very general terms, this is especially true for girls, who internalize and look to bring someone into their life to fill the void, equating sex with self-esteem.

On the offender side of the coin the same disconnect occurs, for similar reasons. This child/boy may attempt to

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**On the offender side of the coin the same disconnect occurs, for similar reasons. This child/boy may attempt to fill the void with drugs, gangs, etc., but he may also turn outward. If, in his quest to fill the void, the boy learns that sex fulfills the need, you have the birth of a sex offender.**

fill the void with drugs, gangs, etc., but he may also turn outward. He may discover that dominating – controlling someone else, helps him fill this void. Think of it as the boy turning his feelings of being abandoned, alone, disconnected, into anger and then projecting this anger towards someone else. If, in his quest to fill the void, the boy learns that sex fulfills the need, you have the birth of a sex offender.

When a potential victim crosses paths with a potential offender, whether he is someone across the street, down the hall, or in another state, no amount of safety warnings will prevent the molestation.

If the involved children are both 13 years old, society tends to blame sexually seductive TV commercials, movies, song lyrics or the Internet. If the offender is 20 years older than the victim, society yells “child molester!”, but no one so much as whispers, “Disconnection”.

Many of us like to believe that all child molesters are pedophiles and we find some level of comfort in being able to label offenders. The truth is that pedophilia (someone with a true sexual preference for pre-puberty children) is rather rare and is not the result of disconnection. What I have discovered in my years in law enforcement is that most sex offenders are a product of a family disconnection and this means, they look perfectly normal, behave normally and are completely undetectable, until they act out.

Many of these offenders will seek out victims of opportunity (children or adults) to stabilize the emotional imbalance created by their own childhood disconnection. The degree of acting out is difficult to predict. They may

become the serial rapist breaking into homes in the dead of night, or they may prowl a party searching for a drunken girl in need of a ride home. They may pick-up a street walker and beat her instead of paying her, or they may tip-toe into the bedroom of a sleeping step-child. Some will become nuisance offenders, peeking into windows or exposing themselves to people in the park.

Of course, most people who suffer a disconnect do not turn into sex offenders. Many find ways to build self-esteem and create other, healthy connections from a variety of venues and never act out sexually. But the risk exists, so parents need to do everything possible to avoid disconnection with their children.

So, what can parents do? Start by building a strong relationship with your children and keeping the lines of communication open. Something as simple as having dinner together most nights will keep the connection strong. Helping your children stay connected and in balance can keep the coin from tipping one way or the other.

Don Howell is a retired detective with over 30 years’ experience in the Huntington Beach Police Department (California) who still works part-time on sex crimes and cold cases. He has taught at the University of Southern California’s School of Sociology for 12 years and written several books on sex crimes. Don Howell has been in law enforcement for 40 years, with a majority of the years specializing in sexually motivated crimes. This article is an abridged extract from his upcoming book, *Beyond Stranger Danger*. He is an editorial adviser for *Cancer InCytes* magazine.