

Wolves in sheep's clothing

Most child molesters blend into the background

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Child molesters are often portrayed as greasy, dirty, unkempt individuals who sneak into our towns and snatch our children.

The reality is most sexual offenders of children are well known to the children and their parents or caretakers, and don't particularly stand out. The majority of children are seduced when these molesters play on the child's emotions, establish their trust and give affection.

The most prolific type of child molester is preferential in his focus on children and may be exclusive in his gender interest. The term preferential child molester refers to the behavioural pattern chosen by this sexual predator.

The following article will explore this predator's patterns of behaviour. The male gender will be used to describe this behaviour. Although there may be more female child sexual abusers than once thought, the vast majority of child molesters are male.

Well groomed

Grooming is a process that begins when the predator chooses a target area. He may visit places where children are likely to go: schools, shopping malls, playgrounds or parks. He may work or volunteer at locations that cater to children. Other predators strike up relationships with adults who have children in the home.

When I was providing family therapy during a practicum placement, one case illustrates this behaviour. The turmoil in the home began when the mother of two young girls (ages 8 and 12) invited her new boyfriend to live with them. I had a sense that the boyfriend was more interested in the girls than he was in their mother. Sure enough, it turned out that he was a convicted child molester and eventually he admitted that his interest in this family was the little girls and not their mother. He was caught in the grooming process. Not only had he moved in with them; he had convinced the mother to allow him to take showers with the girls.

Grooming can take place on three levels. The first target is, of course, the victim. However, there can also be grooming of the parent(s) or adult caretaker in many cases. Finally, there is often a self-grooming that takes place. Here, the offender talks himself into the sexual abuse with thoughts such as "she wants me" or "I can give her love" or "she needs me to teach her."

Although any child may be victimized, it is not surprising that predators often target children with

vulnerabilities. A child's intuition may not yet be loaded with enough information and experience to keep them from harm. They may not yet have learned that there are users and predators in our world.

Sexual predators prey on weakness in much the same way as predators in the wild. Children with family problems who spend time alone and unsupervised, who lack confidence and self-esteem, and who are isolated from their peers, are all likely targets. A child who feels unloved and unpopular might gravitate toward anyone who will give them attention.

One predator that I assessed in prison said the following: "I went after the weird one in art class rather than the high school prom queen because she's probably suffered abuse and doesn't have much self-worth." He targeted rebellious teens who had emotional problems. This type, he said, was "easy prey." He admitted he developed a pattern of getting the girls drunk or stoned and then having sex with them. He acknowledged that, in the late 80s, he had approximately 140 teen sexual partners.

"Trust me"

Predators recruit their victims using a variety of methods. Many are charming and offer an understanding ear, ready to listen about how parents don't understand and how other kids are mean. Predators learn that self-disclosure works with vulnerable children. They may tell the child that they went through the same hard times when they were children. Some predators offer to play games, give rides or buy treats and gifts as tokens of friendship. They may offer drugs or alcohol to older children or teenagers. They will find and fill a void in a child's life while telling them: "I care for you more than anybody else. I love you. I'm here for you."

A predator will usually introduce secrecy at some point during the grooming process. Initially, secrecy binds the victim to the predator: "Here's some candy. But don't tell your friends because they'll be jealous and don't tell your mother because she won't like you eating between meals." Secrecy can lead to threats if the predator feels threatened with exposure. Threats can range from "If you tell your mother what happened, she'll hate you" to "I'll kill you if you tell."

The emotional bond established through grooming eventually leads to physical contact. Predators use the grooming process to break down a child's defenses and increase the child's acceptance of touch. The first physical contact between predator and victim is often non-sexual touching designed to identify limits. This is often play fighting or tickling or an arm around the shoulder. Non-sexual touching desensitizes the child. It breaks down inhibitions and leads to more overt sexual touching, which is the predator's ultimate goal.

More research needed

The paucity of Canadian-based research for projecting trends and patterns among Internet-based child sexual offenders was noted in the RCMP Environmental Scan (Sinclair, 2005), which examined Internet-based sexual exploitation of children. The Integrated Child Exploitation sections need a clearer understanding of offender behaviour with Internet-specific offenders. There is a need to gather Canadian statistics on the findings of warrant searches conducted by our police officers. These statistics can further bolster the information to obtain a warrant. Finally,

research specific to this topic can be used in training all those involved in the evidentiary process.

There has been much time and effort spent on offender typology and the profiling of an unknown assailant. The RCMP's Behavioural Sciences Group in B.C. is focused on the known offender with the belief that the top five percent of these offenders are responsible for much of the unsolved crime. The Integrated Sexual Predator Intelligence Network (ISPIN) is a research-based and intelligence-led process that applies the knowledge of offender behaviour and crime cycle to active police surveillance and investigation.

Whether you are a police officer, social worker, parole/probation officer, teacher or parent, all of us must be vigilant in protecting our children by better understanding the "wolf in sheep's clothing." Some of the predators who don't fit into our present understanding of a deviant sexual offender need to be recognized. The knowledge that we can all be groomed by these predators must direct us to tighten up screening procedures and make adults more accountable for time and action with children.

The Behavioural Science Group in "E" Div. have recently investigated three police officers and three teachers with sexual offences against children. There needs to be an increased awareness and knowledge of the child sexual offender so that investigators can look for evidence with open eyes.

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SIDEBAR

TYPES OF CHILD MOLESTERS

Situational

- The vast majority are male
- Often indiscriminate; will sexually assault male and female children alike
- The psychopath often falls into this category as he craves satisfaction and stimulation achieved through variety and experimentation
- He may also collect pornography, with child pornography comprising a small percentage of the entire collection
- There is likely to be a wide variety of sexual perversion with a higher level of sadism

Preferential

- Male, varying in age from nine to 99 years
- Children are the preferred sexual object
- Characterized by a long-term and persistent pattern of behaviour, including well-developed grooming techniques
- Pedophilia (desiring children sexually) is most often diagnosed within this group
- Preferential molesters are much more prolific than other types
- Behaviour is ritualistic—collects child pornography and child erotica with a high degree of

predictability

- Uses child pornography to feed sexual fantasies. Some only collect and fantasize about the material without acting out their fantasies, but in most cases the arousal and fantasies facilitated by the pornography is only a prelude to actual sexual activity with children.

Polymorphous perverse

- Displays a variety of deviant sexual interests.
- Sometimes referred to as “trysexual,” as they will try to have sex with anyone or anything.
- This is a very disturbed individual whose deviance often surfaces in childhood or adolescence. A recent assessment conducted with a polymorphous perverse individual resulted in a sadistic personality disorder diagnosis. The 18-year-old offender had begun molesting children and animals at age 11. He admitted to sexual intercourse with five different animals and the sadistic sexual killing of a young dog. His interest in children and infants as sexual objects would likely have likely superseded his arousal to adult women or men.