

## Learning Your Child Has Been Molested

Janet and Bill Thompson recently discovered that their son Scott had been molested. They were appalled and saddened by the idea that someone violated their child, nine-year-old Scott. Friendly and bright, Scott is a popular child who played Tom Sawyer in his class play, and with his red hair and freckles, he was well suited to the part. He loves the outdoors and enjoys building tree houses and forts with the other neighborhood kids.

The Thompsons feel numb and confused. They wonder why they couldn't prevent their son's abuse. Would Scott believe them when they said they would protect him from further harm? Was it a realistic promise? Why did their emotions swing so dramatically? And how were they to keep their seven-year-old daughter, Beth, safe? Had their seventeen-year-old son, Brad, been molested as well but was too afraid to let them know?

### WHEN SCOTT FIRST DISCLOSED

Janet and Bill worked hard at being good parents and felt strongly about getting their children involved in activities that encouraged confidence building. Scott, who loved the outdoors, became a member of a youth camping program, much like the one Bill fondly remembered from his childhood.

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For the first two years, Scott was enthusiastic about his program experience. He liked palling around with his friends and the outdoor activities. But recently, Janet and Bill had noticed his interest dwindling. He would forget meetings, or disappear when it was time to go, or say he didn't feel like going. A few times he said he was too old for "that camping stuff."

A few days ago, while father and son were painting the family's fishing boat, Bill asked Scott how his camping program was going. Scott replied by shyly asking his dad why people became gay. A little taken aback, Bill gently asked his son what had prompted the question. Scott replied that his friends thought their camping instructor, Mr. Webster, was gay.

Confused by his son's comments, Bill asked Scott to explain. Scott answered in a strained voice, saying that his leader made weird comments when they were alone and they made him feel nervous. Scott's dad quietly encouraged his son to continue, taking great pains to keep painting.

Mr. Webster told Scott he liked to see the boys with their clothes off because they seemed to be less stressed. He told them that most nature lovers wore little or no clothing. Scott went on to say that he averted Mr. Webster's stares and in close settings sometimes felt the older man's hand brush across his crotch.

Scott continued, saying that he no longer enjoyed the outings and wanted to withdraw from program activities. He didn't know what to make of an authority figure behaving in such strange ways. Confused, Scott feared he, Scott, was gay.

Bill held his emotions in check when he told his son that no one had a right to touch or speak to Scott in ways that made him feel uncomfortable. Mr. Webster had been wrong, and Scott had done nothing to encourage him. Bill thanked Scott for speaking to him and emphasized that Scott had done nothing wrong.

Later, Bill and Janet discreetly asked other program parents if their children had mentioned Mr. Webster's behavior. They were extremely careful not to make false accusations, but they wanted to

know if Scott's experience was isolated or if other children had also been affected.

It was soon apparent that Scott's remarks were similar to those of some of the other young campers. Sometimes reluctantly and other times with relief, they disclosed their experiences. Then out of the blue, Scott shared another startling disclosure with his parents: Mr. Webster had fondled him.

The Thompsons were stunned by this surprising new information. They didn't know that children often begin by disclosing their abuse only partially. After they receive reassuring feedback, they feel safer to share their full experience.

Janet and Bill had never thought that anyone would sexually molest their children. And although they were sure their son had been harmed, they weren't sure what child sexual abuse actually meant.

The following reality check defines child sexual abuse. Keep in mind that the legal definition for child sexual assault varies from state to state.

### **Reality Check 1: Child Sexual Abuse Definition**

*Child sexual abuse* is any act with a child or youth that is intended to sexually gratify an adult, and in certain cases another child or youth. Sexual activity can include but is not limited to clothed or unclothed exposure of genitalia, fondling, masturbation, intimate kissing, verbal discussion, anal or oral intercourse, or pornography exposure that is enacted with a minor by a person who holds power over the event.

Asking a child or youth to engage in sexual activity, *even if it does not occur*, is child sexual assault. Asking the child or youth to engage in sexual activities with animals or objects is sexual assault. And a person commits the offense of child molestation when he or she does any other sexually explicit act to or in the presence of or with any child or youth.

Physical contact with a child or youth is *not* required for conviction of child sexual abuse. Most states agree that child sexual abuse laws are designed to protect children from exploitation regardless of

whether their participation was voluntary. (Specific descriptions of child sex crimes are given in the Additional Information section at the end of the book.)

## WHO MOLESTS CHILDREN?

Janet and Bill were disturbed that Mr. Webster pretended to care about children but took advantage of his position. How would this situation affect the young campers? Would their experiences have an impact on their trust? In the future, how would they decide which situations were safe and which weren't? The Thompsons knew that when it came to their own child, they could not excessively restrict what they allowed Scott to do and still provide him with a normal childhood.

Certainly most people who work with children and youth do it for the right reasons. Yet people who molest children often place themselves in positions that put them in contact with young people. *Most sex offenders know their victims.* And sexual molestation may occur in a progressive way over time or happen only once.

The following reality check shares facts about child and youth sexual abuse, as well as child molesters. This information is not meant to raise your anxiety but to help with your understanding.

### **Reality Check 2: Facts That Challenge Misconceptions About Child Sexual Abuse and Child Molesters**

- ✓ Intercourse is not necessary to constitute sexual abuse. (See Reality Check 1.)
- ✓ Children *do not* seduce adults.
- ✓ Sexual molestation has always occurred and continues to occur in all societies worldwide.
- ✓ A physical illness such as diabetes or cancer does not prompt child sexual abuse. In other words, it's not

prompted by disease unless it may be a severe mental illness.

- ✓ Most people are not insane when they molest children.
- ✓ Child molesters represent all age, economic, ethnic, social, racial, and religious groups. They can be geniuses, of normal intelligence, or intellectually slow.
- ✓ Child molesters are single, married, divorced, or separated. They are heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual. And they can be male or female.
- ✓ There are different theories and a good deal of speculation, but no one really knows why sex offenders sexually abuse children.
- ✓ The majority of people who sexually abuse children know their victims.
- ✓ Many sex offenders do not molest only one time. And they may have molested one or a number of children several times.
- ✓ Some sexual offenders report using alcohol or drugs when they molest kids. This circumstance does not minimize or justify the sexual abuse.
- ✓ Infants through older teenagers are molested.
- ✓ Sexual molestation can be as devastating for teenagers as it is for younger children.
- ✓ The same attention should be paid to very young children as well as older youth when seeking help for their sexual abuse.
- ✓ Children and youth who are molested usually experience a freezing response within their bodies that can inhibit their ability to fight or resist their molesters. It's

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unrealistic to expect kids to speak out or fight when they are in this circumstance, although some children do.

- ✓ Children can molest other children. Although the intervention that occurs with them is different from that of adult child molesters, their behavior should be disrupted and at the very least clarified with a sexual abuse investigation worker.
- ✓ Any child—friendly and outgoing, or shy and withdrawn—can be the victim of sexual abuse. Bright or slower children can be harmed.
- ✓ A growing number of women are being prosecuted for child sexual assault.
- ✓ Many child molesters were molested themselves as children, but the vast majority of molested children do not grow up to be child sex offenders.
- ✓ Being molested by an adult of the same sex does not mean that the child victim is or will be homosexual.

### TYPES OF ADULT SEX OFFENDERS

Child molesters are generally classified as preferential or situational child molesters:

*Preferential child molesters* are sexually aroused by children. There are different types of preferential child molesters, but the two dominant ones are pedophiles, who are compulsively sexually drawn to prepubescent children, and hebophiles, who are compulsively sexually drawn to postpubescent males.

*Situational child molesters* are not compulsively sexually drawn to children, but will engage them in sexual acts for a variety

of reasons. They may have distorted sexual fantasies, for example, and molesting a child is a departure from their usual sex patterns, or their behavior may be related to stress.

Note that those who have not acted on their urges to speak about sexual matters to children or to coerce children into sexual acts are not child sex offenders, and not all child molesters are pedophiles. Also, molesters from both groups may admit eventually to having molested more children over a longer period than when they first disclosed.

People who molest kids are like everyone else in many ways. They have families and jobs and may hold prominent positions in the community. They represent varied professions: doctors, police officers, church representatives, teachers, youth leaders, coaches, construction workers, funeral directors, postal workers, and others. They are friendly and helpful, or shy and withdrawn. They can be your friends or neighbors. Many sex offenders come from backgrounds that reflect extreme levels of deprivation and oppression; others may come from good homes.

Sex offenders are generally limited in how they deal with stress. Their coping skills in working through stressful times or their ability to communicate with others to solve problems is often immature. Consequently they may bottle or exaggerate their emotions and behave impulsively. In addition, it's not unusual for some to use drugs or alcohol, and they may be physically and verbally abusive. Others feel empowered by having sexual contact with children. And some commit other crimes that indicate they do not feel remorse.

Rarely, some child molesters demonstrate extraordinary self-control, to the point of being rigid about their routines and even ritualistic in how they molest children. After their sexual assault, they may feel energized and even euphoric. Or they may feel intense remorse. They can also be overly controlling and critical in their other relationships. Preferential sex offenders are represented in this group.

Child molesters' personal lives are often troubled, and they may have a long, difficult history in forming and maintaining relationships. They may lack social skills, and their approach to sexual intimacy is concrete and may reflect thinking such as, "If he loves me, he'll have sex with me." And most rationalize (that is, justify) their behavior.

## CHILDREN WHO MOLEST OTHER CHILDREN

A growing number of child protection agencies are intervening with children who sexually molest other children. Child sexual molestation occurs when a child is used for another person's sexual gratification even if the molester is young.

Children frequently engage in normal experimental sexual behavior with each other, but some may have acquired more serious problems such as conduct or attachment disorders that reflect persistent violation of social norms with others. One of the characteristics of these conditions is to compulsively sexualize other kids, often with physical or verbal coercion. Children from severely deprived and abusive backgrounds living in environments where alcohol and illegal drugs are commonly used, war-torn countries, or violent communities can develop these disorders.

For example, a parent in Indiana was overwhelmed when her adopted son, raised for five years in another country, compulsively sexually abused his sister. Unable to stop her son's compulsive behavior, she felt helpless to protect her younger child and reported the abuse to the local child protection agency. Eventually the boy was removed from his home and placed in long-term therapeutic residential care.

Age doesn't necessarily make a difference in determining a sexual act by another child as abusive. A younger, more powerful child may use his ability to sexually abuse an older, more passive child such as one who is developmentally delayed.

### **Child Welfare Workers Had Worried About a Ten Year Old**

Caseworkers had intervened for several years to try to stabilize a troubled boy. But when he was ten years old, he raped and then murdered another child. He lured a three year old away from a local library, sexually assaulted him, and left him to die. The mother of the murdered child was quoted as saying, "He shouldn't go to jail. He needs help. I know he has mental problems and if he goes to jail he'll just come out an angry adult."

### **Siblings and Other Family Members**

In some situations, older siblings sexually indoctrinate younger kids. It may even be their cultural norm. But it's still wrong.

Siblings may target a particular brother or sister to sexually abuse. When she was a child, Sharon lived on a farm in Texas with her parents and two brothers. Her older brother, Bill, began to molest her when she was six years old. Because both of her parents were away working, she was terrified to spend time after school with Bill. She never knew if he would leave her alone or force her to engage in sexual acts. Sometimes he tied her to her bed. Other times he'd march her into the barn and coerce her into fondling animals. Sharon's parents were oblivious to the abuse, and she felt too frightened to let them know because Bill had threatened her on several occasions. As an adult, Sharon has difficulty trusting other people and even recognizing that her brother's behavior was rape. This is an example of domestic violence, which often gets ignored.

### **Bullies and Others Who Feel Empowered by Their Behaviors**

Acquaintance rape is another way young people are being violated. With the escalating use of "club drugs" such as GHB, teenage

females are unwittingly given beverages by “dates” that have been laced with these substances, leaving them helpless to defend themselves and even recall their sexual assault. (GHB is produced as an odorless, colorless liquid or white powder taken orally or combined with alcohol. It has been used as a date rape drug and produces sexual arousal, amnesia, nausea, drowsiness, respiratory distress, dizziness, and seizures.)

Bullies may coerce other youth into sexual activity. They also take advantage of other children in institutional settings such as group living centers or boarding schools. These types of situations are not always reported because victims may believe they’ll get into trouble if they step forward to disclose what happened to them.

### **Child’s Rape in School Went Undetected**

One newspaper reported that four boys raped a twelve-year-old girl during school hours in the school’s bathroom. Three other juveniles told police they witnessed the abuse but did not participate. Two of the rapists were twelve years old, one was thirteen, and another fourteen. The girl was found outside the bathroom by a friend after the attackers ran away. For over half an hour, none of these children were in class, yet their teachers did not notify the administration that the children were missing. Said the girl’s mother, “She’s afraid of going back to school. She’s afraid. She’s very afraid.”

### **Child Sex Offenders Need Help**

Child and adolescent sex offenders, especially younger children, may have suffered from previous traumatic experiences themselves. Often their behavior is a form of reenacting their own sexual abuse.

Nevertheless, these compulsive behaviors must be addressed through compassionate therapeutic interventions. Older youth need to be held responsible and court-ordered into therapy as well. Adults must interrupt the behavior and bring their child's sexual assault by a minor to the attention of child protective services. (The definition of *minor child* varies by state, but its upper range can extend from sixteen to nineteen years of age.) Otherwise, the sexual abuse incidents may occur more frequently or become more intense and serious.

### **Adult Sex Offender Registration, Interventions, and Other Sex Offender Definitions**

- All those who have been found guilty of sexual abuse by a court of law are now required by law to register at their local law enforcement agency. They are also required to register their DNA.
- Megan's Law, important sex offender registration legislation, and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders* description of exhibitionism and pedophilia are described at the end of the book in the Additional Information section.
- Interventions being used with sex offenders include pharmacological and psychotherapy treatments, relapse prevention, court-ordered living restrictions, and prison terms.

## **LEARNING ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S ABUSE**

Bill and Janet were grateful that Scott came to them first when he disclosed his experience. They realized how embarrassed and anxious he must have been. The Thompsons were fortunate their son shared

his abuse with them first because caregivers often learn about their children's experience from other sources.

One of the more shocking ways to learn about your child's abuse is to witness the act or hear about it from an eyewitness. One mom reported feeling practically immobilized when she walked into a room and saw an older neighbor girl performing oral sex on her son. Another caregiver stated she had trouble believing her nephew when he described watching a teenage babysitter tongue-kissing her five-year-old niece.

Molested children often disclose their abuse to someone they think won't overreact to the information. They may talk to a day care worker or a teacher because they might first learn about inappropriate touching and wrong adult behavior in day care or at school. By sharing their experience with a safe person, they may be checking to see if they've done something wrong and if they're still okay.

A child may mention his sexual abuse during casual play or, having already been instructed about wrong touch, may disclose it in a small group setting. Depending on his age, he may share aloud or write about it in a poem. Sometimes children give nonverbal cues through their changed behavior and reveal their abuse only after direct questioning.

Astute teachers and other caregivers may spot abuse markers in a child's drawings or sudden destructive anger or during a routine medical exam. These indicators may lead them to ask questions. At other times, classmates or other friends may report another student's "different" actions to their own parents, prompting parent involvement.

It's not uncommon for child protection agencies to receive their initial complaint from a favorite relative who was drawn into the child's disclosure during a visit or telephone conversation. The Internet and cell phones make extended family members more accessible to children who have been sexually abused.

Parents may feel hurt if their children initially share their disclosures with others. One mother explained, "I felt I was a bad mother because she told someone else. I was guilt-ridden."

### Child Sexual Abuse Statistics

- The average victim of child sexual abuse is between eight and eleven years old.
- One of four girls and one of six boys under the age of eighteen are victims.
- Incest is the most common form of sexual abuse.
- Current reports reflect that the majority of abusers are men.
- The average reported duration of abuse is one to four years. Abuse can continue over a longer time or occur once.
- Approximately 13 percent of all types of child abuse are determined to be sexual abuse. Children may suffer multiple forms of child abuse, which include child neglect and physical or emotional abuse.

Children may not tell their parents first because they are afraid of their parents' reactions. They worry that they will not be believed, or will be blamed or even punished, or that their parents will seek revenge. In fact, when their molestation occurs, they may have been in a forbidden place—somewhere their parents would not allow them to go. If a child has been abused at a neighbor's and he has been repeatedly warned about being there, he may be extremely reluctant to disclose that he went there. Parents must be clear that while they're not pleased about their child's disobedience, it didn't cause the molestation. The child is not responsible for his sexual abuse.

Children's fears are usually tied to their fear of caregiver abandonment as well as their own intellectual development. Because

being self-involved is part of normal child development, a child may believe he is bad because of the bad things that happen in his life. He may worry about burdening an already burdened parent. In addition, he may be frightened that his molester will return to harm him or other family members.

Older children want to be viewed as normal, and they worry about being labeled crazy or gay. Many youth resist drawing attention to themselves and believe they can handle their own problems.

More times than not, kids' fears are not founded and do not reflect their parents' actual ability to deal with the information. Personal shame is a feeling that often develops in children who have been molested. Children report that they fear their parents will feel ashamed of them as well.

Don't be surprised if guilt begins to dominate your experience. It's normal to feel guilt in response to hearing about your child's experience. You may think you "should have been there" or "able

### Understanding Shame

*Webster's New World College Dictionary* defines shame as the absence of experiencing grace or a feeling of falling from grace.

Children often feel shame as a result of their sexual abuse. They feel as though they've personally lost something divine.

Shame can be positive, as a marker reminding us to notice and correct behavior, or negative, as a trigger that elicits feelings of being flawed or devalued. Where there has been sexual assault, human shame develops negatively.

Without appropriate intervention, repeatedly feeling negative shame subsequently affects a child's self-perception and worldview.

to prevent it.” And you might be surprised to learn that some of your anger is connected with guilt.

Regardless, you must continue to communicate with your child and try not to allow your anger or guilt to stand in the way of future communication.

However you become aware of your child’s molestation, give him the support and love he needs. You must all work together as you begin the child and family recovery process.

Chapter Two discusses how to make a report and handle this extremely sensitive information.

