

# **Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse-Family Dynamics of Molest**

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When we see accounts of child molestation on the news, perhaps we feel vulnerable and frightened. Can anything be done to protect our children? We ask ourselves, “How can anyone use a child for sexual gratification?” Even though occurrences of child sexual abuse may disgust us, the practice is still rampant. It is estimated that 12-24 million women in the United States have a history of incest. We can protect our children by learning the dynamics of molest, learning the history of molest, and becoming informed of the reasons people tolerate the abuse of children.

The law that determines if abuse to a child constitutes molest reads as the following: “Any act which annoys or molests a child under the age of 18 and which is motivated by an unnatural or abnormal sexual interest in children, which act would reasonably be expected to disturb, irritate, trouble, or offend the victim, whether or not the victim is so affected; not touching of the victim is necessary.”

I wonder what defines a “natural” sexual interest in children, but that is probably my issue as a help professional. Let us explore, then, what molest could include. Molest can be in the form of voyeurism. In this case, the abuser can engage in acts such as peeking through the shower curtain or watching a child dress. It also includes showing a minor pornography or adult sex toys. Molest includes encouraging or forcing a child to touch an adult sexually, seeing adult nudity, and allowing the child to observe sexual intercourse. In addition, molest also includes the actual touching of the child. However, the touching is not necessarily limited to penetration of an orifice. Other forms of touching can also be deemed inappropriate. One must remember that molest is not always in a physical state. Emotional and psychological incest also exist.

More than two million cases of molest are reported each year in the United States. Unless the perpetrator is caught in the act, the child must report the crime. Who is responsible for preventing this heinous crime? Is the child then the responsible party to prevent the rape of a child?

In Ancient times, the practice of using children as sexual objects was widely accepted and even encouraged by adults. In some cases, it was seen as appropriate and even healthy for the child. It was not until the 1920's that molest was seen as a problem in the streets. People believed the perpetrator was a complete stranger, and the victim was a "temptress." People did not believe family members molested children in their own homes. Freud's influence caused social workers to de-emphasize molest in the family when the child reported being seduced by a father. The general public believed incest was extremely rare. Even Kinsey, the sex guru of the time, reported, "It was difficult to understand why a child, except for cultural conditioning, should be disturbed at having its genitals touched."

The sexual revolution of the 1960's and 1970's changed the common beliefs regarding molest in the United States. Unlike the previous generation, adults molested as children were given an atmosphere that allowed them to speak out about the abuse. As a result, public awareness about the family involvement in molest began to increase.

Today we know 99% of molest is perpetrated by someone the child knows. Only 1% of molest is "stranger danger." The "dirty old man" stigma is no longer held to be true. In reality, sex offenders are typically relatives or acquaintances of the child. Sex offenders are not distinguishable from any other person. Sex abuse is not a minority problem. It is a tragedy with no regard for race, class, ethnicity, location, intelligence, socio-economic level, religion, occupation, or culture. There is a larger number of males reported as perpetrators while there is a disproportionate number of female victims reported. Culturally, there is generally an unwillingness to believe a female could molest a child. Molest of males may also be underreported because of a social stigma. Society outwardly expects boys to be dominant and self-reliant. Therefore, they do not report cases of molest since that suggests vulnerability and weakness. Society assumes early sexual experiences are a "normal" part of a boy's life without considering the impact said experiences have on the child. Boys also fear being considered homosexual if they are molested by a male. Society's expectations pressure males to suppress feelings of helplessness or vulnerability. One way to prevent molest then is to change the societal messages we give to our males.

Who are the people who molest our children? Pedophiles are classified by sexual preference. In other words, one group is sexually attracted to

children and referred to as “fixated” or “exclusive.” The second group is classified as “regressed” or “nonexclusive.” Fixated means the person has a primary sexual attraction to children. Fixated pedophiles usually cannot change this attraction.

Regressed pedophiles have a normal adult sexual attraction and “regress” to sexual behaviors with children in stressful situations. Regressed pedophiles were often molested as children, and they choose victims the same age they were at the time of their molest. In the case of regressed pedophiles, their molest is not about sex. If the regressed pedophile was molested as a child, then repeatedly having his/her needs subordinated to those of a perpetrator may have resulted in unmet dependency needs. This contributes to feelings of powerlessness and a later need to exploit others to regain the personal power and control. Thus, molest by a regressed pedophile is not about sex. It can potentially be about power, control, and sometimes revenge. Sexual acts toward children can be as addictive as using drugs, smoking, or gambling. Perpetrators use power to control their victims. Spoken threats may not be present because the victim may just know not to tell due to prior knowledge of the perpetrator. Sexual abuse may lower a child’s self-esteem, and the subsequent sexual offense involving control over a child’s body maybe a distorted way of trying to restore self-esteem.

Identifying with the aggressor may be easier for boys than for girls. Identifying with the aggressor causes a child victim to develop a sense of entitlement to exploit others, even sexually. More male victims become offenders than female victims. Females are reported to respond to the abuse by internalizing the experience of victimization. Reports illuminate the tendency for female victims to continue the abuse by picking an abusive partner or abusing themselves with drug use, an eating disorder, “workaholism,” or other harmful behaviors. Perhaps female victims learn to sacrifice their own needs, leaving them devoid of self-protective mechanisms and more vulnerable to subsequent abuse and exploitation. As with physical abuse as a child, being sexually abused may put one at risk to eventually become abusive.

Underlying similarities are shared among sexual perpetrators. They seek power, view the child as an object, and have a perception that the child is his/her possession. They are willing to exploit the child’s trust for selfish purposes. Some believe the adult’s crime may be, in part, the repetitious acting-out of sex offenses he/she was subjected to as a child.

These acts may represent a maladaptive effort to solve an unresolved early sexual trauma or series of traumas. The offenses appear to duplicate his/her own molestation including the selection of a child the same age he/she was when he/she was molested.

Even though the data confirms “stranger danger” warnings are of little relevance in preventing a significant number of child sex abuse cases, the public still assumes the perpetrators of child sexual abuse are strangers. This tendency exemplifies the denial surrounding incest today. This denial may be based on the tenacious belief in the sanctity of the family. Traditionally, a man’s home is his castle. Children are often taught to blindly honor and obey. Families are ashamed to acknowledge internal problems and be imperfect.

Even with all these facts in mind, I would like to state there is no excuse for molesting a child -- *no* excuse. The adult must assume responsibility to seek appropriate help for his/her mental health and find appropriate ways to relieve stress.

Even though this may seem like an overwhelming issue and impossible to prevent, there are some things we can do to help decrease the child's vulnerability to molest. Leona Tokey states there are four family dynamics in every family where molest occurs. These four dynamics can be in other families and molest not occur, but they always seem to be present when a child is molested. The four dynamics identified by Leona Tokey are inherited from your family of origin. Your family of origin obtained the dynamics from their family of origin. These dynamics are passed down from generation to generation. They are just a way of being together as we relate ourselves to our family members. The wonderful thing about identifying the four dynamics is that we can then change them and lower the risk of our children being vulnerable to molest. We must remember that even though we can reduce the likelihood of a child being molested within the family, it is not the family's fault the child is molested. The perpetrator is an adult and makes a conscious decision to hurt a child.

As you read on, please do not feel guilty. If you are a molest victim, you must know your parents were not aware they could change these dynamics in order to protect you.

The first dynamic concerns “secrets.” Communication in an incestuous family is secretive, not open. Children do not feel free to share how they

feel. Their feelings are usually discounted, and they are eventually taught to disregard their feelings. They are told things such as the following: "Stop crying. You don't have a reason to cry because you are okay," "Stop being mad," "Big boys don't cry," or "Don't talk to me in an angry voice." After hearing these messages, children are not encouraged to express themselves. They are discouraged from sharing, what goes on inside the family with persons outside the family. Isolation, either geographic, social, or emotional, usually exists. In fact, all forms of abuse have been associated with isolated families that lack social support through community ties, friendships, or organizational affiliations. Isolation from the scrutiny of outside parties is also thought to create an atmosphere that allows incestuous relationships with family members. The secret of incest is therefore kept securely because the child has no one to turn to. Even the other parent cannot serve as a confidant because the communication is not open, and the child does not feel secure and supported. This family dynamic can be passed from generation to generation. The way we communicate (whether our family is isolated or open), our attitude about privacy, and the respect we have for others are all a part of what we learn in our family of origin.

The second dynamic is inappropriate boundaries. Families thought to predispose children to sexual abuse commonly blur the boundaries between parents and children. Parental, marital, and children roles are then blurred and confused. An adult's use of a child for his/her own gratification constitutes role confusion. In this situation, an incapacitated or absent mother assigns a maternal role to the child, so the daughter assumes many of the household and child care responsibilities. By natural extension, the daughter also assumes sexual responsibilities. This could be an alcoholic parent relying on the child as a parent or caregiver. Good boundaries include privacy with respect to bathroom use and sleeping arrangements. The child is also regarded as an individual deserving his/her space and privacy. Good boundaries also include respecting each others' belongings and space. This is the age of internet, so a child's privacy is not all inclusive. It is limited to personal privacy and space. A child's privacy privileges do not include unmonitored internet interactions. It is not appropriate to share things such as toothbrushes, bras, and beds. It is also inappropriate to allow the child to witness and/or participate in physically intimate behavior.

The third dysfunction is a marital dysfunction. Many myths surround the notion of what an incestuous family looks like. A common myth is the following: the incestuous family has been depicted as regularly

consisting of an unfortunate husband who is emotionally and sexually deprived. An immature wife who does not fulfill her role in the family, and is sexually “frigid.” Their daughter is precocious and sexually provocative. In reality, the incestuous family cannot readily be distinguished from other families. Some of the dynamics that we know about these families cannot readily be seen. Marital conflict has been frequently related to sexual abuse from outside the family and inside the family. Why would this affect the child being molested? For example, to reduce the tension that exists within the marital relationship, a father might distance himself from his wife by turning his sexual and/or emotional attention to his daughter. This distancing stabilizes the marital conflict and reduces the likelihood of a breakup.

Many intra-familial sex offenders discount the impact they have on the family as they make the comment, “At least I didn’t go outside the family and have an affair.” Child molestation may also occur because the victim living in an unstable home may seek some sense of emotional stability outside of the home. Additionally, marital discord may lower a child’s self-esteem, which in turn increases his/her vulnerability to offers of affection. Parents who are preoccupied with their marital conflicts may not adequately supervise their children, children are consequently more vulnerable to sexual abuse when they are poorly supervised.

The fourth and last dysfunction is sexual dysfunction. This dysfunction can exist in the offender or in the victim.

One of the myths about sexual abuse is that the offender is sexually deprived. Actually, most incest offenders are sexually active, if not with their wives, with other women. They also may be sexually active with more than one child in the family. While there may be sexual dysfunction in their marriages, such dysfunction also exists in the marriage of men who do not commit incest.

Child sex offenders may more accurately be viewed as “sexual addicts” whose addiction (as with alcohol, drugs, gambling, etc.) represents relief from unpleasant emotions such as inadequacy, anxiety, depression, and powerlessness at the expense of others. As with any other addiction that can and must be controlled, responsibility for that control ultimately rests with the incest offender and no one else.

The sex offender usually lacks impulse control. Some researchers suggest incestuous families are over-sexualized. In this case, children

are sexually stimulated by their own parents in homes characterized by a “loose sex culture.” Obscenities, nudity, overt sexual behavior, and pornography may be pervasive, and the children are readily exposed to all. These children become prematurely sexually stimulated. Combined with limited supervision, this stimulation can lead to sexual imitation.

In contrast, others have described a home that lacks information about sex. Children who grow up in families where sexual information is absent, limited, or inaccurate may be vulnerable to offenders’ assurances about the appropriateness of the sexual behavior. In addition, parents who prohibit or punish normal sexual behaviors (such as masturbation), could create a climate whereby children feel guilty about their sexual feelings or perceive their genitals negatively. When natural tendencies are suppressed or punished, the child’s sexual development is negatively affected. This might increase the risk of being victimized or becoming a victimizer. Children must be taught the correct names for body parts early in their development. Therefore, if Uncle Joe touches their genitals, they don’t report him touching their “bottom,” “bootie,” or “bum.” Instead, the child can say, “Uncle Joe touched my vagina/penis.”

Research shows that excess sexual information or not enough age appropriate sexual information along with inappropriate or inaccurate sexual information put the child at risk to be a victim or perhaps a victimizer.

Another myth regarding child sexual abuse is that the child is seductive and lures the adult. In 1982, the Boston Globe reported, “Last month in Lancaster, Wisconsin, Crant County Circuit Court Judge William Reinecke sentenced a 24 year old man to 90 days in a work-release program for sexually assaulting the five year old daughter of the woman with whom he lived. In explaining the sentence, Judge Reinecke said, “I am satisfied we have an unusually sexually promiscuous young lady. And he (the defendant) did not know enough to refuse. No way do I believe (the man) initiated sexual contact.” This “promiscuous young lady” was blamed despite the fact she was only five years of age.

Incest routinely occurs well before puberty, yet blaming the victim is the most common defense offered by offenders in the instances where incest is not clearly denied.

If children use foul language, we deduce they have been around someone who uses the same language. If a child behaves in a sexualized fashion, we should likewise suspect they have been exposed to such and wonder about the “purpose” of his/her acting out. Surprisingly, there is an increased risk of abuse (both intra-familial and extra-familial) among the children of women who were themselves sexually victimized during childhood. These women, although not necessarily molesting the child themselves, choose mates with the potential for molest. This is an example where recurring family dynamics return to haunt us. We look for a mate with the same dynamics as ourselves. We are more comfortable with familiar dynamics.

Changing our family dynamics may not be easy. You may want to get the help of a professional if you feel you are not making progress. Sometimes a third party can see the dysfunctional patterns and help find a solution. Mental health professionals have the tools to facilitate change.

In review, there are four family dynamics of sexual abuse:

1. Secrets - poor communication: Make a distinction between secrets that hurt someone when kept and secrets that save a surprise for later. Surprises are kept until they are revealed. There is a difference, and this difference must be explained and understood. Encourage your child to pay attention to his/her feelings. Make sure your children know they have the right to be sad, angry, or happy and express that. As a parent, it is not your job to make your child's life wonderful. It is your job to challenge, nurture, support, and prepare him/her for the real world. You are not a “bad” parent if your child is sad or mad. You are actually a good parent to allow that expression in a healthy and appropriate manner. If your child tells you “No,” then celebrate. You can celebrate secretly as you explain that they may not want to do something, and they still have that responsibility. Celebrate because they can say “No” to an offender also. Be proud to have an assertive child.

2. Inappropriate boundaries - personal space and person are not respected. Establish rules about privacy, and respect those rules in your household. When the door is shut, it means “knock and wait.” Parents must respect those rules, too. You model behaviors for your children. One parenting book I recommend is How to Behave so Your Kids Will Too. You don't have to read the book to get the idea. Just read the title. Allow the child to decide who he/she hugs and kisses. Just because



Aunt June wants to plant juicy kisses on him/her does not mean he/she must comply. That is good boundary teaching. He/she has a right to his/her body and the right to decide who touches them. Stress empowerment. Stress the right of the child to be safe, strong, and free. Let your children know they have the right to say "No." this may be difficult for the parent who feels they must have control. However, we must remember that allowing the child to say "no" is an essential part of acquiring self-empowerment. This gives the child a sense that he/she can be in control of his/her situation. The power to refuse adult requests will give him/her the right to refuse unwanted sexual contact. So, little Mary may say "No," when told to pick up her room. At this moment, the parent says, "I know that is how you feel, and I still need your room picked up." This does not deny the feelings or personal power and it simultaneously maintains your authority as the parent. The right to say "no" to unwanted touches also gives the child the right to say "yes" to wanted touches.

3. Marital dysfunction - the couple acts as parents do not get along and/or do not have a good relationship. If your relationship is not wonderful, fix it. Find a couples counselor and get the tools to change. It will not only benefit your child, but it will also benefit both parties in the relationship.

4. Sexual dysfunction - can be with the offender or with the victim. The victim may have too much sexual information or not enough age appropriate sexual information. Make sure your child is appropriately informed and be open in his/her communication.

In closing, if your child reports inappropriate sexual behavior to you, the way you respond at that moment of disclosure determines the depth of recovery that child attains. The moment of disclosure is the most important time in a molest victim's healing. The correct reaction is to believe and to listen. Reporting to the authorities will come later, and the child will need a solid, secure support system. Even if you cannot bring yourself to believe the story, please voice belief for now. Recovery from molest is determined by several factors: the molest victim's inner strength and personal resources, the length and extent of the violent act, and the relationship of the child to the offender. If the offender is a trusted member of the family or extended family, then the impact on the child will be greater than if the offender was a casual acquaintance.

The best defense against child sexual abuse-molest is a healthy family dynamic and an emotionally strong, secure child. This is a defense against sexual abuse from within and without the family.

References:

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