



PEER-TO-PEER CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE RISK: *Protecting Children from Other Children*

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Where child sexual abuse is concerned, peer-to-peer abuse provides the *curveball* of sexual abuse risk. To recognize and address it properly, an organization must be watching for it.

COMMON FACT PATTERN

Peer-to-peer sexual abuse – children molesting or abusing *other children* – unfolds in predictable patterns.

Some years ago, we were asked to assist a church in correctly responding to a child sexual abuse scenario. This ministry served very young children in a horseshoe-shaped building with a fence across the top of the horseshoe, creating a courtyard. The fenced area contained a playground for children surrounded by windows looking into the play area. In the center of the playground was a play structure with panels near the base, creating a box-like cube. One Sunday, while two staff members sat twenty feet away, a seven-year-old boy enticed a four-year-old girl into the cubed play structure and sexually molested her there.

Later that day the little girl shared with her parents – in a vague and inarticulate manner – what she had experienced that morning in the play structure. The girl's parents believed her (which doesn't always occur) and contacted a ministry supervisor. Ministry leaders, in turn, contacted our firm.

In assessing the situation, we interviewed the two staff members who supervised the playground, who were present on the day in question.

During the interview, these staff members were courteous and concerned but became defensive when asked about the *possibility* of sexual abuse occurring on the playground several days before, saying, "That's not possible." When asked why they were convinced that sexual abuse couldn't occur on the playground, they replied, "We have a fence." In this circumstance, these conscientious ministry workers believed sexual abuse could only originate from *outside the fence*.

What these ministry workers did not grasp is that the majority of sexual abuse risk arising in a ministry context occurs *inside the fence*. These staff members had received minimal sexual abuse training: from their standpoint the risk of abuse, to the extent it existed *at all*, came from *outside the church*. They had no training or understanding regarding the preferential offender or peer-to-peer sexual abuse: sexual abuse occurring at the hands of *other children*.

Where child sexual abuse is concerned, *we cannot reduce a risk we do not understand*. This truism is particularly apt in addressing and preventing peer-to-peer sexual abuse. In our experience, peer sexual abuse is the least understood and expected risk likely to be encountered in child-serving organizations: the *curveball*.

UNDERSTANDING PEER SEXUAL ABUSE

Staff members and volunteers must be trained to understand the preferential offender and peer-to-peer sexual abuse: *Sexual Abuse Awareness Training* (see below).

Peer Sexual Abuse:

Sexually harmful behavior between children involving an aggressor and a child who does not seek or want the sexual interaction.

Peer sexual abuse is not prevented by a background check or child check-in system. What about the two-adult rule? In the fact pattern above, two adult staff members supervised the playground – the church was following the two-adult rule. Unfortunately, these two adults had no real understanding of the risk of peer sexual abuse, much less how to prevent it. Peer sexual abuse is shockingly prevalent: offender studies indicate that convicted male abusers begin their predatory behavior, on average, at 13 or 14 years of age. The majority of convicted male abusers admit their first offense occurred *before* reaching 18 years of age. US Department of Justice reports indicate that *one out of three* reported cases of child sexual abuse are peer-to-peer abuse allegations.

What's more, peer abusers tend to take opportunities where they find them; where they spend time anyway – school, sports, camp, younger cousins or siblings, and church. Children who have been sexually abused tend to act out in a sexual manner with other children. Even very young children can act out in a sexually harmful context.

So how should an organization act to reasonably address this known risk? Staff members must be trained to understand and recognize scenarios where this risk is higher: anywhere *clothes come off*, for any reason (e.g. the restroom), any location on your campus which is *less easily seen* (e.g. play structures) and any activity *less easily supervised* (e.g. *any activity involving swimming or group play*). Effective training must define peer sexual abuse, address where it is more likely to occur and how to correctly respond.

Responding to an Allegation

Responding correctly to peer sexual abuse allegations requires an exercise of judgment, and organizational leaders must avoid two common misconceptions.

Error: No sexual behavior between children is harmful--simply indicative of curiosity or *play*.
Error: All sexual behavior between children is dangerous and harmful.

Some childish behaviors are predicated upon natural sexual curiosity. In the course of normal human development, children commonly engage in harmless sexual curiosity or play. This behavior, though innocent, should always be redirected.

What constitutes *harmful* sexual behavior between children?

Any adult sexual behavior that children should have no knowledge of or experience with should be reported to child protective services. This is because these behaviors are typically learned behaviors resulting from interaction between an adult (or older child) and a child, and the abused child is replicating these learned behaviors with *other* children. The purpose of a report is to get appropriate resources to the children impacted, redirect the harmful behavior and determine where the sexual conduct *began*: generally at the hands of an *adult* who has abused a child.

Clearly, any coerced or forced sexual behavior is harmful. In most jurisdictions, criminal prosecution of peer sexual abuse requires three elements: an *aggressor child*, a *non-aggressor child* and an *imbalance of power* favoring the aggressor. The imbalance of power is typically age, but size, mental acuity or the existence of a disability can create the imbalance. In most states in the US, a three-year age gap between children creates a *presumption* of an imbalance of power.

One indication that sexual behavior between children is something other than simple curiosity or play is when the behavior is hidden or accompanied by a sense of shame or culpability. When a child is hiding behavior or enticing another child into a closet or other unseen area, the conduct is problematic.

Peer Sexual Abuse Must Be Reported

Although peer sexual abuse constitutes *one third* of all reported sexual abuse in the US, peer abuse tends to be underreported. One reason it isn't reported is the belief that mandatory reporting requirements do not apply to children who sexually abuse other children. Untrue: mandatory reporting requirements are driven by the age of the *victim*, not the age of the abuser.

Peer Sexual Abuse Fire Drill

Peer abusers are opportunistic – they take opportunities where they find them and where they spend time *anyway*, including child-serving programs. While on an organization's property or participating in an organization's program, children must be safe and protected – sometimes from other children. Organizational staff members are responsible for the safety and welfare of *each* child participating until that child is returned to a parent or caregiver.

Like fire, peer sexual abuse is a foreseeable risk. Where this risk is concerned, an organization's primary protection is *effective training* coupled with intentional supervision. Many organizational workers believe that peer sexual abuse won't happen in their programs. This illusion is dangerous to both the organization and the children it serves. Because peer abusers are opportunistic, greater opportunity exists in programs staffed by workers who don't understand or acknowledge the reality of this risk. The first step to a better understanding of this risk is effective training: when staff members learn the facts, they are better equipped to protect children in their care.

Drill the foreseeable risk. Assume you have a sexual aggressive child in your program. Is your staff trained to recognize imbalances of power and where peer abuse may manifest in your program? Do you have a bathroom plan that minimizes the risk of peer interaction that can lead to inappropriate behavior? Do you have a reporting process for peer sexual abuse and is it

communicated to staff and volunteers? These and many more questions should be asked and answered before this foreseeable risk unfolds in children's programming.

SEXUAL ABUSE AWARENESS TRAINING

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training is the foundation of any effort to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse. At the core of this training is a description of the preferential offender's grooming process: the process used by the abuser to gain access to a child, prepare the child for inappropriate sexual interaction, then keep the child silent.

This training provides these elements of instruction:

- Facts vs. Misconceptions
- Abuser Characteristics
- Grooming Process
- Common Grooming Behaviors
- Peer-to-Peer Sexual Abuse**
- Impact of Abuse
- Reporting Requirements

The abuser's *grooming process* is the focus —allowing child-serving workers to see risky behavior *before* an abuser has harmed a child. The training also provides a segment dedicated to peer sexual abuse.

Training Staff Members and Volunteers

We can't address a risk we don't understand. Sexual offenders have no *visual profile*; they look like everyone else. Instead, abusers are characterized by their *behavior*. Sexual Abuse Awareness Training equips staff members and volunteers with a better understanding of abuser characteristics, the abuser's *grooming process* and *common grooming behaviors*.

Abuse Prevention System & MinistrySafe Training

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training is the cornerstone element of the wide-ranging resources available online at Abuse Prevention Systems (APS) or MinistrySafe. At present, the online Awareness Training provided by APS and MinistrySafe is being used by over 25,000 organizations, 400 schools, 10 seminaries ... and growing daily. In 2019, APS/MinistrySafe issued its 1,000,000th certificate of completion and continues to train over 35,000 people per month online. Request a free online Sexual Abuse Awareness Training link [here](#).

Kimberlee Norris and Gregory Love are partners in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of [Love & Norris](#) and founders of [Abuse Prevention Systems](#) and [MinistrySafe](#), providing child sexual abuse expertise to organizations worldwide. After representing victims of child sexual abuse for more than two decades, Love and Norris saw recurring, predictable patterns in predatory behavior. Abuse Prevention Systems (APS) and MinistrySafe grew out of their desire to place proactive tools into the hands of ministry and child-serving professionals. Love and Norris teach the only graduate-level course on Preventing Sexual Abuse in Ministry Contexts as Visiting Faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary.