



# Child Molesting

## *Every Mother's Nightmare*

**F**OR the young mother, it was a nightmare come true. When her four-year-old daughter complained of abdominal pains, she took her to see a doctor. The doctor, after a thorough examination, gravely told the mother that her little girl was the victim of sexual molestation. She had been raped. The mother informed the New York City authorities, who quickly determined that the abuse occurred at a Bronx, New York, day-care center.

Investigations at the center yielded horrifying results. First one, then another, then still another child revealed that they, too, had been molested. At least 30 children eventually claimed that they had been abused in that same center. One of them had gonorrhea. Then reports surfaced that children had been molested at another day-care center. Then at another. Eventually seven day-care centers had to be investigated in the New York City area alone.

As each new case was publicized, reports of child molesting started coming in

from other parts of the country. The scandal spread. Parents asked one another: "What's happening?" What indeed! Was this just a freakish rash of molestation incidents? Or was it something very widespread that was only now being noticed?

### ***A Widespread Problem***

The fact is, sexual molestation of children has been going on for a long time and today it is widespread. In 1983, the head of New York City's Advisory Task Force on Rape reported 'a dramatic increase in the number of young children who are victims of rape, incest, and other forms of sexual abuse.' Dr. David Finkelhor of the Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire conducted a large-scale study of the subject. He found that the children of 9 percent of the parents interviewed had been sexually abused. Fifteen percent of the women and 6 percent of the men had themselves been sexually abused as children!

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Exact statistics are difficult to come by. In the United States, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect has records of 55,399 cases of children being sexually molested in one year. But these are only cases of incestuous abuse. Abuse by friends, neighbors, teachers, and so forth—as well as by strangers—would increase that figure to a considerable extent. And a spokesman for the Child Welfare League of America told *Awake!* that “the figures we have are only the tip of the iceberg.”

A report in the magazine *Ladies Home Journal* estimates: “Sexual abuse of

young girls is four times more common than rape of adult women. Between the ages of five and 13, one in four little girls falls prey to some form of sexual abuse by adults—whether it be exhibitionism, inappropriate fondling, rape, or incest. Although young females are the most common victims, 20 to 25 percent of those attacked are little boys.”

Doctors are convinced of the harmful and long-term effects of such abuse. Hence, parents wonder: ‘Are my children at risk? What steps can I take to protect them? What sort of person would try to harm them?’

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## ‘Who Would Do a Thing Like That?’



**M**OST parents would answer this question wrong. When we think of sexual molestation, most of us probably picture a weird stranger who exposes himself to children or lures them away into a car or to some wooded area. Publicity has also been given to groups that lure children away to exploit them for pornography or child prostitution. Such things *do* happen, but these people are far from the usual type of child molester. So who are the usual child molesters?

Sue was molested by a man who was running a church group. He ran a youth club, and everybody agreed that he was very pleasant. But he sexually abused Sue

and other girls. Another young girl wrote to an advice column to tell that her favorite uncle had taken to pulling her onto his lap and fondling her improperly. One man remembers that as a boy he was habitually abused by the grown son of a close family friend. An 11-year-old boy was molested by the aunt that he lived with. A New York woman reports being molested by her grandfather when she was seven years old. A 15-year-old boy was molested by his doctor during a medical examination. For Pam, it was even worse. For many years, her own father molested her. And Mary was molested by two older brothers and an older first cousin.



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In fact, probably less than a third of sexual assaults on children are committed by strangers. Usually the victim knows the assailant. Often the abuser is a relative. Thus, in most cases children are molested by people they know and trust, which makes the problem of protecting them more difficult.

### ***The Molester at Work***

Many parents have another misconception. They envision molestation as being violent, with the child fighting and screaming for mercy. This may not be the case at all, at least not in the beginning. At the outset, sexual abuse may be disguised as playful or affectionate contact, and go on from there. The abuser is likely to persuade and pressure the child, using all the built-in authority of an older person. Do you remember what it was like when you were a child and were trained to obey adults even when they told you to do things you did not like, such as go to bed early or eat all your vegetables? Molesters take advantage of this training. One convicted abuser said: "Show me an obedient child, and I'll show you an easy victim."

One child was receiving obscene phone calls. When asked why she had not put the phone down, she said she thought it was rude to do that when someone was still talking! A woman of 30 remembers having been approached at the age of 5 by her grandfather. He said to her: "Good girls do this for Grandpa and never tell their mothers." How many five-year-olds would be able to see through such a deception?

And do you remember how you loved presents and treats as a child? Abusers

often use this childish trait to get an abusive relationship started. For example, what would your child do if the school janitor said: "Stay with me for a while in the office after school, and I will give you some money"? or if the baby-sitter said: "I will let you sit up late and watch television, if you do something for me first"?

Sometimes molesters misuse a child's natural love of secrets. Wasn't it exciting, when you were young, to have a secret? One little girl had a secret that she kept from her parents. But one day her parents

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### ***She was molested by her minister***

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saw her acting in a precocious, sexual manner. When asked where she had learned such a thing, the little girl said: "It's a secret." Her father explained that sometimes we should not keep a secret, so the little girl revealed her secret. A 40-year-old man with a family of his own, who was a close family relative, had pushed her down and sexually assaulted her.

Finally, threats may be involved, subtle threats that strike at a child's sense of security. A grown woman tells of having been abused by her stepfather when she was a child. She says he abused her for four years, starting when she was six. Why did she not tell her mother? "He said that if I ever told anybody about it, the police would come get him and my mother would lose her job. The family would starve and it would all be my fault."

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Author Gail Sheehy covers many of these points in the following observation: "We forget how grownups seemed omnipotent to us when we ourselves were children." She adds: "It is very easy for a parent or babysitter to initiate sexual activities under the guise of normal bathing and hygiene inspection. The child gets the message something is wrong only when secrecy is introduced: 'Don't tell your mommy that we did that'—and sufficient intimidation can be laid in with a single stroke—'or she won't love you anymore.'" Would your child be able to withstand that sort of psychological blackmail?

### ***The Child's Best Defense***

So you see, molesters can be the most unexpected of people and they can use sophisticated and cunning tactics. Child molestation is probably almost as old as history. But as this generation progresses, and more and more people are "lovers of themselves, . . . having no natural affection, . . . without self-control," the threat is becoming greater. (2 Timothy 3:1-3) However, children do have one very strong defense. What is that? Their parents. These are the adults best able to protect them from other adults who may wish to molest them. Let us see how.

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## You Can Protect Your Child



**A** YOUNG woman who was molested as a girl by her brother and her brother-in-law says: "I was afraid, so I did not tell anyone. For this reason, I would like to warn all parents: 'Please teach your children not to let anyone in the family, or outside the family, put their hands on them in any wrong way. If anyone tries to, do not be afraid to tell on them.'" She adds: "It can happen to any child at any time!"

In this degenerating world, we must take definite steps to protect our children from sexual molestation. It is not wise to leave things to chance and just hope that nothing will happen.

### ***The First Line of Defense***

The first line of defense is to avoid situations that leave our children vulnerable. For example, parents are advised to be careful about using as baby-sitters young adults who seem to prefer being with children rather than with folks their own age. One clinical psychologist reports that two thirds of the molesters he is treating committed the offense while baby-sitting.

Dr. Suzanne M. Sgroi mentions two more situations that have led to trouble: Children doubling up (in beds or rooms) with adults or teenagers, and large family gatherings where the grown-ups get in-



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volved in enjoying themselves and just assume that the older children are taking care of the young ones.

The truth is, the more we can keep our children under our own supervision, the less opportunity molesters will have to get at them. Ann, a mother of three, goes to the extent of not allowing her youngest child, a 14-year-old boy, to wander around the shopping mall—or even to go into public rest rooms—alone. The boy probably finds this very restrictive, but his mother has her reasons. She was molested as a child.

However, parents cannot always keep such a close watch on their children. Working parents may have no choice but to use day-care facilities or to leave their children with relatives or baby-sitters. Children have to go to school, and parents cannot always be with them. Relatives and friends come to visit. And then there are the neighbors! How can we protect our children when they are so vulnerable? Really, there is only one way—

### ***Talk to Your Child About the Danger***

Psychologist Debrah Shulman said: "It's foolish to pretend to children that dangers do not exist. Children are aware of their vulnerability and are naturally concerned about their own safety. It's part of a parent's job to give them the tools to deal with danger realistically. If presented honestly and posi-

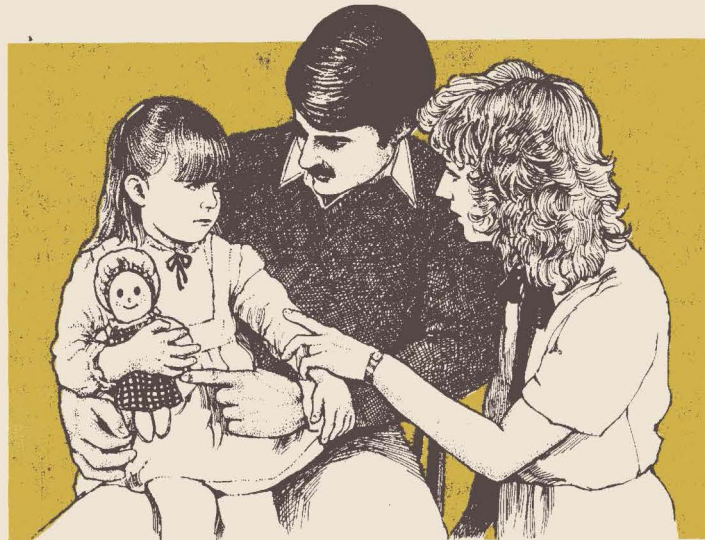
tively such information will not threaten children, it will reassure them." Yes, we have to talk to them about it.

This is easy to say but not so easy to do, especially since the greatest danger is from friends and relatives. We may already have warned our children against the stranger who wants to lure them into the woods or carry them away in a car. But how can we give them "the tools" to protect themselves from ones they know, respect, and even love?

### ***Follow Their Instincts***

Ann, the mother referred to previously, reports that she was only five years old when a male relative molested her. Nevertheless, she knew that he was doing something wrong, although she did not know how to stop him. And, unhappily, she could not talk to her parents about it. The lines of communication were not very good at that time.

Ann's experience demonstrates that





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children usually have a natural sense of what is fit and proper. We have to reinforce this instinct, tell them that they should obey it even if an adult tells them differently. A simple and determined “No, I don’t want you to do that!” is often

enough to deter a molester. Ann’s experience also shows the need for open lines of communication with our children.

Recently a husband and wife were discussing this problem between themselves. Becoming concerned, they asked their

### *If the Worst Should Happen*

No parent can give a child complete protection against sexual molestation, although taking sensible precautions will enormously reduce the possibility that anything will happen. However, if parents have established good family communication, it may be that children will talk about it in the event that the worst should happen. Sometimes, though, children are so shocked by or ashamed of the experience that they will not discuss it. Hence, parents need to be alert. Here are some signs that researchers say *may* show that something has happened.

**Be suspicious** of any changes in the normal routine. In one case, a teacher asked that certain children come to school long before others. Watch for any telling signs in children such as declining grades or extreme anxiety around a specific adult. One woman who was victimized by her brother and her father as a girl said: “I came at the bottom of a class of 42, and nobody tried to find out why.”

**Pay attention** to physical symptoms, such as headaches, vomiting or loss of appetite, and difficulty in sleeping. Genital complaints, such as soreness, are particularly important. Be aware of precocious sexuality in language, dress, or behavior. Be on the lookout for sudden changes in behavior that might indicate a problem. If a child becomes unusually withdrawn or shows an inclination to avoid one member of the family, a warning bell should sound. We also have to listen for the oblique messages that our

children send us. The statement, “I don’t like that math teacher any more” may be the child’s way of trying to broach this difficult subject.

If parents see anything like this in their child, they should try to find out what is wrong. The child has a problem, and it may be a problem of molestation. If so, the child needs help. Unfortunately, many children do not get that help. Molested children have been accused of inventing the incident, although researchers assure us that children rarely, if ever, invent such things. Incest has been covered up so as not to break up the family.

However, if molestation—and especially incest—is discovered to have occurred, two things must be done immediately:

**First**, the child—and other children too—must be protected from any further abuse. This must be done, whatever the cost. In many cases the accused molester will have to be confronted. But whatever it takes, it is important that the child should feel confident that the molester will never be able to get at her (or him) again.

**Second**, the child must be given a lot of love and emotional support. Parents must make it very clear that the little victim is not to blame. The crime and anything that happens as a result of it—even if a close relative goes to prison—is not her (or his) fault. But that reassurance will have to be given many times, so that the victim comes to believe it—and to believe that the parents believe it too!



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child if she had ever been molested. To their horror, the child said yes. An old and trusted friend of the family had repeatedly done so. The family had excellent communication with their children, so why had the child not said something before? Simply because she did not know how. Once the subject was mentioned, the child was more than willing to discuss it.

### ***How Can We Tell Them?***

First, we have to bring the subject up. One suggestion is that if ever a scandal is reported in the news, parents could use it as an opportunity to ask their children: "Did anyone ever do anything like that to you?" and then go on to tell them how to act if anyone tries to.

Parents who teach their children about the Bible can use parts of it as a starting point. They can use the story of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, to explain the boundaries that exist in what one person may do to another. (Genesis 34:1-4) The story of Tamar and Amnon can be used to show that there are things that even close relatives are not permitted to do to each other. (2 Samuel 13:10-16) And we should make sure they understand that if something like that does happen to them, we want to know about it. We will not get angry with them if they tell us.

Mary was molested when she was a little girl, so she made very sure to put her three daughters on guard against molesters. How did she do it? As soon as they were old enough to understand, she told them: "If anyone touches you in the wrong place, tell me and I will not be angry." How would they know where the

wrong places are? Mary says that when they were about three years old she showed them. When she was bathing them or getting them ready for bed, she pointed out the parts of their body that other people should not touch. As they got a little older, she presented situations: "Nobody should touch you there, even if it is a schoolteacher or a policeman. Not even Mummy or Daddy should touch you there. And a doctor should only touch you there if Mummy or Daddy is with you!"

Did this work? Mary remembers one occasion when a relative was playing with her six-year-old daughter. The things the relative was doing started to make the little girl feel uncomfortable. What did she do? She just walked away from him. Mary is not sure whether the relative had bad intentions or not. But she is delighted that her daughter was able to walk away from the situation when it started to feel "not right," or "strange."

Hence, just as parents warn their children against going off with strangers, playing in a busy street, and putting their

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***"If anyone touches you in the wrong place, tell me"***

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hands on electric wires, they should also tell them about avoiding molestation. They should explain the boundaries on their bodies that others—even their own parents—should not transgress. They should clearly state that if something *does* happen, they want to know about it. And they will not blame the children.



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### ***The “What if . . . ?” Game***

Sometimes adults will use their greater experience and intelligence to deceive children into joining them in some inappropriate activity, and children may not spot the deception without help. So Linda Tschirhart Sanford, author of the book *The Silent Children*, suggests a tool that could be used to counter this in advance: the “What if . . . ?” game. From time to time, ask the children what they would do in certain situations: “What if the baby sitter said that you could stay up late watching television if you got in the bathtub with him and played games? What would you tell him?” “What if someone you knew took you for a ride and wanted to put his hands where he should not? What would you do?” “What would you do if an older friend touched you in a way

### **Tell children the right names for the parts of their body**

you did not like, or wanted to undress you and play a secret game with you?”

In teaching the child how to answer, parents can show that there are occasions when they can say no to an adult. There are also occasions when they should reveal secrets. If they are trained to say things like “I will just go and ask Mummy first,” they will be able to discourage most potential molesters. If the child learns the right answers in the “What if . . . ?” game, it is gaining some good tools to protect itself. If it gives a wrong answer, well, go back over the question and suggest a different answer.

### ***Give Them the Words***

The following experience shows another problem that children face in the matter of molestation: A woman relates that she was abused as a child and tried to tell her mother about it. But she did not have the right words and could not explain what had happened. Her mother thought that someone was just trying to be affectionate and that the little girl had misunderstood the situation and blown it out of proportion.

Because of similar experiences, social workers encourage parents to tell their children the right names for parts of their bodies. Give them the vocabulary to express themselves in case the worst happens.

### ***Alert but Balanced***

One of a parent's worst nightmares is that their child might be sexually molested. However, we need to remember that *most* adults are not going to molest our children. Most of our relatives love them and would be as concerned as we are to protect them from abuse.

On the other hand, it *can* happen. And merely hoping that it will not happen is not enough. The Biblical proverb says: “Shrewd is the one that has seen the calamity and proceeds to conceal himself.” (Proverbs 22:3) Hence, it is wise to be cautious, especially in view of the times we live in. If we avoid, to the extent possible, putting our children in situations that leave them vulnerable, if we explain to them the boundaries that even adults are not to cross, and if we teach them how to react in case any adult should try to cross those boundaries, then we are doing a lot to protect our children from the molester.