

# Preventing and Identifying Child Sexual Abuse

By John Gehring



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Paul Duckro  
Director  
Office of Child, Adolescent  
and Adult Protection  
Diocese of Tucson



Safe environment coordinators, researchers and psychologists agree there is no definitive profile of a child sexual abuser. Instead, these experts speak about patterns of behavior, or “red flags,” that should alert adults that a young person may be in an abusive situation.

“If you start looking for a typical abuser in your mind you are going to miss a lot of people,” said Paul Duckro, the director of the Office of Child, Adolescent and Adult Protection in the Diocese of Tucson, Arizona. “Your net will have a lot of holes in it.”

A former medical school professor who specializes in the behavioral aspects of illness, Duckro says that people who are unusually secretive, shun supervision or demand special rules that do not apply to others should raise concerns.

Sexually inappropriate behavior with a child often begins with a process psychologists call “grooming,” often subtle actions that can make children feel special, protected and comfortable in situations that may lead to more deviant activities.

An adult could be grooming a potential victim, for example, when he or she frequently signals a child out for special gifts or looks for opportunities to be alone with them. Abusers often attempt to view pornography or use alcohol with children to create intimacy and trust. While abusers cannot be easily classified and demonstrate a range of personality types, Duckro does point to a common characteristic they do share.

“Narcissism is a concern, with my needs at the exclusion of yours,” he said. “There is no empathy for other people or their needs.”

Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, the president and chief executive officer of St. Luke Institute, a residential treatment center in Silver Spring, Maryland, for priests and religious who have psychological problems, believes the media has presented a caricatured view of abusers.

“The media has reinforced stereotypes like the ‘dirty old man’ when in reality there are many kinds of offenders,” said Msgr. Rossetti, a licensed psychologist who has written frequently about child sexual abuse. “You can’t understand a complex phenomenon in a twenty second sound bite.” Despite their differences, he said, abusers do generally fit into subtypes that include the compulsively sexual person, the narcissist who uses others for pleasure and the dependent person who is emotionally immature.

“Red flags” include adults who do not respect a child’s physical or emotional boundaries, lack peer relations, exhibit extremes in sexual experiences, show confusion about their sexual orientation or have a

personal history of childhood sexual abuse. He is quick to note, however, that most adults who have been abused as children do not grow up to be abusers.

Msgr. Rossetti believes the Catholic Church has come a long way in addressing sexual abuse and points to the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, a landmark document adopted by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 2002, as a model for prevention strategies. The Charter requires all dioceses to implement safe environment measures and participate in annual audits to help ensure compliance. Background screening, education programs that help prevent abuse, rapid response when abuse occurs and swift punishment of offenders have all contributed to declining rates of child sexual abuse in parishes, according to Msgr. Rossetti.

“The reality is that right now the Catholic Church has one of the strongest anti-abuse policies of any organization in the country,” he said. “But one case of abuse is always too many.”

Karen Terry, an associate professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, The City University of New York, said there are several biological and psychological theories for why adults sexually abuse children.

“The most important point is that abusers constitute a heterogeneous population of individuals who begin abusing for a variety of reasons,” she said. “In addition, there is no clear ‘best practice’ as to how to treat or manage abusers, largely because the treatment and management plans should be tailored to their specific needs and risks. The best that I can recommend for prevention of child sexual abuse is education.” In about 90 percent of cases, she notes, children are sexually abused by family members, relatives or acquaintances like coaches or teachers who have some power over a child.

Monica Applewhite, the president of religious services for Praesidium, Inc., an Arlington, Texas, risk management consulting firm that helps corporations, youth-serving institutions and churches maintain safe environments, said having a written policy with clear standards for behavior is critical. But she stressed that those standards must reflect the nature of the particular organization.

“The policy needs to be fair and adapted to the culture of the program,” she said. “If we start saying you can never hug a child, it just doesn’t seem right, and then you have something that doesn’t fit with your belief system. One of the best things in the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People is that it says every diocese must define in writing its standards for children and youth. As much tailoring as you can do is always the best situation because your decision makers are informing the policies.”



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