




# CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

## Child-to-child abuse also a concern

**By Jane Sutter**

With concern about adults sexually abusing children making headlines, parents and caregivers may be surprised to learn that children sexually harming other children is a notable problem, too.

Lack of that knowledge means that adults are “missing some real opportunities and some really important conversations about kids’ sexual behaviors,” said Jennifer Coleman, director of Stop It Now!

The Massachusetts-based organization focuses on preventing the sexual abuse of children through prevention education and training, help services and technical assistance.

Coleman said that experts on child sexual abuse say that “child to child, sexual harmful behaviors happen in 30 percent to 50 percent of cases of child sexual abuse.” Pinning down an exact percentage is difficult because of the ways that states define criminal activities for various ages, Coleman said.

A U.S. Department of Justice report found that juveniles accounted for 35.6 percent of those known by police to have committed sex offenses against minors.

It is important to keep in mind that sexually harmful behavior instigated by a child against another child covers a broad range, Coleman said. “Children’s sexual behaviors can be very different from adult sexual behaviors, what their intention is, what their motivation is.” A youthful offender may not understand the impact of his behavior. And of course, not all sexually harmful behavior rises to the level of criminal.

The Stop It Now website defines sexually harmful behavior by children and young people as ranging from experimentation that has gone too far to serious sexual assault. “It’s important for adults to recognize that many children will engage in some forms of sexual exploration with children of a similar age, size, social status or power. Sometimes a child or young person may engage in sexual play with a much younger or more vulnerable child, or use force, tricks or bribery to involve

### Warning Signs

***Signs that a child or young person may be being sexually abused:***

- Nightmares, sleep problems, extreme fears without an obvious explanation.
- Sudden or unexplained personality changes: seems withdrawn, angry, moody, clingy, “checked-out” or shows significant changes in eating habits.
- An older child behaving like a younger child, such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking.
- Develops fear of particular places or resists being alone with a particular child or young person for unknown reasons.
- Shows resistance to routine bathing, toileting or removing clothes even in appropriate situations.
- Play, writing, drawings or dreams include sexual or frightening images.
- Refuses to talk about a secret he/she has with an adult or older child.
- Stomach aches or illness, often with no

identifiable reason.

- Leaves clues that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues.
- Uses new or adult words for body parts; engages in adult-like sexual activities with toys, objects or other children.
- Develops special relationship with older friend that may include unexplained money, gifts or privileges.
- Intentionally harming himself or herself, such as drug/alcohol use, cutting, burning, running away, sexual promiscuity.
- Develops physical symptoms, such as unexplained soreness, pain or bruises around genital or mouth; sexually transmitted disease; pregnancy.

***The following are warning signs that a child or adolescent may be engaging in sexually harmful or abusive behavior.***

***Behaviors that may indicate increased risk include:***

- Regularly minimizing, justifying or

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someone in sexual activity.”

A child may harm another for reasons that range from “simple curiosity gone amok, lack of social and emotional skills in terms of knowing things like safe boundaries, and (lack of) understanding consent fully,” Coleman said. A child or adolescent may abuse another in response to adult material to which they’ve been exposed (including pornography) or due to other stresses in their lives, including bullying, difficulty in the home, response to abuse happening to him or her, or frustrations with a learning disability.

Because there are so many pathways that can lead a child to harm another child, Coleman said that a child should not be labeled as having something wrong with him or her, or that he will grow up to be a perpetrator. “Typically sexual behavior problems with a child, particularly ones that are harming another child, are just a real flag that we

need to step in and help that child with their behaviors.” The children involved, whether victim or abuser, may not realize that the behavior is harmful, Coleman noted.

For example, a five-year-old may ask another five-year-old to show his penis. That could be typical behavior for that age, where children are curious, and a caregiver should redirect the behavior and remind the child that there are rules such as “nobody should play without their clothes on in this family or anywhere we visit,” Coleman said. But if a five-year-old continues the behavior or uses sexually explicit language, that’s a flag.

Coleman said of particular interest are instances of sexual behaviors that are harmful to children where there is a three-year age gap, with the abuser being over the age of 12 and the other child being three years younger or just below age 12, and where

*Continued on page 2*

there's coercion, threats and manipulation.

According to the DOJ report, the number of youths coming to the attention of police for sex offenses increases sharply at age 12 and plateaus after age 14. A small number of juvenile offenders, one out of eight, are younger than age 12. The vast majority of offenders are male, with just seven percent being female.

The report also showed that the majority of juvenile sexual offenders have low sex-offense-recidivism rates. Coleman said that it would be wrong to think that "all children who have a problem with sexual behavior as a youth grow up to have sexual behavior problems." The majority of offenders who get treatment don't go on to re-offend.

Preventing sexual abuse, like many problems, begins in the home with knowledge and communication, Coleman emphasized. Parents and caregivers need to know about normal healthy sexual development behaviors to be in a good position to recognize a potential problem. Coleman suggested that parents develop a family safety plan.

The Stop It Now! website offers guidelines for such a plan, including how to talk to family members about sexual abuse and setting clear family guidelines on behavior. "This helps to set up a protective layer for children, so they know what safe behaviors are expected," Coleman said. For example, if a child complains that when he spends the night at a friend's home, the friend's older brother always walks in on him in the bathroom, that's a red flag.

But Coleman also emphasized that adults can't rely on children to tell them what's going on. "They're not going to disclose for a lot of complicated, kid reasons. We know that they have questions, and we want them to

**Warning Signs** *Continued from page 1*

denying the impact of inappropriate behaviors on others.

- Making others uncomfortable by consistently missing or ignoring social cues about others' personal or sexual limits and boundaries.
- Preferring to spend time with younger children rather than with peers.
- Insisting on physical contact with a child even when that child resists.
- Responding sexually to typical gestures of friendliness or affection.
- Offering alcohol/drugs, sexual material or inappropriate "privileges" to younger child.

**Stronger indicators of risk for abusive behavior include:**

- Linking sexuality and aggression in language or behavior; engaging in sexually harassing behavior online or in per-

son; and forcing any sexual interaction.

- Turning to younger or less powerful children rather than peers to explore natural sexual curiosity.
- The inability to control inappropriate sexual behaviors involving another child after being told to stop.
- Taking younger children to "secret" places or hideaways to play "special" undressing or touching games.

While any single behavior may suggest that a child needs help, these behaviors do not, in themselves, indicate that a child is likely to engage in ongoing sexually harmful behaviors. For more information about concerning behaviors or about resources, call the Stop It Now! confidential helpline at 1-888-PREVENT (1-888-773-8368).

Source: Stop It Now!

know who they can go to safely with those questions, who will do their best to get accurate information."

Parents often are reluctant to talk to their children about sexual abuse because they worry about busting their child's innocence and exposing them to sexual matters, Coleman said. But children "are being exposed, whether it's an advertisement on a bus for a steamy new album coming out, or whether it's something online, or whether it's something their friend showed them this morning before school started. I don't care how protective or vigilant you are as a parent, unless you live under a rock, your child will be exposed to some sort of sexual behaviors."

It's also important for parents to teach

their children about respecting other children's privacy and boundaries. The Stop It Now! hotline gets many calls from parents who have learned that their child sexually harmed another, Coleman said. Usually, the parents' first reaction is disbelief or denial that their child could do such a thing, and the parents are having trouble finding resources of support.

"It's really important for (these) parents to understand that their kid's sexual behaviors are different than adult sexual behaviors, that kids absolutely can be held to establish safer practices and boundaries, but we need to address it," Coleman said. "We can't just fluff it off to 'boys will be boys' or 'he'll grow out of it.' We need to understand that these are opportunities to help kids with their behaviors early."

Above all, Coleman urges parents to talk with others about their concerns and questions. "One of the things that we know about child sexual abuse is that it really thrives in secrecy." A parent concerned about her six-year-old's behavior can ask another parent, "Has your 6-year-old ever done this?"

"A key step is to help parents and caregivers feel comfortable about talking about sexual safety in the same way we talk about physical safety and emotional safety," Coleman said. Stop It Now! and other organizations provide guidance through their websites, phonelines and informational programs.

*Jane Sutter is a Rochester-area freelance writer.*

**FURTHER RESOURCES:**

*Stop It Now! based in Northampton, Mass. offers a helpline at 1-888-PREVENT (1-888-773-8368) and by email at [helpline@stopitnow.org](mailto:helpline@stopitnow.org). along with many tip sheets and resources at its website, [www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org). Stop It Now! Director Jennifer Coleman recommends that adults call the hotline with any concerns because there is value talking with another adult.*

*Available on the Stop It Now! website is an 18-page downloadable PDF titled: "Do Children Sexually Abuse Other Children? Preventing sexual abuse among children and youth."*

*The PDF includes answers to such questions as what is healthy sexual development; what is age-appropriate or developmentally expected sexual behavior; how to recognize and what are warning signs of sexually harmful behavior; what are signs that a child or youth is being sexually abused; what are some things adults can do to help prevent sexually harmful behavior between children; and what adults can do if they suspect their child is sexually harming another.*



# STEP-UP AND SPEAK OUT

## A PARENT'S GUIDE TO SELECTING YOUTH SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

Between soccer practice, tutoring sessions, and piano lessons, your child is frequently in the care of many different adults. By stepping up and speaking out to youth serving organizations in your community, you have the power to protect your child and countless others against child sexual abuse.

Organizations should be ready and willing to talk about their prevention measures. Following are some proactive questions to help you start the conversation.

### IS THERE A CHILD PROTECTION POLICY?

Youth serving organizations should have clearly defined child protection policies.

### DOES THE POLICY INCLUDE LIMITING ISOLATED ONE-ON-ONE SITUATIONS?

One-on-one time is important to a child's emotional growth and development, but it does not have to happen behind closed doors. One-on-one interactions should take place in an open, observable, and interruptible setting.

### HOW ARE EMPLOYEES AND VOLUNTEERS SCREENED?

Employee screening best practices includes an in-depth application, personal and professional references, criminal background check, and an extensive interview.

### DO OLDER AND YOUNGER CHILDREN INTERACT, AND IF SO, HOW?

Supervising contact between children and older/bigger youth requires structure and adult supervision. There should be separate areas and activities for different age groups. Make it clear that you would always like an adult present with your child.

### ARE THERE CLEAR PROCEDURES FOR REPORTING SUSPICIONS OR INCIDENTS OF ABUSE?

Push for organizations to provide mandatory reporting training for their staff. Over half of all mandated reporters fail to report suspicion of abuse. In most cases they are simply confused or uninformed about their responsibilities. You can help by sharing this information. If you have reason to believe abuse is occurring at an organization, trust your intuition and make a report.



**DARKNESS TO LIGHT**<sup>®</sup>  
END CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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# STEP-UP AND SPEAKOUT (CONT.)

## MORE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUTH SERVING ORGANIZATIONS:

- Are parents encouraged to drop in at any time?
- Can parents tour the facilities?
- Are your staff and volunteers trained in sexual abuse prevention and response?
- Do you have a code of conduct? May I have it?
- How are your policies disseminated and to whom?
- Are the children aware of the rules?
- How are older youth screened, monitored and supervised?
- Do you train, allow and empower your staff and volunteers to report suspicions of sexual abuse?
- If a staff member or volunteer violates the child sexual abuse prevention policy, what procedures and penalties follow?

IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE ANSWERS TO ANY OF THESE QUESTIONS,  
YOU DO NOT HAVE TO LEAVE YOUR CHILD.

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To learn more or to get trained to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse, visit [www.D2L.org](http://www.D2L.org).



ROMAN CATHOLIC  
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

## Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:

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Diocesan Coordinator  
of Safe Environment Education  
and Compliance,  
585-328-3228, ext. 1255  
or [Karen.Rinefield@dor.org](mailto:Karen.Rinefield@dor.org).

*Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.*

*To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator:*

Deborah Housel  
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;  
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,  
ext. 1555  
[victimassistance@dor.org](mailto:victimassistance@dor.org).

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# ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

## ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

### CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

#### Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>

*PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.*

#### NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>

*A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.*

## FOR PARENTS:

### Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>

*A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education*

#### Darkness to Light organization:

[www.d2l.org](http://www.d2l.org)

*Darkness to Light is a non-profit committed to empowering adults to prevent child sexual abuse.*

#### Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

#### iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>

*Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies*

## LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

#### Bivona Child Advocacy Center

(Monroe, Wayne counties):

[www.BivonaCAC.org](http://www.BivonaCAC.org)

585-935-7800

#### Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:

607-737-8449

[www.chemungcounty.com](http://www.chemungcounty.com)

#### Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:

315-253-9795

[www.cacofcayugacounty.org](http://www.cacofcayugacounty.org)

#### Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program

(Ontario County):

[www.cacfingerlakes.org](http://www.cacfingerlakes.org)

315-548-3232

#### STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:

[www.sthcs.org](http://www.sthcs.org)

716-372-8532

#### NYS State Central Registry

(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):

1-800-342-3720

#### NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)

866-313-3013

#### Tompkins County Advocacy Center:

[www.theadvocacycenter.org](http://www.theadvocacycenter.org)

607-277-3203

#### Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:

585-786-8846

#### Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:

315-531-3417, Ext. 6