

“A Close-up Look at Female Offenders in ‘Positions of Trust’”

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In the United States, we are in denial about both the frequency and the severity of the child sexual abuse that occurs throughout our society. We don't want to acknowledge that parents and relatives molest children. We are appalled by the sex scandals and cover-ups involving priests and ministers and most recently, university athletic coaches. And we refuse to seriously consider our nation's teachers as potential perpetrators. It is disturbing to concede that child sexual abuse occurs not only within families, but also in our churches and in our schools—wherever there are vulnerable children and offenders in powerful positions of authority and trust.

For decades, female teachers were viewed as above suspicion, enjoying a “carte blanche” blind trust with our nation's children. Only fairly recently have females working as teachers, coaches and administrators been arrested and convicted of sexual assault crimes against the young people in their care.

This workshop explores cases of female teacher-offenders who were found guilty of child sexual abuse. We will investigate the dynamics of their teacher-student relationships and discuss how the gender of the perpetrator impacts disclosure, public response and even sentencing. An interview with a convicted female sex offender (conducted Oct. 2011) offers unique insights into the crime of female teacher-male adolescent student sexual abuse.

In addition, participants will identify proactive strategies for possible prevention and early intervention.

Utah Children's Justice Symposium/
UPC Domestic Violence Conference
Zermatt Resort, Midway, Utah
May 14th - 16th, 2013

School personnel who molest children—Research frequently ignored

1998—*Education Week* published a three-part series, “A Trust Betrayed.”

“Of the nearly 250 cases of alleged staff-on-student sexual misconduct reviewed by *Education Week*, 43 of them, or nearly one in five, involved female employees. In five of those cases, the victims were girls. The rest were boys in middle or high school, ranging in age from 11 to 17.”¹

2007—“A Lingering Shame: Sexual Abuse of Students by School Employees.”

An Associated Press major study of teacher sexual misconduct based on AP reporters’ extensive investigation; published again in *Education Week*.

“The Associated Press’ seven-month investigation found 2,570 educators whose teaching credentials were revoked, denied, surrendered, or sanctioned from 2001 through 2005 following allegations of sexual misconduct. There are 3 million public school teachers nationwide, most devoted to their work. Yet the number of abusive educators—nearly three for every school day—speaks to a much larger problem in a system that is stacked against victims. Most of the abuse never gets reported. Those cases reported often end with no action. Cases investigated sometimes can’t be proven, and many abusers have several victims.”²

Adults in “positions of trust” are granted easy access to children:

- Day care providers; pre-school teachers
- Leaders of groups, clubs, activities (Scouts, drama, dance, art)
- Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders; camp directors & counselors
- School teachers—kindergarten through 12th grade; school administrators; mentors
- Coaches of youth athletic teams
- Staff at school and community programs providing services for “at risk” children

Offender motivations in female teacher-student sexual abuse cases

Pre-pubescent victims:

Offender motivations: power, control, anger, aggression and/or sexual gratification. May re-enact their own childhood abuse histories; may be sexually attracted to and aroused by children

Offenders use children’s curiosity and naivety about sex to initiate sexual behaviors.

Offenders manipulate victims by using their position of trust and authority.

Adolescent victims:

Romances; “love affairs” (lasting for months or years; often monogamous)

Female offenders may perceive victims as equals and as “lovers. Sexual-physical attraction may be mutual; the adult offenders and their victims may *both* perceive the sexual acts as consensual at the time of the offenses.

Offenders are often immature women with emotional problems and arrested social development; they seek romantic excitement through seductions of teen-age students whom they describe as their “soul mates” and “true loves.” They see their relationships as “special” and not subject to ethical and/or legal restrictions. There may be flagrant public displays of affection and juvenile patterns of note writing and e-mail messaging.

The gender of the perpetrator and of the victim may impact:

- **Disclosure frequency**
Male offender—female victim
Male offender—male victim
Female offender—male victim
Female offender—female victim
- **Public perceptions and response** (impact the jury pool?)
Female offender—male teenage victim: the abuse is often viewed as a harmless “rite of passage.” Male victims may be seen as “lucky young men” or “studs.” Cases may be highly sensationalized and gain national media attention.
- **Sentencing factors**
The legal definitions of various sexual offenses and the accompanying sentencing guidelines *vary greatly* across the United States. Yet female perpetrators appear to consistently receive shorter, lighter sentences than their male counterparts.

Prevention and early intervention

School Districts’ responsibilities:

Establish and enforce clear standards for professional behavior, including guidelines for electronic communication among teachers and students; use of social media (Facebook). Discuss appropriate vs. inappropriate teacher-student interactions, behavior and relationships; teach adults how to set limits and boundaries.

All district employees must receive mandatory, annual sexual abuse training covering:

- The ethical and legal duty to report child abuse (“mandated reporters”)*
- Reporting policies, procedures and the use of any standardized forms*

*Personal safety education for all students, K-12th grade: In addition to other health and safety issues, students need developmentally-appropriate education about sexual abuse. Students need training about appropriate and inappropriate behavior, *who* to tell and *how* to tell *if they experience or observe abuse or if a friend discloses to them.**

Administrators must refuse to “pass the trash” on to other schools or districts. ³

Inter-agency communication and cooperation among school districts, social services, law enforcement, and legal and child advocacy personnel are critical for our success.

*Yet perhaps the most important step is for educators and coaches and mentors and advisors—all of us who work with young people—to “police our own.” The problem is too insidious to ignore. It is not the children’s responsibility to somehow keep their selves safe. We must take to heart the most painful lessons of the Sandusky tragedy at Penn State. *We* adults must protect them by being their most vigilant and outspoken guardians. Our legal responsibility, our ethical loyalty, our most sacred trust is to the children.*

Footnotes:

¹ Hendrie, Caroline. "States Target Sexual Abuse By Educators," *Education Week*, April 30th, 2003, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2003/04/30/33abuse.h22.html>

² Irvine, Martha and Tanner, Robert. "Sex Abuse a Shadow Over U.S. Schools," *Education Week*, October 21, 2007, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/10/24/09ap-abuse.h27.html>

³ Graves, Bill. "Abusive teachers lose shield: 'Passing the trash' - A bill banning deals to hide sexual misconduct by educators will become law," *The Oregonian*, Friday, May 08, 2009 <http://www.oregonlive.com/education/oregonian/index.ssf?/base/news/124175130931200.xml&coll=7>

Resources:

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Vivian Ho. "Principal sentenced in molestation case," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 6, 2012 at <http://www.sfgate.com/crime/article/Principal-sentenced-in-molestation-case-4010883.php>

Jennifer Preston. "Rules to Stop Pupil and Teacher From Getting Too Social Online," *The New York Times*, published: December 17, 2011 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/business/media/rules-to-limit-how-teachers-and-students-interact-online.html>

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"A Lingering Shame," Associated Press, reported in *Education Week*, 2007 at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/collections/apsexabuse/index.html>

"A Trust Betrayed," series update in *Education Week*, April, May, 2003 at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/collections/trust-betrayed-update/index.html>