

People who prey on children

There is considerable misunderstanding around the subject of who exploits children for sex. The short word ‘paedophilia’ is a convenient term for headline writers, but understanding the different categories of people who have sex with children and the different definitions given to their motivation and *modus operandi* is vitally important. They work in different ways, with different methods and in different contexts, and they target different groups of children. If these people are to be stopped, then differentiated interventions and responses are needed.

Preferential paedophilia

Paedophiles are a specific group of exploiters who are sexually attracted to children below the age of puberty – in clinical definitions, they are considered to be sexual deviants who target children under the age of 13. Their behavioural patterns are well documented and these patterns can therefore be recognized and intercepted. They fall into different sub-categories such as sexual preference, exclusive or non-exclusive type, nature of sex offence, strategies used, ways of penetration, character traits, weak or strong social competences. Preferential paedophiles are found among all socio-cultural milieux and all social classes. Far from being the ‘monster’ many commentators depict, many are friendly and well integrated into their community and sometimes entirely above suspicion, not least because they do not openly talk about or display their paedophile tendencies.

Paedophile activity has been described as generally progressing through a number of stages: Paedophiles report that often depression, anxiety and boredom, and a sense of powerlessness are precursors to a rise in their deviant sexual arousal. This may lead them to orchestrate a situation in which they can act against children. Rarely do they act on impulse; generally they spend time setting up a situation in which the child can be abused: they put themselves into positions where they have access to children, gain the child’s (and sometimes the family’s) trust, isolate the child by promises and/or threats, give gifts and show an interest in the child’s hobbies, use threats or force, and may encourage the child to acquiesce by showing pornographic materials (see also below, ‘taking care of children’)

Prevention indicators

Some paedophiles do not progress beyond fantasizing about sex with children. If identified and intercepted at this stage – or if they seek assistance or treatment at this stage themselves – they may never act on their fantasies. Importantly, a detailed knowledge of paedophile behaviour patterns and profiles allows prevention officers, whether in the law enforcement or other communities, to act before a child is harmed.

Prevention strategies may also include treatment of the paedophile’s urge to act. These treatments, which may include psychological or drug-based therapies, are increasingly being written into law.

Although much has been written about the failure rate of such treatment and the high rate of repeat abuse (recidivism), there are few reliable statistics, just as there are few reliable statistics on the incidence of sexual exploitation of children. In general, psychological interventions are based on group dynamics therapies, aimed at building the paedophile’s generally deficient sense of social responsibility. The effectiveness of this treatment is difficult to determine because it is generally carried out in a prison setting or as a result of a sentence, and so cannot be detached from the state of punishment. The treatment may be of genuine benefit to some paedophiles.

Drug treatments designed to lower the sex drive of the paedophile are considered to be effective in reducing the possibility of sexual fantasies being acted out on impulse, but their effectiveness ends as soon as the patient stops taking them.

Paedophiles who do engage in sexual activity with children may prey upon them and expose themselves, touch and fondle or engage in penetrative sex. Sometimes they travel to places where they are able to procure children more easily or more covertly, in which case they join the ranks of so-called 'child sex tourists'.

Active paedophiles typically engage in sexual activity with a large number of children, partly because their interest in a child lasts only as long as the child has not reached puberty. Documented cases of active paedophiles brought to justice have unearthed records of sexual activity with scores of children.

Paedophile networks and acting alone

Paedophiles typically engage in identifiable behaviours: they attempt to justify their sexual attraction to young children as 'normal' by fraternizing – either personally or on the Net – with other paedophiles. The 'membership card' to such 'clubs' is often a specified number of pornographic images of young children, since the collection of child pornography – a way not only of satisfying lewd fantasies but also of fixing the age of the child at a pre-pubertal stage – is a common paedophile activity. Similarly, paedophiles often keep documentary evidence of their activity in the form of indexes of children exploited, with their personal details and records of the exploitation.

One specific category of paedophile, however, almost always acts out his fantasies alone. This is the father/stepfather/brother or uncle who preys upon children in his own family, boys or girls. The specific case of incest presents special characteristics: the incestuous father, for example, does not feel any general attraction towards children who are not his own. He acts only within the family relationship. Similarly, the child victim suffers a particular form of harm: sexual abuse within the family breaks all the rules of kinship boundaries that traditionally codify the identity of the child.

When the line between family relationship and sexual relationship is crossed, the very basis of the child's self-identity and place in society is destroyed and the child suffers confusion and isolation in addition to the health and reproductive risks faced by all abused children. Incest has traditionally been the only recorded form of paedophile activity by women, although in recent years women have also known to be among the ranks of child sex tourists, and there have been a number of high profile cases of women acting as accomplices to procure victims for male paedophiles and themselves abusing the children. By far the majority of paedophiles, however, are men.

Situational abusers

Paedophile activity is generally considered particularly heinous because the children targeted are so young, yet paedophiles are by no means the only group who use children for sex.

Some men use children for sex not because they have a predisposition to do so but just because they want to or find themselves in a situation where it is possible. Such men engage in the criminal activity of sex with minors (under-18s) without necessarily feeling any real sexual attraction towards them.

Such abusers may well be family men with regular partners and in every way 'normal' lives. For this reason they are particularly difficult to identify and often are protected by those around them who find it impossible to accept that 'Mr Normal' next door – or the husband/brother/son – could possibly have sex with children.

These are the men that society in many ways protects, looking upon their criminal acts as momentary lapses in an otherwise blame-free existence. Yet these exploiters have committed a criminal act: they have subjected a child to physical violation, reinforced his/her vulnerability to exploitation, undermined the child's self-esteem and trust in adults, taken the child a step along the road to continued exploitation, degradation and ill health. The criminal activity of situational abusers can only be mitigated by the law; such men cannot be 'treated'; the only response to their crime is punishment.

Situational exploiters may have many sex partners; both adult and minor partners may be involved, a particularly hazardous situation for both adults and exploited children, since multiple sex partners

constitute a severe health risk and children in particular are vulnerable to STD infection because of their fragility, developing physiology and inability to insist on condom use. Some may have only one episode of sexual activity with a child.

The ‘I-don’t-give-a-damn’s

Members of this group have sex with children through negligence, stupidity or, more often than not, because they simply do not care. Their behaviour is no less abhorrent, no less unforgivable and no less criminal.

Into this category fall, for example, young men who travel overseas and measure the success of their holiday by how many beers they drank in a night, how loud they sang in the bar and how many young girls they ‘pulled’. Sometimes such men know that the young girls they are buying for sex are under-age, but they excuse themselves on the basis that this is ‘normal’ in whichever country they are visiting (it never is). Or they may simply prefer not to know the age of the girl and so excuse themselves on the grounds that ‘all the women here look like 12 year-olds’ (not an excuse in law or common decency).

Exploiters like these men are also ‘situational abusers’ because, in other situations, they would often not dream of having sex with a child. Often they have good jobs, girlfriends and a decent lifestyle back home. They are no less criminals for all that. As public awareness of situational abuse increases, as more people become aware of the damage done to children by such behaviour (the abuser may only sleep with one child but that child may have to service a dozen ‘one-off’ abusers in a night), and as laws are increasingly revised to take account of sex offences committed abroad (extraterritoriality), these young men will find themselves paying dearly for exploiting a child for sex.

Into this category also fall the large numbers of men who are not clinically paedophiles but who buy the services of children trapped in prostitution. Although media reports of ‘child sex tourists’ may lead people to believe that it is only foreign men who exploit children they travel to meet, in fact the clients of those who prostitute children – in brothel, on street corner or more recently in deserted store premises in a modern shopping centre – are predominantly local men. Often these men do not care whether the person they sexually exploit is adult or child; to them the person is a ‘service provider’, hardly a human being. Sometimes, however, the client specifically seeks a child, believing that this is less of a health risk or indeed a positive rejuvenating opportunity, and in some circumstances because it is cheaper.

Understanding as a basis for action

It is clear from these brief descriptions that, with regard to the commercial sexual exploitation of children, it is important to ‘call a spade a spade’. Exaggerated and incorrect use of the term ‘paedophile’ blinds people to the fact that the ‘normal guy’ living next door might also be using children for sex (whether paid sex or in abusive situations in the family). Grouping together preferential abusers and situational abusers under-plays the possibility that a man who has otherwise normal relations with adult women might also be abusing minors. Ignorance of the activities of situational abusers denies the impact such men can have on the children who provide a brief moment of ‘fun’ for them. And these misunderstandings can lead to inappropriate interventions and responses.

Beyond understanding for the sake of vigilance and protection, it is also important to understand the variegated nature of sexual exploitation of children so that it can be effectively stopped. This is particularly true in the case of ‘care-takers’ who use children for sex.

Taking care of children

Many people devote their lives to taking care of children, and it is important to recognize that such people are motivated by a deep, generous desire to make the world a better place for children to live in. In a way, such people are exploited too, by those who abuse the position of ‘care-taker’ to gain access to children and earn their trust, setting them up for abuse and exploitation. Such people often escape

detection because they are in positions of trust, and even those who may have concerns about their habits or behaviour find it difficult to believe that they might be involved in sexually exploiting children.

In countries of the industrialized world, there have been examples of paedophiles who take up employment in children's agencies, local authority departments, organizations like scouts and guides, youth clubs and half-way houses for street kids, specifically to manoeuvre themselves into a position where they can identify and have access to vulnerable children, gain their trust and encourage them to pose for pornographic pictures or videos, engage in sex or provide sex to others in exchange for favours. A Royal Commission of Enquiry into paedophile activity in the Australian state of New South Wales in the 1990s was triggered after two young boys reported having been abused while in the care of social services; the enquiry uncovered several cases of paedophile infiltration of social service departments, as well as the prostitution of boys through a half-way house financed from charitable donations.

Since the demise of communism in the countries of Eastern Europe, there have been cases of western paedophiles presenting themselves as philanthropists who want to help by providing funds for a children's home, or directly to families of young children, or in other ways that help them to gain the trust of authorities, communities, families and children to facilitate their abuse.

In some developing countries or in countries recovering from conflict, care-takers find their equivalents in procurers who entrap children by setting up bogus centres for unaccompanied minors, or vocational training establishments, or by organizing 'beauty contests' or charm and fashion contests. Often children have lost or been separated from their families, have been forced to flee to unknown areas or cross borders into countries with a different language. They may be living in orphanages, camps or billets, where they are dependent on others for food and basic services. Cases of infiltration into legitimate aid agencies providing such services were documented in Africa in the late 1990s.

In Asia in the 1980s, United Nations peacekeeping troops were reported to be involved in organizing prostitution of young people under the age of 18; an internal enquiry led to a battalion of European soldiers being sent home. The military, religious orders and other groups in which men predominate and can have access to children have all provided examples of both paedophile and non-paedophile abusers in action. The examples given here illustrate how important it is that organizations and institutions dedicated to providing care and services for children should put in place careful recruitment procedures and strict codes of behaviour, and act promptly on reports of abuse.

Ultimately all social sectors are responsible for taking care of children, and all must accept responsibility for allowing their exploitation to continue. The vast majority of people do not exploit children, but many are silently complicit.