

Sexual Abuse and You: Understanding the Consequences

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Ignorance, I was taught as a child, is not knowing something that a person *ought* to know. Stupidity is talking as though we know a lot about something that in fact we are ignorant of. I am a survivor of childhood torture and sexual abuse for over three years. I become very angry, and then frustrated, at so much of what I hear people saying today when speaking of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

In his book *Betrayed as Boys*, Richard Gartner, Ph.D. writes: "Sexual betrayal encompasses a greater range of human experience than the more common expressions of sexual abuse, incest, and sexual trauma. Put simply, betrayal is the violation of implicit or explicit trust. It is by definition an interpersonal experience. The closer and more

necessary the relationship in which it appears, the greater the degree of betrayal and violation. I call your attention to two words especially: *betrayal and violation*. (Page 13)

I can write only from the aspect of a boy who was betrayed and violated by two adult males, and a fellow scout who was forced to rape me, after he himself had been raped by the same perpetrator. Since the perpetrator of the betrayal and violation of me was a friend of my Boy Scout scoutmaster, there were some very specific results of the violations and betrayals. Much of what happened as a result of repeated rapes of myself as a mere kid and early teen, is common to males betrayed and violated by a member of their family, coach, teacher, clergy or any trusted adult.

Aspects of betrayal

Several aspects of the present discussion of childhood sexual betrayal and violation trouble me. *First*, there is the failure to remember that we have an adult who is forcing himself on a child or youth for the sake of his own sexual pleasure. *Secondly*,

many people say they do not know what we are talking about when we speak of this sexual betrayal/violation. Let me make it clear! We are speaking about any of the following: an adult who makes a child/teen strip naked; touches him when naked or puts his hands inside of or on top of, the child's clothes, over the genitals, which in this instance includes the buttocks, takes pictures of the naked child, hugs, kisses or cuddles the child even when the child makes it clear they do *not* want this. It includes fellatio and sodomy, (oral and/or anal sexual penetration). It includes taking video or other forms of photo exploitation of the child. And it includes making the child/teen touch, kiss or in any other way give pleasure to the perpetrator's penis, masturbating the adult, or having to permit the perpetrator take the boy's penis out of the child's clothes and either suck on it, touch it, or mastur-

bate the child. Caressing, massaging, or "playing with" the boy's buttocks is also a violation.

It is further betrayal and violation to "sell" or "trade" the child for some other adult to violate in any of the ways mentioned above. It is also a felony in most if not all States, distinct from the crime of the exploitation itself.

Third there is a failure to understand that after a certain age a boy may not consider himself to have been "abused," even though he legally was exploited.

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Dr. Gartner has an excellent discussion of this in his book on pages 17ff. He points out that some post-pubescent boys may not consider themselves traumatized when their perpetrator is a person of the gender the boy prefers. Such a boy will, nonetheless, need to be helped to "come to terms with the fact that he was exploited."

While it can be easier to see what damage is done to a child who is so violated, some adults think that if the male teen was the victim the teen must have agreed to it at least to some degree and took some pleasure in it. A moment's thought would let any thinking person know that this is just not true.

Remember, we are talking about a child who has been betrayed and

violated. The betrayal causes the child to lose trust in the entire class of person who perpetrated this betrayal and violation. It is more than fifty years since I was last raped, and trust of male adults is still very difficult for me. Children betrayed by coaches, teachers, clergy, cannot feel secure around adults in these positions for a very long time. The fear is that this is what all teachers etc. do to children their age.

The feeling of violation is a suffering that only another survivor, or therapists who work with survivors, can understand. A loving partner of a survivor can also become aware of the depth of suffering. But even then, that can be at the end of a long and difficult effort.

Painful consequences

The astounding fact is that this long list of painful consequences is found in most all survivors to some degree or the other. That is, most survivors will have a cluster of many of these problems. They are tortured by their doubts and fears and feeling that no one will believe them. Too many survivors will wait a number of years before talking about the abuse. Some never talk about it. Some commit suicide rather than talk about it. Others develop a long list of physical and/or emotional sufferings. Not a few boys and men receive serious and painful injuries as

a result of being raped. A certain number will pick up a sexually transmitted disease.

These problems are further complicated when the betrayal and violation of the boy is by a parent or family member. It has special consequences for their spiritual/religious life if the perpetrator was a clergyman or religious person. If the person you were most expected to be able to trust betrays you, whom can you trust? If the person who violated you was a representative of God, how can you trust that there is a loving God who protects you? Pious platitudes cannot remove the damage done in these cases. Some writers refer to this as "soul murder."

This seems a very accurate term for me as I speak with men who are the survivors of abuse by a clergyman. We truly struggle with our belief that a God *does exist* but we cannot understand how a representative of God could do something so vicious to us when such a person is a trusted and respected clergyman. Many men cannot go to any church after they have been betrayed. Church and the property connected to it has become for them a place of danger and extreme degradation. It is better to stay as far from it as possible. And yet, so many, will long for the feelings of peace and security they remember having felt, before they were violated. A sincere apology is a beginning of healing, but a very small beginning.

After coming to understand both the depth and breadth of the consequences to a child or youth who has been betrayed and violated, is it still possible to think "victims" are "over-reaching?" The term survivor is a very appropriate term. These boys and men live with all these burdens and seldom bother any-

one else with their sufferings. They have an inner rage that is always ready to explode. Still, most of the time, most survivors are not violent and do not themselves become abusers. Most men who betray and violate boys have also been betrayed and violated. However, that is a far cry from the myth that most abused boys become abusers themselves.

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said it yourself? I can understand the feeling, because most people do not know what a manipulative perpetrator can and will do to get his way. Even therapists have asked me why I went on the Boy Scouts campouts if I knew I would be violated. Let me try to explain this.

First, every perpetrator will have his method to assure himself of the silence and obedience of the child. Some use threats of death to the boy himself, a younger sibling or even his entire family. Others use different forms of effective threats - the threat of having him expelled, of saying that you are the one who took advantage of them, that the child initiated it, the use of alcohol and drugs so the child is not aware of what is happening or is unable to respond. In some cases, the adult is so much bigger and stronger that even a strong teen would know he would not be able to fight him off. In my situation, the experience of always being strangled until I was just losing consciousness was sufficient to put terror into me even to this day. I knew that a fight would have gotten me killed, and I would

The Black Magic of the Abuse of Power

"I just feel that any 16 year old boy who claims he was abused is lying. By that age he can fight his way free. At the very least he won't put himself into the situation where 'it' can happen again." Does that sound familiar? Have you maybe

The vast majority of our priests are faithful in their ministry and happy in their vocation.

- U.S. Bishops, Origins, Nov 28, 2002

have been found drowned in a near-by river, which was another threat he used. Other survivors tell of equal or worse forms of intimidation. The secret that the perpetrator uses to trap the boy is that he has some very specific power over the child and he knows when and how to best use it. Sexual betrayal and violation of children happens because and adult has some power and the child feels absolutely powerless. Sometimes, that power is as simple as the question, "who will they believe, me or him?"

As an example of this sense of powerlessness just think of a very petite woman being attacked by a huge professional football or basketball player. Would anyone insist that she could have and should have "fought him off?" Most men, even strong men would not have been able to "fight him off." The imbalance of power is not limited to the physical realm. Powerlessness can come from many sources. Sometimes it comes from the perpetrator having a weapon.

The intimidation by some perpetrators relies on the goodness of the boy he will violate. The threat will be to torture some person who is even more unable to defend himself than the child he is violating. I remember the capture of a US Navy ship (the Pueblo) at sea during, I believe, the Korean War. A Captain Bucher and his crew were taken to the mainland and tortured for weeks. Eventually Captain Bucher gave the

enemy the information they wanted. After the crew was released Captain Bucher was court-martialed to the dismay of the nation. When Captain Bucher was interviewed after his court martial he stated that, while he had been trained to withstand any kind of torture of *himself* rather than give up military secrets, *none* of his training prepared him to have to watch his young crew, really just boys, be tortured and remain silent. Some children accept being violated in order to protect a smaller brother or friend from being violated, or a sister or mother etc. This certainly does not take away from, but rather adds to, their feeling of betrayal and violation.

The list of ways that survivors have been intimidated with is long and shows the creativity of sexual predators. I will not mention any more of them for fear that it would give ideas to someone who might read this or talk about it to someone who is a predator. It is tragic that evil people can be so ingenious in discovering ways to inflict pain and humiliation.

Think about it. Who has power over you? What will you do or not do to have this person not abuse you? Many of us adults have someone whom we know who could make our life miserable, a boss, and supervisor, spouse. We are in a sense "fearful" of them. What then can we expect of a child or a teenager who feels so powerless?

The following is a list of very common results in the lives of adults who were betrayed and violated as children or teens:

- We wonder and worry about our sexual orientation
- We fear we have been turned into a homosexual
- We feel that we have been ruined at the core of our being
- We confuse sex and love
- We fear that we somehow caused it and are responsible for it
- We doubt that we are "real men."
- We suffer from anxiety and depression
- We usually have addictions to food, drink or drugs
- We feel dirty and ashamed
- We are unable to feel that we are not guilty
- We feel worthless
- We often do not function well as responsible adults
- We have sexual dysfunction in our marriages
- We commonly act out sexually in an obsessive compulsive way
- We have life long problems in relationships and intimacy
- We have sleep disturbances and nightmares
- We are filled with self-hatred
- We worry that we will never be well
- We see sex as dirty
- We may have a sexual addiction
- We may be addicted to pornography
- We may use pornography to masturbate
- We can't trust
- We can't connect our unacceptable behavior to our having been betrayed and violated
- We find it difficult to admit to the betrayal/violation
- We find it difficult to seek help or to find competent therapists if and when we do reach out
- We feel helpless
- We feel hopeless
- We feel profoundly lonely
- We feel that we must not tell or it will ruin the family
- We doubt that we would be believed if we do tell
- We feel we will be shunned if we tell
- We fear being rejected by family and loved ones
- We fear being called a liar
- We fear being sued for having broken the silence
- We fear that we might become one of them, an abuser

Betrayal and violation of a child or teen is truly an unspeakable crime and a tragically painful attack on the body and soul of a powerless and innocent child.

Societal refutation

The prurient remarks heard about teenage boys who have had sex with an older female, whether a mother, sister, babysitter, teacher or any woman that has some form of real power over him, is especially hurtful. The boy knows it was wrong but hears men and other boys talk as though he "got lucky." What such irresponsible comments do is, they make the child feel ashamed, guilty, and wondering why it is that he has such mixed feelings about it. He can't deny that he enjoyed some of it. He can't deny that in some way he "went along with it." He knows that what happened was not right, it was not an experience of him being the male in the situation as he had expected. And he knows that he can't be sure that this won't happen again, that he won't be in "serious trouble", that he won't have terrible consequences for what happened. He feels powerless and emasculated and it will very likely cause him problems in his sexual relating to girls and

women the rest of his life. He feels toyed with. Commonly such boys in later life have erectile dysfunction and will not feel comfortable having sex with their wife. If they have children they have unfounded fears about their children and can communicate a fear of sex as something that is bad, dirty, or dangerous. These are rather serious consequences for "having gotten lucky."

Repeat violators

One of the most confusing aspects of sexual betrayal and violation for many people today has to do with what they consider an unfair punishment for a purportedly single act.

Let me say that a single act can be as devastating as repeated acts. If you have a difficult time relating to this, then think of some young boy or teen that you very much love. Then think of him being sexually betrayed and violated, even "just" once. Would you chastise him for making too much of it? I doubt it. I suspect

you would feel great anger and not rest until the perpetrator is severely punished.

Many of the cases in the Catholic Church today are portrayed as a single violation of a single child many years or even decades ago. The fact is that a true child molester perpetrates many acts on many individual victims. Perhaps only one victim will come forward. Perhaps that one will downplay what happened to him and the number of times because he is so embarrassed and feels so damaged by it. When the betrayed and violated boy does come forward it is *crucial* to condemn him for "harming the good reputation" of the adult.

Certainly there is no way that I, or anyone else but the perpetrator, could honestly tell how many boys/teens he betrayed and how often. There may well be some perpetrators who, in a moment of madness or drunken foolishness, violate a boy a single time and never repeat that. But with the huge range of what is clearly betrayal and violation, I personally find it difficult to believe in the single offense. These single offenses could certainly occur. I think, however, that single offenses are much more rare than most people want to accept as fact.

Betrayal and violation of a child or teen is truly an unspeakable crime and a tragically painful attack on the body and soul of a powerless and innocent child. Research is beginning to find that there may be as

many as one in six boys who are sexually betrayed and violated by the age of 16. One study mentioned in *Betrayed as Boys*, states that, if the betrayal does not include touching, such as making the child take his clothes off, or having the child masturbate himself, be videotaped or photographed, then the number rises to one in four boys before the age of 16!

Survivors of sexual betrayal have a better chance of overcoming the effects of the violations and betrays the sooner they seek help. There is a sense of power in simply "breaking the silence" about what happened to them.

Resource for help

Adult and teenage survivors can find a great deal of help, support and encouragement by going to a website that is managed by Male Survivor, National Organization against Male Sexual Victimization. This website is located at <http://www.malesurvivor.org>. Mail can be directed to: Male Survivor, PMB 103, 5505 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20015-2601

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Catholicism is a comprehensive way of life. In our fragmented ... and fragmenting society, it may be considered a wisdom and a set of practices informing all aspects of life.

- R. Scott Appleby, Origins, Nov 7, 2002