



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Signs of sexual abuse may be subtle

By Jane Sutter

Child sexual abuse remains a hush-hush problem that many parents don't want to even think about, but ignoring it can prove harmful to the children that those adults love and want to protect.

In New York State, the number of child sexual abuse cases (that meet the criteria of actual abuse) amounts to about 6 percent of all abuse and neglect cases, according to Timothy Hathaway, executive director of the non-profit Prevent Child Abuse New York, a chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America.

But Hathaway believes the numbers don't tell the entire story.

"We know that children, if they are (sexually) abused, they've been groomed by their abuser in such a way that the child doesn't realize that it's abuse," Hathaway said. "They may feel uncomfortable, they may feel this is kind of weird, but there is a grooming factor that the abuser builds with the child,



What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is a sexual offense against a child, such as rape, sodomy, engaging a child in a sexual activity, or engaging a child in—or promoting a child's—sexual performance.

Touching offenses:

- Fondling
- Touching sexual organs
- Making a child touch an adult sexually
- Attempted or actual sexual intercourse
- Rape

Sexual exploitation:

- Child pornography
- Child prostitution
- Sex rings (this involves one or more adults who abuse children in small groups)
- Ritualistic abuse (sexual abuse as part of a ceremony)

with the family of the child, and (the abuser) approaches the child in a way that the child may not even know what is happening."

Sexual abuse ranges from non-touching offenses, such as exhibitionism, to fondling, intercourse or using a child for pornographic materials, according to the brochure "Recognizing and Reporting Abuse and Neglect," a collaboration of Prevent Child Abuse New York, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, and the New York City Administration for Children Services.

Children may be reluctant to tell a parent or trusted adult about the abuse, because they're scared, Hathaway said. The abuser may have threatened them or told them no one will believe them. "Or in some of the more extreme cases, children are told, 'If you tell anyone about this, then I'm going to kill you or kill your family or kill your dog.'"

In most instances of sexual abuse, the child usually knows the perpetrator, Hathaway said. It could be an adult in authority such as a coach or babysitter, a neighbor, a

friend of the family or a family member, so the child feels all kinds of pressures about disclosing the abuse.

As with all kinds of matters related to children, parents need to be paying attention to changes in a child's behavior, to certain types of conversations, to physical signs that may indicate abuse. Hathaway listed a variety of examples of behavioral changes, such as:

- A child, who previously spent time at a friend's house, no longer wants to go there.
- A child who normally is withdrawn, becomes outgoing and wants to be best friends with a lot of other kids.
- A child who normally is outgoing, becomes withdrawn.
- A child complains of frequent stomach aches; these could be a sign of anxiety. There may be changes in their eating patterns or they may complain of frequent headaches.

"Those should be yellow flags going up to parents, for parents to say, 'Hey, I've got to

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pay attention here,” Hathaway said.

“We know that children going through the trauma of sexual abuse or any trauma ... they are going to tell us in a number of different ways that their world is in trouble,” Hathaway said. Those ways may well be indirect, such as a child asking questions about boundaries in a relationship such as “Is it ok if somebody does this to somebody else?”

Or a child may be more open, according to Hathaway. “Sometimes kids will say, ‘I’m really uncomfortable with this person’ or ‘I really don’t want to sleep over there anymore.’ Or ‘So-and-so wants to buy me something.’”

If parents sense something is different in their children’s behavior or in their conversations, they should listen to their instincts, Hathaway said.

When asked how parents can have their radar up, but not be paranoid about other adults in contact with their children, Hathaway responded: “What we say to parents is, first of all, the best, most protective thing that they can do is build a close relationship with their children by talking to them on a regular basis, listening to them, we emphasize this so much ... Put aside that temptation as an adult to talk at your children, (but instead) listen to your children and the concerns that they are sharing.”

Should a child disclose that abuse has happened or what sounds like abuse, it’s important that parents take that seriously, even if it’s about a family member or someone close to the family, Hathaway emphasized. Expressing disbelief, such as “how could this person possibly have done this, you must have imagined it,” could be detrimental.

A small amount of research has been done on the issue of disclosure, Hathaway said, and



it shows that if a child tells someone about abuse, and he or she is not believed, or nothing happens as a result of the disclosure, that child will not tell anyone else again, until seven years later, on average. The abuse may continue then and not be caught for a number of years, Hathaway said.

It’s important for kids to hear from their parents that they are taking the allegations seriously, but not have parents overreact or panic. He suggested that parents say: “I hear what you’re saying to me. This is a very, very important issue. I’m glad that you’ve shared this with me. We want to keep talking about this, and we want to make sure that you are safe and protected, and you feel safe and protected.”

If a parent believes abuse has happened and the alleged abuser is a family member, then a parent should call the New York State Child Abuse Reporting Hotline at 1-800-342-3720, Hathaway said. If the alleged abuser is

not a family member, a parent should call 911 to report it to local law enforcement.

Even if a parent just suspects abuse but is not sure, a call to the hotline should be made, said Hathaway. The hotline will notify the local Child Protective Services (CPS) who will investigate and take the needed action to protect the child. Often a Child Advocacy Center, such as Bivona in Rochester, will work with CPS, law enforcement and other agencies in the field of sexual assault to coordinate the investigation.

Preventing child abuse from ever happening is a key focus for Prevent Child Abuse New York, and much of that work focuses on helping families be strong and stay strong, according to Hathaway. To that end, the group conducts a public awareness campaign that includes showing a film called “Resilience” to engage conversation on protecting children and helping families be healthy.

The organization also conducts free “train the trainer” sessions. Those trained, in turn, go back to their organizations and teach others the need for building resiliency in families and the techniques for doing so.

The website of **Prevent Child Abuse New York** at <https://preventchildabuseny.org/> offers a variety of resources, including fact sheets and brochures. For more information on child abuse, building strong families and the various programs the organization offers, go to the website or call the group’s helpline at 1-800-244-5373.

Jane Sutter is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

Learn About Problem Behavior

If you feel uncomfortable with an adult’s behavior around children, trust your instincts. Learn as much as you can about problem behavior.

Adults or older children who sexually abuse or are looking to sexually abuse may:

- *Seek to get time alone, or insist on time alone, with a child.*
- *Refuse to let a child set their own limits.*
- *Insist on physical contact (hugging, kissing, tickling, etc.) even when the child does not want the attention.*
- *Be overly interested in the sexuality of a particular child or teen.*
- *Spend all or most of their spare time with children and have little interest in spending time with adults.*
- *Regularly offer to baby-sit or take children overnight.*
- *Buy children expensive gifts or give them money for no apparent reason.*
- *Frequently walk in on children or teens in the bathroom.*

Source: Prevent Child Abuse New York

Recognizing and Reporting Sexual Abuse

Symptoms of sexual abuse may include physical and behavioral signs. Many children who are sexually abused never exhibit any physical signs. Behavioral signs are more common.

Physical indicators of child sexual abuse:

- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Torn, stained or bloody underclothing
- Pain or itching in the genital area
- Bruises or bleeding in the genital, vaginal or anal area

- Venereal disease
- Pregnancy

Behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse:

- Unwillingness to change for, or participate in, gym class
- Withdrawal from family, school, or friends
- Reverting to more childish or infantile behavior
- Bizarre, sophisticated or unusual sexual behavior or knowledge
- Reports of sexual abuse

Reporting sexual abuse:

If the abuse was by someone in the child's family or household, make a report to the New York State Child Abuse Reporting Hotline at 1-800-342-3720. If you are a mandated reporter, call 1-800-635-1522. The hotline will notify the local Child Protective Services (CPS), who will investigate and take needed action to protect the child.

If the abuse was by someone outside of the family and household, call 911.

Online and Texting Safety Tips for Children and Parents

Tips for Children and Teens:

Parents, share these tips with your children. Tell them:

- Don't post personal information online (name, age, birth date, address, telephone number, or school name). This information can be used by others to find out where you and your family live.
- Don't post your picture or pictures of your family online – they can be copied or changed or used to find you.
- Don't send any inappropriate photo or message by email or text.
- Don't post your plans and activities in a chat room or on your personal website.
- Don't post entries that make it clear that no one is at your home.
- Don't communicate with someone who has made you uncomfortable or afraid. Tell your parents or a trusted adult if someone does.
- Don't join online groups or games without talking to your parents.
- Don't meet with someone you met online without first telling your parents or guardian.
- Don't post hurtful or inappropriate messages. If someone else posts hurtful or inappropriate messages -- Don't respond, but do tell a teacher, parent or other adult.
- Don't click on any link that you don't know, and you are not sure is legitimate.
- Don't buy any "apps" or "in app" purchases without talking to your parents or guardian.
- Don't enable any location services without talking to your parents or guardian.
- Do remember that people can lie online and say they are something they are not. Someone who says they are a 12-year-old girl could really be an older man looking to harm you.
- Do save messages that upset you and show them to your parents.
- Do share your password with your parents.

Tips for parents:

- Do teach your child not to post identifying information on the Internet.
- Do set a limit for how much time your child can spend online.
- Do keep the computer in a public room in the house.



- Don't have an Internet-connected computer in your child's bedroom.
- Do utilize parental controls provided by your Internet Service Provider and/or blocking software. (Contact your Internet ISP if you have questions).
- Do talk to your children about purchasing "in app" products.
- Do talk to your child about using any location services on their device.
- Do periodically review your child's computer, emails and messages. You should have all of your children's passwords.
- Do spend time with your child online. Have them show you their favorite online destinations. Get to know your child's online friends as you would their real-life friends. Learn to navigate the web.
- Do know who they text and email. Most providers have online ways to identify frequent contacts so you can see if someone new appears as a contact.
- Do monitor your child's access to the Internet and texting.
- Do talk to your child about the danger of Internet predators.
- Do watch for unexplained changes in your child's behavior.
- Don't hesitate to seek help from law enforcement if you think a predator may be targeting your child.

Source: Department of Justice



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:
Karen Rinefield,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228, ext. 1255
or 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
victimsassistance@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

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

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>

Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center

(Monroe, Wayne counties):

www.BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:

607-737-8449

www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:

315-253-9795

www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program

(Ontario County):

www.cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:

www.d2l.org

STEUBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:

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
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:

585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:

315-531-3417, Ext. 6