

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

Julie Brand, M.S.

CAPER Consulting: Child Abuse Prevention, Education and Recovery

Web site: <http://www.caperconsulting.com>

E-Mail: julie_brand@caperconsulting.com

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 an esteemed football coach, and most recently a high power businessman accused of trafficking young girls. We refuse to seriously consider our nation's teachers as potential perpetrators. It is disturbing to acknowledge that child sexual abuse occurs 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 in our schools, our churches and other community agencies been arrested and convicted of sexual assault crimes against the young people in their care.

We *are* making progress in holding female offenders accountable. However, the gender of the perpetrators and of the victims continues to impact victim disclosure, reports to law enforcement, public opinion, prosecution and sentencing.

Female-dominated “position of trust” roles with easy access to children:

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

Offender characteristics:

Immaturity; arrested social development as exhibited by the flagrant public displays of affection and highly juvenile written patterns of communication.

May have mild to profound emotional problems. (Defense attorneys have frequently cited “bi-polar personality disorder” as a justification for their clients' behavior.)

Emotionally “*needy*” and crave excitement, attention and affirmation. Often the offenders are married and they may have children of their own.

They *know* their behavior is wrong—but they view the “relationship” as “special” and therefore not subject to standard ethical and legal guidelines for teacher-student behavior.

Female offender motivations for abusing adolescent males:

Seeking romance and excitement through the romanticized seduction of a much younger male

Seeking attention; looking for “love”

Female offenders often perceive their victims as equals and as “lovers” or “soul mates.”

The sexual-physical attraction may be mutual and perceived of as “consensual” by both the perpetrator and her victim.

The gender of the perpetrator may impact:

- The frequency of victim disclosure
- The frequency of incidents being reported (even by “mandated reporters”)
- Arrest of the alleged perpetrator
- Successful prosecution
- Sentencing

The legal definitions of various sexual offenses and the accompanying sentencing guidelines *vary greatly* across the United States. Often there is considerable judicial discretion. Yet female perpetrators appear to consistently receive shorter, lighter sentences than males who are convicted of identical crimes.

- Public perceptions and response (impacting juries?)

Cases of female teacher offenders molesting their adolescent male students are often sensationalized by the media. The sexual abuse may be viewed as a harmless “rite of passage” for the “lucky” young man.” Defense attorneys may attempt to re-define the sexual assaults as “consensual.” But sexual acts cannot be “consensual” if one of the people involved is too young to legally give consent. *Non-consensual sexual intercourse equals rape; having sexual intercourse with a minor is rape.*

Two phenomena that have impacted an increase in the identification and prosecution of female sex offenders:

1) Computer/mobile device teacher-student communication (email, text messages, call messages, photo files, etc.) can constitute forensic evidence of an inappropriate relationship. (Narcissists often like to take and to share “selfies.”)

In many cases, a history of sexual messaging precedes the sexual assaults. Early detection and intervention may prevent an actual sexual assault from occurring.

2) Recognizing that the sexual assault of an underage boy by a female perpetrator *is a crime* (and not a “rite of passage”) is an important change in attitude. Labeling the assaults as “molestation” or “rape” can lead to the successful prosecution of females and to increased support and services for their victims.

Prevention and early intervention:

School Districts (and other child-serving agencies) must:

1) Establish clear standards for appropriate adult-student communication and behavior. These apply to all employees and to volunteers, coaches, etc.

Guidelines must include specific rules for electronic communication, use of social media, etc. These must be clearly communicated to staff, students and parents, both orally and in writing

2) Guarantee that *all* employees receive compulsory annual child abuse training which includes:

- Signs and symptoms of physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect and the various ways they might observe or hear about suspected abuse;
- The ethical and *legal* duty of “mandated reporters” to make reports;
- The reporting policies and procedures and the use of any standardized forms

3) Hold mandated reporters accountable! Demote/fire those who fail to report suspected abuse. In a number of states, failure to report is a prosecutable offense. Enforce the law!

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

5) Refuse to “pass the trash” on to other schools or agencies. In the past, rather than investigating the concerns, it was sometimes deemed easier to write the employee suspected of abuse a satisfactory reference and send the problem on to another town. Inter-agency communication and cooperation among school districts, social services, and law enforcement are critical for keeping children safe.

Perhaps the most important step is for educators and coaches and mentors and parents—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 painful lessons of past cases and refuse to ignore the “red flags” and concerns we may have. We must hold female staff to the same standards as males and apply the same scrutiny to their behavior and interactions with students. We must report our concerns, following protocol until action is taken on behalf of the children.

We adults must protect them by being their most vigilant and outspoken guardians. Our ethical responsibility, our loyalty and our most sacred trust must be with the children. . not with our colleagues in the offices down the hall.

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