

Society's Role in Ending Child Sexual Molestation

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In my role as a psychotherapist, I have seen hundreds of people who have survived childhood sexual abuse. I have seen only a few perpetrators of such abuse, so I have given some thought to possible reasons for the discrepancy. I have come to think that the factors that keep perpetrators from seeking help are intrinsic both to the perpetrators themselves, and to society at large. In this article, I am offering my thoughts, and hopefully raising some questions for us to examine as a people. I have chosen not to limit my ideas to the realm of what might be considered reasonable or realistic. Rather my purpose is to stimulate questioning of the status quo, and new ideas in the reader.

What is it that would engender in a person the impulse to engage in sexual activity with a child? If I had the personal experience of working with many people with this problem, I would have more insight. At my current level of awareness, I would say that the person so afflicted probably experienced at least one abusive situation in their past in which they felt they had no control. Sexual abuse of a child is certainly a power play. It also suggests that because the person is confused about sexuality, their own abuse was of a sexual nature. I believe that the act of child sexual molestation is often spawned by an encapsulated part of the perpetrator's consciousness, probably the complex of memories, perceptions and emotions that are tied in with their own childhood abuse. This "inner child" may be attempting to understand why the abuse occurred to them by doing it to someone else of similar age. The adult self may be in a slightly altered state of consciousness during such acting out. Many survivors have described the "strange look in the eyes" of their perpetrators. There is much that remains to be understood about the dynamics of becoming a child molester. While I suspect that nearly all perpetrators have themselves been victims, the inverse does not hold true. Therefore, we must seek to identify by what other avenues the consciousness of perpetration arises.

If perpetrators were once victims, why are they rarely among those who seek therapy? What comes to my mind is 1) a higher level of denial, 2) shame about both being a victim and having impulses to act out, and 3) the expectation and fear of condemnation by others, prosecution, and ultimately, being excommunicated from humanity.

Denial

Denial is not the same as lying. It is, perhaps, lying to oneself. Denial is somewhere between deception and delusion. When something in a person's past is too painful for them to accept, they may deny that it happened, rewrite (distort) the memory, or project it outward as "somebody else's problem". Acceptance means facing the truth. It does not mean that what happened was OK, or not damaging. Acceptance is an acknowledgment of "what is". Denial is the opposite.

To take responsibility for oneself is to start from a place of acceptance of one's current behaviors, thoughts and feelings. For example, the statement "I like to touch young boys and I don't know why" reflects less denial than statements such as "I don't touch young boys" or "So what? There's nothing wrong with it. They like it".

Psychotherapy tends to be most effective with people who have lower degrees of denial. We find that child molesters are very difficult to treat. I think we need to devise therapies that

relate to the perpetrator's level of denial, with the initial goal of continually reducing it. Healing cannot occur in the face of denial.

Survivors of childhood abuse often carry shame because children interpret their experiences subjectively. Subconsciously they may believe, "If this happens to me, there must be something about me that is causing it", or "I deserve what is happening; this must be what I am for". Survivors who become perpetrators, or have thoughts of acting out, I suspect carry a double load of shame, which could further reduce their willingness to seek help.

There are few among us who remain untouched by the judgments of others. Given the current attitude of most of us toward child molesters, why would anyone come forth and identify themselves as such? The acknowledged child molester can expect to be ostracized in our current social climate. Consequently, molesters may remain "in the closet" fearing the judgments of family, clergy, and therapists, the very people we are supposed to count on for support. Where then can they go? What options have we created, if any? Confide to a therapist any abuse of a child, and it will be promptly reported to law enforcement. (I do not oppose this law.)

Societal Denial

I believe that the denial of the the individual perpetrator is supported by the denial of society as a whole. We don't want to put energy and resources into rehabilitation of such "bad people". We do not seek to understand them or heal them, as if they were not even part of "us". I see this as societal denial. "Us" includes people with all kinds of confusion about who they truly are. The confusion manifests in ways which can be quite disturbing to the rest of "us". We forget that there's nobody in here but us people.

We as a people have a responsibility to find ways to deal with "what is" in our society. Child molestation exists with alarming regularity. Child molesters are part of our population. Safety must be a first priority. We have an obligation to protect our citizens, especially our children, from people whose behavior endangers others. But what next?

Punishment Vs: Logical Consequences

We want to punish people who hurt children. We want them to "pay". The dictionary defines "punish" as "to cause pain, loss or discomfort to for some fault or offense". It is returning hurt with hurt. It appeases our pain, our sense of outrage. So much so, in fact, that many of us gleefully anticipate the sexual abuse a child molester may experience in prison. We thereby condone the same behavior we abhor.

What does punishment actually accomplish in the long run? It does not engender healing. It does not reflect goodwill nor the higher spiritual aspirations of humanity. Anger and hatred breed anger and hatred. We have solved nothing.

The logical consequence of being a danger to others must include being separated from those endangered. Incarceration is a necessary option. The benefits of incarceration, as I see it, are the protection of the public, and an opportunity for the offender to reduce denial. It sometimes takes a strong unpleasant experience to break through denial and begin to turn inward in self-examination.

I do not see incarceration as "payment" for a crime. There is no value that can be placed on harm. Of what service is "serving time"? And what happens when the person is released? Have they healed? Are they worse? Does "serving time" reduce the risk to the public? I

think the risk is greater. The person is likely to be angrier, less in control, and therefore be more likely to re-offend.

Is punishment a deterrent? We like to think that the threat of being caught and going back to prison will stop them. Just as many have argued that capital punishment may stop a criminal from committing murder. Perhaps for some, these distant threats of punishment do limit their crimes. However, I suspect that for many compulsive child molesters, the short term gratification of acting out may outweigh the far off possibility of punishment.

Treatment

Given that incarceration is often necessary, why not put the time to good use? I suggest that prison should be a place of minimal standard of living, with massive, intensive, opportunities to confront, sensitize, break through denial, begin to uncover conscience, and thereby open up the perpetrator's ability to feel and heal. They need to be confronted with the pain they have caused others, and confronted with the knowingness of other perpetrators further along in their own process of healing. Confrontation must be relentless yet humane until their defenses are broken through and they can begin to process their own pain in therapy. This is not punishment. It is self-discovery. If we do not make a strong attempt to heal the molester, we are in effect supporting the avoidance of self-awareness, and exacerbating the anger, violence and inhumanity that we want to end.

Some perpetrators may choose to remain in denial. What if release from prison were based on criteria that the person no longer posed a risk to others? What if, prior to release, offenders had to be honest about their acts, make amends in some way to their victims, and know in their heart that nothing within them could move them to such behavior in the future? Of course, at this time we have not developed ways to determine how completely healing has taken place, but that would certainly be another valuable research endeavor.

Summary

Sexual abuse of children is an issue in the collective consciousness (society), and it will remain so until enough healing has occurred that the tide turns. I suggest that as more survivors and perpetrators of abuse are healed, the overall level of denial in the collective consciousness will be reduced, thereby paving the way for faster healing in the future. At some point, there may be no more abuse.

As a psychotherapist I have learned that all healing of childhood abuse is possible. No experience is too awful to overcome, but it does take great courage on the part of the survivor of abuse to face how they were effected by it. Just as what is healed in an individual will not be passed on to their child, what is healed in a generation will not be passed on to the next. Are we ready to decide that enough is enough and look at healing as an imperative?

As a society, we need to address our fears of that which is so distasteful to us. Child molesters are part of us. We need to open options for child molesters and potential child molesters to seek help and receive meaningful treatment. Although I support the mandatory reporting of child abuse, I believe that more options need to be made available as far as consequences. Each case needs to be taken on its own merits and adjudicated meaningfully. We offer rehabilitation programs as an alternative for incarceration for drug and alcohol related crimes. Perhaps this could be an appropriate option for certain sex offenders. Many are given probation now without even the requirement of treatment.

Due to limited resources, the number of cases handled by police officers, investigative agencies, child protective agencies, psychotherapists, probation officers, prosecuting attorneys, courts and judges is often overwhelming to the individual. Very often no one has looked at the whole picture in a particular case of child molestation. No one has read all of the evidence. No one has put the case together in a way that leads to a holistic understanding of how the molest occurred, and what assistance is needed by all parties involved.

When we decide to apply adequate resources to really understand the problem, to ensure safety to the public, and to offer healing opportunities to all who are impacted by sexual abuse, we will make great strides as a society.

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