



JDiBrief – Crime

Sexual abuse in schools: ANALYSIS (3 of 5)

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Research and analysis of sexual abuse in schools has found the following general trends:

PLACE: Sexual abuse is more likely to occur in places where risk of detection is low. However, an actual abuse incident can occur quickly (commonly 5 to 15 minutes), so does not always require a remote, out-of-the-way place. School-related abuse can happen away from school grounds – at school camps; in a vehicle; or even in a teacher's or student's home.

OFFENDER: Offenders are most likely to be adolescent and adult males. Except for antisocial or psychopathic traits, in which case problem behaviours are likely to be generalised, there is no personality type that would indicate risk of sexual abusing. Rather, the potential abuser is likely in all other respects to appear normal, even ordinary.

Some offenders may abuse purely for sexual gratification, and will be indifferent to the experience of the victim. Others' motivations may involve a disorganisation of care-seeking, care-giving and sexual motivations. The situation may be made worse by efforts to avoid detection, which may include committing the child to secrecy, implied or actual threats, and in some cases violence.

VICTIM: Girls are around twice as likely as boys to be sexually victimised. Girls are more likely to be abused repeatedly, in domestic settings, and at a younger age (average around 9-12 years). Boys are more likely to be abused over shorter periods, in non-familial settings, and at an older age (around 12-15 years). Victims of adolescent abusers are generally younger than for adult abusers. Again, no reliable data are available specifically on sexual abuse in schools.

Vulnerability to sexual victimisation may be increased if the child is lonely, has problems at home, is emotionally needy, and lacks confidence. Sexual victimisation may itself lead to further isolation from family and peers.

Abuse by strangers, and abuse involving physical injuries, is more likely to be reported. In other circumstances victims can develop complex emotional bonds with their abuser, and may feel responsible for the abuse. Disclosures are more likely to be made to a trusted friend, family member, or teacher, than directly to child protection authorities or the police. Delayed reporting is common.

Effects vary widely. Abuse by a father or father-figure, a longer duration and frequency of abuse, and more intrusive abuse, are associated with more negative outcomes. Reactions by significant others to detection or disclosure can affect psychological outcomes in positive or negative ways. Victimisation increases risk of further sexual victimisation, sometimes in different contexts and in later stages of life.

MODUS OPERANDI: Sexual abuse can happen abruptly, but more often is preceded by a period of 'grooming'. Abusers and victims often know one another for significant periods (a year or more is common) before the first abuse incident. Grooming typically involves a graduation from attention-giving and nonsexual touching to increasingly more intimate behaviours. Much of this will appear ambiguous both to the victim and others who may observe it. The abuser may not become conscious of sexual motivations until late in the process, sometimes just minutes before the first incident itself. Grooming is likely to become more conscious and deliberate following the first incident.