
Improving the Response to Male Sexual Abuse: A Primer for Communities of Faith

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Introduction

After friends, spouses, and therapists, clergy are among the most likely individuals to receive first disclosures of sexual abuse from male victims.² There are many reasons why a survivor may feel more comfortable disclosing to a member of the clergy than law enforcement, teachers, or other authority figures. In many communities, pastors and other faith leaders possess moral integrity and trust that lead many people, especially vulnerable and hurting individuals, to turn to them for advice and counsel. In addition, there are fewer logistical barriers to speaking with faith leaders: often it is easier to speak with a member of the clergy than to find and schedule appointments with mental health professionals. In rural areas, it can also be more difficult to access professional mental health resources due to lack of professional providers. In these areas, leaders in faith communities often fill a needed role of counselor and/or confidant. It should also be noted that, typically, there is no out-of-pocket cost to confide in a pastor, whereas professional mental health providers usually charge for services. Lastly, a clergy member is often someone already known and, to some degree, trusted by a survivor. The expectation of confidentiality a pastor enjoys is also of critical importance to a survivor. The promise of absolute confidentiality in the relationship of priest/pastor to penitent provides male survivors, who often feel increased feelings of shame and stigma,³ extra reassurance that can help them feel safe enough to come forward.

Unfortunately, many individuals entrusted with overseeing the spiritual care of their communities are not adequately informed about the preponderance of sexual abuse against males, the risk factors, and best practices for preventing sexual abuse against boys and providing trauma informed support for victims who disclose. A poor, incompetent response often exacerbates the problem, with researchers finding that “negative responses” to a disclosure of sexual assault “are positively associated with symptoms of PTSD

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2. Scott D. Easton, “Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse among Adult Male Survivors,” *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 41 (2013): 344–355.

3. *Ibid.*, 345.

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Important facts about male sexual victimization

There are a number of myths and mistaken assumptions that lie behind much of the stigma faced by male victims of sexual abuse. Any person who is in a position of trust and leadership in a community of faith—whether a lay leader, pastor, or reverend—must be informed about these facts in order to ensure they will be empowered to counter the cancerous harm done by these myths.

Men and boys experience rape and other forms of sexual abuse at extraordinarily high rates.

Decades of research make clear at least one in six boys will experience some form of sexual molestation prior to their eighteenth birthday.⁵ As many as one in four males will experience some form of sexual abuse during their lifetime.⁶

4. Valentina Nikulina, *Responses to Sexual Assault Disclosure and Survivor's Symptoms of PTSD and Depression: Does Race/Ethnicity of Sexual Assault Survivor and Disclosure Recipient Matter?* (St. John's University 2009), 10.

5. Vincent J. Felitti and Robert F. Anda, “The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare,” in *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic*, eds. Ruthe A. Lanius, Eric Vermeten, and Clare Pain (Cambridge Medicine, 2010), 78–79.

6. Matthew J. Breiding, “Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual

It is also important to understand “sexual abuse” is a term that encompasses a much wider range of experiences than “rape,” which is commonly perceived as an act of bodily penetration.⁷ The confusion around this is part of what leads to mistaken assumptions that males experience far less sexual abuse than females. In short, any time a person is touched, or feels pressure to consent to touch they don’t want, there is the potential for sexual abuse to occur and significant trauma to be experienced.

Most sexually abused boys and men delay disclosing the abuse.

Many advocacy organizations and advocates in the sexual violence field recognize that survivors of sexual abuse delay disclosure for years. This makes sexual abuse one of the most difficult crimes to investigate, prosecute, and, perhaps most importantly, from which to heal. Some research shows that male survivors of child sexual abuse delay initially disclosing the abuse for over twenty years on average, and almost thirty years until “helpful in-depth discussions” occur for survivors.⁸ Often these decades are marked by significant suffering—depression, anxiety, and disruption of interpersonal relationships.⁹ Survivors are also at significantly higher risk for a wide range of negative health outcomes, including substance abuse, diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, and consequently have lower life expectancies.¹⁰

Boys attending church may be particularly susceptible to sexual abuse.

Clinicians and researchers who interview and work with serial offenders report that communities of faith are especially at risk for being targeted by perpetrators because they offer access to large numbers of children and often readily offer forgiveness for past misdeeds.¹¹ It is also well known that within many communities of faith, young males can be at significant risk because of participation in many church-organized youth service activities (such as camps, scouts, and church sponsored sports) that can put them in extended contact with potential perpetrators. There is also a bias within many communities that boys require less protection from perpetrators than girls. However, data on perpetrators and their targets suggest a far different picture. Some research into offenders has detailed that, on average, serial sexual offenders who target

Violence, Stalking, and Intimate Partner Violence Victimization—National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, United States, 2011,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Surveillance Summaries* 63.8 (Washington, D.C.: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), 1.

7. Ibid.

8. Easton, “Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse among Adult Male Survivors,” 349.

9. Ibid., 350

10. Vincent J. Filetti, Robert F. Anda, et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14.4 (1998): 245.

11. Anna C. Salter, *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists, and other Sex Offenders*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 29.

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young boys have over 150 victims on average.¹² This is almost three times the number of victims than for offenders who target girls.

Most sexual abuse of boys is NOT perpetrated by homosexual males.

Regardless of any community’s specific interpretation of biblical teachings on same sex conduct, linking homosexuality to child sexual abuse is misleading and harmful. According to MaleSurvivor’s website, “One of the most damaging, and profoundly mistaken, beliefs about male sexual abuse is that perpetrators of abuse against boys are usually gay males. This is false, and has been demonstrated as false in research for many years.”¹³ Clinical researchers and law enforcement professionals have understood for decades that most perpetrators of sexual abuse against boys actually identify as heterosexual.¹⁴ Many of the most dangerous and prolific abusers, such as Jerry Sandusky,¹⁵ rely on the protection of being married to better hide their illicit and abusive activity. In addition, it’s important to acknowledge that there are many female perpetrators of abuse against boys.¹⁶

It is possible for a victim of abuse to experience physical pleasure, an erection, and even an orgasm.

A significant source of shame, misunderstanding, and vulnerability for boys who are abused is the lack of clarity on how our bodies naturally respond to certain kinds of contact and stimulation. Contrary to popular belief, biological responses to sexual stimulation—such as erections, physical and mental feelings of pleasure,

12. Kenneth V. Lanning, *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis for Professionals Investigating the Sexual Exploitation of Children*. (Alexandria, Va.: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2010).

13. For additional information on this issue, see the website of MaleSurvivor at: <http://www.malesurvivor.org/fact-2/>

14. Gene Abel, “The Child Abuser: How Can You Spot Him?” *Redbook* (August, 1987), 100.

15. For an account of Jerry Sandusky’s sexual abuse of boys, see Aaron Fisher, *Silent No More: Victim Number 1’s Fight for Justice Against Jerry Sandusky* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2012).

16. For an overview of research on female sex offenders, see Dominique A. Simons, “Sex Offender Typologies,” in *Sex Offender Management Assessment & Planning Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Justice, Sex Offender Sentencing Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering & Tracking, 2018), available online at: https://www.smart.gov/SOMAPI/sec1/ch3_typology.html (last visited January 21, 2018).

release of pre-ejaculatory fluids, and even orgasms themselves—are not processes that can be fully or easily controlled through an act of will. In short, the body will do what it is wired to do. Especially in the case of younger males, physical responses to stimuli can be especially sensitive.¹⁷

Communities that shun open and frank discussions of the biological facts of sex and normal sexual functioning risk contributing to feelings of confusion and shame connected to misunderstandings about normal human sexual functioning. This opens broad avenues for perpetrators to successfully target and control their victims.

Assume, for example, a boy has never been instructed by family or in a formal educational setting about how his body actually works. As he begins to enter puberty he feels confusion and shame over uncontrolled thoughts, fantasies, and biological responses such as unwanted and/or unconscious erections. This boy can fall prey to a perpetrator in many ways. First, the perpetrator can offer information, instruction, and shame-free reassurances that sex is “OK” and “natural” that he cannot receive from proper channels. Second, the abuser can be a source of “adult” things, providing access to pornography, alcohol, and other substances the victim’s pubescent brain will be unable to easily resist or maturely process. Third, the victim’s ignorance and curiosity can be easily manipulated by a perpetrator. For example, the offender may say that his erection is a sign the boy must “want” to engage in the abuse, or that he is enjoying the abuse. Lastly, the abuser can use threats to expose the victim to his family and community to enforce silence from the victim.

Sexual abuse does not determine sexual identity or orientation, or make a victim more likely to become an abuser.

Another significant source of confusion, stigma, and shame is lack of consensus about what are the causal factors that determine a person’s sexual orientation. As Richard Gartner, a leading expert on sexual abuse of boys, has written:

While scientists don’t agree about what causes sexual orientation, most researchers and psychologists believe it’s established in early childhood before the age when boys are likely to be sexually abused.¹⁸

It is also critically important to make clear that the vast majority of male victims do not go on to perpetrate sexual abuse, while only a small proportion of perpetrators report having been abused as children.¹⁹

17. In his memoirs of being sexually abused at a summer church camp, Martin Moran describes this confusion in great detail. Martin Moran, *The Tricky Part* (New York: Anchor, 2006).

18. Richard B. Gartner, *Beyond Betrayal: Taking Charge of Your Life after Boyhood Sexual Abuse*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 99.

19. Chelsea Leach, Anna Stewart, and Stephen Smallbone, “Testing the Sexually Abused-sexual Abuser Hypothesis: a Prospective Longitudinal Birth Cohort Study,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 51 (2016): 144–153.

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Both facts give rise to significant shame and confusion for victims, especially for victims of same-sex perpetrators who inhabit communities where homosexuality is viewed to be sinful conduct.

Females can and do perpetrate sexual abuse at significant rates.

There are major cultural blind spots within which female perpetrators can often offend against many male victims in ways that are literally “unseen” by both the victims themselves and community members. In a study by Lisak, 40 percent of male survivors reported at least one female perpetrator.²⁰ Perhaps more surprising, Dr. Bryana French interviewed over 300 high school- and college-aged males and over 43 percent of respondents reported being “coerced” into participating in unwanted sexual activity.²¹ The respondents also reported that 95 percent of the perpetrators were female.²²

Boys make up approximately half of the victims of sexual trafficking.

A study by The John Jay College and the Center for Court Innovation estimated that as many as half of the commercially sexually exploited (CSE) children in the United States were boys.²³ In a related study done in Alberta, Canada, Dr. Susan McIntyre notes that “Young men [who are CSE victims] have service needs that are different than young women” and males “enter the trade younger

20. David Lisak, Jim Hopper, and Pat Song, “Factors in the Cycle of Violence: Gender Rigidity and Emotional Constriction,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9 (1996): 721–743.

21. Bryana H. French, Jasmine D. Tilghman, and Dominique A. Malebranche. “Sexual Coercion Context and Psychosocial Correlates Among Diverse Males,” *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 16.1 (2015): 42.

22. Ibid.

23. Sara Ann Friedman and Nora B. Willis, *And Boys Too: An ECPAT-USA Discussion Paper about the Lack of Recognition of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Boys in the United States*. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: ECPAT-USA 2013).

and stay longer than young women.²⁴ Anchor House, a faith-based residential treatment program for male victims of sex trafficking in North Carolina, states on their website, “Continuing to leave the issue of male sex trafficking unaddressed only reinforces the repetitive cycle and does no more than resolve victims to give in to their enslavement. Moreover, it leaves no room for boys and men to receive the care they so desperately deserve for complete healing and personal development.”²⁵

The simple fact is that many boys and men who escape from abusive homes have little choice but to engage in survival sex in order to find food, shelter, and safety.

What should communities of faith do?

The facts listed above lead to a clear and pressing question. What should communities of faith do to take positions of responsible, ethical leadership in the efforts to prevent and respond to the sexual victimization of boys and men? There are at least seven concrete steps every congregation can and should take.

Training

We cannot know what we do not know. If we are ignorant of the facts of male sexual abuse, we are powerless to do anything to address it. Communities of faith should make it a priority to learn about male sexual abuse by researching the topic and seeking out training from experts on these issues.²⁶

Begin by believing

Many survivors of sexual abuse fear that their stories will not be believed. Not only do perpetrators tell this to victims in order to pressure them into remaining silent, but for male victims, especially, cultural norms can reinforce the belief that boys and men cannot and should not be victims of abuse. Meanwhile, it is well known that false disclosures of sexual assault are rare.²⁷ Therefore it is critical that faith communities commit to responding to disclosures with belief and acceptance of victims’ accounts. It can be helpful to train all staff and volunteers on trauma-informed models of responding to initial disclosures.²⁸

24. Susan McIntyre, *Under the Radar: The Sexual Exploitation of Young Men—Western Canadian Edition*. (Calgary, Alberta: Hindsight Group, 2009).

25. <http://www.restoreonlife.org/boys/>

26. In addition to MaleSurvivor, GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment), Sacred Spaces, and the Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center offer quality training on the sexual abuse of boys and men.

27. See e.g., Mark D. Everson and Barbara W. Boat, “False Allegations of Sexual Abuse by Children and Adolescents,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 28 (1989), 230–235.

28. There are a number of trauma-informed models for responding to disclosures of victimization. For one suggested method see <https://www.christophermanderson.com/single-post/2015/02/09/OpEd-Compassionate-support-can-improve-healing-for-survivors-of-abuse>.

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Talk about male victimization

In any and all efforts to react and respond to the threat of sexual abuse within communities of faith, it is critically important to remember that sexual abuse is a gender inclusive threat. Serial offenders often abuse male and female victims, and choose victims based on vulnerability and opportunity not just simple gender preference. Efforts to discuss sexual abuse that ignore or fail to specifically mention the risks to BOTH males and females are ineffective and can actually prevent male victims from coming forward to report and get the support they need to heal.²⁹

Be proactive

The work of prevention requires more than having staff members participate in an occasional compliance training every few years. Effectively preventing abuse and supporting the needs of victims requires a cultural shift. This shift demands enacting proactive vigilance, training for all personnel, and enforcement of appropriate youth protection policies.³⁰ These must be supplemented with ongoing discussions with the entire community about sexual abuse prevention and response.

Do not nickname body parts

A simple and effective measure that will help protect children from being abused is to destigmatize and encourage the use of proper biological terms for all body parts, especially genitalia. Children who are accustomed to using the correct terminology for their penises, anuses, and other body parts show that they are less ashamed of their bodies, which makes them less likely candidates for targeting by offenders. A child who uses correct terms for their body parts appears less vulnerable to a perpetrator, and is thus a riskier potential victim for the perpetrator. In the tragic event that a child is abused, investigation and eventual prosecution of an alleged perpetrator is made significantly easier when victims spontaneously use specific and appropriate terminology for their body parts.

29. As one example, see Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *God Made All of Me: A Book to Help Children Protect Their Bodies*, (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2015).

30. Basyle Tchividjian & Shira M. Berkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2017).

Connect with community partners

It is impossible to create a culture of prevention in isolation. Communities of faith that are serious about wanting to reduce their risk of harboring potential perpetrators of abuse within their midst will actively seek out the support and collaboration of partners from other faith communities, abuse and prevention organizations, law enforcement, and the social services providers in their communities. This is especially important because it is known that serial offenders can often move from community to community without fear of being “outed” because of the lack of open communication with community partners.

Rethink and reframe sex and sexuality

To reinforce this point, if sex and sexuality are topics that are largely framed in negative ways (such as “Sex is sinful temptations that must be controlled or expressed only in ‘appropriate’ or ‘holy’ ways”) a perpetrator can easily position themselves to wield great power and influence over the child. Further, if a victim is fearful that being sexually abused has stained or ruined them in the eyes of God, how likely is it they will feel empowered to come forward and report the abuse they’ve experienced to spiritual leaders (especially if the perpetrator is him or herself a member of spiritual leadership in a faith community)?

Conclusion

The challenges male survivors present and experience are deeply felt, while being distinct and different from some of the issues experienced by women and girls who endure sexual abuse and trauma.

These specific traumas must be acknowledged and proactively responded to within a Christian ministerial framework. Even a

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superficial review of how communities of faith have often reacted to claims of sexual abuse by survivors shows a consistent lack of trauma-informed, compassionate, and effective response. It is far more common to see leadership of these communities pursue strategies that indemnify institutions and shield perpetrators from true accountability while silencing, shunning, and shaming survivors.³¹ Within many faith communities, harm is further done to survivors because reconciliation with and forgiveness of perpetrators is a central theme of their response, effectively blocking attempts by survivors to protect themselves from additional traumatization.

The suggestions outlined above share a common goal of protecting and enforcing community standards while making space to offer greater compassion and healing support to those who have been wronged.

31. E.g., Michael D’Antonio, *Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime and the Era of Catholic Scandal* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2014).