

Protection From Sex Offenders

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I. KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: THE MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT SEXUAL OFFENDING

Because of common misconceptions, many of us have both unwarranted fears and misguided complacency about sex offenders. Protecting ourselves and our children must begin by understanding the facts about sex offenders and their crimes.

- ❑ ***Sex offenders who are caught and convicted are the tip of the iceberg.*** MOST sex offenders are never identified. Less than 30% of sexual crimes are even reported to law enforcement, and even fewer are successfully prosecuted and convicted. Estimates are that the several hundred thousand convicted sex offenders nationwide represent only a fraction (less than 10%) of all sex offenders living in communities across the country.
- ❑ ***The vast majority (80-95%) of sex offenders KNOW THEIR VICTIMS.*** Sexual assaults committed by strangers, while often high-profile, are far less common than assaults by someone in a victim's familiar circle of family, friends, and acquaintances - an old boyfriend, a babysitter, a coach, an uncle. Between 75-90% of adult victims of rape report knowing their assailant. About 60% of sexual victimization of boys and 80% of girls is committed by offenders known to the child or his family. Young victims who know their abuser are least likely to report the crime.
- ❑ ***Sex offenders cut across all demographic groups.*** Sex offenders come from all kinds of backgrounds, income levels and professions. Many have no official criminal record or sex crime history of any kind. While there is no profile of a "typical sex offender," therefore, they all tend to be manipulative, deceptive, and secretive. Most do not offend on impulse, but rather plan their crimes carefully.
- ❑ ***Sex offenders often commit different types of sex crimes with different kinds of victims.*** At least half of convicted child molesters have also assaulted adults. Over 80% of convicted rapists of adults have also molested children. Over two-thirds of offenders committing incest have also assaulted victims outside the family. One-third of offenders report assaulting both males and females.
- ❑ ***Not all sex offenders are male, and not all offenders are adults.*** The majority are male, but women also commit sexual offenses, particularly against children. While most offenders are adults, adolescents account for a significant number of rapes and child molestation cases every year.
- ❑ ***Sex offenders are four times more likely than other offenders to be***

rearrested for another sex crime, and child molesters have the highest rearrest rates among different types of sex offenders.

Measuring how likely it is that a sex offender will commit another sex crime is tricky because most sex crimes are unreported. Sex offenders are less likely than other offenders to be rearrested for *any* crime, but considerably more likely to be rearrested for a sex crime. The more prior arrests a sex offender has before release, the higher the rate of rearrest. Rearrest rates of sex offenders also do not follow the pattern of non-sex offenders by falling as offenders age.

- The median age of sexual assault victims is less than 13 years old; the median age of rape victims is 22 years old.***

II. CONVICTED SEX OFFENDERS IN MARYLAND

- About 1830 sex offenders were incarcerated as of February, 2005.
- About 4330 convicted and released sex offenders were registered under the State's sex offender registry as of November 2005. Only about 1360 were under any type of supervision.
- The majority of registered offenders are child sex offenders, who have been convicted of 1st or 2nd degree rape, or 1st, 2nd, or 3rd degree sex offenses against minors. About 2900 registrants, who are the most serious offenders convicted of sexually violent crimes and offenses against children, are required to register for life.
- As of November, 2005, the whereabouts of about 15% of registered sex offenders were unknown or under investigation.

III. UNDERSTANDING AND USING THE SEX OFFENDER REGISTRY

A. WHAT IS THE REGISTRY?

Maryland law requires that sex offenders, if they are going to live, work, or attend school in the State, must register with state or local authorities upon their release from incarceration, once a year thereafter, and when they change their place of residence. The registry classifies sex offenders into four categories: 1) sexually violent predators, 2) sexually violent offenders, 3) child sexual offenders; and 4) offenders. The most serious offenders, which are the majority of offenders in the first three categories, must register for life, and the rest must do so for ten years.

An offender's registration statement includes his name and address; photograph

and fingerprints; a description of his crime; where and when he committed the crime, was convicted, and was released; his social security number; and for non-resident offenders, where he works or attends school.

B. HOW CAN I USE IT?

The most efficient way to find out about sex offenders in your area is to access the registry online at www.dpscs.state.md.us, and then click on "Sex Offender Registry" under "Online Services." The online registry allows you to search by offender name or by zip code. It does not provide all of the information available from an offender's registration statement, but it provides an offender's name, address, photograph, the crime for which he was charged, his offender category, and the number of the local law enforcement unit you may call to provide any information you may have about the offender.

For more information or if you do not have access to a computer, you may also request a copy of the registration statement from the State Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services Sex Offender Registry Unit. You may send your written request by mail, email or fax. You must state your full name, mailing address, your reason for wanting the information, and the registrant's name, address and/or date of birth.

The mailing address is Sexual Offender Registry Unit, P.O. Box 5743, Pikesville, MD 21282-5473. The fax number is 410-653-5690, and the email address is sor@dpscs.state.md.us. Specific instructions on how to make a request are on the Sex Offender Registry website under "Registration Statements."

C. WHAT DO THE OFFENDERS' CRIMES MEAN IN PLAIN LANGUAGE?

The registry lists the offender's crime and offender category. The crimes are most often described in legal language which may leave you confused about what an offender actually did. The following is a glossary of terms translated loosely into plain language:

Sexual predator: offender who has been convicted of a sexually violent offense and has been deemed by a court likely to do it again.

Sexually violent offender: offender who has been convicted of a sexually violent offense.

Sexually violent offense: 1st or 2nd degree rape or attempted rape; 1st, 2nd, or 3rd degree sexual offense.

1st degree rape: Vaginal intercourse by force or threat of force, along with an aggravating factor, like causing or putting in fear of serious

physical injury or disfigurement, suffocating, kidnapping, *etc.*

2nd degree rape: Vaginal intercourse by force or threat of force, or with mentally disabled victim, or with victim under 14 and perpetrator 4 years older.

1st degree sexual offense: *Sexual act* by force or threat of force, along with an aggravating factor, like causing or putting in fear of serious physical injury or disfigurement, suffocating, kidnapping, *etc.* *Sexual act* is oral sex, anal sex, or penetration by an object, but does not include vaginal intercourse.

2nd degree sexual offense: *Sexual act* by force or threat of force, or with mentally disabled victim, or with victim under 14 and perpetrator 4 years older. *Sexual act* is oral sex, anal sex, or penetration by an object, but does not include vaginal intercourse.

3rd degree sexual offense: *Sexual contact* without the consent of the victim, along with an aggravating factor, like causing or putting in fear of serious physical injury or disfigurement, suffocating, kidnapping, *etc.* *Sexual contact* is intentionally touching genitalia, the anus or other intimate area. It includes penetration by a part of the body except the penis or mouth.

Also includes sexual contact with mentally disabled victim, victim under age 14 and perpetrator 4 years older, a sexual act with victim 14 or 15 and perpetrator 21, vaginal intercourse with victim 14 or 15 and perpetrator 21.

4th degree sexual offense: Not considered a sexually violent offense. *Sexual contact* without consent of victim, sexual act with victim 14 or 15 and perpetrator 4 years older; vaginal intercourse with victim 14 or 15 and perpetrator 4 years older. *Sexual contact* is intentionally touching genitalia, the anus or other intimate area. It includes penetration by a part of the body except the penis or mouth.

Child Sexual Offender: An offender who has been convicted of any of the above offenses with a victim less than 15 years old, *i.e.*, any sexually violent offense (1st or 2nd degree rape; 1st, 2nd, or 3rd degree sexual offense), or a 4th degree sexual offense. Also

includes offenders convicted of sexual abuse of a minor who is a family member or living in the household.

Offender: An offender who has been convicted of certain other offenses related to sexual offending, like kidnapping or false imprisonment of a minor, violations of the child pornography and prostitution laws, *etc.*

D. USING THE REGISTRY TO ASSIST IN THE SUPERVISION OF CONVICTED OFFENDERS, AND WHAT NOT TO DO - THE DANGERS OF HARASSMENT AND OSTRACISM

Except for the most dangerous offenders, the vast majority of convicted sex offenders eventually leave prison and return to live in our communities. Given that inescapable fact, it is in the best interest of community safety that they become successful, integrated members of their communities. Those offenders who are able to find and maintain adequate housing, become gainfully employed, and establish connections to others in the community are far less likely to reoffend, and everyone is safer as a result.

Thus, while everyone should take care to protect themselves and their children from vulnerable situations involving known offenders, no one should try to harass, ostracize, shame or brand them. Harassment is against the law, and these kinds of activities also decrease the likelihood that an offender will become an integrated and productive member of the community.

At the same time, as members of your community, you can help make sure an offender does not engage in activities that could lead to his reoffending. People who live and work around an offender are in a better position to know if he is exhibiting troubling behavior than are law enforcement and parole agents who can only check in with offenders periodically. Thus, if you see a child sex offender engaging in any behavior which concerns you, like loitering around playgrounds or befriending neighborhood teens, you should report the activity to the local law enforcement authority listed on the registry. Community supervision is an important component of successful sex offender management.

IV. WHAT CAN I DO TO PROTECT MY CHILDREN FROM UNIDENTIFIED SEX OFFENDERS?

The **single, most important fact** that we must understand to protect our children is this:

MOST SEX OFFENDERS ARE NEVER APPREHENDED BY THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

Being concerned about the sex offenders we do NOT know about, therefore, is just as important as focusing on those we do. This means taking steps to safeguard your children against sexual abuse from known convicted offenders, other strangers, and people they know. The following are common sense guidelines to help your children stay safe:

A. TALK OPENLY AND LISTEN CAREFULLY.

The key to your children's safety is effective two-way communication. You must give your children the knowledge they need to protect themselves, and they must feel able to express their fears and describe any real problems they may encounter. This requires an environment where you and your children feel comfortable talking about sensitive, embarrassing, or frightening things. Listen to them and believe them, even about little things, for the conversations about little things build the foundation for communication about big things that could change their lives. Emphasize a few key points which will foster more open communication:

- You always want to know if something scary, confusing, embarrassing or weird happens to them and you will never be angry. You want to know even if they are not sure exactly what happened.
- If an adult does something that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable or confused, it is the adult's fault and not the child's fault, even if the adult tries to blame it on the child. You will never blame it on your child.
- An adult who tries to make a child keep a secret, or tells him something bad will happen if he does not keep a secret, is very wrong. Children should not keep adults' secrets.
- You or someone can always help, even if your child thinks something has happened that can never be fixed.

B. TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO BE AWARE AND CAREFUL, BUT NOT AFRAID.

Be honest and open about dangers, but you know more than your children need to know. Avoid scary details, talk in a calm and reassuring manner, and use language that is age-appropriate. For example, with a young child it would be enough to warn, “there are people who do bad things to children,” when talking about safety rules.

C. FOCUS CHILDREN ON CERTAIN SUSPICIOUS SITUATIONS AND BEHAVIOR RATHER THAN CERTAIN KINDS OF PEOPLE.

Warning children to beware of “strangers” ignores their vulnerability to unidentified sex offenders whom they may know quite well. Teach your children instead to be on the lookout for suspicious behavior in any adult. Be sure to emphasize that they should tell you or another trusted adult immediately if they encounter such behavior, which can include:

- *Asking a child for help.* Children help other children, but should not be asked to assist adults, like giving directions or helping to “find a lost puppy.” An adult who tells a child his parent is in trouble and offers to take the child to the parent is also highly suspicious.
- *Paying an unusual amount of attention to a child.* Offenders often initiate seemingly innocent contact with a victim and cultivate a close relationship over time. Most adult-child relationships are healthy and positive, of course, but certain behaviors can be warning signs of trouble, like insisting on physical affection the child does not want, giving inappropriate gifts, wanting time alone with the child, etc.
- *Touching a child or asking to be touched by a child in areas of the body that would be covered by a bathing suit.* No one should touch your children in any way that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused.
- *Asking a child to get into a vehicle or following a child on foot or by car.* Children should know never to get into someone’s car without parental approval, and always to make a loud scene if someone tries to take them somewhere or force them into a car.
- *Asking to take a child’s picture.* Children should know never to let an adult take their photograph without parental consent.

D. BE SPECIFIC AND ENGAGE IN ROLE-PLAYING TO TEACH THE BEST RESPONSES TO DANGER.

Act out different situations and give children specific ideas about what to do. Examples include:

- *Your child is separated from you in a store or other public place.* Tell your child not to wander around looking for you, but to go immediately to a police officer, store salesclerk or other person in authority, or to a mother with children.
- *A man tries to get your child into his car.* Tell your child to make a loud scene by kicking and resisting physically, and by screaming things like, “this man is trying to take me away,” or “this man is not my father,” or “help me - he’s hurting me.”
- *Your child’s soccer coach gives him a ride home and touches him in a way that feels uncomfortable.* Tell your child that he does not need to be polite. He should say no, or stop, or he should push the coach away. He should also tell you immediately what happened, even though the coach said not to tell anyone else. Emphasize that people who do this kind of thing almost always make the child afraid to tell anyone else, and explain that this is wrong. Explain that a child should not believe any adult who says something bad will happen if he tells a secret. Your child should not keep other adults’ secrets from you. Emphasize also that if an adult touches your child or asks to be touched, it is NOT your child’s fault.

E. TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO TRUST THEIR INSTINCTS AND UNDERSTAND IT IS SOMETIMES O.K. TO SAY NO TO ADULTS.

In the effort to raise our children to be polite, well-mannered, and respectful of authority, we may miss conveying the message that their safety is nonetheless always more important. They must learn to trust their own feelings and know that they have every right to say no when they sense something is wrong, like someone trying to take them somewhere, touch them inappropriately, or do anything else that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused.

F. MAKE YOUR CHILDREN AWARE OF KNOWN, SPECIFIC THREATS.

If a convicted sex offender does live or work in your community, make your children familiar with the offender and the risks he may pose to them. Show them the offender’s photograph, warn them to avoid inappropriate or unsupervised contact, and instruct them to tell you immediately if the offender initiates contact with them or makes

them feel uncomfortable in any way.

G. KNOW YOUR CHILDREN. KNOW WHERE THEY ARE, WHO THEIR FRIENDS ARE, AND WHAT THEIR DAILY ACTIVITIES ARE. BE SENSITIVE TO CHANGES IN THEIR MOODS AND BEHAVIOR.

Although sex offenders can be the most unlikely suspects, you are the best gauge your children have of whether they are at risk from someone in their familiar circle. Watch for suspicious behavior in adults who come into contact with your children, and watch for changes in your children which could signal trouble. Above all, keep talking to them.

V. WHAT ARE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD SEX OFFENDERS I SHOULD WATCH OUT FOR?

Sex offenders come in all shapes and sizes. They can be adolescents or senior citizens, homeless or executives in Fortune 500 companies, and they can come from any racial, ethnic or religious background. They cannot, therefore, be identified easily. Yet certain behaviors can be a sign of trouble, although it is also important to remember that such behaviors are not always indicative of sexual offending. Some common warning signs can include an adult who:

- insists on hugging, kissing, touching, wrestling or holding a child even if the child resists;
- is too interested in a child's developing body, sexuality, dating habits, *etc.*;
- seeks uninterrupted time alone with a child;
- spends more time with children than with people his own age, and more time doing activities involving children;
- offers to babysit children free of charge and/or takes them on overnight outings alone;
- gives children inappropriate gifts or money for no reason;
- often walks in on children in the bathroom;
- is too permissive with children and allows misbehavior;
- talks repeatedly about the sexual activities of children and teens;
- talks with children about sexual fantasies, and seems unclear about what

is O.K. to do and talk about with children;

- encourages children to keep secrets;
- looks at child pornography;
- asks adult partners to dress or act like children or teens during sexual activity;
- has a series of children who are “special friends;”
- makes fun of children’s body parts, and calls them sexual names such as “stud” or “whore.”

VI. HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CHILD IS BEING ABUSED?

Both behavioral and physical signs may provide clues that a child is being sexually abused. Keep in mind, however, that many of these changes can also occur at other times of stress or trauma in a child’s life, like a divorce or the death of a loved one or pet.

Behavioral warning signs:

- nightmares, fear of the dark, or other sleeping problems;
- extreme fear of “monsters;”
- loss of appetite, trouble eating or swallowing, or constant stomach aches and disturbances for no apparent reason;
- sudden mood swings, *e.g.*, rage, fear, anger, or withdrawal, or spacing out at odd times;
- fear of certain people or places not formerly feared, or uncharacteristic behavior around a certain person, *e.g.*, a talkative child becomes quiet and distant around a babysitter;
- regressive behavior, like a return to thumb sucking or bed-wetting;
- imitating sexual behavior with toys or other children;
- using new words for body parts;

- refusing to talk about a “secret” the child shares with an adult or older child;
- talking about a new, older friend;
- suddenly having money;
- cutting, burning, or hurting himself or herself as an adolescent.

Physical warning signs:

- unexplained bruises, redness, bleeding, or pain around a child’s genitalia, anus or mouth;
- sores or milky fluids in the genital area.

VII. WHERE CAN I GET FURTHER HELP?

If you suspect a child or someone else you know may be a victim of abuse, or if you are a victim, please seek out help immediately. You should report suspicious activity to your local police or law enforcement agency. For more general information about sex offenders, sexual offending, and signs of abuse, you may also contact the following organizations:

Maryland Sex Offender Registry:

Sex Offender Registry Unit
P.O. Box 5743
Pikesville, Maryland 21282-5743
410-585-3600
Email: sor@dpscs.state.md.us
Website: www.dpscs.state.md.us

Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault:

1517 Gov. Ritchie Highway, Suite 207
Arnold, MD 21012
410-974-4507 or 800.983.RAPE
Email: info@mcasa.org
Website: www.mcasa.org

Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence:

6911 Laurel-Bowie Road, Suite 309
Bowie, MD 20715
1-800-MD-HELPS or 301-352-4574
Email: info@mnadv.org
Website: www.mnadv.org

Center for Sex Offender Management:

c/o Center for Effective Public Policy
8403 Colesville Road, Suite 720
Silver Spring, MD 20910
301-589-9383
Email: AskCSOM@CSOM.org
Website: www.csom.org

VIII. WHAT SHOULD SCHOOLS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS WHICH CARE FOR CHILDREN DO IF THEY BECOME AWARE OF A PERSON EXHIBITING SUSPICIOUS BEHAVIOR WHO COULD BE A THREAT TO CHILDREN?

The first and most important step: NOTIFY LOCAL POLICE, if they have not been the original source of information. After notifying law enforcement, consider taking any or all of the following actions, depending upon the nature of the threat and the information available.

- Send letters home to parents which do one or more of the following:
 - a. outline whatever description and information is available about the person and his actions which have alerted you to a specific threat;
 - b. make parents aware of the Sex Offender Registry and other sources of information, see “WHERE CAN I GET FURTHER HELP?”
 - c. encourage parents to talk to their children about the person who poses the specific threat, and about sexual offending more generally;
 - d. advise that you will communicate to parents whatever further information becomes available to you;

- e. advise that you may talk to individual children about the threat, and that parents should call the school if they do not want their children to participate in any such discussions;
 - f. encourage parents to require any children who walk to and from school to walk in groups or be accompanied by an adult, depending on age; and
 - g. request parents to report any information they may have about this threat.
- Gather school children together in small classes or groups to talk about the threat, to show them any available pictures, and to LISTEN to whatever information they may have to offer about the threat. Often children will have already noticed a suspicious person lurking around the playground, walking with kids home from school, *etc.*
 - Increase teacher and adult monitoring of playground activities, as well as morning and afternoon dismissal.
 - Hold a school assembly in which children act out skits or engage in role-playing to demonstrate appropriate responses to specific dangerous situations, like being followed on the way home from school, being asked to get into a car, *etc.*

Sources:

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, *Child Protection*, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice

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Center for Sex Offender Management, *Myths and Facts About Sex Offenders*, August 2000, <http://www.scom.org/pubs/mythsfacts.html>.

Stop It Now! The Campaign to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse, *Warning Signs About Child Sexual Abuse*, 2005, <http://www.stopitnow.org/warnings.html>.

Colorado Bureau of Investigation Convicted Sex Offender Site, *Things You Should Know About Sexual Offending*, <http://sor.state.co.us/you.should.know.htm>.