

Abuse, Interrupted

Group aims to prevent the sexual abuse of children by reaching adults at risk and those who care about them

Stories about the sexual abuse of children are spread across the headlines and splashed over our TV screens. Usually, these stories focus on the worst of the worst—hard-core predators whose compulsion has gone unchecked, with horrifying consequences.

These stories can leave us wringing our hands, outraged, afraid, worrying that our only option is to lock all offenders up and throw away the key.

Yet these stories don't represent the full reality of child sexual abuse. And they don't represent our only option for dealing with people who would sexually abuse a child.

What's been missing, in our view, is a concentrated effort to stop abuse before a child is harmed by reaching adults who are at risk of sexually abusing a child and those who are in a position to stop them.

Perhaps you've seen one of our billboards: "Having sexual thoughts about children?" we ask, and then refer people to our safe and confidential helpline, 1-888-PREVENT, and to our Web site, www.youcanstopitnow.org.

We aim to put more responsibility for prevention on the shoulders of the person having sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviors toward children. We also recognize the important role that empowered bystanders can play when they know how to recognize a person or situation that puts children at risk - and how to take preventive action.

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**YVONNE
COURNOYER**



**Having sexual thoughts
about children?**

1-888-PREVENT

Safe and Confidential Helpline

YOU CAN STOP IT NOW.ORG

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From our intensive work with adults who have abused children and adults who were abused as children, we know there's hope. We know that it's possible to interrupt the series of thoughts and decisions that may lead to sexual abuse of a child. We know that treatment works.

We know that it's possible, in many cases, to prevent the sexual abuse of children.

Of children who are abused, 90 percent are abused by someone they know. At least half of all abuse happens within families, and most instances of sexual abuse are not reported to authorities. Our work with people in treatment for sexual behaviors toward children teaches us that abuse doesn't just "happen." Before it does, there are a series of decisions, and a series of opportunities to intervene, before someone sexually abuses.

But in this climate - defined by horrifying headlines and TV reports about child predators - intervention can seem like too much of a risk. Asking for help, for yourself or for someone you love, can seem terrifying. That fear stops people from getting help, and, worse, can prolong the abuse of a child.

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That's why we're working to change certain social norms around the sexual abuse of children. We believe our cause of prevention will be served by:

- ◆ Breaking the silence, shining a light on the subject, sharing stories of individuals affected by sexual abuse (you'll see excerpts from several such stories on this page today; expanded versions are available on our Web site, www.youcanstopitnow.org).
- ◆ Increasing awareness of options for help, so families and friends don't feel as if they have only two choices: put up with the abuse or lock

away the person who's abusing for good.

- ◆ Encouraging adults to take action as soon as they see something that worries them instead of believing they have to have proof before doing anything.
- ◆ Emphasizing that treatment for sexual behavior problems works, and that help is available.

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Among the principles that guide our work is collaboration. No single sector of society can address the problem alone; no single approach will do everything that needs to be done. So we work with many other people and organizations, in criminal justice, treatment, child abuse and sexual violence prevention, and public health. We work closely with people with relevant personal experiences, including those who have abused, adults who were abused as children, and family members who know and love both the person who abused and the child who was harmed.

Our goal is to play a part in a more comprehensive approach to the problem, an approach that goes beyond holding individual perpetrators accountable and providing services for children after they've been harmed.

Of course we believe that people who abuse children must be held accountable. Some have to be locked away to protect the public. We support strong law enforcement and court action against child sexual abuse. We support the reporting systems already in place, those that require professionals to alert authorities when they suspect a child is being abused.

But that's not enough.

When child sexual abuse is defined solely as a criminal justice issue, our options are limited to responses after the harm has been done. We believe that people who have sexually abused children should face accountability. Currently, though, Minnesota is focused disproportionately on punitive approaches that increase sentences and civil commitments while reducing funding for victim services - and not funding prevention.

Here's why that's a mistake: The vast majority of sexual abuse cases never make it to the criminal justice system.

By reaching adults who are sexually abusing children or who might, as well as their loved ones, we have an opportunity to prevent abuse from starting or to stop abuse that has gone undetected.

Our prevention messages will not reach all people who are at risk of sexually abusing children. But, from our research with adults in treatment, we know the majority of them wanted to stop but didn't know how. They also described other barriers - mostly having to do with fear of the consequences.

Our prevention messages target this audience. (Our safe and confidential 1-888-PREVENT Helpline is designed to reduce the barrier of unknown consequences by providing information about treatment options and potential consequences. The Helpline is confidential not because we believe those who abuse should escape accountability, but because our first priority is to prevent, or stop, the abuse.)

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Our research also shows that a majority of these adults had sought help earlier for a different issue - depression, substance abuse, relationship issues, sexual addiction, thoughts of suicide, anger management - and many received treatment without ever being asked about sexual behavior toward children.

Our research and experience lead us to promote a message of hope and help.

This finding is significant. If mental health treatment providers know more about the interconnections among sexual behavior problems and some other mental health issues, they can screen for those - and refer individuals at risk of sexually abusing children for assessment, and treatment.

Half of the participants in this study said people around them (spouses, parents, friends) had noticed something was wrong and had asked about it or commented on their behavior, particularly their alcohol or drug use, depression or anger. About a fourth of the participants were urged by loved ones to get help, and said these concerned bystanders were instrumental in their decision to get help.

It is important that family, friends and other "bystanders" understand the important role they play in helping their loved ones to step forward, be accountable for any illegal behavior and receive treatment.

It's also important that adults learn to identify behavior that may signal a problem. In 2003, Stop It Now! surveyed the seven-county metro area. At that time, nearly 80 percent of adults surveyed could describe the signs of a child who has been abused. But only about half that many were able to describe the signs of an adult who has sexually abused children. To prevent sexual abuse, adults need to know and respond when they see warning signs.

Our research and experience lead us to promote a message of hope and help. We know from our work with people who have sexually abused that many can learn to control their behaviors and go on to lead healthy lives free from abuse. Treatment is available, and it works.

Sexual abuse of children is not inevitable. It is preventable.

People affected by sexual abuse share their stories

It is not easy to say, 'I sexually abused a child' or 'I was sexually abused' or 'I love someone who sexually abused a child.' Several people whom Stop It Now! has worked with agreed to share their stories, with names withheld, in the hope that describing their experiences will help prevent abuse. Here are excerpts; expanded versions and additional accounts are available on Stop It Now! Minnesota's Web Site, at www.youcanstopitnow.org.

OFFENDER: Alcohol, porn, jail, recovery

My story begins with alcohol. From the very first time I drank, I could drink a lot and had a high tolerance for alcohol. Around the late 1990s, both of my parents became ill at the same time. The increased stress and responsibility gave me an even greater excuse to drink, and I started drinking all day, every day. I was a teacher and I'd have a bottle of Mountain Dew with 2 inches of vodka in it. Despite all my drinking, I never had any negative consequences from it.

I've also had a lifelong interest in pornography. To keep my pornography use secret from my wife, I began to use my school computer. At first I wasn't looking at illegal porn, but I was crossing boundaries at work, and I knew my behavior was addictive.

At first I looked at heterosexual adult porn, but after a while I began exploring other types of porn. I kept looking for new things, and child porn became my target. I had never been sexually attracted to children before but I liked the thrill from the risky, illegal nature of child porn.

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One day a guy offered me illegal porn through the mail. I sent the money, and when it was delivered I was arrested. I was charged with a felony, and after 26 years as a teacher, I was fired. The consequences were enormous. My arrest was very public. I lost most of my friends. It was hard on my family. I went to jail for four months. I was also court-ordered to complete chemical dependency

treatment and sex offender treatment.

When I started sex offender treatment I was determined to finish faster than anyone had ever finished. But after about nine months, I started to see that I was really learning something. I am a real proponent of treatment. It worked for me and I've seen it work for others.

I feel bad about the people I let down, my students, their parents, other teachers at my school, the whole community. My wife was also really hurt, and I have a hard time with this.

At the same time, I need to find things to feel good about myself. Because if I hate myself, I put myself in a dark place that can lead to bad choices. I know my underlying issues are never going to go away, but I have strategies for dealing with them.

I co-founded a weekly peer self-help support group for people struggling with healthy sexual boundaries. Our group also provides early intervention for someone who is starting to have some red-flag behaviors and needs to talk to someone. This is really crucial.

I'm healthier both physically and emotionally. Before, I had a lot of secrets and lies and I was totally disconnected. Now, someone always knows where I am and where I'll be, and I have lots of new connections. I have a lot of support and I feel like I'm paying back the community every week.

I'm sharing my story so other people know that there is help.

SURVIVOR: Coming to terms with the person who abused her

When I was 8 and my oldest brother was 13, he began molesting me. It lasted one year. I don't know what started it, and I don't know what stopped it. What I do know is the profound effect it has had on my life. I knew what my brother was doing was wrong and yet I took the blame and the shame of it all.

I grew up in a seemingly perfect family. Two parents (never divorced), two brothers and one sister. I was the youngest. We lived an above-average lifestyle with a nice home, a cabin and annual vacations around the United States. My dad always told my brothers never to hit a girl, especially their sisters. He didn't tell them they shouldn't touch us sexually.

Before my brother molested me, I remember being daddy's little peanut! He would tuck me into bed with my favorite stuffed animal and give me butterfly kisses on my cheek. I felt very loved, protected and safe. Afterward I remember declaring to my parents that I no longer wanted to be hugged or kissed. Looking back, I think my parents might have seen this as a warning sign, something to at least ask me about.

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Flash forward to my 22nd birthday. I went into my mom's room and told her that my brother had molested me. Her first words were, "We can't tell your dad. It would kill him." I was devastated.

By the time I was 28 I had a full head of steam built up about what happened to me. I blamed my brother for absolutely everything in my life, and I hated him. I didn't realize how much I did until I heard myself utter the words, "I wish my brother would contract AIDS and die a slow, lingering

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death." No sooner did I get the words out than I gasped and began to cry. I couldn't believe I had so much anger and hatred festering inside of me that I'd wish anyone dead. At that moment I knew there was only one answer to healing myself. It was forgiveness - forgive him, forgive my family and, especially, forgive myself.

As I learned and prayed about forgiveness, I began to craft a letter to my brother. Finally, at Christmas time I requested some time with my brother to confront him with the truth and forgive him. On Christmas Eve my brother and I found a room in our house to talk privately. The room happened to be my childhood room - where all the molestation occurred.

He read the letter and said, "I don't remember this, but if it happened, I am sorry." I thought "What! That's it! You don't remember, but you're sorry?" Then I realized it didn't matter what he said. My healing came from the active pursuit of letting go of all my pain and forgiving him.

Being molested has resulted in such a magnitude of issues. What I want to share is the biggest ongoing challenge that incest has created in my life. It is the issue of intimacy - especially physical intimacy. Because I was sexualized at such a young age, my relationships are complex and difficult at times. I pray and hope that one day this part of my life will be healed, also. Forgiveness and understanding helped me realize that people who have abused are human beings, also.

I speak about my journey in hopes to break the shame that keeps victims quiet.

RELATIVE: A family's nightmare

Our family nightmare began on Mother's Day 1997. My husband and I went to northern Minnesota to relax for a week. That evening we received a call that changed our lives forever. Our daughter-in-law called to tell us that our son had been arrested for sexually molesting our step-granddaughter. We were packed and on our way home in 15 minutes.

When our children (three daughters and one son) were home, we were not the "Cleaver" family. Yet, on the outside, we appeared to be the average suburban, middle-income, two-parent family. Behind the walls of this seemingly happy home was a secret that many families face. There was not sexual abuse or chemical abuse, but there was physical abuse. I stayed in the marriage to keep the family together, not facing the reality that my children suffered the mental anxieties of witnessing this abuse.

Looking back, I recall my son's behaviors toward his step-daughter that concerned me. As she became a teen-ager, he would often tease and put her down unmercifully. We also saw less of their family and heard many excuses why they could not attend family functions.

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We need a nation of educated adults to know and watch for signs of sexual abuse so all children in our families, neighborhoods and communities will be safer. The abusers who have been prosecuted are just a small portion of the people guilty of sexual abuse toward children.

I knew then that I had to accept that my son had committed his horrific crime. Then I had to learn how to be a support system to his recovery program and see what I could do to prevent other children from suffering sexual abuse.

You always hear that something good comes out of even the worst situation. I could not see how anything positive could evolve from this mess until my son began chemical dependency and sexual offender treatment programs in prison. When answering a question that a therapist asked, I started a statement with, "Before my son got into trouble...." My son interrupted me and said, "I did not get into trouble, Mom, I raped two young, innocent girls." I knew then that I had to accept that my son had committed his horrific crime. Then I had to learn how to be a support system to his recovery program and see what I could do to prevent other children from suffering sexual abuse.

I pray that my granddaughter and all victims of sexual abuse will have love and peace every remaining day of their lives. I miss the close relationship I once had with my granddaughter. She is now a beautiful married woman. We talk and hug and say "I love you," but she needed the distance to heal, and I understand and respect that. It is difficult when you love both the victim and offender.

My son was divorced during his incarceration. After serving 5½ years in prison, he was released. He is so blessed to have found a wonderful wife who can accept who he was and believe in who he is now. He has the love of his children, a job he enjoys and friends and family to love. Many of you may think he does not deserve that; he should have been locked up for life. I understand, because I was there before this story became my life.