

SEXUAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT: TOPICS WE MUST TALK ABOUT

Not too long ago, I gave a weekend workshop at a church that was staggering under the impact of sexual abuse. The pastor told me that the present church membership is about one-third of what it was several years ago. A generation of young people have left because of allegations that children in the congregation were sexually abused by a prominent church officer. Only one teacher remains in a beautiful building that used to house a three-teacher school. The members are struggling to rebuild their spiritual community and hoping that someday their young people will return.

I hope so, too, but I know trust is very hard to rebuild. In cases where sexual abuse has occurred, the damage eats at the very core of a person and his or her beliefs about God and the church. When a trusted adult uses his or her (usually his) power and control to seduce or force a child into sexual activity, the child's capacity to love and trust is shattered into a million tiny shards of doubt. The foundations of personality and the relationship with God are lost. Rebuilding trust demands an arduous personal struggle.

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spouse. In schools, principals, teachers, and students refuse to believe that a popular teacher could have done such a thing—and scorn the accusing student. In churches, adults do not believe a child's account of abuse by a prominent church officer. All of us prefer to believe that sexual abuse happens somewhere else, but not in our church or school. And so we close our eyes to the compelling needs of children and adults around us.

We can no longer afford to ignore sexual abuse, harassment, and intimidation. However painful or embarrassing, we must talk about these topics. Prevention begins with the light of open discussion. As employees at every level—from preschool to graduate school—we must be informed and alert. In this article, we will briefly examine how educators can actively work to prevent sexual abuse and harassment in schools.

Reports document the fact that sexual abuse and harassment are a significant threat to the well-being of young people worldwide.¹ Social and family upheavals have caused a breakdown in the historical role of adults in protecting children. In countries where traditional restraints on conduct have been undermined, children and young women are at particular risk for rape and sexual abuse. In most parts of the world, girls and women hold inferior status, making it easy for males to assert power and control at whim.

Child sexual abuse is widely be-

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lieved to be underreported. Most data come from large urban centers, and not all locales regularly collect and report data.² In the United States, the incidence of reported child sexual abuse is 1.9 percent, compared with physical abuse at 4.3 percent and neglect at 2.7 percent.³ Some 10 to 25 percent of all preadolescent females have had sexual contact with adults.⁴ One-third of college students responding to one study indicated they had been sexually abused as children.⁵ Another study reported that as many as 38 percent of females have been sexually abused before age 18.⁶ The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect believes that the true extent of sexual abuse of children is unknown.⁷ Data on sexual abuse of students by teachers are even more difficult to obtain.⁸ Reports of sexual abuse from other countries vary, with some reporting lower and others much higher incidences of abuse and rape.⁹ Many governments do not systematically collect such data.

To bring the American statistics a little closer home, and show just how many children are being abused, we might suggest that in a church school of 50 students, it is likely that at least one child is being sexually abused, at least two are suffering physical abuse, and one or two are neglected by their families. My personal experience suggests that these numbers may be low.

Sexual harassment appears to be even more common. Two studies released in 1993 document sexual harassment of students in elementary and secondary schools. The American Association of University Women surveyed a diverse group of 1,632 female and male public school students

in grades eight to 12 from 79 school districts. They concluded that most students experience sexual harassment, both verbal and physical, on a daily basis.¹⁰

The Wellesley College Center for Research on Women and the National Organization for Women Legal Defense and Education Fund sponsored a *Seventeen* magazine survey as reported in "Secrets in Public: Sexual Harassment in Our Schools."¹¹ Of 4,200 surveys, 2,002 letters were randomly selected for analysis. Girls aged 9 to 19 years in grades two to 12 from a variety of racial groups were surveyed. Ninety percent attended public school, while one-tenth came from private nonparochial, parochial, and vocational schools. The researchers concluded from their responses that sexual harassment is not an isolated event: 39 percent of the girls reported being harassed on a daily basis during the past year, while 83 percent reported physical abuse and 89 percent reported verbal abuse at some time in the past.

The girls reported that sexual harassment happened in all kinds of schools, and that schools were less likely to do something about it when the harasser was a teacher. Most harassers were male, and the most common forms were comments, gestures, or looks, and actions such as touching, pinching, or grabbing. When administrators or teachers refused to intervene, the girls interpreted this as negligence because the harassment continued.

Often nothing is done by schools to stop or prevent future sexual harassment.¹² Few schools have policies that they enforce. Most school administrators admit to feeling very ambivalent about reports

of sexual harassment and sexual abuse. In many cases, accusations are made by a marginal student against a popular teacher on campus. Administrators tend to identify emotionally with the teacher and fear the fallout from other students, faculty, and parents—and it will come—if they do anything public about the accusation.

On the other side, since the advent of laws in the United States declaring that sexual harassment in the workplace is illegal, some school districts have become more concerned.¹³ Also, local education agencies or postsecondary institutions that receive federal aid from the U.S. Government risk loss of funding if they do not comply with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination.¹⁴ Some court cases have focused strongly on the responsibility of the school to protect students from sexual abuse and harassment.

Data on sexual harassment in higher education are difficult to come by, although it clearly exists. General harassment, such as sexist comments and innuendos, probably is quite frequent, even on Adventist campuses. Female students are asked to provide sexual favors in exchange for grades, mentoring, and career advancement. My personal experience suggests that this type of sexual harassment exists on Adventist campuses, but most likely at a much lower rate than on secular campuses.

Finding a Balance

Because of the fear of legal recrimination, some schools have become emotionally cold places for students. Teachers refrain from touching students or from seeming friendly for fear of being accused of sexual harassment. Somewhere between the extremes of ignoring the sexual innuendos or acts and giving up on normal mentoring relationships with students is the path of integrity we desire for Christian schools.

Schools have a responsibility to help students who have suffered sexual abuse outside of school. They come to school emotionally vulnerable and needy.¹⁵ Sometimes, their emotional needs are so overwhelming that school work can only be a sideline. These children desperately need

our help, yet they can easily misinterpret our actions and words. We need to know the proper way to help.

What can we do to prevent and deal with sexual abuse and harassment in our schools at all levels?

Prevention—Employee and Volunteer Screening

Prevention begins with the development of a sexual harassment policy and careful selection of school personnel, both employees and volunteers.¹⁶ Screening potential sexual abusers is not an easy task. At the very least, all references should be checked carefully and specific questions asked, such as: Have there been any accusations of sexual abuse or harassment in the past? How were the charges resolved? Have you ever been convicted of a crime?

Seek legal counsel to determine how specifically you may ask about the individual's personal life, as well as his or her employment history. While recognizing that there can be false allegations, we do need to carefully investigate previous accusations. Employers have a known tendency to want to "pass the trash." Interviewers need to be especially alert to these issues, since previous employers may downplay such problems. Most teachers do not lose their teaching credentials because of a sexual abuse or some other types of criminal conviction. Any discrepancies in the application should be investigated thoroughly.

Even though most sexual abusers do not have a police record, investigation should also include police records and information from state or county family and social service units. Applicants should sign a release allowing for verification of information in their application. We cannot be too careful in this area.

Adventist Risk Management Inc., provides guidelines¹⁷ for interviewing prospective employees and volunteers, with special emphasis on obtaining information about past sexual misconduct. Their document also provides suggested statements that can be included in the application document, as well as a sample application for volunteers. They strongly suggest obtaining local legal counsel about employment/volunteer interviews and keeping careful records, since state statutes vary

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widely. The records of prospective employees and volunteers should be carefully investigated, using the legal guidelines of each locality.

Policies

Setting clear policies about sexual abuse and harassment will go a long way toward preventing problems. School boards need to vote policies stating the school's position on these issues. Since each county, state, and local jurisdiction may have a different approach to the legal issues, these policies should be carefully reviewed by competent legal counsel. Once a policy is voted, the board has a responsibility to distribute the policy statement to all interested parties—administrators, teachers, parents, and students—and to enforce it. Administrators must make sure that the policies are clearly understood and fairly and responsibly applied. Having policies that are clearly and carefully devised, then widely disseminated so everyone concerned is aware of them, will greatly aid in preventing sexual abuse and harassment. The recently voted General Conference statement on sexual abuse provides clear support for schools to devise and publicize their own policies. (See sidebar on page 46.)

A survey reported by *Phi Delta Kappan* concluded that "Districts that have fewer incidents of sexual abuse have at least three things in common. First, they have *strong and clear policies on sexual harassment*. Second, *they make sure all employees and students know what these policies are and know how to make complaints*. And third, *they educate students and staff members about sexual harassment and about what to do if harassment occurs*."¹⁸

Conference departments of education should provide model policies that are appropriate for their locality. In preparing this article, I briefly contacted some conference and union offices of education

about their policies, only to discover that they did not have any. I believe prevention mandates that we devise appropriate policies and then apply them.

Model sexual harassment policies can be found in Fastback No. 370 from the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation: *Establishing School Policies on Sexual Harassment*.¹⁹ The booklet summarizes judicial cases and discusses procedures for establishing policies and school-wide prevention programs.

Procedures

Each school should establish procedures for reporting and handling complaints about sexual harassment and abuse, both on campus and off campus at practicum or internship sites. Teachers and students need to know what procedures to follow when they observe or are the victim of sexual harassment or abuse, and administrators need clear guidelines to follow when difficult situations arise. Schools need to be alert to potential problems that may arise in a variety of situations, including those at off-campus school-related sites.

Individuals who report incidents should be taken seriously. It is easy to hide behind the standard myths or explanations—"It can't happen here," "She asked for it," "Boys will be boys," "I can't believe that teacher would do such a thing," etc. Taking sexual complaints seriously helps to establish a school culture that says "We are serious about your safety. We believe in personal integrity." As teachers and administrators, our attitudes state that we believe sexual harassment and abuse are totally inappropriate under all circumstances.

Teacher/Administrator Behavior

Policies and procedures mean nothing if teachers and administrators regularly tell off-color jokes, pat girls or women on the behind or breast, comment about their sexual attractiveness, tolerate sexually explicit graffiti, and generally join in the "fun" at the expense of females on the campus.²⁰ Students come to our schools from sexually explicit environments. We live in a sex-saturated society where any type of sexual perversion can be viewed on TV or in magazines generally available to the public. Sexuality is used to "sell"

almost anything, and prime-time television is known for its explicit sexual innuendos and situations. Adolescence is portrayed as one long sexual orgy, and perversions seem to be the norm.

Since our students are very “tuned in” to sex, our behavior must be impeccably non-suggestive if we are to portray Christian ideals and keep ourselves out of trouble. Students who have experienced sexual abuse are especially sensitive to implied sexuality in our behavior. (See sidebar for

some of the characteristics of children who have been sexually abused.) Teachers can be friendly, while keeping their hands to themselves. They can mentor a young woman without being sexually provocative. If you have any doubts about the way you come across to students, ask a trusted colleague to observe and give you honest feedback. You may be surprised. Many times, it takes an outside observer to objectively evaluate our long-accustomed ways of dealing with the opposite sex.

We are all born with sexual drives that can get us into trouble if we are not careful. Peter Rutter, in an illuminating article in *Ministry*,²¹ discusses sex in the “forbidden zone”—that is, between professionals like counselors and ministers (or teachers) and clients (or students). The allure of the forbidden and the opportunity to engage in it are great for men (or women) who work closely with young people. Only personal integrity and the grace of God can help us deal with those

Seventh-day Adventist Statement on Child Sexual Abuse*

Child sexual abuse occurs when a person older or stronger than the child uses his or her power, authority, or position of trust to involve a child in sexual behavior or activity. Incest, a specific form of child sexual abuse, is defined as any sexual activity between a child and a parent, a sibling, an extended family member, or a step/surrogate parent.

Sexual abusers may be men or women and may be of any age, nationality, or socio-economic background. They are often men who are married with children, have respectable jobs, and may be regular churchgoers. It is common for offenders to strongly deny their abusive behavior, to refuse to see their actions as a problem, and to rationalize their behavior or place blame on something or someone else. While it is true that many abusers exhibit deeply rooted insecurities and low self-esteem, these problems should never be accepted as an excuse for sexually abusing a child. Most authorities agree that the real issue in child sexual abuse is more related to a desire for power and control than for sex.

When God created the human family, He began with a marriage between a man and a woman based on mutual love and trust. This relationship is still designed to provide the foundation for a stable, happy family in which the dignity, worth, and integrity of each family member is protected and upheld. Every child, whether male or female, is to be affirmed as a gift from God. Parents are given the privilege and responsibility of providing nurture, protection, and physical care for the children entrusted to them by God. Children should be able to honor, respect, and trust their parents and other family members without the risk of abuse.

The Bible condemns child sexual abuse in the strongest possible terms. It sees any attempt to confuse, blur, or denigrate personal, generational, or gender boundaries through sexually abusive behavior as an act of betrayal and a gross violation of personhood. It openly condemns abuses of power, authority, and responsibility because these strike at the very heart of the victims' deepest feelings about themselves, others, and God, and shatter their capacity to love and trust. Jesus used strong language to condemn the actions of anyone who, through word or deed, causes a child to stumble.

The Adventist Christian community is not immune from child sexual abuse. We believe that the tenets of the Seventh-day Adventist faith require us to be actively involved in its prevention. We are also committed to spiritually assisting abused and abusive individuals and their families in their healing and recovery process, and to holding church professionals and church lay leaders accountable for maintaining their personal behavior as is appropriate for persons in positions of spiritual leadership and trust.

As a Church, we believe our faith calls us to:

1. Uphold the principles of Christ for family relationships in which the self-respect, dignity, and purity of children are recognized as divinely mandated rights.
2. Provide an atmosphere where children who have been abused can feel safe when reporting sexual abuse and can feel that someone will listen to them.
3. Become thoroughly informed about sexual abuse and its impact upon our own church community.
4. Help ministers and lay leaders to recognize the warning signs of child sexual abuse and know how to respond appropriately when abuse is suspected or a child reports being sexually abused.
5. Establish referral relationships with professional counselors and local sexual assault agencies who can, with their professional skills, assist abuse victims and their families.
6. Create guidelines/policies at the appropriate levels to assist church leaders in:
 - a. Endeavoring to treat with fairness persons accused of sexually abusing children,
 - b. Holding abusers accountable for their actions and administering appropriate discipline.
7. Support the education and enrichment of families and family members by:
 - a. Dispelling commonly held religious and cultural beliefs which may be used to justify or cover up child sexual abuse.
 - b. Building a healthy sense of personal worth in each child which enables him or her to respect self and others.
 - c. Fostering Christlike relationships between males and females in the home and in the church.
8. Provide caring support and a faith-based redemptive ministry within the church community for abuse survivors and abusers while enabling them to access the available network of professional resources in the community.
9. Encourage the training of more family professionals to facilitate the healing and recovery process of abuse victims and perpetrators.

(The above statement is informed by principles expressed in the following scriptural passages: Gen 1:26-28; 2:18-25; Lev 18:20; 2 Sam 13:1-22; Matt 18:6-9; 1 Cor 5:1-5; Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:18-21; 1 Tim 5:5-8.)

* Voted at General Conference Spring Council, March 1997.

moments when the allure of sex or power seems irresistible.

Being aware of our sexual drives and avoiding extended, isolated contacts with students are the safest way to ensure integrity. A hefty dose of common sense should prevail when we are confronted with a potentially compromising situation. For example, in a slightly flirty way, an attractive eighth grader tells you she needs a ride home. If you are a male teacher, suggest that she call her parents or a neighbor. Avoid extended one-on-one sessions with a student of the opposite sex. Don't room alone with a student on field trips. Don't laugh at sexually suggestive jokes.

In summary, in today's societal climate, we cannot be too careful about matters of sexuality. We must screen our employees and volunteers carefully, establish and disseminate clear policies and procedures about sexual abuse and harassment, and be very careful about our own behavior. ☞

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ence dealing with sexual harassment issues.

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2. Lane J. Veltkamp and Thomas W. Miller,

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4. Veltkamp and Miller, p. 26.

5. Finkelhor, 1979, cited in *ibid.*, p. 27.

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10. American Association of University Women, *Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in American Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Author), reported in Cohan, et al., pp. 10, 11.

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15. Veltkamp and Miller, pp. 29, 30; "Signs and Symptoms of Child Sexual Abuse," in a pamphlet produced by Southwestern Michigan Area Health Education Center, Kalamazoo, Michigan; Christopher Bagley, "Early Sexual Experience and Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents," in George A. Rekers, ed., *Handbook of Child and Adolescent Sexual Problems* (New York: Lexington Books, 1995), pp. 141-145.

16. The North American Division has produced several helpful documents relating to this subject: "Sexual Harassment Policy" (NAD D 70), "Negligent Hiring Prevention Tracking System," and "Sexual Misconduct in Church Relationships Involving Denominational Employees and Volunteers," which are available from the NAD Office of Human Relations, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904. Telephone: (301) 680-6410.

17. For additional information, contact Risk Control Resources Library, Adventist Risk Management, 11291 Pierce St., Riverside, CA 92515. Telephone: (909) 352-6802. Request the child abuse prevention manual.

18. Shakeshaft and Cohan, p. 519.

19. Available for \$3 a copy plus shipping (\$1 for one; \$3 for 2-25 copies) from Phi Delta Kappa International, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789 U.S.A. Telephone: (800) 766-1156 or (812) 339-1156.

20. *Ibid.*; Shakeshaft and Cohan.

21. Peter Rutter, "Sex in the Forbidden Zone," *Ministry* (January 1992), pp. 7-9; _____, *Sex, Power, and Boundaries: Understanding and Preventing Sexual Harassment* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996).

22. From a pamphlet produced by Southwestern Michigan Area Health Education Center, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE²²

Hematomas, hickeys on children. Lacerations, hand marks on arms or back.

Pregnancy—may be result of incest but also way to get out of the house.

Difficulty with urination/defecation—no physical basis.

Frequent somatic complaints—no physical basis.

Venereal disease in children.

Nightmares/daydreaming.

Difficulty in sitting still.

Eating difficulties.

Depression.

Behavioral signs—runaways, prostitution, substance abuse.

Heavy use of drugs/alcohol.

Young children who have excessive sexual curiosity.

Children who write notes with sexual messages.

Children whose behavior may be categorized as sexually "promiscuous."

Children who begin to withdraw from social relationships.

Any type of significant behavior change.

Poor peer relationships.

Poor eye contact.

Children who are treated significantly different than other children in the family—
either better or worse.

Evasive comments about sexuality.