Issues in the sexual molestation of deaf youth

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An overview is provided of issues involved in sexual abuse in schools (as well as the general problem of child molestation in society), some characteristics of pedophiles and hebephiles, and data on how sexual molesters are dealt with by the criminal justice system. Specific information is provided on how sexual abuse becomes an issue in schools for children who are deaf, what can be done to prevent it, and symptoms to look for in identifying deaf children who are being victimized.

Over the last decade, there has been a steadily lengthening series of revelations of the widespread nature of child sexual molestation by pedophiles both in the United States and Canada (Boyle, 1994; Tomes, 1996). Molestation is occurring in the most respected institutions working with children in the United States (Boyle, 1994). For example, the Roman Catholic Church is reported to have paid up to $1 billion in settlements to victims of pedophilic priests. In the Archdiocese of Boston alone, bishops have been forced to resign and the names of 80 suspected priests whose offenses go back as far as 40 years have been turned over to local prosecutors (“Lax Church Policies,” 2002, Zoll, 2002). Since 1995, more than 130 people have claimed that one former priest, John Geoghan, fondled or raped them over 3 decades (Zoll, 2002). The problem also exists within the clergy of the Protestant and Jewish faiths (Boyle, 1994). The Boy Scouts have had to pay out huge settlements to boys victimized by pedophiles who were scout leaders (Boyle, 1994). In Canada, potential scoutmasters now face mandatory police checks whose purpose is to weed out pedophiles (“Scouts Plan Police Check,” 1996). Schools, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Big Brothers, YMCAs, Little League baseball, high school sports programs, and many other kinds of organizations serving children increasingly are facing lawsuits growing out of new revelations about problems with child molesters (Boyle, 1994).

Schools for children who are deaf are no exception. In an expose series that has focused national attention on the issue as it relates to these children, newspaper journalist Ruth Teichroeb (2002) reported on recent sexual abuse cases in eight schools for the Deaf.
The aspect of sexual abuse we focus on in the present article is that committed by pedophiles or hebephiles. Pedophiles are adults who molest prepubertal children (Figure 1). Hebephiles are those who molest children ages 13 to 16 years (Greenberg, Bradford, & Curry, 1993). We will look at some characteristics of these individuals, how they operate, and how schools can cope with the problems they present.

Historically, all of the service organizations we have mentioned handled the problem of child sexual abuse, once it was discovered, in basically similar ways (Boyle, 1994; Teichroeb, 2002). First, every effort was made to keep the problem as secret as possible, especially from the media, but also from coworkers, parents, teachers, and boards of directors or other superiors. This was done in part to protect the school or organization, because this kind of publicity can be devastating. It has contributed to the closing of several schools serving deaf youth, for example, the Nebraska School for the Deaf and the Central North Carolina School for the Deaf.

With the advent of laws that make the reporting of sexual abuse mandatory, the practice of secrecy has been significantly reduced. However, it has not been stopped altogether, even though failure to report sexual abuse is a crime. In addition, attempts at secrecy leave the perpetrator and the school open to costly civil suits.

The second way sexual abuse was handled historically was either to reprimand the offender, talk the offender into leaving, or terminate the offender's employment. At some schools, offenders were even promoted, or transferred to positions providing less direct contact with students (Teichroeb, 2002). However, this was done without making clear to the public and the police that the offender was a pedophile. In the case of many organizations, such as the Catholic Church, offenders were simply relocated (Zoll, 2002).

In schools for the Deaf, because the offense was usually not prosecuted in court, pedophiles often obtained positions in different schools. In many cases, except for their sexual pathology, these were competent teachers, coaches, or residential counselors, respected by their colleagues and peers. Thus, in addition to wanting to protect the school from harmful publicity, administrators did not want to destroy the career and family of a respected, well-liked coworker. In other cases, the administrators did not fully understand the nature of pedophilia. They felt that by lecturing or dismissing the pedophile, they would teach the individual a lesson and that he or she consequently would no longer sexually abuse children. But despite these well-meaning approaches, the bottom line is that, by virtue of these policies, children were being sexually molested and, in some instances, led into pedophilia themselves (Freund, Watson, & Dickey, 1990). Sometimes it was allowed to happen because those in charge did not know it was going on. In other instances, administrators were simply covering up the activity to protect themselves, their friends, or the reputation of the school.

**Some Characteristics of Pedophiles**

Figure 2 lists some characteristics of pedophiles. In examining the figure, one must take several points into particular consideration: The fact that a third of sexual abusers are under age 18 years (Finkelhor, 1994) means that in a school it is not only the staff, but the students as well, who are at risk of becoming sexual abusers. In fact, the median age for juvenile sexual offenders is between 13 and 14 years. Their average victim is 7 to 8 years old (Ryan, 1991).

Another point worthy of note is the recidivism rate of molesters, which, according to one study, ranges from 34% to 40% (Becker, 1994). When evaluating this statistic, one should take into account that incarcerated pedophiles are only caught 1 out of 30 times in which they commit an act of sexual molestation (Becker, 1994; Musk, Swetz, & Vernon, 1997). The average nonincarcerated pedophile molest 117 victims (Squires, 1986). For those who molest boys only, the figure is 231 victims on the average (Musk et al., 1997). What this means is that the rate of recidivism is far higher than reported because pedophiles are so rarely caught.

The main reason for the high rate of recidivism is that, in the opinion of most experts, pedophilia is incurable (Berlin & Krout, 1986; Forby, Wainrot, & Blackshaw, 1989). Many believe it can be treated—that is, that some pedophiles
can, with the help of psychotherapy or chemical inhibition of their sex drive, learn not to act out their sexual desire for children (Berlin & Meinecke, 1981; "Natural Born Predators," 1994). However, the sexual preference for children remains. These facts make it clear that when pedophiles are discovered, it is critical that they be reported in order to ensure that they do not find another position working with children.

Another point in Figure 2 that deserves attention is that the average duration of a pedophile's relationship with a child is 2 years. This is important for several reasons, the main one being that the longer a child is subjected to pedophilia, the more severe the effects, other things being equal. In fact, 49% of juvenile sexual offenders were themselves sexually abused (Becker, 1994).

**General Facts About Sexual Abuse and Outcomes of Court Cases**

Before one gets into specifics about sexual abuse in schools, it is helpful to examine some general information about sexual abuse per se. The data in Figure 3 indicate that youth who are deaf are more often sexually molested than hearing youth. These data also indicate that a disproportionately high percentage of inmates who are deaf are in prison because of a sexual offense involving a minor.

The data on litigation involving pedophiles indicate that, given the number of children they abuse, they are rarely caught. When apprehended, they are often returned to the community rather than incarcerated (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990). If they are incarcerated, their sentences generally are not long (Finkelhor, 1994). With all the recent national coverage of child molestation, this may change.

The data in Figure 3 also indicate that there may be more female pedophiles or hebephiles than has generally been thought. There is almost no literature on female pedophilia, especially concerning women who are deaf. As part of a general discussion of pedophilia and deafness, Vernon & Rich (1997) reported two case studies of deaf women who molested children.

**How Does Sexual Abuse Get Into a School?**

Sexual abuse enters a school in several ways (Figure 4). One is through the inadvertent hiring of pedophiles or hebephiles as residence staff, teachers, or other school employees. This gives a child sexual access to the most vulnerable group of children that exists, those who are deaf (Sullivan & Knutsen, 1998). Most youth who are deaf get little or no sex education from their parents, and many do not get it at school. Hence, they often may not know that it is wrong for an adult to fondle them or initiate sexual relations with them. The children may sense that it is wrong and feel uneasy about it, but because someone in authority does it to them, it is often accepted as being all right, or at least tolerable. Furthermore, there may be no responsible adult they can talk to about it because frequently their residence hall counselors, parents, or teachers do not know sexual signs, nor are they fluent in American Sign Language.

It is important to note that most pedophiles and hebephiles genuinely like children and relate to them very effectively (Vernon & Rich, 1997). They are also expert at picking out psychologically needy youngsters who will respond to their attention and kindness. They may do things like offer to take children off campus for treats, take children home or on a camping trip, or show them pornography. They are not as likely to pick children with strong ties to their parents.

Once a sexual molester gains employment in or other access to a school,
Figure 3
Some General Facts About Sexual Abuse and Related Litigation

1. The more rigorous studies suggest that 20% of American women and 5% to 10% of men experienced sexual abuse as children. Ninety percent of the abuse is committed by men. Seventy percent to 90% is done by persons known to the child (Finkelhor, 1994).
2. Of the 92 deaf inmates in the Texas prison system, 42 (46%) were sex offenders. Of these 42 inmates, 25 (60%) had committed their crime against children and 7 (17%) against adult women. In 19 cases (45%), the gender of the victim was unknown (Miller, 2001).
3. Prison inmates who raped children got an average sentence of 189 months. Those who raped women got an average sentence of 240 months (Musk et al., 1997).
4. Approximately 25% of the deaf clinical population at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, that is, those seeking psychological services, reports having been sexually abused. As a group, these are bright youth, many of whom attended public school mainstreaming programs (Elder, 1993).
5. Sexual molestation of children who are deaf most often occurs in speech training settings, bathrooms, residence halls, school buses, and bedrooms (Elder, 1993; Sullivan, Vernon, & Scanlon, 1987).
6. Approximately 66% of child sex abuse charges end in guilty pleas. Often, the defendant pleads to a lesser charge. Prosecutors and judges often allow this to spare the child from having to testify (Myers, 1993).
7. In a study involving 159 child sex abusers in New Jersey, West Virginia, and California, 80% of those convicted got probation (Smith, Hillenbrand, & Govesky, 1990).
8. In most state prison systems, one third of the inmates are sex offenders. Two thirds of them molested children.
9. Eighty percent of convicted child molesters serve no prison time, but remain in the community (Finkelhor, 1994).
10. Very few of the remaining convicted molesters receive sentences of more than 1 year. Thirty-six percent to 46% serve no jail time (Finkelhor, 1994).
11. The average incarcerated pedophile gets arrested for 1 out of every 30 molestations (Musk et al., 1997).
12. From 1988 to 1990, the child molester population in prisons increased by 48% (Becker, 1994).
13. About one third of sexual abusers of children are under age 18 years (Finkelhor, 1994).
14. About 20% of the sexual contacts of pubescent boys have with older partners are with females. Five percent of pubescent girls’ sexual contacts with older persons involve females (Finkelhor, 1994).

over time his or her victims tend to victimize and otherwise involve other students, thus spreading the behavior.

Often the adult molester will encourage a fellow molester to get a job at the school. Very soon, what was an isolated incident becomes an epidemic. One school with which the senior author was involved let this situation get so bad that it had four molesters among its residence hall staff. One of these was in each of the school’s four boys’ residence halls. As a consequence, from the time a boy entered the school at age 5 or 6 years he was subjected to sexual overtures from an authority figure in the residence hall. The moment the lights were turned out, many of these children would lie in bed in fear that it would be their turn to be sexually assaulted. No child away from home should face this trauma. As could be easily predicted, in this school many of the children who had been victimized became victimizers, often preying on younger and weaker children. While this institution was an exceptionally bad case, it illustrates what can happen in any

Figure 4
How Does Sexual Abuse Get Into a School?

1. Schools can inadvertently hire a pedophile as a teacher, coach, dorm counselor, or other employee. Sexual abuse can also result from giving access to clergy and other outsiders without thorough screening.
2. The sexual naïveté and vulnerability of deaf youth make them ideal targets for pedophiles.
3. Pedophiles pick victims very carefully and usually with good judgment regarding their willingness to keep everything secret.
4. Once a child becomes a victim of a pedophile, that child often becomes a victimizer himself or herself, thereby spreading the behavior to other students.
5. Once hired in a school, a pedophile may encourage other pedophiles to apply to that school for work.
6. Pedophilia can enter the school through a child who has been molested at home or exposed to pornography.
school if a vigilant program to prevent sexual abuse is not put into effect.

Another way pedophilia can enter a school is from one child to another. For example, in the normal course of sexual experimentation or through pornography, an aggressive child may learn about sexual molestation and entice or bully another into oral or anal sex. Once the two children become eroticized by this behavior, it gets repeated and others become involved. It spreads rapidly and can become an epidemic unless staff are alert and knowledgeable about the problem and take action to stop it.

A third way pedophilia can enter a school is from the home setting. Because children who are deaf are so vulnerable to sexual exploitation, they are often molested in their home environment by parents, other family members, and friends. They then come to school and, behaving as an aggressor rather than a victim, reenact the molestation with other children.

Preventing Pedophilia in Schools

Realistically, regardless of how hard schools or parents try, they will never be able to guarantee that incidents involving sex between an adult and a child or a teenager and a child will not occur at school or in any other setting where children are present. However, such incidents are almost certain to occur if schools do not have an aggressive prevention program that is well thought out and continuous. One-shot workshops are helpful, but an ongoing, comprehensive program that addresses the problem at all age levels is essential (Getch, Bronca, D. Fitzgerald, & M. Fitzgerald, 2001; Sullivan, Brookhouser, & Scanlon, 2000). If such a program is done and done well, it is one of the best protections a school can have for its children, for its staff, and for its superintendent.

School policies regarding sexual abuse need to be explicitly stated, put in writing, and distributed to all school employees. Sometimes molesters are support staff such as janitors or bus drivers, not just teachers or residence hall staff. Responsibilities need to be clearly defined and reporting procedures made specific and rigorously enforced. Unfortunately, enforcement often breaks down. For instance, a counselor or teacher or someone close to the children will report an incident of sexual abuse. Almost immediately, the person reporting the abuse becomes a pariah: "You are disloyal to the school!" "How could you accuse a fine man like so-and-so of molesting a child?" This is often the first step in a series of denials, failures to report abuse, and cover-ups that can lead to disaster when the facts come out and the charges are proven to be true (Klopping, 1985). The school then finds itself facing bad publicity, a loss of jobs, bitter feelings, and a hemorrhage of money and person-hours as it defends itself against civil and criminal suits. However, the greatest cause for concern is that the failure to report and act on incidents of sexual abuse contributes to more sexual abuse of deaf youth. The absolutely best defense against this kind of tragedy is a strong prevention program involving all school staff and students (Figures 5 and 6).

Most reasonable adults realize that there will inevitably be isolated incidents of sexual abuse in any large educational program, scout troop, summer camp, Sunday school program, or other setting involving children and youth. However, if a school has proof that (a) every reasonable step was taken to prevent the behavior, (b) the abuse was reported immediately to the proper authorities, and (c) help was quickly provided to the victim and the victim's family, the school will have met its basic responsibility—that is, to do its best to protect the child, the school, and everyone else involved.

In addition to the program outlined in Figure 5, other prevention programs are described in Anderson (1987), Kennedy (1989), Mounty and Petterman (1988), Rindfleisch (1984), Sullivan et al. (1987), Trevely (1988), and Warfield (1988).

Special attention in any prevention program should be given to checking out all applicants for employment in a school by obtaining a federal Bureau of Investigation background screening and state police records. Any school located in a state that does not have a law making such background searches legal, such as the one enacted in South Dakota, should request that its state legislature pass such a law. (The text of the South Dakota law is provided in the Appendix.)

In addition to background screenings, checks of potential employees' references should be made by telephone. Previous employers should also be contacted by telephone. Hiring institutions should also respond to letters of recommendation and check the information provided in résumés.

Symptoms of Sexual Molestation

It is essential that child care workers and parents be aware of the behavioral and physical symptoms of sexual abuse. Some of these are listed in Figure 7. If a constellation of these symptoms appears in a child, the situation should be investigated through discussion with the child and with those who work directly with the child. If suspicions persist, the police and child protective services should be brought in.

Summary

In recent years, investigative journalists in the print and electronic media have brought the sexual abuse of children to national attention. The focus has been on the magnitude of the problem faced by human services organizations such as churches, the Boy Scouts, Big Brothers, and schools, including those serving children who are deaf. The litigation that has followed has been devastating to these organizations. However, the real tragedy is that so many children were abused in settings intended to serve them.
Figure 5
Administrative Strategies to Prevent Sex Abuse in Schools for the Deaf*

1. Provide caretakers with appropriate ongoing supervision and in-service education, which prepares them to identify and report sexual abuse.
2. Have reasonable child-to-adult ratios in residence halls and recreation programs.
3. Avoid having older students assigned caretaker responsibilities for younger students. Doing so often results in a “barn boss” system in which the strong exploit the weak.
4. Check all employees who have access to students who are deaf by getting police and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) records on applicants and current employees. To get FBI records involves some red tape and may require a special law in some states. For complete data on how to obtain FBI records on employees and applicants, contact Jon C. Green, Superintendent, South Dakota School for the Deaf, 2001 E. Eighth St., Sioux Falls, SD 57103-1899 (green@sdpsd.edu). See also the Appendix for the text of a law enacted in South Dakota that assures access to such data. The FBI data are particularly important because pedophiles, once caught in one state, will often move to another state under the assumption that their record will not follow them. This kind of checking on employees is easily the fairest and most effective way to prevent sexual abuse of children who are deaf.
5. Avoid the depersonalization of children who are deaf, which is characterized by statements such as "They do not know the difference anyway," "They all do it," and "They are like animals." It was this kind of depersonalization that led to the Holocaust and other persecutions of Jews in Germany and elsewhere. Such depersonalization is especially likely to occur when administrators and staff have little experience with deafness, isolate themselves from contact with children and adults who are deaf, cannot use sign language, or have authoritarian-type personalities and administrative styles.
6. A lack of parental involvement with the school sometimes is the result of the geographic isolation of the school. Parental involvement should be encouraged rather than made difficult by unnecessary rules and red tape.
7. Have clearly stated written policies on child care, which include operationally stated definitions of what child sexual abuse is and the actions that will be taken if policies are violated. Such action should, by law, include reporting of such incidents to the police.
8. Implement an audit system wherein the children, their families, and referral agencies are interviewed on a timely, ongoing basis regarding sexually inappropriate behavior by fellow students, staff, family, and others. Here are some sample questions:
   - Has a staff member ever forced you to do anything you did not want to do, touched your private body parts, or asked you to take drugs?
   - Has any staff member ever threatened you or told you not to talk to a supervisor?
   - Have any other children here hit you, threatened you, touched your private body parts, and told you not to tell a supervisor?
9. Unannounced observations by administrators of areas such as residence halls, recreation facilities, and restrooms are critical. It is a wise superintendent who does this often enough so that no one knows when or where he or she may appear. Such behavior reflects interest in the children and the employees and gives the administrator a firsthand awareness of what is happening in the school.
10. Consumer evaluations involving students, referral agencies, parents, and staff should be done regularly. They should be set up so that responses can be made anonymously.


Figure 6
Basic Criteria for a Comprehensive Policy on Sexual Abuse Reporting*

1. The legal requirements for reporting should be clearly stated, as well as the penalties and protections established by law.
2. The policy should describe how and when to report.
3. The policy should delineate the duties and responsibilities of different staff members in reporting. For example, a teacher may report abuse to the principal, who in turn informs the parent and child and gives feedback to the teacher.
4. Almost all states have a specific law that makes failure to report sexual abuse a crime. It is also a civil liability, which means that a person can be sued for not reporting it.
5. Giving feedback to those who report sexual abuse is critical.

*Besharov (1994).
Figure 7
Symptoms of Sexual Molestation*

**Behavioral symptoms**
1. The child cries a lot and seems emotionally upset. Often these symptoms appear suddenly and for no apparent reason.
2. The child experiences bedwetting or fecal soiling even though he or she has been successfully toilet trained.
3. The child develops behaviors associated with precocious sexuality such as excessive masturbation, preoccupation with sex and sexual signs, sexual play with peers, and excessive use of explicit sexual language.
4. The child starts crying when diapers or clothes are changed.
5. Anxiety symptoms manifest, for example, nightmares, fear of the dark, insomnia, refusal to sleep alone, frequent bathing, and phobias.
6. The child becomes sullen or depressed.
7. Marked changes in behavior occur, such as a serious decline in the quality of school work, the sudden onset of agitation or hyperactivity, silliness, depression, or excessive aggressiveness.
8. The child refuses to shower with a group or change clothes for gym class in front of other children, or show other signs of feeling ashamed of his or her body.
9. The child suddenly manifests fear, avoidance behaviors, or dislike of a caretaker, or of another child with whom he or she was previously friendly.
10. The child displays general characteristics of posttraumatic stress disorder.
11. If a teenager, the child becomes involved in substance abuse.
12. The child displays seductive behavior.
13. The child experiences sleep disturbances.
14. The child displays acting-out behaviors such as running away, withdrawal, and clinging.

**Physical symptoms**
15. The child manifests hypochondria involving symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains, or psychosomatic complaints that do not make medical sense.
16. The child walks "funny" or has difficulty walking or is in pain when sitting or walking.
17. The child experiences itching and scratching of the genital or rectal area.
18. Rectal or vaginal bleeding or evidence of infection or swelling of the rectum or vagina is present.
19. Bruise or lacerations appear that the child cannot explain.
20. The child has torn, stained, or bloody underclothing.

*Sullivan et al. (1987).

In addressing the issue, we have considered the characteristics of the perpetrators of this abuse, facts about the abuse itself, and how it is addressed by the justice system. In more specific ways, we have described how sexual abuse can get into a school for the Deaf, how this can be prevented, and the symptoms that are likely to manifest in sexually abused children that facilitate their identification.

**References**


APPENDIX

A Model Law on Background Checks

State of South Dakota
Seventy-Fourth Session
Legislative Assembly, 1999

400C0291 Senate Engrossed No. SB27 –2/2/99
Introduced by: The Committee on Education at the request of the Board of Regents

FOR AN ACT ENTITLED, An Act to require the conduct of criminal background checks for certain persons employed by the Board of Regents,

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA:

Section 1: That chapter 13-49 be amended by adding thereto a NEW SECTION to read as follows:

Each person hired at the South Dakota School for the Blind and Visually Impaired and the South Dakota School for the Deaf to serve as superintendent or principal, in a teaching or assistant teaching position, in a certificated or licensed clinical employment position, or on the residence hall staff in any capacity shall agree to submit to a background investigation, by means of fingerprint checks by the Division of Criminal Investigation and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The hiring institution shall submit completed fingerprint cards to the Division of Criminal Investigation before the prospective new employee enters into service. If no disqualifying record is identified at the state level, the fingerprints shall be forwarded by the Division of Criminal Investigation to the Federal Bureau of Investigation for a national criminal history record check. Any person whose employment is subject to the requirements of this section may enter into service on a temporary basis pending receipt of results from the background investigation. The employing institution may, without liability, withdraw its offer of employment or terminate the temporary employment without notice if the report reveals that the person has been convicted of any crime involving moral turpitude, including traffic in narcotics, that might justify suspension or revocation of a teaching license pursuant to §13-42-10, or otherwise reveals circumstances that reasonably suggest that the person should not be employed in the special school setting.