



# Sex offenders

*Protect children, talk to them about it*



by JILL SCHMELZER  
Reporter

**A** neighbor, a friend, a family member or a complete stranger — all of these, or none of these — could be a sexual predator living in the neighborhood.

The sad truth is an average of 5.5 children per 10,000 enrolled in day care are sexually abused, and an average of 8.9 children out of every 10,000 are abused in the home, according to the bureau of Justice Statistics Web site.

The statistics also showed that approximately 14 percent of all sexual assaults in children occur between the ages of infancy and 5 years; 20.1 percent of abused children are between 6 and 11; and 32.8 percent of child victims are between 12 and 17.

The chance that a child will become a victim of a sex offender is 1 in 3 for girls and 1 in 6 for boys according to national alert registry Web site.

These statistics make it imperative for parents to talk to their children and to be observant of any changes in the youth's behavior.

## Who are sex offenders?

Sharon Sisti, an assistant professor in Human Services at Hilbert College, said sex offenders are people who are unable to have their physical and emotional needs met in adult relationships.

There are two types of sex offenders.

Pedophiles are people who are primarily attracted to children. It is as if they are fixated during an early stage of development and do not move beyond adolescence in terms of attractions, said Sisti, who has counseled adults and children who have been sexually abused.

Pedophiles make up between 10 and 20 percent of sex offenders. Most predators are among the second type, which is a person who acts out with children or teens but wouldn't necessarily be labeled a pedophile, Sisti explained. These men and women are involved in adult relationships but tend to stretch the boundaries with children or teenagers.

"Abusing a child is a choice. It's like alcoholism," Sisti said, noting that it can be compared to an addiction.

"Once a sex offender, always a sex offender," Sisti said, adding that perpetrators can move beyond the urges and resist their actions — just like alcoholics learn to abstain from alcohol.

The person recognizes certain things that trigger these urges and finds an alternative to his or her past behavior, Sisti said. For instance, stress or the sight of a young girl or boy might set off the need to have contact with a child. The offender may then walk away from the situation or find a way to keep busy until the feeling passes.

## What signs indicate sexual abuse?

If a child's behavior drastically changes over a period of time, it could be an indicator that he or she has been molested — for instance a youth with normally calm behavior becomes aggressive, or he or she avoids certain situations involving contact with a particular person.

If the victim is very young, such as a toddler, the child may respond by engaging in sexual behavior prematurely. For example, a young girl behaves in adult sexual ways that are not appropriate at her stage of development, Sisti said.

The first step is to talk with the child and gather as much information as possible without doing an investigation. Call the local police authorities. From there, contact a mental health counselor who specializes in youth victims to assess whether the child has been molested or not, Sisti advised. A medical examination may be performed, but many times no evidence of sexual abuse is prevalent.

## What is sexual abuse?

Sisti defined sexual abuse as any kind of contact between a child and adult that is inappropriate. It could include touching, pornography, intercourse or contact which makes the youth feel uncomfortable.

Sexual abuse can also be conducted between two youths who are generally five or more years apart in age, Sisti said. However, an investigation determines whether it is two children engaging in experimentation.

If it is sexual abuse, it usually involves an older child who is developmentally delayed and may have been abused as well. If caught early enough, these children can

sometimes be saved from being repeat offenders, Sisti said. She noted that there are treatment programs available to youth sex offenders.

## How to prevent sexual abuse?

The best prevention method is conversation. Talk to children and have good relationships with them. Give children the strength to come to an adult if another adult makes them feel uncomfortable, Sisti said.

## The Internet, a sexual predator's playground

Paul Moskal, an FBI agent, works with the national program Innocent Images.

The project targets sexual predators online. Statistics show the majority of online offenders are men looking for children between first grade and high school, said Moskal. Adults, working for Innocent Images, pose as children and visit Web sites that are frequently hit by predators.

Unfortunately, using inappropriate language is not grounds for legal action, Moskal said. However, inappropriate contact or sending an image of a pornographic photo to a child, or the possession of child pornography, can lead to prosecution.

The Internet today provides "bad people with a means to do bad things," Moskal said, noting the Internet can be a wonderful tool when used properly.

The FBI has no interest in children talking to children, adults engaging in conversation with other adults or even adults having appropriate conversation with a child.

"No one monitors the Internet," Moskal said. "We ask for public assistance in these areas." He noted that if there is a question of whether or not inappropriate conversation has occurred between a child and adult, contact the agency or the local police department.

"People don't realize predators are out there who prey on children," Moskal said, noting that the Internet is worldwide and gives people anonymity.

A predator could be reaching out to your child from a county away or a completely different country.

## What happens to sex offenders after capture?

Sex offenders who have been caught and are either on

parole, probation or imprisoned for a sex offense after Jan. 21, 1996 must register with the Division of Criminal Justice Services, according to the Megan's Law Web site.

Currently there are more than 491,000 registered sex offenders in the United States, according to the national alert registry Web site. That does not include the sex offenders who fail to register from state to state, depending on where they reside.

Sex offenders are categorized into three levels depending on their risk of re-offending, said Detective Sgt. Michael Torrillo with the Amherst Police Department.

Level one sex offenders have the lowest risk of repeat offense and are required to be registered for 20 years. They must report their name, a photo, zip code, place of employment or higher education, mode of operation and vehicle information, Torrillo said.

Level twos, who pose a moderate risk of re-offense, must report the same information as level ones but are required to register for life.

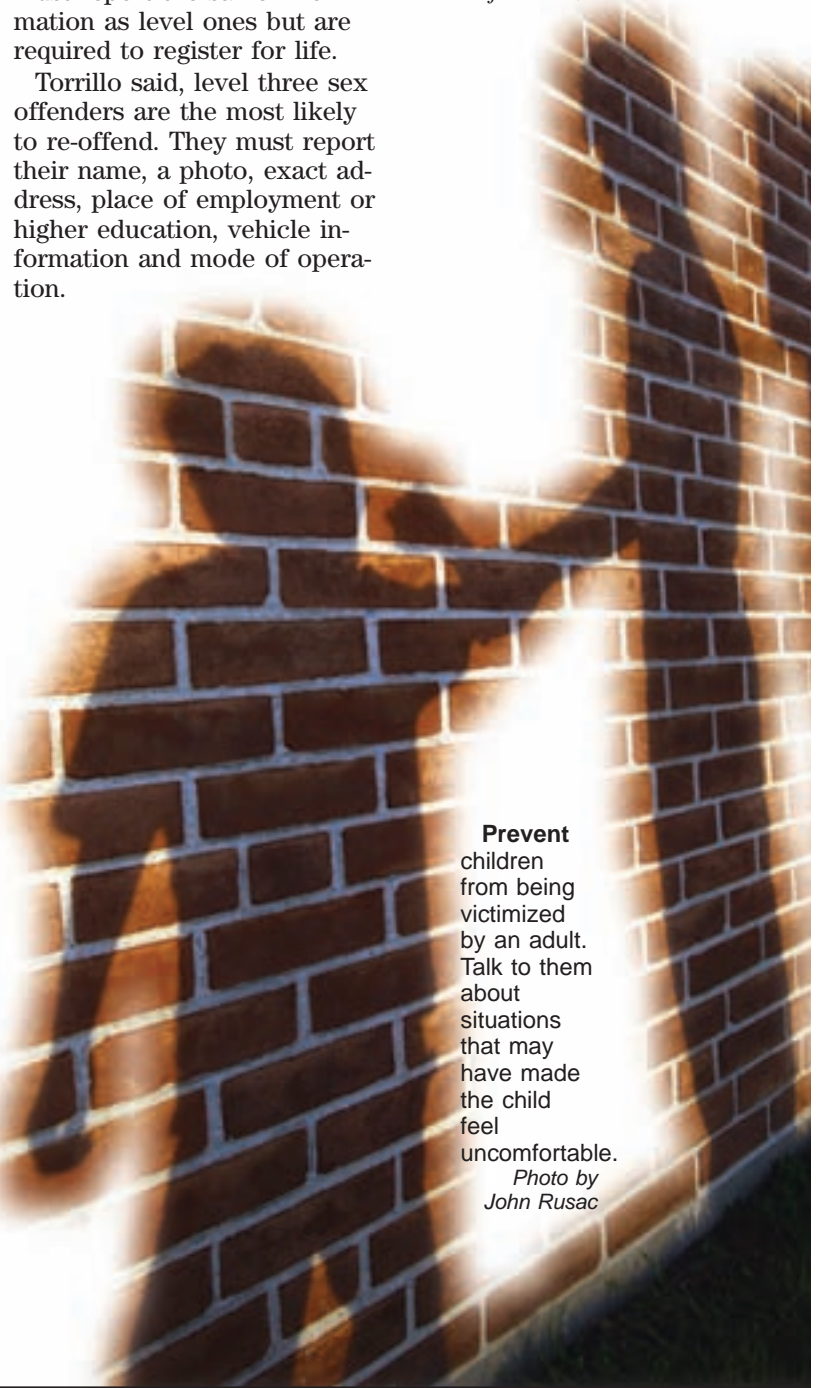
Torrillo said, level three sex offenders are the most likely to re-offend. They must report their name, a photo, exact address, place of employment or higher education, vehicle information and mode of operation.

There are four level three sex offenders living in the Amherst area, and they are required to meet with Torrillo every three months to update any information and so that any change in appearance — for instance, shaved beard, glasses or hair coloring — can be documented.

According to the Amherst Police Department Web site, some restrictions these sexually violent people encounter include no unsupervised contact with children 18 years of age or younger, counseling, no contact with the victims, substance abuse treatment, periodic urine testing, curfew and no unauthorized use of a vehicle. Others are not permitted to own or use a computer. If any of these restrictions are violated, they could face more jail time.

To report an incident, call the Amherst Police Department at 689-1311 or the FBI at 856-7800.

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**Prevent** children from being victimized by an adult. Talk to them about situations that may have made the child feel uncomfortable.  
Photo by John Rusac