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Know the warning signs of educator sexual misconduct

Educators can prevent much of the sexual misconduct in schools if they know how to recognize and respond to suspicious patterns and if administrators enforce an environment of high expectations for behavior.

By Carol Shakeshaft

You've seen the headlines and watched stories unfold on TV. A local educator is arrested and charged with sexual contact with a student. Sometimes, the educator is a man; sometimes, a woman. The person charged might be a teacher, an aide, a principal, a coach, the band director, or any other adult in the school.

According to the most recent data from a nationwide survey of 8th- to 11th-grade

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students asking about incidents of unwanted sexual attention at school, nearly 7%, or about 3.5 million students, report having physical sexual contact from an adult, most commonly a teacher or coach, in their school (Shakeshaft, 2004). These students describe unwanted touching on breasts, buttocks, and genitals; forced kissing and hugging; oral/genital contact; and vaginal and anal intercourse.

Reports of educator misconduct that doesn't include touching a student, but rather sharing pornography, sexual talk, sexual exhibitionism, or masturbation raised the proportion to about 10%, or nearly 4.5 million students (Shakeshaft, 2004).

I coined the phrase educator sexual misconduct at least a decade ago because it brackets a range of inappropriate to criminal sexual behaviors and includes verbal, visual, and physical misconduct. Some of this behavior is criminal, some not. But all of the behaviors are unacceptable when directed by an adult, especially by a school-based authority figure, toward a student.

While predators are the adults who abuse, adult bystanders also contribute to an unsafe environment. When I talk with teachers in schools where an abuser has been arrested, I hear admissions that they had suspected something but, because they were not completely sure, did not want to say anything. A common explanation for not reporting questionable behavior is, "If I reported and I was wrong, I would have ruined the life of another teacher." I have never heard a colleague say, "If I didn't report and this person had abused, I'd have ruined the life of a student."

The number of students abused is high, especially where prevention is spotty or absent. Most educators, parents, and students don't know the warning signs and patterns of educator abusers. If they did, they'd be more likely to report and therefore prevent harm to children.

It is ironic, if not indeed tragic, that most programs to stop sexual abuse are directed toward children, asking them to do what adults will not — report. While children must learn risky situation identification, refusal, and disclosure skills, adults — not children — are responsible for ensuring that schools are safe places for all students.



Patterns of sexual misconduct

While there are no screening tools to help determine who is an active or potential sexual predator, school leaders can learn to read the warning signs and patterns that identify risk and boundary behavior. The descriptions that follow are archetypes summa-

rized from scores of court cases and from the empirical literature. I offer generalizations because they're grounded in the reality of school-based sexual abuse and, to that extent, may help caring educators understand and act on this circumstance.

I've identified two predominant types of predators in schools. The first is the *fixated abuser* who is most often found in elementary schools and the early middle school grades. This person is more likely to be male than female and is likely to be judged a good teacher by parents, students, other teachers, and administrators. Fixated abusers have a disproportionate number of teaching awards. This should not be interpreted as meaning that outstanding and awarded teachers are child sexual abusers, but rather that most fixated abusers in elementary school are considered to be excellent teachers by the school community.

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A typical pattern in an elementary school is an outstanding male teacher who identifies a male student as a possible victim. The predator talks with the boy, has him stay after school for extra help, and gives him small gifts. If the child doesn't resist, then the teacher contacts the parent, often the mother in a single-parent home, and tells her that her son has a lot of promise, but needs some extra help. The teacher is soon at the child's home, working with the child. The mother might feel a sense of relief, knowing that a respected teacher has reached out to help her son. She's often grateful for the presence of a positive male role model. The teacher has now secured the trust of the mother. He already had trust at school because of his reputation as a good teacher and a helpful and caring colleague. This predator begins to take the male student to special places — ball games, fishing, camping — that give him private access to the child. The teacher shows the child affection, tells him how much he cares, and escalates touching. When the teacher predator sexually abuses the student, he does so in an environment in which he feels safe. He is respected at school, the family knows him and trusts him, and the child is available to him.

A different pattern at the elementary level is for a male teacher to choose a female student as a



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class monitor or class helper. For example, a music teacher might select one of the outstanding musicians and tell her she's more capable than others in the class. He compliments her maturity and has her stay after school. Soon, the female student and the teacher are well known to each other. The teacher continues to flatter and charm, and the girl feels special. Soon, the teacher touches the girl and, over time, increases the sexual nature of the touch. By this time, the child trusts and cares for the teacher, and the teacher exploits that trust and sexually victimizes the student.

Anna Salter, an internationally known expert on sexual predators, recently reminded us that fixated abusers work hard to be likeable. Popularity and likability are often confused with trustworthiness. When a fixated abuser is accused, victims protect them, parents refuse to believe the accusations, authorities discount the reports, communities support the predator, and juries acquit (Salter, 2012).

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School faculty and staff often rally around a teacher accused of sexual misconduct while shunning and shaming the victim. Even when the accused admits the crime, colleagues have been charmed and groomed to such a degree that some conclude the predator confessed to spare family and friends the embarrassment of a public trial.

While fixated abusers are difficult to detect because they get parents, children, and other educators to trust them, they can be stopped if administrators and other teachers understand the patterns and are willing to act. In most cases, reporting suspicions to a child protection agency and/or the police will lead to an investigation that will explore the possibility of abuse. While not all investigations accurately identify abusers, many do. Moreover, a complaint and investigation record alerts school personnel to keep an eye on the alleged predator and to make connections with future allegations.

But fixated abusers are not the majority of those who sexually victimize students. Only about one-third of offenders who abuse children under 13 are fixated abusers. The remainder who target the other two-thirds of children under 13 and most students older than 13 are *opportunistic abusers*. These are

adults who take sexual advantage of a situation, but who aren't exclusively attracted to children or teenagers. These adults tend to be emotionally arrested and operate at a teenage level. They are adults who have boundary and judgment problems and aren't difficult to identify once their patterns are familiar to others in the school.

A typical example is the case of a 6th-grade girl whose friend reported the abuse, ultimately leading to the teacher's arrest. Other teachers wore arm-bands in support of their colleague and collected money from students and parents to support his legal defense, including collecting money in the female victim's classroom, in front of her. Other teachers called her a "slut" and accused her of "trying to ruin the career of a good man." The accused teacher confessed to sexually abusing the student. The female victim left the school because she was harassed daily by adults and students. Although the teacher was arrested and lost his teaching license, the treatment of the victim by other adults in the school caused additional damage.

Although students report that instances of educator sexual misconduct by adult males are 4.5 times more likely than instances of abuse by females, 40% of the reported misconduct was from a female working in the schools (Shakeshaft, 2004). Females frequently attribute their misconduct to romantic love for a male student, playing out a redo of their own adolescent fantasies. For instance, a female teacher with a weak self-image might be attracted to a male student in her class and feel excited when she talks with him. She starts to think that pursuing him is acceptable because he's a teenager. She flatters him and makes herself sexually available. The male student might be anxious and repelled or pleased by such attention. Either way, social and cultural norms have taught the young man that he is supposed to feel honored and engage in a sexual relationship. And so, he acquiesces to the female teacher. A similar pattern is a male teacher who finds a female student attractive. He courts her, flirts with her, and romances her. The female student is thrilled that a teacher thinks she's smart, mature, and attractive. She thinks they're dating and in love.

The opportunistic abusers tend to spend a lot of time around groups of students, talking with them, going to the same places they go, and trying to blend in. They are the teachers who want to be seen as hip or cool and who want the students to think they are part of the student peer group. They are adults who comment on the attractiveness of the students, talking about a student as hot or sexy. Their conversations about students are often inappropriately personal. They also know a great deal about the personal lives of individual students, more than would

be available to an adult whose interactions were academic or appropriately friendly.



Environment in which abuse occurs

According to David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, four preconditions facilitate educator sexual misconduct.

- The adult must be motivated to sexually abuse a child. This motivation might be the sexual arousal of a fixated abuser or the happenstance that prompts an opportunistic abuser.
- The adult must overcome both internal and external inhibitions against abuse.
- The adult must have an opportunity to engage in sexual activity.
- The adult must overcome the child's resistance.

Motivation to sexually abuse. No screening devices will identify a fixated abuser nor is there a treatment that will change the sexual desire of a fixated abuser. But schools can create an environment that discourages child sexual abusers. This is true for both fixated and opportunistic offenders. Close supervision, a series of policies and regulations that reduce risk, and the commitment of all staff in a school to protect children — proactively and especially through reporting — can make it difficult for a fixated abuser to groom and abuse children. The same is true for the opportunistic offender, who takes advantage of situations that are generally prevented or proscribed in well-run, closely supervised schools.

Internal inhibitors. Predators don't want to be caught. Fear of arrest and prison can derail the motivation to abuse. Policies and procedures that make it clear that child sexual abuse is a criminal act and that educator sexual misconduct can lead both to termination of a teaching career and prison time go a long way to prevent abuse. Making consequences clear and operating with zero tolerance for educator sexual misconduct impedes abuse. Predators rationalize their actions by using thinking errors such as "She wanted me to do those things to her." "I'm helping him to grow up." "She flirted with me." "He knew what he was doing." "He liked it." "She wanted it." It is possible to provide training that clarifies the criminal consequences of such rationalizations. The climate established by that effective professional learning then provides an additional defense against abuse.

External inhibitors. Good policies and procedures, annual training, clarity about boundaries, parent awareness, and staff vigilance — these all work to minimize abuse. Knowing that other teachers and personnel will report inappropriate or questionable behavior also can inhibit an adult from inappropriate behavior with students. Unfortunately, only 11% of teachers say they would report abuse of a student by a fellow teacher (Shakeshaft, 2004). Students who don't report are often embarrassed, ashamed, and/or afraid they will be blamed. They also believe that school officials will do nothing to help them. Some want the abuse to stop, but don't want the abuser to get in trouble.

Child resistance. Children should learn how to refuse inappropriate behavior and how to report such activity. However, even the best training is no match for a determined predator, and strengthening student skills is not a substitute for adult responsibility.



Creating a safe environment

Keith Kaufman, professor of psychology at Portland State University, advocates a situational prevention approach to preventing sexual abuse by trusted others (2012). With this process approach, schools and districts assess their environments for safety risks and can make necessary improvements.

Careful hiring. While background checks are required in most states, they rarely flag a sexual predator applying for a professional position because these people are not likely to have a criminal record. Therefore, it is important to complete careful reference checks asking direct questions about allegations of sexual misconduct. Applicants moving from one district to another should be given careful scrutiny and reference checks should extend beyond the references listed.

Strong policies. Districts should have clear policies and procedures that systematically and explicitly detail the following:

- What constitutes educator sexual abuse?
- What are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors by educators?
- What are the mechanisms for legally required reporting?
- How can students, teachers, administrators, and parents prevent educator sexual abuse?
- When and how does the school's or district's

system for detecting abuse automatically trigger an investigation and ensure an impartial investigation?

- What are the legal consequences for a violation?

Stakeholders need policies that define verbal, visual, and physical sexual misconduct and make it clear that the district is committed to eliminating sexual exploitation of students by adults.

Policies should provide guidance in identifying and reporting behaviors that might indicate sexual exploitation and make it clear that the entire school family is responsible for identification and reporting. Policies should not only provide direction for reporting concerns to school district officials, but also be clear about requirements for investigating and reporting to local law enforcement and to state education officials who certify and license educators.

Making consequences clear and operating with zero tolerance for educator sexual abuse can impede abuse.

School and district policies should be published in staff, student, and parent handbooks, and the materials need to deal directly and explicitly with educator or staff sexual misconduct. Broad statements about nondiscrimination or child abuse are insufficient to ensure that staff, parents, and students understand what constitutes educator sexual misconduct and the procedures necessary to prevent or report adult sexual exploitation of students in schools.

Policies should stress that any report, rumor, or suspicion of sexual misconduct must be reported to the responsible authorities. Policies should stress that reporting suspected misconduct is both a professional responsibility and the law. Individuals who report suspected abuse are not responsible for determining the validity of the suspicion — that's the role of the subsequent investigation by police or child service workers.

School districts should identify a central source — an office or a person with a specific title — that is responsible for receiving all reports of educator sexual misconduct. This helps avoid situations in which reports are overlooked or patterns unidentified. Directing all complaints to a single source helps ensure that all allegations are investigated and that histories of complaints are compiled.

Finally, policies must stress that even acts of sexual misconduct that do not break the law will not be tolerated and can lead to termination of employment.

Environmental monitoring. Creating a safe environment means changing the school culture and enlisting everyone in assessing risk. Identify areas of potential risks. Classroom doors should have glass windows, and they should never be covered. Locked classrooms, storerooms, and teacher offices are all places where sexual misconduct occurs, often before or after school. They need to be secured. A staff person should be assigned to check classrooms at the end of each school day to ensure that they're empty and that students have left the building unless they are in approved activities. Any before- or after-school tutoring should occur in a public and supervised location.

Environmental monitoring also relates to employee behaviors. Are there staff who consistently cross boundaries, sexual or not? Or who are emotionally needy or who spend most of their free time with students? Do some school personnel hang out with middle or high school students regularly? Do employees know and follow the prohibition against being alone with a child or taking a child in a car?

Safe schools are places where administrators and teachers know what is happening in the next classroom, down the hall, and before and after school.

Training and education. Even the best policies won't work unless staff, students, and parents understand the expectations of the district. Training needs to be done with all staff — professional and nonprofessional workers — as well as with students and parents, and the training must be repeated annually. Annual training ensures that new students and new teachers are aware of the policies and reminds veteran staff of their responsibilities. A one-time workshop will not prevent sexual misconduct. Prevention requires a combination of annual workshops for staff, students, and parents that focus specifically on sexual exploitation of students, written materials in policy books and manuals, posters and flyers that remind students and staff about appropriate conduct, and visible information in all department and administrative offices.

Sexual abuse prevention training is not just for those who might abuse. Such training also is for adults and students who are third-party observers. Staff must understand their legal responsibilities for reporting behavior that might indicate sexual misconduct of staff toward students and learn the consequences for their failure to report. Training should deal with the "it can't happen here" syndrome of denial by discussing specific situations and incidents

that have previously occurred at the school or in the district. If an incident is in the public sphere (newspaper or trial accounts), staff can discuss it in training sessions. If the incident has not been made public, staff can still use it as an example or a case study, without names, in discussions during department, grade-level, and other staff meetings. The more local and specific the training is, the more effective it will be.

If an incident of educator sexual abuse does occur in a school or district, the school and district should immediately conduct a root cause analysis to prevent system and personal failure in the future.

Consistent messaging. The message is that the school and district won't tolerate educator sexual misconduct. In order for the message to be believed, schools and districts must act when confronted with suspicious behavior. Most students and staff members believe that districts won't do anything about sexual misconduct. Students often see cover-ups even when they don't exist, and, for some sad but good reasons, most have little faith that school personnel will take their complaints seriously. Because of this lack of faith in school district personnel, many students and staff members won't report incidents. Administrative actions need to be communicated to the school community to send the message that reports of sexual misconduct are taken seriously.

Consistent enforcement requires that administrators and other staff members listen to rumors and complaints and respond by investigating and following up. Reports of inappropriate sexual behavior are more likely to come from a friend or parent of a student than from the student her or himself. Such reports may be tentative, with disclaimers such as "I'm probably making too much of this" or "I may be overreacting."

Students who report sexual misconduct by teachers are likely to be harassed by other students and by teachers, especially if the accused is a popular teacher. They may also come from homes in which little support will be available to them during this stressful time, although this is not always the case. District officials must ensure that students who report abuse are themselves protected from harassment, and the districts also must provide support systems for student victims.



Preventing sexual misconduct

Schools are microcosms of society. Regrettably, society has not been effective in protecting children from the epidemic of child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse has been described as a preventable health problem. A 2012 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the estimated average lifetime cost per victim of nonfatal child maltreatment (which includes sexual abuse) is \$210,012. If we multiply that by the 3.5 million students currently in school who report physical educator sexual misconduct, the result is more than \$735 billion (Fanga, Brown, Florencea, & Mercya, 2012). And that's just for the students currently in school.

The personal costs of educator sexual misconduct are tragic. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study found that victims of sexual abuse are more likely than nonvictims to have problems with adult relationships, a history of drug or alcohol abuse, the risk of suicide or other harm, and health problems such as diabetes and heart disease (Dube et al., 2005).

The cost of awards or settlements to schools ranges from hundreds of thousands of dollars to millions of dollars, which does not include the legal and personnel costs to the school district in civil cases. For instance, I examined settlements in teacher sexual misconduct in California between 2002 and 2008 and found that the average settlement was \$2,723,000, with awards from \$892,000 to \$6,800,000.

And then there is the loss of trust. Schools are places where parents send their children to learn. They expect those places to be safe and nurturing. While most teachers or school staff members don't sexually abuse children, many do. It is possible to prevent abuse. We know how to do it; we only need the will to do it. **K**

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