

# **BREAKING SILENCE**

*Creating Hope*

**Help for Adults  
Who Molest Children**

# **BREAKING SILENCE**

## *Creating Hope*

### **Help for Adults Who Molest Children**

**Frederick Mathews, Ph.D., C. Psych.**

The views expressed in this booklet are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of Health Canada. Contents may not be commercially reproduced but any other reproduction, with acknowledgments, is encouraged.

Copies of this booklet may be obtained from:

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence  
Family Violence Prevention Division  
Health Programs & Services Branch  
Health Canada  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 1B4  
(613) 957-2938 Fax: (613) 941-8930  
or call toll free: 1-800-267-1291



For TDD users (613) 952-6396  
or call toll free: 1-800-561-5643

© Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1995  
Cat. H72-21/132-1995E  
ISBN 0-662-23056-6



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This booklet would not have been possible without the vision, support, and assistance of:

**Barbara Merriam**, National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada.

Special thanks to the following persons for reviewing the manuscript and for providing helpful comments and advice on earlier drafts:

**Dr. Howard Barbaree**, Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, Toronto, Ontario.

**Ross Dawson**, Institute For The Prevention of Child Abuse, Toronto, Ontario.

**Dr. Arthur Gordon**, Twin Rivers Correctional Center, Monroe, Washington.

**Len Kushnier**, London Children's Aid Society, London, Ontario.

**Dr. Bill Rowe**, Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland.

**Judy Stephens**, Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, Toronto, Ontario.

Thanks to **Dr. Jean-Yves Frappier**, Hôpital Ste-Justine, University of Montreal for his assistance with revisions to the French manuscript.

Thanks also to the anonymous client reviewers at the Twin Rivers Correctional Center, Monroe, Washington, for their valuable feedback and comments on the manuscript.

## INTRODUCTION

This booklet is written for adults who have committed a sexual offence against a child. It contains information that may help you understand why you molest children and what you can do about it. It also provides information about victims, treatment, and some of the laws regarding sex with children.

This is not an easy subject to talk about. You may be experiencing Strong feelings of guilt or remorse. Sometimes the reactions of other people can make the process of seeking treatment difficult. But it is important to break the silence around what happened. The silence you thought protected you and guarded your secret will continue to harm you and your victim. The sexual abuse of children grows in silence and secrecy and keeps those who abuse from getting the support and help they need to avoid harming children.

Any child, boy or girl, can be a victim of child abuse. Some adults choose to abuse their own sons or daughters, nieces, nephews, other child relatives, neighbourhood children, a child they baby-sit or provide care to, or someone on a sports team they coach. Sometimes professionals or persons in authority abuse their power and molest children in their care.

If you have molested a child it is important to get help. You are unlikely to stop on your own. You will likely require support and assistance from professionals trained to help adults deal with this type of problem. If you are having sexual thoughts about children and feel you might initiate sexual contact with a child - **stop!** It may not feel like it, but you can learn to control your impulses and desires and avoid harming a child and yourself!

You are not the first adult who has molested a child. Other men, and some women, have been in your shoes. You can break the pattern that led you to this place. The first step is to make a commitment to care about yourself.

The term "molest" and "abuse" will be used in this booklet to talk about any sexual contact with children. You may be more familiar with terms such as sexual abuse, sexual assault, or incest. Child molestation is also referred to as "pedophilia", a more technical term used in psychology and psychiatry to refer to the study of people who have a sexual preference for children or who commit sexual offences against children. The next section will briefly outline some of the legal terms used to describe the molestation of children.

## WHAT OF A SEXUAL OFFENCE AGAINST A CHILD?

Under the **Criminal Code of Canada** any sexual contact by an adult with a child under the age of 14 is illegal (**150.1**). It is also illegal to have any sexual contact with a person between the ages of 14 and 16 if you are more than three years older than that person. Anal sex with a person under 18 is also illegal. **Incest (155)**, or sexual contact with a family member, is always illegal at any age.

You can be charged and convicted of **Sexual Assault (271)** if you engage in any kind of sexual activity with a child including forced kissing, holding, or grabbing. You can be charged and

convicted of **Sexual Interference (151)** if you touch directly or indirectly "for a sexual purpose" any part of a child's body. You can be charged with Invitation to **Sexual Touching (152)** if you ask a child to touch directly or indirectly "for a sexual purpose" you, him/herself, or another child, teen, or adult. You don't have to even touch a child to be charged with Invitation to **Sexual Touching (152)**; just asking is enough under the Criminal Code. You can also be charged with **Indecent Exposure to a Child (173(2))** if you expose your genitals to a child "for a sexual purpose." Other possible charges include **Anal Intercourse (159)** and **Sexual Exploitation (153)**.

Some forms of sexual assault are obvious, such as fondling, forced vaginal or anal intercourse, masturbation or oral sex. However, some of the sexual things adults do to children may not always be obvious to others. The following are some of the less obvious things adults may do to children for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification or getting "turned on".

- Deliberately walking in on a child while he/she is bathing, changing clothes, undressing for bed, or using the toilet.
- Making fun of a child's sexual development or sexual organs.
- Compulsive or excessive washing of child's genitals or buttocks.
- Bouncing a child on your lap, hugging a child, tickling a child's genitals "for a sexual purpose".
- Rubbing your crotch against a child while wrestling or during horseplay.
- Showing a child pornographic videos, magazines, comics, or computer games.
- Sexual talk with a child.
- Deliberately leaving a bedroom or bathroom door open to permit a child to observe the adult bathing, showering, undressing for bed, or changing clothes.

## **WHAT HAPPENS TO MY VICTIM?**

Perhaps the most important thing you need to understand is how seriously affected a child can be because of being molested. You may see no outward signs that they are in distress or scared. Younger children sometimes do not appear to be affected by your actions or show resistance because you may be someone they know, like, and trust. This doesn't mean they have not been harmed. They may be unsure or unaware of what is happening to them. A child may disclose immediately or wait until much later in his/her life out of fear or because they feel confused, guilty, or ashamed.

Children often do not protest to adults if they are uncertain or do not want to lose your affection or their relationship with you. However, as the child gets older, he or she will remember what happened and gradually come to realize that you molested them. Most abuse victims experience consequences right away. Victims typically experience a variety of emotional and physical health problems as a result of being abused. Nightmares, anxiety, refusing to eat, anger, fear of adults and authority figures, drug abuse, chronic stress, depression, inability to trust and form intimate relationships, and suicide are just some of the possible consequences. Some of these may not show up until later in their lives.

Any sexual contact with a child is a crime. Even if you believe a child is consenting, **you, as an**

**adult, are responsible - not the child!** Under Canadian Criminal law, a child under the age of 14 **cannot** legally agree to have sexual contact with you. Neither can a child 14 to 16 years of age if you are three or more years older than the young person.

Children do not understand what they are saying if they say "yes", or they may not realize they can say "no". Children do not have the life experience and emotional maturity to understand and make informed decisions regarding sex. Children do not understand the consequences of having sex with an adult. Children depend on adults and are often eager to please. They enjoy being hugged and touched but do not understand an adult's sexual arousal and what it means. Also, most adults forget the enormous power they have over children, whether they are in the role of parent, teacher, sports coach, or a neighbour on the street. Children find it very difficult to resist adult requests, especially when those requests are tied to rewards the child needs or wants.

But it is not just the victim who gets hurt by your behaviour. The families of the victim, your spouse, your own children, family members, and friends are also affected. If you molested a child in the context of your work, your company or organization, your supervisors, colleagues, union, professional association, and clients will be affected. Your own family can suffer economically if you go to jail. Also, society is harmed and incurs significant costs.

## **WHY DO ADULTS MOLEST CHILDREN?**

There is no simple or easy answer to this question. Adults who molest children do so for many different reasons. Some therapists and researchers believe it is caused by family and cultural factors or things the perpetrator has learned, usually in childhood. Some believe that being molested as a child has some influence on an adult's decision to molest children. Some think that repeated masturbation to fantasies of sex with children eventually leads to actual sexual contact with a child. Some think that emotionally immature adults are attracted to children because they feel they make safe, compliant, and non-threatening sexual partners. Some feel that molesting children gives an adult a sense of power and control over the child and their own life.

Some see child molesting as an addiction, like being addicted to drugs and alcohol. When adults experience a release of tension, feelings of pressure, in powerlessness and low self-esteem along with pleasure after sexual contact with a child, they will often seek out more contact. A lot of sexual abuse of children happens when adults are intoxicated with drugs or alcohol. Drugs and alcohol may reduce your ability to control your thoughts and behaviour making it possible for you to act on your sexual thoughts and feelings, but there is no excuse for sexually abusing a child.

## **TRIGGERS**

Most researchers and therapists believe that sexual assault against children is started by a predictable circumstance or behaviour pattern called a "trigger". Adults who molest children may have one or more triggers. Some adults are "triggered" by children of a particular age, sex, or stage of development. Sometimes certain situations will trigger your pattern of molesting behaviour, such as when you are baby-sitting or in other circumstances where you know you will have uninterrupted

access to a child.



Whatever **your** trigger (or triggers) it is important to define them precisely so you can recognize them when they are happening and do something to stop yourself. **It will be especially important for you to pay close attention to those circumstances, feelings, or behaviour patterns that are likely to put you at high risk for sexually assaulting a child.**

Searching for causes of why you molest may be an important part of understanding your behaviour. Understanding why you molest children may help you to stop doing it. But understanding is not enough. You have to learn to control your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours when you are faced with one of your triggers. **Because your behaviour is harmful to children it is important to have a plan to control it.**

## **ADULTS WHO WERE MOLESTED AS CHILDREN**

Some adults who molest children were themselves abused as children. Some were physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or neglected. Being an abused child does not give you any right to do the same thing to someone else. **It is important to understand that being abused does not cause an adult to molest a child. Like all people, abused persons make choices. Many people who were abused never harm a child.**

Many men and women who were abused as children develop problems with drugs and alcohol. Some lose interest in sex or become interested in sexual behaviour that is harmful to themselves and others. Others develop physical illnesses and suffer life-long bouts of mental illness or depression. Of course some adults abused as children seek out the support and treatment they need and go on to live normal, happy, and productive lives.

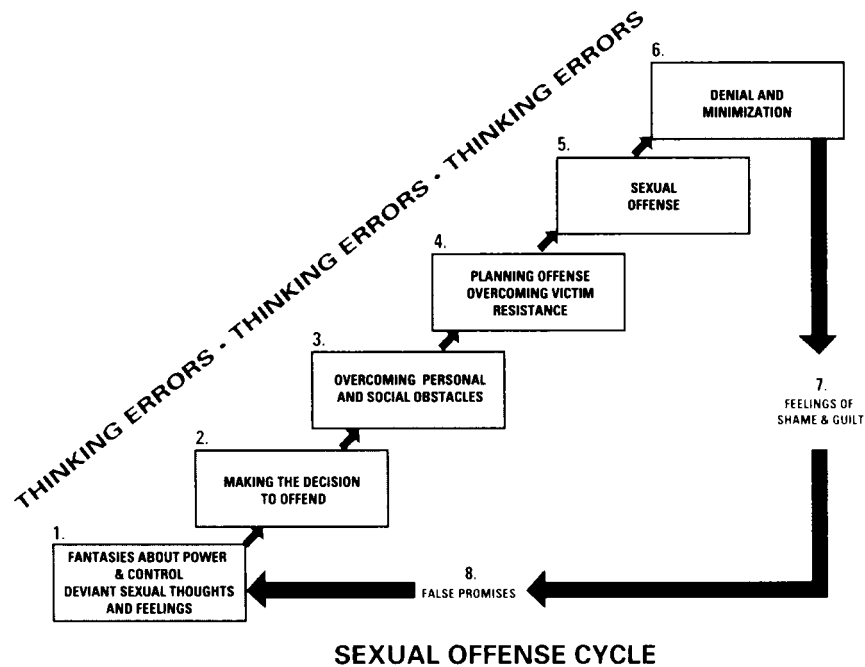
Whatever may have happened to you in the past, it is important to deal honestly with it now and not use it as an excuse for your present behaviour. You must always remember that what happened to you when you were a child was not your fault. The person who molested you was responsible, just as you are responsible if you molest a child. As a child you were powerless to stop what happened to you and had few choices about how to deal with your feelings. As an adult you can now make decisions for yourself. Seeking help to deal with your past will be an important part of taking care of yourself. There are many trained therapists that can help you deal with the feelings, fear, anger, or frustration that may have resulted from your abuse and that may be affecting your life now.

## **THE SEXUAL OFFENCE CYCLE**

In order to start making a plan you have to understand a few basic things about the pattern of your molesting behaviour, your sexual offence cycle. The model of the sexual offence cycle presented below shows the steps typically taken by someone who commits a sexual assault. Keep in mind that it does not necessarily apply to everyone in all cases.

Molesting a child does not "just happen". A number of decisions and a lot of excuses or rationalizations get made along the way that make it possible for you to molest a child. There are

many points at which you can stop yourself.



**1. Fantasies about power and control, deviant sexual thoughts and feelings.** This is usually the first stage in the cycle. It is at this point where you begin your pattern. For some it starts with overwhelming feelings of despair, anger, powerlessness, or depression. Abusers choose to act on these feelings in a harmful way instead of dealing with them more responsibly. For others it can start with fantasies about having sex with children. You may not even be aware you are starting your cycle. Without even thinking you may be making a number of small but important decisions or using a number of rationalizations that get you started. Think of it as a series of small steps you take on a path. In the beginning, they may not seem like very large or important steps, but ultimately they can lead you into a situation where you are vulnerable, out of control, or overwhelmed. An example of this is the alcoholic who leaves work after a stress filled day and "accidentally" drives past his street towards the local pub. Realizing his "mistake" he decides to go in and have a "quick beer" before dinner, promising himself he'll be home on time. Several hours later he awakens to find he has passed out in his chair in the pub.

**2. Making the decision to offend.** Regardless of the reason why you believe you molest children, you are the person who decides. Some adults deny they intended to harm their victim and claim they just got carried away with horseplay or tickling. However, even if that were true **you still made a decision not to stop!** Some adults blame drugs and alcohol for their behaviour. But even if that were true you are still admitting your drinking and sexual behaviour are completely out of control. This is an indication that you need help. As difficult as it may be to accept, you **did** make a decision to molest.

**3. Overcoming personal and social obstacles.** Most adults never molest a child. That is

because they respect the child's privacy and boundaries and the social taboos we have against sex between adults and children. A person who molests children crosses those boundaries. It usually requires a lot of rationalizations and excuses to get past the guilt most adults would have about harming a child. You may even have to convince yourself that what you are planning will **not** harm the child. You also have to move past the responsibility most adults feel for the care and safety of children and the fear of being caught and punished.

**4. Planning the offence.** At this stage you have to find a child to molest, determine a way to get that child alone, and have enough time to commit the offence. All this takes thought and effort to plan. Some adults "groom" their victims slowly over a long period of time by acting as a "friend", taking them to movies, buying them gifts, and showering them with lots of attention and affection. Children will typically not see through your actions until you ask them to do something that is distressing to them. Even then they may be so confused and afraid that they just go along with you to avoid the risk of losing your attention. Other adults move more quickly and will simply force a child into sexual activity.

**5. Committing the offence.** After you molest a child you may experience a brief period when your stress or arousal is reduced. But it usually lasts only a very short period of time. Most adults soon begin to feel ashamed and guilty for their behaviour. To cope with these feelings or to avoid responsibility when they are caught, most molesters deny they committed the offence or minimize their responsibility.

**6. Denial and minimization.** When you **deny**, you are saying the offence did not take place and that the victim or witnesses are lying about the incident. When you **minimize** you are not completely denying the offence took place but you are trying to reduce your responsibility.

Denial and minimization are natural, but they can slow down your process of rehabilitation. Adults who molest children usually do not want to face the embarrassment or anger and disappointment of family, neighbours, and work colleagues who might find out. Friends or peers may not want to hear about what you did and may inadvertently support your denial and minimization rather than believe you molested a child. However, you cannot start to understand your behaviour or develop a plan to avoid hurting a child again until you accept complete responsibility for your actions. **Denying the offence took place is harmful to both you and your victim. Continuing to deny the offence, even after a court of law has found you guilty, means that you have harmed the victim twice!**

**To start treatment you don't have to admit everything or completely stop minimizing and denying.** Some adults need time to face their bad feelings and open themselves up to face their past actions. Others do it more quickly. In either case, the more honest you are the better your therapist can help you.

Another way you deny or minimize your behaviour is through the use of **thinking errors**. Thinking errors are rationalizations or excuses you make to help deal with your bad feelings or to avoid facing the responsibility for your actions. Thinking errors also make it possible for you to molest a child. Such thoughts help you ignore the child's feelings, get past his/her resistance, and turn "molesting" into "just horseplay", "just showing affection" or something else. Some adults will say the child "asked for it", didn't say "no" or "stop", or "sat on my lap on purpose" to excuse their behaviour.

What you need to understand is that no child "asks for sex" or deserves to be harmed in this manner. **As the adult, you alone are responsible.**

**7. Feelings of shame and guilt.** Adults who molest children typically become flooded with bad feelings for what they did. Sometimes it is out of real feelings of concern for the child. Sometimes it is because of the fear of the consequences for getting caught. Whatever the reason, these feelings can make you feel very depressed. It is usually when adults who molest children are worried, stressed, or depressed that they begin having fantasies about children. It is easy to get stuck in this rut if you do not make a decision to interrupt your old pattern and create a new one that will lead you to other ways to deal with your overwhelming feelings, thoughts, or fantasies.

**8. False promises.** Because of the very strong feelings that you may experience after you molest a child, it is typical to make promises to yourself that you will never do it again. But these promises only serve to deal with the feelings at the moment; they do not help you become aware of what caused you to molest in the first place. This is the truly important work you need to do. **Adults who molest children do not simply stop their behaviour just because they feel bad.** As soon as you find yourself in another stressful situation and run into another trigger you will likely commit another offence against a child.

## ASKING FOR HELP

Seeking help for personal problems can be difficult, especially for persons who have led lives filled with secrecy. It is important to stop judging yourself and start taking control. You need to be honest with yourself, your victim, and your therapist. **Nothing can happen until you care enough about yourself to make a commitment to change your behaviour.** The first few steps may be difficult, maybe even a bit scary. But just remember, the long-term goal you are working towards is keeping children, your community and yourself safe. With sincere effort and honest hard work you can again become a full and productive member of your community.

**Understanding why you molest children, your sexual assault cycle, and your triggers requires time, patience, and hard work. A lifetime of thoughts, experiences, and other factors brought you to this point in the first place. Give yourself time to sort it all out and develop a workable, concrete plan to turn things around.** And always keep in mind that good intentions and promises "never to do it again" are not enough to keep you from molesting children.

It is important for you to find therapists who are specially trained to provide services to persons who sexually offend against children. Skilled counselors can help you identify your patterns and triggers and help you design a plan to stay out of risky situations before they start. Therapists can usually be found in the listings of community service directories or located in the phone book by calling a local hospital, your doctor, a Children's Aid Society, or professional organizations such as those of Psychologists, Physicians, or Social Workers. The services of some therapists or community agencies are offered free of charge or are covered by provincial or territorial health plans. Counselors in private practice charge a fee for their services. These fees are sometimes negotiable for those with low incomes.

Some adults attend group sessions where they have an opportunity to share their experiences with others. These can seem a little overwhelming at first because you may be used to living with so many secrets. Similarly, all of the other members in your group have also lived with secrets and shame. Once you start it gets easier to talk, and sharing your thoughts, feelings, and concerns, Will help other group members help you.

Treatment largely consists of the following phases or stages: 1) learning to identify your "triggers", 2) learning your sexual assault cycle, 3) learning to new patterns of behaviour and committing to a non-offending lifestyle,

4) maintaining these new patterns of behaviour, 5) termination or exiting from the group, returning to the community, and applying skills learned in group to your everyday life.

**NOTE: If you haven't been charged with an offence and you disclose that you abused a child, therapists in most provinces and territories are obliged by law to report the incident to child welfare authorities.**

## **MAKING A PLAN - RELAPSE PREVENTION**

You don't have to have everything all figured out to stop your behaviour. Learning to recognize your triggers and understand your behaviour is a long-term process. However, in order to keep yourself safe and in control of your behaviour it is important to develop a plan of action to avoid and deal with situations where you will be vulnerable and at risk to molest. Understanding and using this plan to control your behaviour is called relapse prevention. The following are some of the steps you can take to create a plan. Together, you and your therapist can work out a strategy that will be best for you.

1. Acknowledge your problem without denial or minimization.
2. Deal with any drug or alcohol problems you have in your life.
3. Avoid pornographic materials, especially those that depict children.
4. Abstain from masturbation for a period of time to help break any compulsive behaviour patterns, especially if those patterns involve fantasies about children.
5. Avoid all situations where you have molested a child before, or where you are likely to be alone with a child for any period of time.
6. Make a precise plan to avoid any public places or situations that will bring you into contact with children and just walk away.
7. Focus on your physical health, diet, and emotional well-being.
8. Learn new skills to help you understand and cope with your feelings, stress, anxiety, and life's daily pressures.
9. Develop an interest in pleasurable hobbies or pastimes that do not involve contact with children or sex.
10. Make a commitment to your counseling and therapy.
11. Rely on your therapist or group when you feel you may be losing control.
12. Learn and practice the skills that will help you cultivate friendships with other adults so you will not be tempted to meet your emotional or sexual needs through children.
13. Begin addressing your own family problems or your own past abuse.
14. Begin resolving unhealthy relationships you have with family members or past abusers.

## **BREAKING SILENCE, CREATING HOPE**

The information contained in this booklet is not everything you may need to know to understand your behaviour or help you seek treatment. Consider it a starting point on your journey. The first few steps may seem difficult but you don't have to do it alone. Many communities have specially trained counselors, therapists, and group programs that can support and assist you. Seek them out. They are trained to help you deal with your troubling thoughts, feelings, or behaviours. Give yourself lots of time to do the work. You cannot expect to resolve your problems in just a few weeks or months. The rest is up to you. Take care, take control, take action.

## **Additional Resources**

### **How Can I Stop? Breaking My Deviant Cycle.**

L. Bays, R. Freeman-Longo, & D. Hildebran (1989)  
Safer Society Press, Orwell, Vermont.

### **Making the Decision to Care: Guys and Sexual Assault.**

F. Mathews (1993)  
Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada, Ottawa, Canada

### **Struggle For Intimacy. (Adult Children of Alcoholics)**

J. Woititz (1985)  
Health Communications, Pompano Beach, Florida.

### **Female Sex Offenders: An Exploratory Typology.**

R. Mathews, J. Matthews, and K. Spelt (1989)  
Safer Society Press, Orwell, Vermont.

### **Victims No Longer: Men Recovering From Incest and Other Sexual Child Abuse.**

M. Lew (1990)  
Harper & Row, New York, New York.

### **Adults Molested As Children: A Survivor's Manual For Women and Men.**

E. Bear and P. Dimmock (1988)  
Safer Society Press, Orwell, Vermont.

## NOTES