

Sexual abusers hard to profile or predict

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(RNS) The grand jury report reads like a textbook profile of child sexual abuse.

Jerry Sandusky, former assistant football coach at Penn State, allegedly bought one boy golf clubs and a computer, took him swimming at a hotel pool, wrestled with him and invited him to sleepovers at his home before sexually assaulting him, the report says.

The pattern repeated over 15 years with at least seven other boys who participated in a mentorship program Sandusky founded for underprivileged boys, the grand jury charges.

The case, which led to the firing of legendary Penn State coach Joe Paterno, upends the popular conception of the child molester as the creepy stranger who abducts a child from the playground. And it resonates with experts who say that in 70 percent of child sex abuse cases, the victim knows the offender.

Epidemiological research indicates 1 to 3 percent of men have sexual interest in children, but there are few outward signs to identify them, said psychologist Michael Seto, director of forensic rehabilitation research at the Royal Ottawa Health Care Group in Canada.

"People would feel better if there was a profile, but there really isn't," he said. "It can be a priest, a coach, or a teacher. It could be a person who is a trusted member of the community. They are employed. They have friends. It doesn't fit with the idea that this person is different in some way that we could notice and protect ourselves."

Serial child molesters seek out vulnerable children and cultivate relationships with them, Seto said.

"They are not picking children at random," he said. "They are seeking out children who will be more receptive to their approach -- children who may be socially isolated, impoverished, lacking a father figure."

Experts call the gift-giving, outings and physical contact "grooming" -- a way of gaining a child's trust and ultimately getting them accustomed to sexual behavior.

"When the grooming starts, the child may like the attention. They like the individual. The children are oftentimes very conflicted," said Ryan Hall, a forensic psychiatrist in private practice in Lake Mary, Fla.

Sandusky denied sexually abusing children. "I enjoy young people," Sandusky told NBC sportscaster Bob Costas in an interview that aired Monday (Nov. 14). "I love to be around them, but no, I'm not sexually attracted to young boys."

Sandusky admitted to Costas that he showered with, hugged and touched children, but "without intent of sexual contact."

Stop It Now!, a child sexual abuse prevention group based in Massachusetts, lists similar behaviors as indicators of an inappropriate relationship between a child and an adult. "Those are all indicators that something was awry," Executive Director Deborah Donovan Rice said.

Research on pedophiles has found that men who molest children can rationalize their actions.

"They might express ideas that children were benefiting from the experience. They might see it as a mentorship relationship," Seto said.

Doctors don't know why some adults prefer sex with children. Some scientists believe "this may be like a sexual orientation. It may not be a choice. It may be how they are wired," Hall said.