

Researchers reveal communication tactics used by sexual predators to entrap children

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A child's innocence and vulnerability presents a target for a sexual predator's abusive behavior. University of Missouri researchers are beginning to understand the communication process by which predators lure victims into a web of entrapment. This information could better equip parents and community members to prevent, or at least interrupt, the escalation of child sexual abuse.

“Our children are our greatest gift and our greatest responsibility. The fact that they could be abused in any way, shape or form is horrific--both in the moment of the abuse and in the long-term effect,” said Loreen Olson, MU associate professor of communication in the College of Arts and Science. “It’s a social problem with grave consequences that is prevalent and needs attention. It’s incomprehensible, but it’s happening. The sexual abuse of children has dramatic negative consequences to their emotional well-being throughout their lives.”

According to the researchers, in order for the process of entrapment to take place, the perpetrator must first gain access to the potential victim through various exploitive means. Olson and her team identified several communicative elements in the cycle of entrapment, including the core phenomenon of “deceptive trust development.” Deceptive trust development describes the predator’s ability to build a trusting relationship with the victim in order to improve the likelihood of sexual encounter.

Deceptive trust development is central to other manipulative strategies used by the predator such as grooming. Grooming sets the stage for abuse by desensitizing the victim to sexual contact. Grooming may include activities such as sitting on a child's bed and watching them get into their bedclothes; "accidentally" touching the child inappropriately; showing the child pornographic images; and making contact or sex play with implicit sexual suggestions.

As perpetrators are grooming their victims and building deceptive trust, they also work to isolate them both physically and emotionally from their support network. Isolation strategies may include offers to baby sit, giving the child a ride home, and taking advantage of fragile family and friend relationships. Isolation causes the victim to become more and more dependent on the perpetrator.

A third strategy is approach, which is the initial physical contact or verbal lead-ins that occur just prior to the sexual act. Examples of approach strategies include suggestions to play sex games, more explicit discussions about sexual issues, giving a child a "rubdown," bathing or undressing a child, and instigating wrestling and other physical games as a means to escalate sexual physical contact.

Olson, and her co-authors analyzed existing published material on pedophilia and child sexual abuse and proposed their theory that explains the communication process used by child sexual predators. Their theory of luring communication is part of a new area of study which Olson calls "the communication of deviance."

"The more we know about how these adults are entrapping children and building a sexual relationship with them, the better we can either intervene and stop the cycle from happening, or de-escalate it," Olson said.

According to the study, the theory of luring communication also may offer important insight into social, deviant and communicative problems plaguing society, such as how con-artists lure victims and the recruitment strategies of gang or cult members.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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