

Understanding the Psychology of Child Molesters: A Key to Getting Confessions

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She walked into the room, a blonde, blue-eyed child, barely seven, her head bowed, eyes unable to look at the two investigators in the room. She walked straight to the only male in the room, positioning herself in front of him. With no hesitation, this hapless little girl lifted her dress, just as she had so many other times in her short life, and waited for the abuse to start.

Who is responsible for the actions of this victim? Who is the monster who programmed her? We all know him; we caught a glimpse of him recently in Idaho: Joseph Edward Duncan, with that terrified little girl, traumatized, fearful, frightened, controlled, and abused.

If a complaint came in to your agency alleging that a popular school teacher, a youth pastor, a Little League coach, or a previously convicted predator like Duncan had been molesting children in your community, are you confident that your investigators have the training and skills necessary to interview that suspect and get a full confession? These can be intense, high-profile cases. The suspect might be a prominent citizen, a pillar of the community. The reality is that in most child sexual abuse cases, the offender is someone who is known and trusted not only by the victim but also by the victim's family.

Child sexual abuse exists in every community and at all levels of society, but allegations of molestation can sometimes be divisive for a community. Some people refuse to believe that the accused is capable of such a crime. It is not unheard of for parents, friends, and coworkers to rally in support of the suspect, proclaim his innocence and even post his bond.¹

These can be extremely difficult cases to investigate. Often there is little or no physical evidence and no witnesses, only a child's allegation that molestation has occurred. With these cases, the suspect interview can be

the most critical stage of the investigation. The outcome of the interview can mean the difference between a successful prosecution and the release of the suspect to continue molesting other innocent children. There is nothing that solidifies a case and quiets the dissenters more than a detailed written or videotaped confession from the sexual abuser.

Ramifications of Child Molesters The ramifications of the release of a child molester are sobering. A pedophile, over the course of his lifetime, can molest hundreds, even thousands of children.

An example of this is the case of an Australian man named Clarence Osborne, who recorded in great detail sexual contacts that he had with more than 2,500 teenage boys. Osborne was a court recorder who worked with juvenile offenders. He was caught in a child pornography investigation and in 1979, at the age of 61, committed suicide. Only after his death did police discover the magnitude of Osborne's criminal activity. In his house they found names, photographs, tape recordings, and written descriptions of his sexual encounters with boys that had occurred over a 20-year period. His victims came from all parts of the community; in fact, many were from wealthy, prominent families. The amazing thing is that with all of these documented victims, many of them later confirmed, the police had never received any complaints on Osborne.

Early 2005 in San Jose, California, Dean Arthur Schwartzmiller, a 63-year-old convicted child molester, was arrested and charged once again with sex offenses involving children. During a search of his residence, police recovered logs kept by Schwartzmiller that suggested that he had molested thousands of children throughout the United States, Mexico, and Brazil over a 30-year period. The more than 1,300 pages of documents contained names and descriptions of children as well as codes indicating the sex acts that were committed.

Many police agencies have a tendency to view a child molestation case as an isolated incident. They focus on the known victim and investigate accordingly. The reality is that most true pedophiles have been molesting children for years, dating all the way back to their own childhood. Few pedophiles are caught the first time they molest a child.

Offender Interview Is Essential When investigating a case involving a suspected child molester, the stakes are high and a full confession is critical. But the ability to interview and relate to this type of offender is something that doesn't come naturally for most police officers. Many officers find the subject matter, as well as the offender, repulsive. They cannot have

an amiable conversation with a person who they believe has molested a child. They are not able to mask their feelings, and they allow contempt, disgust, and hatred to surface during the interview, greatly reducing the likelihood that the offender will open up and share his deepest secrets.

Deep down, most child molesters want to talk. Some are sexually attracted to children and have known it for many years. They may be married, have a family, have a successful business or career, and be active in their religious institution, yet they have a secret that they have never shared with anyone. Most of them have struggled with their desires. They wish that they could change, but they are not able to do it by themselves. They all know that child molesters are hated and despised by society and they believe that no one could really understand their situation. Many know they need help but don't have the courage to seek it.

Although many molesters would really like to talk to someone, they also know there are many reasons to not talk about their feelings and actions. They believe they have everything to lose if they confess. They risk losing their marriage, their children, their home, their friends, their job, and their freedom. They fear embarrassment and humiliation. They are afraid of how the interviewer is going to react to them if and when they make that first admission of guilt. And child molesters fear going to prison. They have heard and read stories about what happens to child molesters in prison.

When interviewing a child molester, an investigator faces two competing forces: the molesters' deep desire to talk and his fear of consequences. The investigator must exploit the first force while helping the molester to overcome the second.

Maryland Heights Study In a 30-month period, from 2003 to 2005, the authors interviewed 45 convicted child molesters, both men and women, at several prisons in Missouri, as part of two separate research projects. Many of the offenders were true pedophiles, while others were more situational-type child molesters, individuals who took advantage of an opportunity to have sexual contact with a child.² Collectively, these 45 offenders molested more than 350 children.

During this research it became apparent that the convicts understand the criminal investigative process well. They shared with the authors their thoughts on the good and the not-so-good interview tactics. The convicts identified the interview mistakes made by investigators and shared stories of the demeaning and often physically violent treatment they received at the hands of the police. They also described their experiences with officers

whose decency, patience, composure, and professionalism led them to confess.

The purpose of these prisoners' interviews was to gain insight about how these offenders think and operate. While incarcerated child molesters are not necessarily representative of all child molesters, they nevertheless offer a tremendous amount of information that can be of great benefit to law enforcement.

In addition to the information disclosed by the offenders during interviews, documentation was obtained in most cases to verify their statements and claims. These documents included police reports, criminal record checks, court records, presentence investigation reports, and offenders' responses on Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) questionnaires. The Hare questionnaire is used to screen offenders prior to placement in sex offender treatment programs. Hare interviews are conducted by social workers on staff at the Missouri

Department of Corrections. During these prison interviews, information was gathered from the offenders on a wide range of topics, including childhood and background, sexual history, victim preferences, selection, grooming, seduction, and personal habits. One important aspect of these interviews

dealt with the offenders' encounters with the police. They were all asked to describe their own arrest and the police interview process. How were they treated and questioned by the police? Did they confess? Did they make admissions? Did they withhold significant information about physical evidence or other victims? Those who made admissions or confessions were asked to give their reasons for doing so. Those who did not make any admission of guilt were asked to explain why.

- Sixteen (36 percent) of the 45 offenders did not confess or make any admissions of guilt when interviewed by the police. Many of these offenders stated that they did not confess solely because of the way they were treated or questioned by the police.
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- Twenty-nine (64 percent) of the 45 offenders confessed or at least made some admission of guilt when interviewed by the police. Eighteen (62 percent) of these 29 offenders acknowledged that although they made some admission they withheld significant information, most often about undisclosed victims. One of the offenders claimed that he had 73 previous victims that he never

disclosed to the investigator and for which he was never prosecuted.

Getting the Confession Getting a full confession is crucial. There is a difference between an admission and a confession. An admission is a partial acknowledgment of the facts of the crime. A confession contains a description of all the elements of the crime. A good investigator can bring closure to many other crimes by being thorough during the interview process and not being too quick to accept a suspect's assertions that this was his first and only victim.

Understand the Thinking Process: One of the critical keys to interviewing child molesters is understanding how they think. There are several different types of child molester; and each child molester has a particular way to meet his or her needs and justify his or her behavior. Molesters use distorted thinking to rationalize and justify their crimes, to make their own needs most important and to minimize their behavior. Many offenders convince themselves that the relationship they had with their victim was different; that it was a mutual, loving, caring relationship; that the sexual acts were consensual; or that the child somehow benefited from the relationship. The more an investigator understands the way a sexual offender thinks, the more prepared he will be to elicit a confession.

There is no magic interviewing formula that works for all child molesters. An investigator must understand the psychology of this type of offender and then be able to apply that understanding to the interview process. An investigator should understand the differences between a situational and a preferential child molester, because there are different interviewing approaches and themes for each type of offender. If an investigator is going to interview a suspected pedophile, he really should understand the term pedophilia—a sexual attraction to prepubescent children—and should know exactly what that entails. He should understand sex offender terminology that includes distorted thinking, thinking errors, sexual addiction, and the addiction cycle.

By having a better understanding of sexual deviance, an investigator will be better able to recognize the importance of certain disclosures. For example, many pedophiles were themselves victims of childhood sexual abuse. In this research study, 78 percent of the pedophile offenders stated that they were themselves victims. During the investigative interview, a suspect might disclose his own history of childhood sexual abuse, trying to use it as a defense for his behavior. For example, the suspect might say, "It happened to me; therefore, I would never do that to someone else." In fact, rather than signaling a flat denial, a revelation like that should open the door for an

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investigator to explore how that sexual abuse might have affected the suspect's own sexual development. Many offenders will admit that their own victimization resulted in confusion and sexual experimentation during their teenage years. This line of questioning will sometimes help the offender to open up and admit to the offense he has committed.

Establish Credibility: An investigator must establish credibility with the offender by showing that he really understands human sexuality and deviance. A pseudotherapeutic approach, where the investigator communicates with the offender in a nonthreatening and nonjudgmental way, showing understanding and empathy, has a much greater chance of success than aggressive confrontation. It will not work, however, if the investigator does not understand the psychology of offenders.

Interviewing child molesters is a skill that can be developed and greatly enhanced through study, training, and experience. For investigators willing to spend the time, there is a wealth of material and data available about sex offenders. There are also many excellent courses and seminars throughout the United States that address the psychology of sexual offenders. Experience is probably the key factor for investigators who work sex crimes. It takes many interviews to develop an understanding for this type of offender.

Why They Confess During this research, the authors identified the successful and the not-so-successful interview techniques used by law enforcement. The information validated many of the existing techniques and, at the same time, highlighted the interviewing strategies that have proven to be most effective.

The focus was on what seems to be most important for improving police interviewing techniques regarding this type of sexual offender. Why did he confess? Why did he not confess? This research offers the offenders' perspectives of what constitutes an effective police interviewer; what they were receptive to, what they rejected, and why. It discovered why their resistance increased or weakened and it examined their positive and negative perceptions of the police.

This research indicates that many sexual offenders will confess to the police investigator who establishes trust, understanding, and the feeling that he can and will help them with their problems. This rapport is based, in part, on the following:

- How trustworthy the police interviewer seems to be
- How qualified and professional the interviewer seems to be

- What type of person the interviewer seems to be

Demonstrate Respect in the Interview The most consistent reason offered by the offenders for why they confessed their crime was the immediate and constant respect shown them by the interviewer. Respect meant several things to them. In some cases, the interviewer engaged in nonthreatening, nonspecific, noncrime-related conversation. The interviewer clearly demonstrated a psychological understanding of sex offenders and was able to create a feeling that the interviewer, as one offender stated, "cared about my issues and showed real concern for me as a human being." One told us: "He was the first policeman who ever treated me right. He made me feel like a real person, not a criminal." Another said, "I have been treated like s- by the police all of my life. I didn't think any of them were any good or gave a damn about anybody but themselves. When Detective ____ talked to me, he treated me like a man, not a kid. He was tough but fair, and never once did he ever talk down to me."

Develop Rapport The second significant reason for confessing was the "ease of conversation" and a perception that the interviewer quickly established trust and understanding and could provide them with help. Participants described how they were "short-circuited," expecting a "police bully" and instead finding the opposite and actually liking the interviewer. Conversation was easy; it was not difficult to confess to someone they perceived as a friend.

Show Empathy The third successful interviewing technique acknowledged by the offenders as being "very helpful" to them in deciding whether or not to admit to their crime was showing understanding and empathy. Empathy is the ability of the interviewer to view the world of the sexual offender through the offender's eyes. Empathy is also, in part, an understanding of why the subject is an offender, why his sexual attraction to children exists.

Investigators who communicate that they feel the molester is "repulsive" and cannot easily sit and talk with the offender will not be successful. Many of the molesters interviewed indicated it was obvious what the police really thought of them, making it difficult for them to relate to the interviewer. The molesters reported that they realized within seconds of contact with the police that there would be no real rapport or honest conversation. Their sense of what the interviewer thought of them came through loud and clear with their introductory words, the practiced mechanical delivery of words that oozed incongruity and betrayed inner feelings of disgust. As one said: "If he only knew what I was feeling inside, how sorry I was, it would have been easier for me to talk. He had that look about him; he tried, but I

couldn't talk with him."

Amnesty and Confession Themes Amnesty is an act of forgiving.

Psychological amnesty is the ability of the interviewer to offer justification for the crimes by offering the offender excuses and reasons that morally (not legally) excuses their behavior. Psychological amnesty offers the offender a plausible reason for his actions. In return for forgiveness (amnesty) the repentant says, first, "I did it," then "I am sorry," and, finally, "I won't do it again."

Creating a sense of amnesty encourages admissions of guilt, remorse, and a promise not to repeat the behavior: (1) "For some reason unknown to me, I touched his penis. I don't know why but I did. I didn't hurt him. I never intended to make him cry." (2) "I'm sorry for this whole thing. I wish it would just all go away." (3) "I swear to God that I will never ever look at another boy. I promise, I will never do that again."

The molesters interviewed during this research provided the following themes, including amnesty, that were significant contributions to their decision to confess:

- Desire to prevent the victim from having to publicly identify him in court as a sexual offender
- Desire to save the victim from being traumatized by the system
- Because of his love and concern for the victim, desire to spare the victim the negative publicity associated with being a victim of sexual abuse
- Desire to avoid embarrassing the suspect's family
- Desire to obtain treatment and learn to control his sexual attraction to children
- Desire to express remorse for his actions and demonstrate his concern by helping the victims find answers and closure
- Desire to take responsibility for his actions
- Disgust with himself
- Guilt (the internal acknowledgment that one is responsible for one's criminal deeds) greater than shame (the reaction to public knowledge of the crime)
- Belief, based on the rapport between suspect and police interviewer, that now would be the best time for a confession
- Belief that the police interviewer understood why the suspect was a sexual offender and why he was involved in criminal sexual behavior
- Belief that the police interviewer understood the suspect's desperate need for acceptance from anyone, children included, as the suspect

had always perceived himself as one who is lonely, uncared for by society, unloved by those who should have loved him, and unable to deal with rejection

- Belief that the suspect was blameless, because the child had initiated the sexual contact
- Belief that the suspect had demonstrated more concern for the child than the child's own parents
- Belief that the child was old enough to enjoy the sexual contact
- Belief that the suspect was really a caring person who demonstrated genuine concern for his victim
- Belief that the suspect had never forced the child to do anything
- Belief that the police interviewer understood that the suspect truly loved and cared for children
- Belief that the sex act was only a small part of the overall relationship
- Belief that the police interview understood that the child victim really did care for the suspect
- Religious beliefs about what is right and wrong

Why Some Did Not Confess During this study, the molesters also provided the following reasons as to why they did not confess:

- Refusal to waive their constitutional rights
- So-called convict code mentality where one does not admit to anything
- Fear of jail or prison time
- Perceived threat of possible physical harm from the officer
- Perceived arrogance of the police interviewer
- Fear of embarrassment and humiliation
- Belief that the police interviewer didn't care about the offender and would make sure that the offender would pay for his actions
- Fear of losing everything (family, possessions, career, reputation in the community)
- The conceit of the interviewer, a "super cop"
- Perception that interviewer was not a human being but merely a cop
- Perception that the interviewer had no integrity and was obviously a liar
- Lack of respect for the police
- Perception that he interviewer was uncomfortable with the subject matter
- Perception that the interviewer could not control his emotions and temper

The findings of this research project can help the investigative interviewer gain insight into the mind of the child molester, learn his strengths and weaknesses, and gain a confession. ■

1 Child sexual abuse is a predominantly male crime. For this reason, the Police Chief magazine will depart from its gender-neutral style for this article. 2 Pedophilia is a disorder characterized by sexual attraction and or sexual activity with a child. The American Psychiatric Association identified the symptoms as intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, and possible sexual behavior with a youth. Persons suffering from this order must be 16 years of age or older, and at least five years older than the child. See American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: 1994): Diagnostic Criteria 302.2; October 13, 2005,(<http://allpsych.com/disorders/paraphilias>).

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