How Sexual Abuse Happens

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse will act based on opportunity and will choose their victim because of the child's vulnerability and accessibility. Regardless of how long the abuse continues, most perpetrators will follow the 6 T's listed below.

1. Targeting

The perpetrator picks a child based on the child's perceived accessibility and vulnerability (i.e., how often could the child be isolated, or lack supervision; does the child "need" a special friend now; or could the perpetrator be around the child without suspicion).

2. Testing

The perpetrator tests the child's initial response to see if they are vulnerable. This may include seeing if the child will speak to him/her, asking questions to see when the child's parents are coming home, or crowding the child's personal space. These actions are called "grooming" the victim and serve to confuse the child.

3. Transportation

The perpetrator tries to move the child into an isolated area to increase the child's vulnerability (e.g., perpetrator's home, child's bedroom, bathroom, etc.).

4. Threats

Threats are used to ensure the child's compliance and secrecy. Although threats can be of physical harm, they are usually in the form of making the child feel like they are responsible for the abuse so they will not tell anyone *(see below for the types of threats commonly used).*

5. Transaction

This is the actual assault. The perpetrator usually does not need to use physical violence because of the power imbalance, the size difference, and the threats already used. In cases when the abuse in on-going, the type of sexual abuse will change (e.g., from touching the child on the outside of clothing to eventual penetration).

6. Termination

After the assault is over, the perpetrator may reinforce the threat or need for secrecy. They may or may not seek out another victim and repeat the steps.

Type of Threats Used by Perpetrators

Bribery – gibing candy, toys, money, special privileges or other rewards.

Deception – the offender will "play a game" which results in sexual activity or tell the child that they are going to do one thing while doing another (e.g., offering to give the child a back rub, and then touching the child's genitals).

Obligation/Manipulation – making the child feel they "owe" the perpetrator something (e.g., "Look at all the special gifts I gave you.").

Instruction/Abuse of Authority – taking advantage of the child's lack of knowledge—"It's okay…this is normal"

Entrapment – catching the child involved in a "forbidden" activity and threatening to tell the child does not go along. The perpetrator may even encourage the child into the activity (e.g., giving them alcohol, then threatening to tell on them).

Coercion – saying things to silence the child (e.g., "If you tell, I will go to jail." or "No one will believe you anyway.").

Reprinted from Reaching & Teaching Teens to Stop Violence, Appendix A.2
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