

Victims Not Destined to Be Abusers

by Phyllis D. Barkhurst

Some time ago, I was talking with a 14-year-old boy, “Johnny,” who had been sexually abused by his uncle when he was 7, 8 and 9. At some point in our conversation, he turned and asked, “When will I abuse a kid? When will it happen to me?”

As Johnny asked this question, it all came pouring out, years of fear and terror that he was going to turn into a sex offender. Johnny said that from the time he disclosed his uncle’s abuse, he had heard adults talking about how being sexually abused is what causes someone to be a sex offender. He heard with certainty from many of the adults involved that his uncle wouldn’t have molested him unless he himself had been molested as a child. He heard people talking about the “cycle of abuse,” and it “runs in families.” As he grew, this fear was fed by what he saw in the popular media, including news and talk shows.

By asking the question, “When is it going to happen to me?” Johnny was revealing his deepest fears, an overwhelming and underlying terror that had added unnecessary pain to his already traumatized life.

A 15-year-old survivor, “Maria,” told me that she was recently fired from a babysitting job when the parents “found out” that she had been molested as a child. They were afraid for their own children and told her so. Maria was devastated and stigmatized. I wonder if the concerned parents know that they themselves have traumatized a child—the very thing they were trying to avoid.

Last week I was talking with a battered woman, “Tisha,” who was concerned about her daughter and son. She told me that she needed to “break the cycle” of domestic violence in her family and was so afraid that her son would grow up to be a batterer, her daughter a victim. Tisha and others had related these fears to the children (11-year-old girl and 9-year-old boy) and have spent the last several months telling the children that they will have to work hard to avoid this.

The truth is that the overwhelming majority of adults sexually abused as children do not go on to become sex offenders. If molesting children were the sole cause of child sexual abuse, we would have reached, exponentially, 100 percent of the population as sex offenders years ago. Being sexually abused as a child does not cause someone to sexually abuse another.

Living in a household with domestic violence does not cause children to grow to become the next generation of either victim or batterer. In fact, a huge number, possibly a majority, of those who spend their lives working to eliminate sexual and domestic violence are survivors of past abuse themselves. This is what they choose to do with their experience.

It would be so wonderful to have a simple, easy answer to what causes people to become sex offenders or batterers. Much research has gone into studying the issues with some interesting results. Studies show that children who grow up in many different types of homes are *more likely* to learn behaviors or attitudes that affect the choices they make as adults. Researchers found that children who grew up in homes where they were physically abused and children who grew up in domestic violent homes—but were never touched—had similar levels of abuse in their lives.

Those who grew up in homes where women were not respected and even treated with contempt had the highest level of violence in their lives as adults—whether there was violence or abuse of any kind in the household.

According to research conducted using polygraph tests, convicted sex offenders were twice as likely *not* to have experienced sexual abuse as children. In other words, only one in three had been sexually abused as a child. What they had in common in much higher numbers was a pattern of thinking errors that told them that they had the right to do whatever they wanted for their own gratification; that although they molested children, it wasn't really their fault and that the children brought the abuse on themselves.

Except for pedophiles (who are sexually attracted to children rather than adults), sex offenders and batterers have learned behaviors and attitudes that they use to give themselves permission for their own behavior. The bottom line is that using a child for sexual gratification is a choice; using physical intimidation to control is a choice.

A majority of adults who experienced this abuse choose not to abuse others. As individuals, we have the power to think and choose for ourselves, to reject unhealthy or abusive messages we received at home and from society, and to refuse to use or abuse anyone else.

Most children who were sexually abused or came from violent homes can describe what a difficult task it can be to define oneself as a healthy and non-violent adult—so can most adults who were never abused. However, look around you—most of us are working with, living with, or socializing with these success stories every day.

I told Johnny that whether or not he became a sex offender was a choice he had, just like deciding whether or not to run over his arch enemy with a bicycle was his choice. I told him he had the control over what kind of man he will become—and the responsibility.

He will need to hear this message many more times to really believe it—and this is a role all of us can play. We can give positive messages to the Marias and Johnnys that their lives are about choice. We can support them in their journey to unlearn and relearn attitudes or beliefs that support domestic or sexual violence. Most of all, we can refuse to label child survivors as the next generation of victims or offenders. Experiencing domestic or sexual violence as children defines issues that need attention—it does not determine destiny.

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