

# **Compliant Child Victims: Confronting an Uncomfortable Reality**

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In this discussion, the term *compliant* will be used to describe those children who cooperate in or “consent” to their sexual victimization. Because children cannot legally consent to having sex with adults, this compliance should not in any way alter the fact that they are victims of serious crimes. Some have suggested using terms such as *statutory*, *complicit*, *consensual*, *voluntary*, *cooperating*, or *participatory* to refer to such victims. Each of these terms may have perceptual advantages and disadvantages. The term *compliant* is being used, however, because at this time I cannot think of a better one. The term used is not as important as recognizing and understanding the reality of the behavioral dynamics involved. For the sake of child victims and professional interveners, it is important to bring out into the open possible reasons for and the complexity and significance of this compliance.

The sexual victimization of children involves varied and diverse dynamics. It can range from one-on-one intrafamilial abuse to multioffender/multivictim extrafamilial sex rings and from stranger abduction of toddlers to prostitution of teenagers. The often forgotten piece in the puzzle of the sexual victimization of children is acquaintance molestation. This seems to be the most difficult manifestation of the problem for society and even professionals to face. People seem more willing to accept a sinister stranger from a different location or father/stepfather from a different socioeconomic background as a child molester than a clergy member, next-door neighbor, law-enforcement officer, pediatrician, teacher, or volunteer with access to children. Society seems to have a problem dealing with any sexual-victimization case in which the adult offender is not completely “bad” or the child victim is not completely “good.” The idea that child victims could simply behave like human beings and respond to the attention and affection of offenders by voluntarily and repeatedly returning to an offender's home is a troubling one. For example, it confuses us to see the victims in child pornography giggling or laughing.

### **Pitfalls in Understanding the Compliant Child Victim**

The sexual victimization of children by family members and by “strangers” can, of course, involve compliant child victims. In my experience, however, this compliance occurs most often in cases involving children sexually victimized by adult acquaintances. In other words, stranger offenders can use trickery to initially lure their child victims, but they tend to control them more through confrontation, threats of force, and physical force. Likewise, intrafamilial offenders tend to control their victims more through their private access and family authority. The concept of child compliance is obviously much harder to define and evaluate when the offender is a parent.

In contrast, acquaintance child molesters, although sometimes violent, tend by necessity to control their victims through the grooming or seduction process. This process not only gains the victim's initial cooperation, but also decreases the likelihood of disclosure and increases the likelihood of ongoing, repeated access. An acquaintance molester who uses violence is likely to be quickly reported to law enforcement and easily identified, but an acquaintance molester who seduces his victims can sometimes go unreported for years if not indefinitely. For this discussion, the determination of who is an “acquaintance” child molester will be based more on

the process and dynamics of the child victimization and less on the technical relationship between the offender and child victim. An offender who is a stepfather, for example, might be an acquaintance molester who used "marriage" just to gain access to children.

One of the unfortunate outcomes of society's preference for the "stranger-danger" concept has a direct impact on intervention into many acquaintance-sexual-exploitation cases. It is what I call, "say no, yell, and tell" guilt. This is the result of societal attitudes and prevention programs that focus only on "unwanted" sexual activity and tell potential child victims to avoid sexual abuse by saying no, yelling, and telling. This technique might work better with the stranger lurking behind a tree, but children who are seduced and actively participate in their victimization, however, often feel guilty and blame themselves because they did not do what they were "supposed" to do. These seduced and, therefore, compliant victims may sometimes feel a need to describe their victimization in more socially acceptable but inaccurate ways that relieve them of this guilt.

The reality of this problem must be recognized, understood, and addressed if these cases are to be effectively investigated, prosecuted, and prevented. We must understand that the offenders often are "nice guys" who typically sexually exploit children by befriending and seducing them. Equally important, we must also understand that the child victims are human beings with needs, wants, and desires. Child victims cannot be held to idealistic and superhuman standards of behavior. Their frequent cooperation in their victimization must be viewed as an understandable human characteristic that should have little or no criminal-justice significance.

In theory, the law recognizes the developmental limitations of children and affords them with special protection. The repeated use, however, of terms such as *rape*, *sexual violence*, *assault*, *attack*, *sexually violent predator*, and *unwanted sexual activity*, when discussing or inquiring about the sexual exploitation of children assumes or implies in the minds of many that all child victims resist sexual advances by adults and are then overpowered by coercion, trickery, threats, weapons, or physical force. Although cases with these elements certainly exist, when adults and children have sex, lack of "consent" can exist simply because the child is legally incapable of giving it. Whether or not the child resisted, said no, and was overpowered are, therefore, not necessarily elements in determining if a crime has occurred. Understanding this is especially problematic for the public (*i.e.*, potential jurors) and professionals (*i.e.*, physicians, therapists) who lack specialized training in criminal law and may not rely on strict legal analysis. The sad reality is, nonetheless, that such victim behavior **does** have significance in the perception of society and in the "real world" of the criminal justice system.

Society's lack of understanding and acceptance of the reality of compliant child victims often results in the following:

1. Victims failing to disclose and even denying their sexual victimization.
2. Incomplete, inaccurate, distorted, even contradictory victim disclosures when they do happen.
3. Lifetime of victim shame, embarrassment, and guilt.
4. Offenders being able to have numerous victims over an extended period of time.

5. Ineffective prevention programs that not only do not prevent victimization, but also make the first four problems worse.

This discussion intends to cast some light on the issue and encourage dialogue to address and improve this situation for the benefit of the victims and interveners. Although society has become increasingly more aware of the problem of the acquaintance molester and related problems, such as child pornography and the use of computers, a voice still persists that calls the public to focus on "stranger danger" and calls many child-abuse professionals to focus on intrafamilial sexual abuse. This narrow focus often leads to a misperception of the entire spectrum of the sexual victimization of children.

### **Mixed Definitions**

Referring to the same thing by different names and different things by the same name frequently creates confusion. For example, the same 15-year-old individual can be referred to as a *baby*, *child*, *youth*, *juvenile*, *minor*, *adolescent*, *adult*, or (as in one forensic psychological evaluation) *underage adult*. A father who coerces, a violent abductor, an acquaintance who seduces, an online child-pornography collector, or an older boyfriend can all be referred to as a *child molester* or *pedophile/paedophile*. Terms such as *sexual exploitation of children and youth* or *sexual exploitation of children and adolescents* imply that a youth or an adolescent is not a child. At what age does a child become a youth or adolescent? If such a person is sexually victimized, is that considered youth molestation or sexual abuse of adolescents?

There clearly can be a conflict between the law and society's viewpoint when it comes to defining a *child*. Many people using the term *sexual abuse of children* have a mental image of children 12 or younger. The main problem, therefore, is often with the 13- to 17-year-old age group. Those are the child victims who most likely look, act, and have sex drives like adults, but who may or may not be considered children under some laws and by society. There can be national, cultural, and ethnic variations in attitudes about who is a child. Pubescent teenagers can be viable sexual targets of a much larger population of sex offenders. Unlike one-on-one intrafamilial sexual abuse in which the victim is most often a young female, in many acquaintance sexual-exploitation cases the victim is a boy between the ages of 10 and 16.

Legal definitions of who is considered a child or minor also vary from country-to-country, culture-to-culture, and even statute-to-statute when dealing with adolescent victims. During a prosecution, the definition can even vary from count-to-count in the same indictment. The age of the child may determine whether certain sexual activity is a misdemeanor or felony and what degree felony. To legally determine who is a child, investigators and prosecutors turn to the law. That is, the penal code will legally define who is a child or minor. But they must still deal with their own perceptions as well as those of other professionals, juries, and society as a whole.

In general, a *child* will be defined for this discussion as someone who has not yet reached his or her eighteenth birthday. One of the problems in using this broad, but sentimentally appealing, definition of a child is that it lumps together individuals who may be more unlike than alike. In fact, 16-year-olds may be socially and physically more like 26-year-old young

adults than like 6-year-old children. Adolescents are frequently considered and counted by child advocates as children in order to emphasize the large scope of the child-victimization problem. But then, little or nothing said or done about addressing the problem seems to apply to the reality of adolescent victims. If adolescents are considered child victims of sexual exploitation, then their needs, interests, and desires must be realistically recognized and understood when addressing the problem.

### **Issues About Age of Consent**

In the United States in the early 1980s, an infamous case involved a judge who sentenced an adult convicted of child molestation to a minimal sentence because the judge felt the 5-year-old victim was “sexually promiscuous.” Society and professionals were outraged and demanded that the judge be removed from the bench. The sad reality is that most people were outraged, but for the wrong reason. They thought it was impossible for a 5-year-old child to be sexually promiscuous. Although not typical or probable, it is possible. Of course, this is more likely the **result** of some maltreatment, not the cause. Instead, we should have been outraged because it makes no difference whether or not the 5-year-old child was sexually promiscuous, a fact that in no way lessens the offender's crime or responsibility. If you change the case slightly and make the victim 9 years old, does that make a difference? Most people would probably say no. If you change it again and make the victim 12 years old, many people would still say it makes no difference, but might want to see a picture of the victim. If you change it again and make the victim 13, 14, 15, or 16 years old, the response of society and the law would vary greatly. For example, those interested in minimizing such sexual activity might emphasize referring to the victims as *minors* rather than as *children*.

In sex crimes, the fundamental legal difference between victimization of an adult and a child is the issue of **consent**. In cases of sexual activity between adults, with a few rare exceptions, a lack of consent must be established for there to be a crime. In sexual activity between children and adults, a crime can exist even if the child cooperates or “consents.” But the reality of age of consent is not so simple.

Age of consent can vary depending on the type of sexual activity and individual involved. At what age can a child do the following: consent to get married; engage in sexual activity; appear in sexually explicit visual images; or leave home to have sex with an unrelated adult without parental permission? Federal case law in the United States seems to suggest that the consent of a 14-year-old to run off and have sex with a 40-year-old man she met on the Internet is a valid defense for the kidnapping charge, but not for the sexual assault charge. At what age can an adolescent consent to have sex with a relative, a teacher, a coach, an employer, or a 21-year-old boyfriend or girlfriend?

In the United States, society and criminal investigators and prosecutors seem to have a preference for sexual victimization cases where the victim, adult or child, clearly does **not** consent. Among lack of consent cases, the **least** preferred are cases where the victim could not consent because of self-induced use of drugs or alcohol. Cases where the victim was just verbally threatened are next, followed by cases where a weapon was displayed. For purposes of ease of proof, the **most** preferred lack-of-consent cases are those where the victim has visible

physical injuries or is, sad to say, dead. Many compliant child victims may inaccurately claim they were asleep, drunk, drugged, or abducted in part to meet these lack of consent criteria and in part to avoid embarrassment.

Sexual-victimization cases in which the child victim is not forced or threatened and cooperates or "consents" are more troubling and harder for society and investigators to deal with. If such victims were adults, there usually would not even be a crime. Although "consent" is supposed to be irrelevant in child-sexual-victimization cases, there are unspoken preferences in these cases as well. The **most** preferred are "consent" cases where the victim can explain that the cooperation was due to some general fear or ignorance about the nature of the activity. That is, the child was afraid to tell or did not understand what was happening. The next most preferred are cases where the child was tricked, duped, or indoctrinated. If the offender was an authority figure, this "brainwashing" concept is even more appealing. Next on this preference scale are the cases in which the victim was willing to trade "sex" for attention, affection, and romance. Much less acceptable are cases in which the child willingly traded sex for material rewards (e.g., clothes, shoes, trips) or money (*i.e.*, prostitution). Almost totally unacceptable are cases in which the child engaged in the sexual activity with an adult because the child enjoyed the sex. In fact, it is almost a sacrilege to even mention such a possibility.

These societal and criminal-justice preferences prevail in spite of the fact that almost all human beings trade sex for attention, affection, privileges, gifts, money or other benefits. Although any of these reasons for compliance are possible, many seduced child victims inaccurately claim they were afraid, ignorant, or indoctrinated in part to meet these societal preferences for this cooperation and in part to avoid embarrassment. Many victims are most concerned over disclosure of and therefore more likely to deny **engaging in sex for money, bizarre sex acts, homosexual acts in which they were the active participant, and sex with other children.**

Any of the above scenarios in various combinations are certainly possible. A child might cooperate in some sexual acts and be clearly threatened or forced into others. All are potential crimes. The offender, the victim, society, or the professional intervener may perceive what constitutes *compliance* differently. Investigators and prosecutors always need to attempt to determine what actually happened, not attempt to confirm their preconceived beliefs about sexual victimization of children.

A young adolescent boy appearing on a television talk show focusing on the topic of sexual victimization of child athletes by their adult coaches was asked by the host why the abuse went on for so long without him telling anyone. The boy, who had been nonviolently seduced by his coach, answered that he was frightened of his coach. Although seemingly inconsistent with the facts, everyone gladly accepted and applauded his answer. What would have been the reaction of the television host and the audience had the boy provided more plausible answers, such as he did not tell because by having sex with the coach he got to play more or because he enjoyed the sex? Such answers are reasonable and perfectly understandable and should not change the fact that the boy was the victim of a crime. Maybe anticipation of society's response and not any threat of the molester is what most "frightened" the boy into not telling sooner.

Most acquaintance-exploitation cases, including those involving computers, involve these seduced or compliant victims. Although applicable statutes and investigative or prosecutive priorities may vary, individuals investigating sexual-exploitation cases must generally start from the premise that the sexual activity is **not** the fault of the victim even if the child:

- Did not say "no"
- Did not fight
- Actively cooperated
- Initiated the contact
- Did not tell
- Accepted gifts or money
- Enjoyed the sexual activity

Investigators and prosecutors must also remember that many children, especially those victimized through the seduction process, often:

- Trade sex for attention, affection, or gifts
- Are confused over their sexuality and feelings
- Are embarrassed and guilt-ridden over their activity
- Describe their victimization in socially acceptable ways
- Minimize their responsibility and maximize the offender's
- Deny or exaggerate their victimization

All these things do not mean the child is not a victim. What they do mean is that children are human beings with human needs. Society, however, seems to prefer to believe that children are pure and innocent. Child abuse conferences often have subtitles such as "Betrayal of Innocence." Bags with children's endearing crayon drawings on them are distributed to attendees to carry handout material. The FBI's national initiative on computer exploitation of children is named "Innocent Images." This preference for idealistic innocence persists in spite of the fact that anyone who has spent time with children, even infants and toddlers, knows they quickly and necessarily learn to manipulate their environment to get what they want. Many children have only a vague or inaccurate concept of "sex." They are seduced and manipulated by clever offenders and usually do not fully understand or recognize what they were getting into. Even if they do seem to understand, the law is still supposed to protect them from adult sexual partners. This protection is based on the developmental immaturity of children, not their "innocence." Consent should **not** be an issue with child victims. Sympathy for victims is, however, inversely proportional to their age and sexual development.

If necessary, an education expert witness can explain the dynamics of these "consenting" victim patterns of behavior to the court. I have personally done so in several cases in the United States with the admissibility of my testimony upheld by appellate courts. The ability to make these explanations, however, is being undermined by the fact that children, at an age when they cannot legally choose to have sex with an adult partner, can choose to have an abortion without their parents' permission or be charged as adults when they commit certain crimes. Can the same 15-year-old be both a "child" victim and an "adult" offender in the criminal-justice system?

## **Offender-Victim Bond**

The successful investigation and prosecution of sexual exploitation of children cases often hinges on being able to answer two questions:

1. Why didn't the victim disclose (fully or partially) when it happened?
2. Why is the victim disclosing (fully or partially) now?

For objective fact-finders, the answers to these questions should be what the evidence supports not what society prefers. Because victims of acquaintance exploitation usually have been carefully seduced and often do not realize or believe they are victims, they repeatedly and voluntarily return to the offender. Society and the criminal-justice system have a difficult time understanding this. If a neighbor, teacher, or clergy member molests a boy, why does he "allow" it to continue and not immediately report it? Most likely he may not initially realize or believe he is a victim. Some victims are simply willing to trade sex for attention, affection, and gifts and do not believe they are victims. The sex itself might even be enjoyable, and the offender may be treating them better than anyone else ever has. But, they may come to realize they are victims when the offender ends the relationship. Then they recognize that all the attention, affection, and gifts were just part of a plan to use and exploit them. This may be the final blow for a troubled child who has had a difficult life.

Many of these victims never disclose their victimization. Younger children may believe they did something "wrong" or "bad" and are afraid of getting into trouble. Older children may be more ashamed and embarrassed. Victims not only do not disclose, but they often strongly deny it happened when confronted. In one case, several boys took the stand and testified concerning the high moral character of the accused molester. When the accused molester changed his plea to guilty, he admitted that the boys who testified on his behalf were also among his victims.

In my experience, some of the more common reasons that compliant victims do not disclose are:

- The stigma of homosexuality.
- Lack of societal understanding.
- Failure to tell when they should have.
- Presence of positive feelings for the offender.
- Embarrassment or fear over their victimization.
- The belief they are not really victims.

Because most of the offenders are male, the stigma of homosexuality is a serious problem for male victims, especially if no threats or force were used prior to the sex. Although being seduced by a male child molester does not necessarily make a boy a homosexual, the victims do not understand this. If a victim does disclose, he risks significant ridicule by his peers and lack of acceptance by his family.



These seduced or compliant child victims obviously do sometimes disclose, often because the sexual activity is discovered (*e.g.*, abduction by offender, recovered child pornography, overheard conversations, computer records located) or suspected (*e.g.*, statements of other victims, association with known sex offender, proactive investigation), after which an intervener confronts them. Others disclose because the offender misjudged them, got too aggressive with them, or is seducing a younger sibling or their close friend. Compliant victims sometimes come forward and report because they are angry with the offender for "dumping" them. They might be jealous that the offender found a new, younger victim. They sometimes disclose because the abuse has ended, not to end the abuse. Some compliant victims eventually disclose due to significant changes later in their lives such as marriage or the birth of a child.

In addition some compliant victims do not want the perpetrator prosecuted or sent to prison. At sentencing, they may even write a letter to the judge indicating their "consent" in the sexual activity and expressing their love for the defendant. Should such a letter get the same consideration as a letter from a victim requesting harsh punishment?

### **Children Never Lie?**

The available evidence suggests that children rarely lie about sexual victimization, if a *lie* is defined as a statement deliberately and maliciously intended to deceive. If children in these cases do lie, it may be because factors such as shame or embarrassment over the nature of the victimization increase the likelihood that they misrepresent the sexual activity. Seduced victims sometimes lie to make their victimization more socially acceptable or to please an adult's concept of victimization. Occasionally children lie because they are angry and want to get revenge on somebody. Some children, sadly, lie about sexual victimization to get attention and forgiveness. A few children may even lie to get money or as part of a lawsuit. This can sometimes be influenced by pressure from their parents. Objective investigators must consider and evaluate all these possibilities. It is extremely important to recognize, however, that because children might lie about part of their victimization does not mean that the entire allegation is necessarily a lie and they are not victims. Acquaintance-exploitation cases often involve complex dynamics and numerous incidents that often make it difficult to say an allegation is all true or all false.

An important part of the evaluation and assessment of allegations of sexual victimization of children is comparing the consistency of allegations:

1. Among *what* multiple victims allege to have happened.
2. Between *what* is alleged and *who* is suspected of doing it is.

If a victim describes his or her victimization as involving what clearly sound like the behavior patterns of a certain type of sex offender, then the fact that the alleged offender fits that pattern is corroborative. If he does not, there is an inconsistency that needs to be resolved. For example, is it consistent for a victim to claim that he or she did not initially disclose the victimization due to threats of violence or death when the "nice guy" offender appears to have controlled his victims by grooming them with attention and affection? The inconsistency could be because the alleged *what* is inaccurate (*e.g.*, distorted account from victim, insufficient

details), the suspected *who* has been misevaluated (e.g., incomplete background, erroneous assessment), or the alleged *who* is innocent (e.g., suspect did not commit alleged crime). In my experience, distorted accounts from victims are frequently caused or influenced by various interveners (e.g., therapists, physicians, parents, law enforcement) who are unwilling to nonjudgmentally accept the reality of the nature of the actual molestation of children. Instead, they influence, pressure, or lead the children to describe the victimization in a way that fits their agenda or needs and in the process destroy the consistency and prosecutive potential of a valid case.

### **Understanding the Seduction Process**

Most compliant child victims were courted, groomed, or seduced over time by an adult. True understanding of this process must be incorporated into the intervention of these cases. For example, pediatricians or therapists who only discuss forced or unwanted sexual activity with their patients are potentially missing a significant area of sexual victimization of children. Because a child wanted to have sex with an adult, does not mean it is not abuse and a crime.

The seduction process usually begins with the offender identifying a preferred or acceptable child target. It continues with the gathering of information about the interests and vulnerabilities of the child. The acquaintance offender in particular must find a method of access to children. To gain such access, it is important that the offender be or perceived to be a "nice guy" who cares about children. Acquaintance offenders with a preference for younger victims (younger than age 12) are more likely to also have to spend time seducing the potential victim's parents or caretakers to gain their trust and confidence. Acquaintance offenders may also encourage and exploit the targeted child's conflict with or alienation from parents. Offenders can gain access to children through a wide variety of activities (e.g., sports, religion, education, online computers). The offender must then fill the potential victim's needs with the most effective combination of attention, affection, privileges, gifts, money, etc. The offender must also lower any sexual inhibitions the child may have. This is most often done by combinations of varying techniques (i.e., games, "back rubs", photography, talk about sex/cybersex, pornography, drugs, alcohol, separation from support systems, and manipulation into changing clothing and spending overnight together). **Any** child is vulnerable to seduction by **any** adult, but troubled children from dysfunctional families targeted by adults who are authority figures seem to be at even greater risk of being seduced. The success of the seduction process of offenders is usually determined by how well they select their victim, their ability to identify and fill victim needs, how much time they have, and how proficient they are at relating to and seducing children.

After understanding the seduction process, the intervener must be able to communicate this understanding to the victim. This is the difficult part. Interveners need to be careful about asking questions that communicate a judgment about the nature of the victimization (e.g., Tell me if you were scared? Tell me if he threaten you? Is it hard to remember such terrible things?). If *why* questions are asked (e.g., Why didn't you immediately tell? Why didn't you resist? Why did you return to the offender? Why are you smiling in this photograph?), every effort should be made to communicate to the victim that **any** truthful answer is acceptable, including "because I enjoyed it."

Interveners must understand and learn to deal with the incomplete and contradictory statements of seduced victims of acquaintance molesters. The dynamics of their victimization must be considered. Any behavior or claims of victims must be understood and evaluated in the context of the entire process. Compliant victims are often embarrassed and ashamed of their behavior and correctly believe that society will not understand their victimization. Many younger child victims are most concerned about the response of their parents and often describe their victimization in ways they believe will please their parents. Adolescent victims are typically also concerned about the response of their peers. Victims and their families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may be even more concerned about the public embarrassment of any disclosure. Interveners who have a stereotyped concept of child-sexual-abuse victims or who are accustomed to interviewing younger children molested within their family will have a difficult time interviewing adolescents seduced by an acquaintance. Many of these victims will be street-wise, troubled, or even delinquent children from dysfunctional homes. Such victims should not be blindly believed, but should not be dismissed because the accused is a pillar of the community and they are delinquent or troubled. Such allegations should be objectively investigated and evaluated.

Some victims will continue to deny their victimization no matter what the interviewer says or does. Some children even deny victimization that the offender has admitted or other evidence clearly discloses. Some will make admissions but minimize the quality and quantity of the acts. They may minimize their compliance and maximize the offender's involvement by claiming he drugged them, threatened them, had a weapon, or had even abducted them. Of course some of these allegations may be accurate and should be investigated. They are, however, not typical of acquaintance-exploitation cases. Violence is most likely used to prevent disclosure. Sadistic offenders may also use violence during sex, but this is relatively rare in cases involving seduction. As previously mentioned, these potential inaccuracies in the details of the allegations of seduced victims may explain some of the inconsistencies between the alleged *what* and the suspected *who*.

The intervener must communicate to the victim that he or she is not at fault even though the victim did not say "no," did not fight, did not tell, initiated the sex, or even enjoyed it. When the victim comes to believe that the intervener understands what he experienced, he or she is more likely to talk. Victims often reveal the details little by little, testing the intervener's response. The intervener must recognize and sometimes allow the victim to use face-saving scenarios when disclosing victimization. As stated, such victims might claim they were confused, tricked, asleep, drugged, drunk, or tied up when they were not. Adolescents, who pose special challenges for the interviewer, use these face-saving devices most often. The intervener must accept the fact that even if a victim discloses, the information is likely to be incomplete, minimizing his or her involvement and acts. Some of these victims simply do not believe they were victims.

In the absence of some compelling special circumstance or requirement, the interview of a child possibly seduced by an acquaintance molester should **never** be conducted in the presence of parents. The presence of the parent increases the likelihood that the child will just deny or give the socially or parentally acceptable version of the victimization. This is especially true of

younger victims. Assuming a more accurate disclosure of compliant victimization results, the issue of if, when, and how to then advise parents is a complex dilemma for interveners.

Some victims in acquaintance-child-exploitation cases disclose incomplete and minimized information about the sexual activity that is contradicted by further investigation. This creates significant problems for the investigation and prosecution of such cases. For instance, when the investigator finally gets a victim to disclose the exploitation and abuse, the victim furnishes a version of his victimization that he or she swears is true. Subsequent investigation then uncovers additional victims, child pornography, recordings, or computer chat logs and other records--directly conflicting with the first victim's story. A common example of this is that the victim admits the offender sucked his penis, but denies that he sucked the offender's penis. The execution of a search warrant then leads to the seizure of photographs of the victim sucking the offender's penis. Some victims continue to deny the activity even when confronted with the visual images. Additional victims may also confirm this, but then lie when they vehemently deny that they did the same thing.

The allegations of multiple victims often conflict with each other. Each victim tends to minimize their behavior and maximize the behavior of other victims or the offender. Today, investigators must be especially careful in computer cases where easily recovered chat logs, records of communication, and visual images may directly contradict the socially acceptable version of events that the victim is now giving. In my experience, the primary reason compliant child victims furnish these false and misleading details about their victimization is their correct recognition that society does not understand or accept the reality of their victimization. This happens so often that distorted and varying details in such cases are almost corroboration for the validity of the victimization.

### **Can We Come To Conclusions?**

The typical adolescent, especially a boy, is **easily sexually aroused, sexually curious, sexually inexperienced, and somewhat rebellious**. All these traits combine to make the adolescent one of the easiest victims of sexual seduction. It takes almost nothing to get an adolescent boy sexually aroused. An adolescent boy with emotional and sexual needs is simply no match for an experienced 50-year-old man with an organized plan. Yet, adult offenders who seduce them, and the society that judges them, continue to claim that these victims "consented." The result is a victim who feels responsible for what happened and embarrassed about his actions. Once a victim is seduced, each successive sexual incident becomes easier and quicker. Eventually the child victim may even take the initiative in the seduction.

Some victims come to realize that the offender has a greater need for this sex than they do, and this gives them great leverage against the offender. The victims can use sex to manipulate the offender or temporarily withhold sex until they get things they want. A few victims even blackmail the offender especially if he is married or a pillar of the community. Although all of this is unpleasant and inconsistent with our idealistic views about children, when adults and children have "consensual" sex the adult is always the offender, and the child is always the victim. Consent should be an issue only for adult victims.

As has been stated, sympathy for victims is inversely proportional to their age and sexual development. We often focus on adolescent victims when we want volume and impact, but we do little to address the nature of their victimization. We want to view them as innocent children when they are sexually victimized, but then try them as fully accountable adults when they commit a violent crime. The greatest potential to worsen societal attitudes about child victims who comply in their sexual exploitation comes from societal attitudes about child offenders. If increasing numbers of ever younger children are held fully accountable for their criminal behavior and tried in court as adults, it becomes harder and harder to argue that the “consent” of children of the same ages is irrelevant when they engage in sexual activity with adults.

The reality of compliant child victims is subtly and discreetly dealt with everyday in the United States by investigators, prosecutors, judges, juries, and others. Some professionals feel that this controversy is best dealt with by overtly pretending that it really does not exist. They believe that to explicitly admit or discuss it is harmful to child victims. Many would certainly object to the use of a term or label like *compliant child victim*. I believe, however, that this reality must be openly recognized, discussed, and addressed. I have come to believe the best way to deal with the problem is to change, not fuel, people’s unrealistic expectations about the sexual victimization of children.

The criminal sexual assault of an adult is, by definition, almost always violent. The criminal sexual assault of a child may or may not be violent. In the United States, however, it is common to view or even legally define sexual victimization of children as violent even if many cases do not meet common definitions of violence (i.e., threats, force). Although emotionally understandable, this often creates confusion and unrealistic evidentiary expectations. Many lay people and even professionals hearing terms such as *sexual assault* or *rape* in the sexual victimization of children seek out or expect evidence of physical violence even when the law may not require it. Often in response to atypical, highly publicized, violent sexual assaults of children, laws requiring sex offender registration and community notification were passed in the United States to protect society from these "sexually violent predators." Only later is it "discovered" that many of the most persistent and prolific child molesters typically use seduction (not violence) and are, therefore, not adequately covered by these laws.

In this discussion, I have focused primarily on the problems (i.e., false denials, delayed disclosures, incomplete and inaccurate details, unrealistic expectations, etc.) that compliant child victims present for the criminal justice system. I believe, however, such victims also present considerable problems and challenges for therapists, physicians, social workers, and other professionals. Awareness and prevention programs that focus on recognizing evil sexual “predators” and "pedophiles" and on advising victims to say “no,” yell, and tell are not only ineffective in preventing compliant victimization, but they make the problem worse. Such programs decrease the likelihood of victim disclosure and increase the shame and guilt of such victims. In almost every case involving compliant child victims that I have evaluated, true victims have had to distort varying aspects of their victimization in statements to parents, investigators, therapists, physicians, attorneys, and the court. Each subsequent statement often requires increasing deceptions to defend the previous ones. What are the long-term emotional and psychological consequences for child victims who are exposed to prevention and awareness

programs that seem to deny the reality of their victimization or who must distort, misrepresent, and lie about what actually happened to them in order to have it accepted as “real” victimization?

Advice to prevent sexual exploitation of children by adult acquaintances is very complex and difficult to implement. Children less than 12 years of age tend to listen to prevention advice but often to not understand it. Children more than 12 years of age tend to understand it, but often no longer listen to it. How do you warn children about offenders who may be their teachers, coaches, clergy members, neighbors, or Internet "friends" and whose only distinguishing characteristics are that they will treat the children better than most adults, listen to their problems and concerns, and fill their emotional, physical, and sexual needs? Will parents, society, and professionals understand when the victimization is discovered or disclosed? Much prevention advice simply does not distinguish to which types of sexual victimization it applies. The right to say "no" and “good touch/bad touch” would be applied differently to a stranger, parent, teacher, physician or Internet acquaintance.

Children at an early age learn to manipulate their environment to get what they want. Almost all children seek attention and affection. Children, especially adolescents, are often interested in and curious about sexuality and sexually explicit material. In today’s world, they will sometimes use their computer and online access to actively seek out such material. They typically find pornography online because they are looking for it, not because they made a mistake. They are moving away from the total control of parents and trying to establish new relationships outside the family. Ask any adult what was the number one thing on their mind when they were adolescents and the answer is always the same: sex. Yet parents seem to want to believe their children are asexual and, I suppose, children want to believe their parents are asexual.

Prevention advice that does not recognize these realities is doomed to failure. Yet, prevention material dealing with online child safety continues to repeatedly warn only about not talking to strangers/predators and advise children to tell their parents if someone they meet online makes them feel uncomfortable. Is it realistic or even accurate to suggest that someone you regularly communicate with for weeks or months is a “stranger” just because you have not met them in person? In most cases where an adolescent left home to personally meet with an adult they had first met online, they did so **voluntarily** in the hope they were going to have **sex** (not to get help with their homework) with someone they felt they **knew** and who cared about them. Unrealistic advice about putting the computer in the middle of the family room and using blocking software will have little effect on protecting children who are committed to overcoming their parents' efforts. How do you prevent something that parents and society may not want to happen, but the child does? Ongoing, loving communication is likely to be more effective than check-off lists and software. Surreptitious parental monitoring of children's computer activity is something that parents will have to decide for themselves based on knowledge of themselves and their children.

## Summary

In valid cases, recognizing, understanding, and documenting the behavior patterns of compliant child victims may not specifically prove an accused offender's guilt, but may help

refute claims of innocence. In addition to appropriate investigative responses, innovative and sensible prevention strategies and therapeutic approaches that recognize the realities of compliant child victims must be developed and implemented.