

# Social Workers Have a Role in Curbing Sexual Grooming in Schools

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The headlines tell the explicit stories:

- “How Teachers ‘Groom’ Students for Sexual Abuse” (Heldiz, 2019)
- “School Districts That Don’t Have Policies on Teacher–Student Boundaries Are Paying the Price” (Jimenez, 2019)
- “A Teacher’s Pet or a Victim of Sexual Abuse?” (McKibbin, 2018)

A 2004 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education on the prevalence of sexual abuse in schools estimated that nearly 10 percent (4.5 million) of K–12 students in the United States reported being the victims of sexual abuse by a teacher (Shakeshaft, 2004). Although several subsequent studies have examined the phenomenon, no comprehensive study enumerating the prevalence of teacher-perpetrated sexual misconduct has been commissioned more recently by the department. However, whether the recent headlines are the result of heightened awareness, prevalence, or both, there is evidence that suggests the issue remains. A 2007 AP Wire Services report draws the obvious parallel between the occurrence of teacher-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CSA) and the clergy scandal that has rocked the Catholic Church (Irvine & Tanner, 2007). Their seven-month investigation covering the years 2001 to 2005 found 2,750 educators in the United States whose teaching credentials were surrendered, sanctioned, or revoked following charges of sexual misconduct. Young people were the victims in 1,801 of the cases, and 80 percent of those were students. A 2016 *USA Today* investigation compiled disciplinary records of certified teachers among all 50 states, using the open records laws (Reilly, 2016). The report found that states failed to report the names of

at least 200 teachers whose license revocations were prompted by allegations of physical abuse or CSA to a centralized national database operated by the nonprofit National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification. The omissions allowed the teachers to obtain classroom jobs in other states. A 2017 study by the U.S. Department of Justice found 39 states out of compliance with 2015 federal legislation banning the practice known as “passing the trash”—school districts helping accused predators find other jobs to make them the new districts’ problem (Olson, 2019).

## DEFINING SEXUAL GROOMING

Knoll (2010) described *sexual grooming* as the process of a predatory adult isolating a child from parents and peers to create and maintain a hidden sexual relationship. It is no secret that the overwhelming preponderance of sexual abusers of children are trusted adults known to the families of the victims. A National Institute of Justice (2003) report puts the figure as high as 74 percent. The insidiousness of sexual grooming lies in the creation of a trusting relationship between the perpetrator and the child, the parents, and the institution (Leger & Pollack, 2019). It not only encourages access to the child, but also allows significant adults to more easily discount any signals of inappropriate behavior or abuse on the part of the perpetrator. This is an important consideration highlighted by the three-step process definition of sexual grooming: the preparation of child, significant adult, and environment for the behavior (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2007).

## VULNERABILITY OF SCHOOLS

One could argue that schools are ready groomed environments for sexual abuse (Winters & Jeglic,

2017). There is easy access to children. There is also a premium put on bonding (at least in the United States) between teacher and student that can initially make the grooming process indistinguishable from more benign behavior. [Winters and Jeglic's 2017](#) study demonstrated the near impossibility of untrained observers distinguishing the behavioral profiles of sexual groomers. A 2017 Canadian study surveying cases of sexual abuse of school children over a decade found that 86 percent of perpetrators were certified teachers and that 70 percent of those used grooming as the primary tactic ([Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc., 2019](#)).

### FIXATED VERSUS OPPORTUNISTIC ABUSERS

[Shakeshaft \(2013\)](#) delineated the fixated abusers who target students under 13 years of age and the opportunistic abusers who target those of secondary school age. Although the techniques of each vary, the attributes of a caring teacher can often appear to overlap with those of the groomer. The fixated abuser tends to be a popular male teacher often highly regarded by the school and in the community. They are more difficult to detect given their proclivity of getting other teachers, administrators, parents, and, of course, children to trust them. Their targets are disproportionately male children. The opportunistic abuser is also characteristically a male teacher, although [Shakeshaft](#) found that 40 percent of cases are reported as female school workers. Female perpetrators are more likely to profess romantic love for their victims. The perpetrator is likely to ingratiate themselves to the target by commenting on the victim's physical attractiveness. Opportunistic predators are often seen inserting themselves into the student's social life and seek opportunities to appear more as a peer than an adult authority figure to the student. These predators may also seek information on the student's personal matters.

### THE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER

School social workers provide services to students, families, communities, and schools, their principal purpose being the removal of barriers to student maturity and academic success. In collaboration with other school personnel—administrators, teachers, psychologists, counselors, nurses—they work to obtain resources that will positively affect a student's educational, social, emotional, and

behavioral functioning. With teacher–student sexual grooming cases seemingly on the rise, what are constructive roles for a school social worker?

### Role with Students and Families

The social worker needs to be the conduit of information regarding appropriate and inappropriate behaviors by school employees to parents and children. It is the behavioral patterns leading up to the actual incidence of abuse that must be illuminated by the school social worker and understood by the child and guardian and indeed all parties.

- Predators can be masterful at targeting needy children starved for adult validation.
- Parents can be highly flattered by (and grateful for) the extra attention directed at their child.
- Parents and students must be educated as to what the limits of such attention should be and the dangers of exceeding them.

The mission of a school district is to create a relationship of trust among teachers, administrators, students, and their parents. The dilemma is that in doing so, one can be construed as paving the road to sexual grooming. These are behaviors that do not necessarily call attention to themselves.

### Role as a School and Community Team Member

As a member of the school-based team, what is the social worker's role in the mitigation of sexual grooming? Given the difficulty in determining a pattern of grooming, what can the social worker do to illuminate the issue to protect the child and the school district ([Surface, Stader, & Armenta, 2014](#))? The following constitute some initial steps:

- Educate the educators
- Advocate for codification of clear rules governing adult interactions with children
- Include online interactions that can take place between student and teacher as technology now expands the educational process far beyond the classroom
- Address barriers that deter reporting suspicious behavior

[Shakeshaft \(2013\)](#) spoke to creating an unsafe environment for predators by making it more

likely that they fear getting caught. She stated that in many cases in which a teacher has victimized a child, peers recount suspecting that something seemed wrong but did not want to ruin the teacher's life on a suspicion. Shakeshaft suggested changing the cultural paradigm to one of asking whether it is better to allow a child's life to be ruined by not reporting.

### Role as an Advocate for Best Practice Policies

According to the [Enough Abuse Campaign \(2019\)](#) only 20 states currently mandate in-school CSA awareness and education. On a macro level, this speaks volumes to the advocacy work that school social workers must undertake collectively. Even within the states that do mandate, it is difficult to ascertain how many overtly take on the subject of in-school child sexual grooming. That school districts might be conflicted in drawing attention to this issue may well stem from their concern about heightening anxiety among parents and children alike. To that point, while an integrative review of literature on the impact of CSA student education saw a rise in reporting in response to such programs, it also indicated a corresponding rise in children's fears and anxiety ([Fryda & Hulme, 2015](#)). One can easily surmise a similar reaction to the lockdown drills that are now commonplace in schools throughout the country. However, in both cases the reality is that they have become a necessity in promoting the safety of our children.

[Knoll \(2010\)](#) suggested several proactive policy steps schools can take and that school social workers can advocate for on a district and statewide level as well:

- More rigorous screening and selection of staff
- Detailed rules governing teacher–student on-line interactions
- District-based policies on behavior
- Standardized investigative practices
- Regular training on educator sexual misconduct for parents, students, and educators
- Whistleblower protection for those who report breaches of conduct ([Wurtele, Mathews, & Kenny, 2019](#))

It benefits all to know exactly where the lines are drawn in creating an unfriendly environment for sexual grooming. It is equally important to

remember that the greatest deterrent to sexual grooming is the potential perpetrator's fear of getting caught. Although it might seem intuitive that it is never permissible for a teacher to show up at a student's social gathering, to offer a student a lift, to bestow a gift or extra privilege, or to join a student's chat room, it is critical that it be stated in black and white. If lines are crossed, there must be a peer culture created that acknowledges that the child, the school, and the profession are all damaged by an unwillingness to report.

### CONCLUSION

Student behavioral issues rarely originate or confine themselves to the school environment. More often they originate in the student's community and home. As such, the school social worker may take on many roles: advocate, case manager, mediator, troubleshooter, arbiter, and educator. In short, an intercessor on behalf of students.

The “ungrooming” of the school environment is an advocacy position well within the parameters of an engaged school social worker. The need for a central resource of illumination of the issues that inform sexual grooming and for policy formation, training, and education could not be clearer. That is exactly where the school social worker fits in.

School social work is driven by a deep belief that every child has the need for a constructive and positive learning experience, to be secure in their own body, and to be free from unwanted touching.

With each victim who is groomed and sexually abused, we question how it could have happened, how signs leading up [to] the abuse were missed. Knowledge, training, and awareness are our best weapons, and our best chance to prevent abuse before it occurs. ([Pollack & MacIver, 2015](#), p. 168)

This sounds like a job for a school social worker. **CS**

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