

Sexual Abuse with Children: Educator Infractions and Counseling Considerations

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Abstract

Sexual abuse of children by teachers represents a critical problem. In fact, it has been suggested that approximately 9.6% of children in grades 8 to 11 report unwanted teacher sexual misconduct, with more than 3.5 million students reporting inappropriate sexual contact with educators. Within schools, then, the issues are profound and the implications for counseling both children and teachers significant. This paper examines the issues.

Keywords: Teacher sexual abuse with children, teacher infractions, counseling sexual abuse

Sexual abuse of children and youth represents a notable problem. In fact, Surface, Stader, and Armenta (2014) found that 2,570 educators nationwide had their teaching credentials revoked, denied, surrendered, or sanctioned for sexual misconduct with a student. More generally, the U.S. Department of Education (2004) noted that 4.5 million students are possibly subject to sexual misconduct by teachers. Because this area is largely understudied, though, and because many cases are unreported while other cases may reflect errors in memory or lies, the data cannot be considered conclusive. Still, the available data is sufficiently compelling to suggest an area of concern. In fact, even if large numbers of allegations are in error the implications for both children and teachers are notable.

For the purposes of this article educator sexual abuse refers to behavior with a sexual intent or component that is committed toward a child intended to create sexual arousal in either the teacher or student or both. Unfortunately, the long-range implications of sexual abuse by adults is notable. Dube et al. (2005) found, for instance, that victims of sexual abuse are more likely than non-victims to have problems with adult relationships, use drugs, demonstrate suicidal risk, and demonstrate an array of health problems ranging from diabetes to heart disease. Truly, sexually abuse of children by teachers creates a variety of problems.

From a national perspective the U.S. Department of Education (2004) has suggested that approximately 9.6% of students in grades 8 to 11 report unwanted educator sexual misconduct. In fact, this seems especially valid as this data is remarkably similar to Hendrie's (2004) report suggesting that approximately 10% of American students are targets of unwanted sexual attention by teachers.

Problems associated with children who have been sexually abused are encompassing. In fact, concern with this area is not new. Randolph and Gold (1994) found that sexually abused children can experience depression, guilt, fear, anger, inappropriate sexual behavior, aggressiveness, sleeping and eating disturbances, low self-esteem, school problems, somatic complaints, and interpersonal problems. Fortunately, though, child sexual abuse has been described as a preventable health problem. At the same time this data suggests that society has not been effective in protecting children from the epidemic of child sexual abuse by teachers.

Within schools, Shakeshaft (2013) reported that 7% of students reported having physical sexual contact from an adult. This data, compiled from a nationwide survey of 8th to 11th grade students asking about incidents of unwanted sexual attention at school, reported unwanted touching of breasts, buttocks, and genitals; forced kissing and hugging; oral/genital contact; and vaginal and anal intercourse. The data reached 10% when reports of educator

misconduct included sharing pornography, sexual talk, sexual exhibitionism, or masturbation. It was this latter addition raised the total number of impacted children to 4.5 million students.

In summary, then, sexual abuse of children by educator faculty represents a notable problem. In point of fact, educator sexual abuse can directly impact children who are abused, children who report abuse while not abused, teachers who commit abuse, innocent teachers accused of abuse, as well as families of children and teachers. This paper, in a basic way looks at the incidence, patterns of sexual abuse, types of predators, patterns involved in approaching children, prevalence, long term effects, and implications. Fundamentally this paper is intended to increase awareness and provide insights for positive change.

Background

Surface, Stader, and Armenta (2014) found that 2,570 educators nationwide had their teaching credentials revoked, denied, surrendered, or sanctioned for sexual misconduct with a student. Elsewhere, Martinez and Hurtado (2012) noted that officials in the Los Angeles Unified School District referred 60 teachers from a four-year time block to state authorities for possible licensure revocation involving sexual misconduct with students.

Teacher sexual misconduct, then, is a significant issue. Fromuth, Mackey, and Wilson (2010) suggested that gender specifically has an important influence on the perception of child sexual abuse and teacher sexual misconduct. In the case of teacher sexual misconduct, the female teacher-male student dyad was generally viewed less negatively than the male teacher-female student dyad. This suggests that perceptions of how abuse impacts children varies. Further, age of children is also a notable factor. The general area of child sexual abuse indicates that when adolescents are targeted, this abuse is viewed with less significance than when young children are abused.

Summarizing this research, adolescents in comparison to children, are viewed as more responsible for their own abuse, and less responsibility is placed on the adult offender. Further, older victims were perceived as less psychologically and physically harmed, and the relationship between the student and teacher was less likely to be seen as abuse. This suggests that when sexual misconduct occurs in high school, it is taken less seriously when compared to the younger grades. Any abuse within schools should be taken seriously, no matter the age of the student. A 2012 report from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that the estimated average lifetime cost per victim of nonfatal child maltreatment is \$210,012. If

multiplied by the 3.5 million students currently in school who reported physical educator sexual misconduct, the result is more than \$735 billion.

Within schools, two types of abusers are evident (Shakeshaft, 2013). First is the fixated abuser who is most often found in elementary schools and the early middle school grades. These abusers comprise approximately one-third of offenders who abuse students under thirteen. This educator is more likely to be a male than female and is likely to be judged as a good teacher by parents, students, other teachers, and administrators. Most fixated abusers within an elementary school are considered to be excellent teachers, possess teaching awards, work hard to be likeable, and are seen as trustworthy.

As illustration, an outstanding male teacher who identifies a male student as interesting may talk to a young boy, offer tutoring, and offer gifts. This teacher may call the mother explaining her son has promise but might benefit from extra support. With this added parental trust, the teacher may take this student to special places as rewards including a ball game or fishing perhaps. The teacher shows the child affection, tells him how much he cares. When the teacher sexually abuses the student, he does it in an environment in which he feels safe. The abuser is respected in the school, the family knows him and trusts him, and the child is available.

Looking at a female student, the teacher might assign the female student to be a class monitor or assistant. The student feels complimented her by such assignments, feeling she is mature and capable. As the teacher offers verbal compliments which flatter the young girl she feels increasingly special. Over time occasions may occur with physical touches which may increasingly harbor a sexual tone. By this time, the child trusts and cares for the teacher, and the relationship is vulnerable to sexual victimization. Salter (2012) notes that when an abuser is accused, victims may protect them, parents may not initially believe an accusation, and authorities may discount the reports.

Knoll (2010) notes that the popularity and trust evoked by these educators may perplex school officials and community members when allegations of sexual misconduct are made, and with such a strong reputation there can be a tendency to dismiss or ignore allegations. Of fundamental note, Yaffe (1995) indicated that there is increased legal liability for a district when a school does not prevent educator sexual misconduct and respond to educator sexual misconduct effectively. Given that approximately 10% of children are impacted, it seems viable and valuable for schools and districts to thoughtfully examine the

prevalence of these issues and examine interventions to help both educate teachers and offer students increased safety.

Prevalence

Educator sexual misconduct against students' span decades and the United States Department of Education (USDE, 2004) notes that news reports, legal cases, and preliminary research all indicate that educator sexual misconduct against high school students is a significant problem. At the same time, despite suggestions that approximately 10% of children are impacted there are a paucity of mental health interventions for students, parents/guardians, and schools facing educator sexual misconduct (USDE, 2004). Thus, while there is a dire need for school-based intervention for students, parents/guardians, and schools facing educator sexual misconduct there is less research then desirable.

With millions of individuals having been impacted by inappropriate sexual contact by teachers and coaches annually the issues seem worthy of additional attention. Looking broadly at teacher sexual abuse, Knoll (2010) suggests that the majority of educators who sexually abuse children are classroom teachers (18%) followed by coaches (15%). The majority of sexual abuse of students by educators occur in empty classrooms, hallways, and offices.

Looking within this research the author notes that when educator sexual misconduct occurs at the late middle and high school level. The United States Department of Education (2004) found that teachers in dual roles are more likely to perpetrate educator sexual misconduct. Although student reports suggest that educator sexual misconduct by adult males are 4.5 times more likely than instances of abuse by females, 40% of the reported misconduct was from a female working in the schools with females frequently attributing their misconduct to romantic love (Hendrie, 1998).

Still, the data may actually be underreported. The U.S. Department of Education (2004) reported, for example, that there are reasons not to report educator sexual misconduct. As example, the student may feel responsible, feel afraid, feel ashamed, and a student may believe the behaviors are expressions of love. It is also possible that at teacher may intimidate and threaten. In cases involving female educators and male students, targets may be silent due to gender expectations. Finally, parents and schools may not believe individual accusations.

Johnson (2009) conducted interviews with former teachers who had engaged in sexual misconducts. The author noted that 92% of female teachers who have been accused of engaging in sexual activities with students were Caucasian. It was also suggested that female teachers who engage in sexual misconduct disproportionately come from the English discipline. The author explains how English classrooms are likely to emphasize communication and discussion. With 20% of cases of educator misconduct involving female offenders, the overwhelming majority of teachers who engage in this inappropriate behavior are men.

Recently Teasley and Gill (2015) found that student athletes also comprise a vulnerable population. Student-athletes who are victims of abuse often experience low self-esteem, depression, and feelings of shame and guilt. In fact, 2-22% of high school and amateur athletes are abused by coaches with 12 of 1,000 students becoming sexual victims. In fact coaches are three times more likely to be investigated for sexual misconduct than teachers who did not coach.

Unfortunately, then, the implications of sexual abuse by educators is notable. Knoll (2010) noted that after sexual abuse occurs by an educator, victims have difficulties forming future intimate relationships and suffer from a sense of betrayal and shame. This is because their trust was betrayed by someone whom they admired. Further, a student's grades may decrease as a result of educator sexual misconduct. In fact, the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW) (2001) data found that 25% of abuse victims received lower grades on an assignment or exam and a lower grade in class. Thirty-one percent experienced difficulty paying attention and twenty-nine percent had difficulty studying (USDE, 2004). In addition, AAUW data found that 36% of targets spoke little in class and 25% "got into trouble with school authorities."

This in hand, schools' responses to reports of educator sexual misconduct are often inadequate. One possible reason for this is that students tend to be perceived as less credible and honest than educators. Another reason is that during the grooming process, students' reports may be discounted because educators' behaviors are not always explicitly sexual (USDE, 2004). Notably, only 11% of teachers say they would report abuse of a student by a fellow teacher (Shakeshaft, 2013). Still, with such widespread prevalence, the importance of intervention seems long overdue. In addition, though, and barely discussed, are the implications and ramifications of reports based on lies. Certainly not all reports of abuse are

based in fact and the implications for children and educators who inaccurately report abuse are notable. These cases also need attention.

Sexual violations in the schools

Creating a safe school environment - safe from sexual attacks - for children and adolescents means changing the school culture. Although background checks are important and generally required for school employment, sexual predators are not necessarily pinpointed if lacking a criminal background.

The transgression of professional boundaries often occurs too frequently as well as sequentially, beginning benignly but gradually ending in a sexual violation. Plaut and Baker (2011) noted that when there's a report of inappropriate boundary crossings between faculty and students the patterns often reflect favoritism, excessive personal disclosure, boundary violations, possible dates, and ultimately the risk of sexual involvement. These behaviors may have different effects on different students. While special attention may be valued by a student, it can also be embarrassing and uncomfortable. If students feel pressured to interact with a faculty member in a personal way, they may be reluctant to voice concern, for fear of affecting a future evaluation or not being supported by the institution. However, if students initiate a personal relationship, it may compromise the ability of the faculty member to teach and evaluate the student in a fair and objective manner.

Barrett, Headley, Stovall, and Witt (2006) found that most school personnel (94.1%) recognized student-teacher romantic relationships as serious violations of teacher ethics, but 5.9% of them did not view these types of relationships as serious violations. In that study, 9.3% did not consider teachers making sexually provocative remarks to students serious ethical violations. The ethical standards of a student-teacher relationship are not that clear and consistent. Teachers are expected to relate more closely to students, part of their role is to acculturate them into the profession which includes socializing-discussing with them how professionals balance personal and professional lives. It is a teachers' responsibility to maintain a certain level of objectivity; students should be taught fairly and equitably. Educators should be taught to deal with sexual dynamics that may arise during the course of their careers. Once teachers are aware of the sexual dynamics in their classrooms they will be in a better position to recognize and manage behavior that could potentially lead to a boundary violation (Worley, 2010).

Plaut and Baker (2011) noted that teachers must balance closeness and distance. Excessive or inappropriate intimacy, whether sexual or nonsexual, can be coercive, abusive, discriminatory, and damaging to both student welfare and the teaching environment. When building a healthy and constructive educational relationship it is important that educators create strong professional boundaries.

Considering interventions to help Caplan (1964) proposed a model of intervention involving primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention/intervention programs. Direct primary prevention programs can focus on teaching children skills to resist abuse, while indirect prevention can focus on teaching others how to help children prevent abuse. Secondary intervention programs incorporate similar information but direct the training to parents or adults working with children. The goal is to target children who are at high risk for abuse or identify children as soon as possible following the onset of abuse so that steps can be taken to intervene, stop the abuse, and provide intervention efforts for the child. Tertiary intervention efforts attempt to intervene with psychotherapy or rehabilitative efforts in order to minimize the consequences of the abuse.

Notably, concerns and interventions are not new. The Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: Teacher Training Workshop Curriculum (Randolph, & Gold, 1994), outlined a 6-hour secondary prevention intervention training program designed to improve teacher skills in the area of child sexual abuse. This training strives to help recognize behavioral and physical symptoms of sexual abuse, responses to disclosures, and provide reporting guidelines on sexual abuse cases.

More recently Oberhand (2014), developed a unique program, the Resilience-Enhancing Crisis Treatment Effects (DIRECT Effects). This program intends to enhance resilience and areas of development that are likely to be undermined by the crisis of educator sexual misconduct and resultant educator removal. By fostering students' resilience and development, the program also intends to prevent the onset or exacerbation of trauma symptoms and developmental problems that may result from educator sexual misconduct.

Morgenbesser (2010) has noted that there is a slowly emerging literature on approaches to prevention and intervention. This includes programs for teachers and administrators involving training. The disciplinary and intervention process for teachers is noted as overly slow, while intervention itself is key to prevention. At the same time there is literature on prevention and intervention with the larger group of sexual offenders which remains largely untapped in education. Future programs future research might examine such

approaches. In the meantime, school counselors and school psychologists can provide important inroads by using these programs, through individual and group counseling for victims and families, and through educator workshops designed to help teachers better understand boundary issues and the implications of sexual abuse.

Summary and conclusions

Educator sexual abuse with children represents a challenging problem. Walz (2010) suggested that approximately 400 teachers are charged annually with sexual abuse of students and the U.S. Department of Education (2004) suggested approximately 4.5 million children have been sexually abused. Certainly recognizing the magnitude of the problem, and elevating awareness, is itself an important first step toward prevention and intervention. Generally sexual abuse with students involves unwanted and inappropriate sexual behaviors. Sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation are of a magnitude to warrant enhanced attention. While it is recognized that not all child reports of sexually inappropriate behavior by educators can be deemed accurate and honest, it is also true that schools and communities have provided too little attention to education and training surrounding the issues.

Sadly, the issues are not new. More than 20 years ago, for instance, Randolph and Gold (1994) suggested that possibly 10% of children may experience sexual victimization by educators. It has also been noted that this population is subsequently at risk for an array of subsequent problems including depression, aggressiveness, sleeping disturbances, interpersonal challenges, as well as lowered self esteem.

Because of the magnitude of the problem, and because interventions can suggest positive outcomes, it is critical to consider initiating training and intervention models. School Counselors and School Psychologists can serve as key school personnel to initiate prevention and intervention initiatives. It will also be important, though, to begin to gather follow-up data on the success of such initiatives. Unfortunately, there are simply too few studies on this problem. There are also too many cases where children are victimized and also cases where teachers are wrongly accused. This article was intended to further highlight a devastating and highly complex problem. Hopefully, interested readers will utilize this article as a starting point to initiate discussions, research, and prevention initiatives.

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