

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Sexual Abuse

We all wish it did not occur, and we avoid talking about it as if it never happens. However the fact is that, like other children, missionary kids (MKs) are sometimes sexually abused. In some cases MKs may be in even more danger of sexual abuse (such as being touched or touching inappropriately, being shown pornography, having intercourse, etc.). If parents are frequently absent, leaving their children with other missionaries, and telling their children to respect and obey the other adults as they would their own parents, those children are put under the authority of a greater spectrum of adults, increasing their opportunity to run into an abuser. If the parents have not had an open attitude about the discussion of sexuality, their MKs may believe a perpetrator whom they know well when that abuser tells them some activity is all right. Let's consider where sexual abuse can occur, what are some signs of sexual abuse, and what we can do to prevent it. (Note that we are talking about sexual abuse involving an older person, not curiosity about sexual differences between children of about the same age.)

Can it happen at home (incest)?

Of course, it can. It most often happens in families that appear to be very close. However, they are too "close"; the family members are too enmeshed. When the incest is discovered, family members typically go through denial, shock, horror, anger, grief, and finally go on to some action (or decide not to act). The following are characteristic of incestuous relationships.

- Power Differences. Children are in a position of less power than perpetrators (parent or older sibling). Holding lower positions and respecting older persons, children find it very difficult to resist sexual advances.
- Betrayal of Trust. Families are expected to be places of safety and security, places where children are nurtured and develop the potential God has provided. Sexual abuse within the family violates this basic function of the family.
- Blame. Although unfair, other family members may blame the abused children, accusing them of dressing or behaving provocatively. Children may blame themselves for letting the sexual activity occur, for participating in the affection and attention, or for actually enjoying the physical sensations and closeness (if they did).
- Secrecy. Children may remain silent because of shame, fear, ignorance or because they do not know how to explain what is happening.

Can it happen with other missionaries?

Of course, it can. When it does, it often has many of the same characteristics as incest (sexual abuse within a family). In fact, many mission agencies refer to themselves as "missionary families" in which each child has many "aunts" and "uncles" who are not blood relatives, but to whom the children feel close. Like biological families, such missionary families living together in another culture may become too enmeshed so that they become dysfunctional, and sexual abuse may happen to children as well as single female

missionaries. These relationships have the same characteristics as incest.

- Power Differences. Children on a given field are encouraged to respect and obey other missionaries as they do their parents. Single women may also be under the authority of the perpetrator and be somewhat flattered to receive attention. This is especially true of the perpetrator is the spiritual and moral leader of the group who is in the spotlight of many worship services.
- Betrayal of Trust. Children and single women expect the missionary community (family) to give them protection and care in the host culture. Sexual abuse within that community betrays such trust.
- Blame. The missionary community (family) may blame the child or the single woman for seducing their colleague or leader. Likewise, the victims may also begin to blame themselves.
- Secrecy. Sexual abuse in the missionary family may be even more secret because if it becomes known, it will bring shame on the missionary enterprise, God's work.

Can it happen at boarding school?

Of course, it can. Cases of such abuse have received wide publicity during the '90s with schools and churches apologizing to those abused. Again the family model is used with the students living in houses with others who are like brothers or sisters their age, and the people in charge are their dorm "parents."

- Power Differences. Students are to respect and obey their surrogate parents and love their surrogate siblings.
- Betrayal of Trust. The school family is to be a place of protection and care.

- Blame. Again victims may blame themselves or be blamed by others.
- Secrecy. Revealing the abuse will bring disgrace on the school. If it is a Christian school, revealing the abuse will also bring disgrace on the cause of Christ.

Can it happen in the host culture?

Again the answer is a resounding "Yes!" In this case it is abuse coming from outside the family, so it is not a betrayal of trust and seldom is the victim blamed, but the secrecy is still there in the sense that it is often not talked about.

One adult MK described walking through a bustling marketplace at the age of 16 with a friend. Suddenly a man on a bicycle veered toward them so that the man could reach out and grab the friend's breast. The two of them walked on without breaking stride. Their conversation continued uninterrupted. Although it is painfully seared on her memory, never in 25 years did the two of them ever mention it.

Some cultures view women as intrinsically inferior to men in nearly every way rather than as image-bearers of God who are to be respected. Sometimes female MKs are told to ignore the stares, rude gestures, touches, and pinches. They may come to believe that their feelings of fear, indignation, and humiliation are wrong rather than seeing the abuse as what is wrong. They are expected to treat such things as insignificant, something to get used to, a part of adapting to the culture.

Boys as well as girls may be sexually molested. In fact, some cultures routinely masturbate boys to calm them, and sodomy can occur in any culture.

What are some signs of sexual abuse?

Some children who are being sexually abused function quite normally and do not have any obvious symptoms. Others have only general symptoms that could indicate a variety of other problems related to growing up. The most certain way to know about abuse is when individuals report it.

Some physical conditions may indicate sexual abuse. If a child has bruises or bleeding in the genital or anal areas, foreign bodies in the vagina or rectum, pain or itching in the genital area, stained or bloody underclothing, painful discharge of urine, or difficulty walking or sitting, they should be examined by a physician. It is important not to make accusations of sexual abuse because any or all of these conditions may have other causes, and a missionary's reputation and effectiveness can be destroyed by a false accusation.

Some behaviors may indicate sexual abuse. Children who force sexual acts on others, talk a lot about sexual activity, engage in sexual games unusual for children their age, have an unusual knowledge of sexual things, engage in sexually aggressive behaviors, have an unusual interest in sexual things, or have an unusual fear of men may have been sexually abused. Again, any of these may have other causes, and accusations must not be made on the basis of them alone.

What can we do?

Although sexual predators will always be with us, there are several things we can do to minimize the damage they do.

- Talk about it (early, regularly, age-appropriately). Teach children the difference between good touch, bad touch, and confusing touch as well as the difference between good secrets and bad secrets. Tell children where they can go if trouble occurs and make it clear that no matter what happens, no sexual activity with an older person should be kept secret. Let them know that sometimes people, even people they trust, may try to touch them inappropriately or get them to do something that seems to be wrong as part of a game or secret. If this occurs they should say no and not do the wrong thing.
- Believe them. If a child reports abuse, tell them that you believe them (even though "Uncle John" seems to be the most child-loving, spiritual missionary you know). Do not jump to conclusions but stay calm and listen. Do not ask leading questions (Did he touch you there?), but write down word-for-word exactly what the child said describing the abuse as soon as possible after talking with the child. Affirm the child's feelings (It's OK to be angry, frightened, etc.) and reassure him or her that you will continue to be there whenever needed.
- Report it. Even though the alleged perpetrator may be an important spiritual leader in your agency, take some action. If your agency has procedures for taking action against people who do wrong, follow those procedures. If not, take whatever action you can in your situation. This is as much to prevent abuse of others as it is to stop abuse of the child involved. Abusers often repeat the offense and must be stopped.

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