

The Mind of a Child Molester

The following is an excerpt from the book Conversations with a Pedophile: In the Interest of our Children by Dr. Amy Hammel-Zambil. For more information on the book visit www.barristerbooks.com.

I was 7 when I first offended. I lured a boy of 5 into a storage shed and manipulated him into pulling down his pants and underpants. It was in the middle of summer, and the child was wearing no shirt, shoes or socks, so when he submitted to my demands, he was standing naked before me. Once he had stood there for a moment or two, staring at the floor to avoid my eyes, I told him to get dressed, and after bribing him to keep our secret, we left.

Although I had no physical contact with the boy, the absolute high came for me the instant the child undid the snap to open his pants. I felt as if electricity were pouring through me. I enjoyed making him stand there, but the rest of his act, actually taking the pants down, was not nearly as exciting as when he made the first move indicating that he was going to do what I wanted.

I was the youngest of three children born into a middle-class working family. I never really wanted for any physical necessity nor was I even subjected to any form of physical abuse.

My family operated in a very cold, detached and formal fashion. Communications between us were more an exercise in intelligence and civility than a genuine sharing of feelings, experience and concern.

When I entered school, life became more confusing. My classmates and teachers made up a world of noise, emotion and direct confrontation beyond my experience. It wasn't long after I started school that I discovered masturbation. Although I viewed everyone around me as being different from myself, I enjoyed sharing this pleasure with another kid. I was almost immediately caught engaging in mutual fondling with a boy younger than myself. My mother's reaction had a tremendous impact on me. She was horrified.

For the only time in my life, I witnessed her being emotional and out of control. She dragged me into the bathroom and attempted to "scrub" the dirt off me, while screaming, "Only twisted, sick and evil people do things like that!"

From the moment I left that bathroom, the relationship between my mother and me became adversarial. She was now my enemy, a person who shared a dark secret and who constantly watched me for signs of my being "different."

As I lay in bed that night, masturbating and fantasizing as I always did, I realized that if only sick, evil people enjoyed masturbation, then I really was a sick, evil being.

Now I had a way of justifying all my failures, fears and frustrations. I had begun not just to build my identity around my sense of difference but also to see myself as being a victim.

If I wanted to force some smaller child into having sex, why shouldn't I? This sense of victimization allowed me to do anything without the slightest twinge of guilt, shame, responsibility or remorse.

When I was around 12, I received an electric train set for Christmas. As soon as I unwrapped the present and saw what it was, I focused on how it could be set up in the basement as a means of luring boys into spending time with me.

As a teenager, I wanted to molest the 10-year-old boy living next door. The problem was that he was too young for me to pal around with without causing suspicion. I started watching

his family. The husband was frequently away on business trips, and in his absence, I often saw his wife struggling with manual chores around the house and yard. Before long, she was in the backyard trying to start a lawn mower. I asked if I could help. I started the flooded mower and wheeled it back to the garden shed. She was delighted and offered me a tip, but I just smiled and said, "It's nothing."

A week or so later, when I was cutting weeds by the fence, the husband came over, thanked me for being so considerate to his wife, and offered me a tip. I again turned this down, saying that it really wasn't a big deal. Then I used the setup line, which I had so carefully rehearsed. "Besides, about the only thing I ever charge for is baby-sitting."

After high school I joined the military for a couple of years in the hopes I could alter my path away from pedophilia. That didn't happen. I went to work as a computer programmer and settled into a new way of life, young adulthood. One of the first things I did in my efforts to get established was to associate myself with a local church, one that, of course, sponsored a small Boy Scouts troop.

Two months after I joined the church, the old scoutmaster's failing health forced him to resign. The elders asked me to take over, and I declined. I desperately wanted to once again be in a position where I was surrounded by young boys, but I did not want to take that step until I had the entire congregation convinced that I was doing this with extreme reluctance. I made it very clear that I had no interest in spending one night a week "baby-sitting." They asked if I would at least run the troop until they found a qualified replacement, and I agreed.

I quickly found myself being asked to Sunday dinner or to drinks by a variety of church families. I was attracted to invitations from young families who had sons. When I first began going to this type of household, I tried to act as if the boy didn't exist. I wanted to portray myself as a young man who was pleasant to children but quite clearly not overly comfortable around them.

Slowly, I'd expand my contact with the boy I had targeted, and if my initial feelings regarding his potential were good, I would offer to let him tag along the next time I was heading out from their house to the mall or on some errand. Once I had the child alone, even in these brief initial instances, I fell back to the first step of the pattern that I had used my entire life. I attempted to get him to "open up." And I learned what may have been the single most important lesson in becoming a manipulative predator: I learned to listen.

By listening to a boy, sharing secrets and encouraging him to talk about everything that was on his mind, he usually wanted to spend time with me and inadvertently provide me with all that I needed to know about his personal vulnerabilities to victimize him. I found that most people loved to talk about themselves if given the chance; and that they would, once convinced you could be trusted, sit and tell you absolutely everything about themselves and their families. I think it was clear to me even at 11 and 12 that these boys felt nobody ever really listen to them.

Secrecy, though, was also a critical weapon both to entice and ensnare my victims. In childhood, having a secret was the ultimate status symbol. It added a feeling of importance, prestige and the sense of control.

My methods were designed to build, very slowly, a child's acceptance of the need for secrets. At the same time, secrecy gave me the opportunity to make a child believe that I was the only person in the world who really cared for him and looked out for him.

I would test the boy to see if he had the ability to keep a secret. I would, for example, swear in front of him. Having done this, I would explain that I should not have and ask him to keep my mistake just between the two of us.

I waited to see if he did, in fact, keep quiet about the incident. If he didn't, I would then immediately end all attempts at victimizing him. On the other hand, if after a week it was clear that this secret had been kept, I escalated the process.

Keeping all of these seemingly minor secrets built up a feeling of equal responsibility and equal guilt in this totally innocent child. And it was this inability to inform on me without having to explain his own willing participation that finally kept him captive to my sick desires.

Secrets became proof of our mutual trust. Little by little, all of his possible reservations and inhibitions were shed, and he began to come to me with every complaint, question and request. In most cases, the victim would call me to discuss how to handle his parents when he wanted to do something they might not normally allow.

Alan was caught when a mother found a Polaroid of her son in a sexual position. Multiple victims came forward. Alan pleaded guilty on all charges and received five to six consecutive life sentences with no parole.

Before I was sentenced, I was put on Lupron (an anti-androgen that lowers testosterone). My entire life changed. I cannot remember a period in my life when I was not acting out and spending hours lost in fantasy and plotting. Nothing that I did proved sufficient to break this destructive obsession until I was put on Lupron.

Obviously, Lupron, or any other form of chemical castration, does not alter the mind's ability to conjure up deviant thoughts. But without the ability to achieve gratification, the thoughts are short-lived. The most stimulating and erotic of ideas has little appeal when the body refuses to respond. For the first time, I could go to sleep without fantasizing and masturbating. I often lay in bed at night asking myself what life could have been like if I had been given this drug 20 or 30 years earlier.

Another critical part of the recovery process is peer groups. I have seen genuine progress made with fellow offenders, simply through the process of being surrounded by peers and therefore having to face the reality that they are neither alone nor different from other offenders.

Most of the guys in prison would enjoy nothing more than having the opportunity to get back out into the world, if only briefly. The world remains for me one that I simply can't handle. As they were taking me from the transport van into the hospital for medical testing I had to walk past a 12-year-old boy. All of the old feelings came crashing down. I felt as if this kid were a magnet pulling me toward him. If nothing else, I am glad that I am tightly confined behind iron bars.

Amy Hammel-Zabin, Ph.D., is a music therapist at New York University. She met Alan while working as a therapist in the prison where he is incarcerated. This excerpt is based on letters he wrote to Hammel-Zabin.

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