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148747

Interrogating Child Molesters

By
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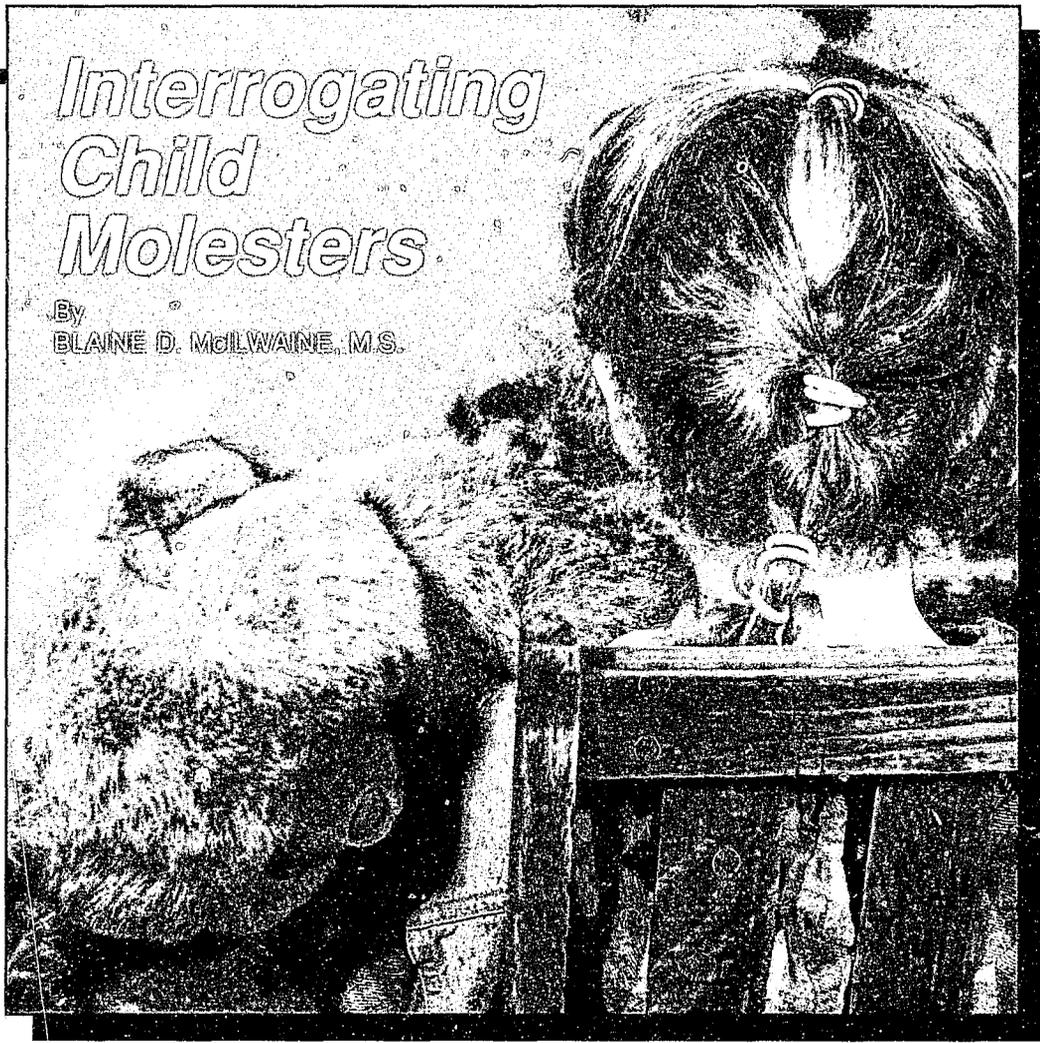


Photo © K.L. Morrison

Despite an evolving public awareness during the past decade, the sexual molestation of children remains a vastly underreported crime—one that represents a significant threat to America's children. When allegations of abuse do surface, cases are often difficult to investigate and prosecute because of a lack of physical evidence. Therefore, most investigations focus on resolving discrepancies between the victim's statement and that of the accused.

One of the best ways to overcome the problems inherent in this approach is to obtain a confession from the offender. Such a

confession produces many positive results, perhaps most notably averting the need for the young victim's testimony in court.

This article provides descriptions of the various typologies of child molesters. It then introduces interrogation techniques designed to assist investigators in interviewing these offenders successfully.

MOLESTER TYPOLOGIES

Research conducted by the FBI Academy's Behavioral Science Services Unit in Quantico, Virginia, divides child molesters into two groups based on descriptive typology. All child molesters fall into one of these two broad categories—the

situational child molester and the preferential child molester.

Situational Child Molesters

Situational child molesters do not have a true sexual preference for children, but instead, engage in sex with the young for varied and sometimes complex reasons. For such molesters, sexual contact with children may range from a "once-in-a-lifetime" act to a long-term pattern of behavior. However, situational child molesters generally have a very limited number of victims.¹

Perhaps the most common manifestation of situational child molestation is represented by the parent or relative who molests a

child because of stress or while intoxicated. Because the majority of child sexual abuse cases encountered by investigators may indeed be situational, it is important to remember that this type of molester abuses children for reasons other than genuine sexual attraction.

Preferential Child Molesters

Preferential child molesters have a definite sexual preference for children. Their sexual fantasies and erotic imagery focus on children. They engage in sexual acts with the young not because of some situational stress or insecurity, but because they are sexually attracted to, and prefer, children. They can possess a variety of character traits, but all engage in highly predictable sexual behavior. Although preferential child molesters are fewer in number than their situational counterparts, they have the potential to molest a much larger number of victims.²

Comparison of Typologies

As a general rule, less physical and documentary evidence exists in investigations involving situational child molesters. This is true primarily because of a low victim-offender ratio and because of the less-predictable sexual behavior exhibited by this type of offender.

By contrast, preferential child molesters engage in highly predictable, and often, high-risk activities in order to identify and seduce their victims. In fact, because of their often-blatant behavior, preferential molesters are more commonly identified today as pedophiles.

SUCCESSFUL INTERROGATION

The key to conducting a proper interrogation of either type of molester is to document patterns of behavior thoroughly. The interrogator must gather as much information as possible on both the offender and the victim(s).

Further, the offender's interpersonal style and methods of approach and seduction of children should be established in the interrogator's mind. A skillful interrogator should also be aware of the victim's background and be very familiar with the details of the case.

INTERVIEW AND INTERROGATION

Skillful interviewing and interrogation are essential elements in resolving child sexual abuse cases. As taught at the FBI Academy, an *interview* is a "conversation with a purpose." During child sexual abuse cases, investigators may conduct numerous interviews with victims, witnesses, and professionals in the field. However, the ultimate success of an investigation often rests with the *interrogation* of the suspected offender.

Interrogation is an art that uses proposals and observations to elicit the truth from a subject. Investigators should base their interrogations on sound reasoning and understanding, without the use of threats or promises.

Because interrogations assume such importance in child abuse cases, they must be thoroughly planned in advance. Location and timing are critical. Great care should also be exercised when selecting the interrogator. Interrogators who prove successful in other kinds of cases may not always be the best choice to interrogate suspected child molesters.

A successful interrogator must display self-confidence, as well as a positive attitude, and must refrain from expressing demeaning or insensitive remarks that may



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preclude a successful interrogation. Interrogators should generally avoid the use of legal or emotional terms, such as "allegation," "molest," "charge," and "count."

Use of Themes

Developing themes is the cornerstone to obtaining confessions in child sexual abuse cases. Proper theme development provides offenders with moral excuses that serve to minimize their crime. In this way, offenders can maintain their self-respect and still confess. Therefore, successful interrogators use themes and proposals or simply provide possible reasons why the offender committed the crime.

Throughout the interrogation, the purpose of the themes is to use the defense mechanisms of rationalization and projection. Themes allow offenders to rationalize or excuse their behavior to themselves or others and to project their actions onto something or someone else.

A properly formatted interrogation with the use of themes makes a big difference in an interrogator's success rate. Interrogators should ensure that the themes appear plausible to offenders, as well as to investigators. Therefore, the proposed excuses for offenders' actions should be carefully selected before the interrogation. While they may feel uncomfortable offering "excuses" to suspected offenders, interrogators must understand that providing such themes is a proven method to break down suspects' reluctance to confess their crimes. However, the investigator must have confidence in the themes used to appear credible to the offender.

Primary differences between an interview and an interrogation		
Interview	vs.	Interrogation
Non-accusatory		Accusatory
Less structured		More structured (Both setting and presentation)
Goal: To gather factual information		Goal: To obtain admissions and confession

If a theme approach proves unsuccessful, interrogators should not terminate the meeting. Often, an offender who is on the verge of confessing will hold back to observe the interrogator's next move.

In these cases, interrogators should consider using a new approach. They should advise the suspect that the absence of a confession will require the victim to appear and testify in court. An offender with any emotional attachment to the child may well want to avoid putting the victim through additional turmoil.

Confronting the Offender

The offender should also be confronted with all physical and documented proof of the violation. Any medical histories, child drawings, and witness observations should be discussed and exhibited.

The offender should then be informed that, given the evidence in the case, a denial would seem implausible to an average juror. This can be accomplished by simply asking an offender, "If you were a juror in this case, what would you believe?"

Nonverbal Behavior

Persistence in the interrogation process, coupled with self-confidence, is another key ingredient to obtaining a confession. In this regard, nonverbal behavior often makes a difference. Good interrogators should be aware of the "body language" they display. Their gestures should exhibit self-confidence and sincerity.

Likewise, an accurate reading of the offender's body language is also essential when themes are established in an interrogation. An upward glance, with eyes cast to the right, or the placing of a hand on the chin may indicate that the offender is seriously considering a particular theme.

LOCATION AND TIMING

Aside from the interrogation itself, the site chosen for it may be the most important determinant of a successful outcome. Offenders may feel less inhibited during an interrogation conducted in a neutral setting, away from the police station. In fact, offenders reluctant to appear at the station due to status, employment, or personality style may

Themes for Successful Interrogations

An interrogator may suggest that the offender:

- Seduced the child in a moment of weakness
- Blamed spouse for neglecting sexual role in the relationship
- Was teaching the child about life, love, and affection
- Believed such encounters occurred regularly in families
- Acted out of love
- Was under a great deal of stress (divorce, unemployment, loneliness), which caused the act
- Was not in a "real" state of mind at the time of offense because of the influence of drugs, alcohol, or a combination of factors
- Read and collected pornography, which caused the offender to lose control and to commit the crime
- Was predisposed to commit the crime because the offender was victimized as a child. (In reality, evidence suggests that the majority of individuals who were sexually molested as children lead productive lives and do not become child molesters.)

(Based on guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Defense Polygraph Institute.)

prove more forthcoming in a different atmosphere, such as a motel. However, "hardcore" offenders, those unfamiliar with police techniques, and those with extensive records are generally best interrogated in a police setting.

Often, investigators can interrogate "on scene" in the offender's home or in the location where the offense allegedly occurred. When possible, this approach should be conducted in a surprise manner, without warning to the offender.

The timing of the interrogation is also important. Every effort

should be made to interrogate the suspected offender as quickly as possible. The timing of the interrogation itself should be commensurate with the collection of other facts related to the investigation. The longer the delay in scheduling an interrogation, the greater the risk of the offender gaining confidence and/or deciding against the meeting.

USE OF POLYGRAPH

The polygraph is a potentially valuable forensic tool, especially in cases where individuals make allegations in direct contradiction to

each other. For this reason, and because child sexual abuse investigations are private in nature and rarely produce eye witness corroboration, the use of polygraph procedures should not be overlooked.

Polygraph examinations often lead to confessions in the post-test interrogation. In fact, when administered by a well-trained examiner/interrogator, the polygraph often means the difference between a successful prosecution and a case that ultimately remains unresolved.

CONCLUSION

Several factors make the sexual molestation and abuse of children a difficult crime to investigate and prosecute. Effective interrogation of suspected offenders is a key element to building successful cases. Therefore, investigators should prepare thoroughly for interrogations. This includes a review of all pertinent documentation, selection of appropriate time and interrogation site, and development of plausible themes to induce offenders to confess.

A thoroughly planned interrogation that results in a confession benefits not only law enforcement agencies but also the entire criminal justice system by reducing case-loads. Perhaps most important, however, is the benefit to young victims who will not be required to recount a painful violation in court. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Kenneth V. Lanning, *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis*, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice, Research, and Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., 5.

² *Ibid.*