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Chapter

School Employee Sexual Misconduct: Red Flag Grooming Behaviors by Perpetrators

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Abstract

The sexual exploitation of students is a worldwide problem. In the U.S., the problem is three-fold: (1) Ten percent of public school students report being sexually abused by a school employee. (2) There is little in the existing research that identifies and describes the school culture, patterns, and conditions in which educator sexual misconduct occurs. (3) Because no one has systematically documented the school culture and the behaviors and patterns of adults who sexually abuse children in schools, school professionals fail to understand what patterns and behaviors should trigger concern, supervision, investigation, and/or reporting. Stopping sexual misconduct directed toward students means understanding the process that adults use to prepare students to be abused so that they do not tell, do not fight, and acquiesce. This process, called grooming, has the purpose of gaining student trust, as well as the trust of parents and colleagues. This study examines school employee sexual misconduct toward students in school in the United States and is based upon an analysis of 222 cases of school employee sexual misconduct toward a student where a school employee was convicted of student sexual abuse. The findings identify red flag grooming patterns used with students, colleagues, and parents.

Keywords: sexual abuse, students, grooming, sexual misconduct, schools

1. Introduction

The shared knowledge of educators about the etiology of sexual abuse of students by school employees – what to look for, how to respond, and what actions might reduce risk – is simply inadequate to the scope of the harm. A report from the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Child Welfare Federal Agencies Can Better Support State Efforts to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Abuse by School Personnel* [1], noted the lack of research on the patterns of sexual abuse in schools. Additionally, an earlier GAO report, *K-12 Education Selected Cases of Public and Private Schools that Hired or Retained Individuals with Histories of Sexual Misconduct* [2], reached similar conclusions.

The problem is three-fold. (1) Ten percent of public school students report being sexually abused by a school employee [3]. (2) There is little in the existing research that identifies and describes the school culture, patterns, and conditions in which

educator sexual misconduct occurs. (3) Because no one has systematically documented the school culture and the behaviors and patterns of adults who sexually abuse children in schools, school professionals fail to understand what patterns and behaviors should trigger concern, supervision, investigation, and/or reporting.

Stopping sexual misconduct directed toward students means understanding the process that adults use to prepare students to be abused so that they do not tell, do not fight, and acquiesce. This process, called grooming, has the purpose of gaining student trust, as well as the trust of parents and colleagues.

2. Review of the literature

Grooming behaviors and patterns are red flags, signaling that something is not quite right and that attention and monitoring, and supervision are needed. Most employee to student sexual misconduct in educational organizations involves a pattern of “preparing” the student for the misconduct so that the student trusts the employee. Rarely does the misconduct begin with unwanted sexual touching, although that occurs later in the process.

Sexual misconduct in schools and other youth serving organizations nearly always begins with grooming. Kenneth Lanning, retired supervisory Special Agent from the FBI and a seminal researcher of criminal sexual behavior since the 1970’s, describes grooming as “specific nonviolent techniques used by some child molesters to gain access to and control of their child victims” [4]. The patterns, now referred to as grooming, were at one time referred to as seduction within the prevention community. That label changed overtime as researchers learned more about how children are persuaded into targets. The change in terminology had more to do with the perception of the words than the actual behaviors. Lanning and others use the words interchangeably to describe “patterned behavior designed to create opportunities for sexual assault, minimize victim resistance or withdrawal, and reduce disclosure or belief.” [4].

Jim Tanner and Stephen Brake [5] developed a framework for understanding the grooming process. They make a distinction between grooming the individual and grooming the “environment. Because offenders need to find potential targets, gain their trust, reduce discovery by others, and reduce the target’s credibility if discovered, they groom victims to “overcome resistance, maintain access, and minimize disclosure” [5]. Offenders need access to targets, need to be desirable to targets, and need to convince the target that everything that is happening is normal. The goal is compliance from the child, often misinterpreted as consent. Children aren’t legally or emotionally able to consent – this is not an equal interaction – therefore compliance is used by the offender as a stand-in for consent, drawing the child into a belief system that the child has control or power when that is not the case.

Offenders must not only gain the trust of the victim, but also that of the community in which he or she works as well as the environment of the child. Typically, the offender grooms the work and community environment first, then grooms potential victims, then the actual victim or victim’s family. Prior to physical sexual abuse of the potential target, the offender seeks to be someone admired by colleagues, recognized in the community as a productive and valuable member, and appreciated by parents as someone who is helpful to the success of their children.

Environmental and individual grooming can occur at the same time, but commonly the offender has first established his or herself as a highly regarded education and/or coaching professional. Tanner and Brake [5] have summarized this process, displayed in **Table 1**.

Purpose of victim grooming	Overcome resistance, maintain access, and minimized disclosure
Target of victim grooming	Emotionally vulnerable child
Goals of victim grooming	Access/affiliate Allure/accept Alibi/assure
Actions of victim grooming	Gaining trust, access, relationship
Bond	Form a special bond, keep secrets, special lures
Reliance	Push and pull of victim. Make victim need offender
Attenuate	Reduce resistance through slow progression and explanation of normalcy
Trap	Prevent disclosure through grooming, threats, guilt, and fear
Environmental Grooming	
Purpose of Environmental Grooming	Find victims and reduce the probability of being reported or victim being believed
Target of Environmental Grooming	Parents/family, teachers, social organizations, peers, significant others, etc.
Goals of environmental grooming	Access: provide entrée Allure: create interest Alibi: minimize risk
Actions of environmental grooming	
Position	Social, Personal
Charm	Personality
Power	Political, fiscal, absolute
Celebrity	Fame

Table 1.
Tanner and Blake's summary of child victim grooming.

Grooming is rarely perceived as a violent act. Instead, it consists of actions that bond the target to the offender such as time spent together, secrets, gifts, special attention. The process presents the offender to the child as kind, gentle, understanding, caring, generous, charming, and accessible. A goal of the offender is to be desirable, needed, and wanted by the child. As the child is progressively drawn-in to this “special” bond, the offender assures the child that the relationship is “normal”, often by telling the target that he or she is more mature than the other students, or smarter, or extra special. The more an offender can minimize the nature of the offense and shape it into an acceptable relationship -- counselor, teacher who cares, friend, father figure, peer -- the more the student is led to believe that what is happening is acceptable.

Generally, the only time the offender uses threatening methods are when the student tries to stop the predator after the grooming period and well into the physical or emotional sexual misconduct. At this point the offender uses threats, guilt and fear to keep the student involved. Most grooming and sexual misconduct toward students by adults occurs right in the school: in empty classrooms, in hallways, in offices. Sometimes the abuse is played out in front of other students. It is not unusual for a teacher to take a student into a storage room attached to the classroom and have sexual intercourse while the rest of the class does seat work. Recess and lunch are prime offending times.

Preventing sexual misconduct and abuse directed toward students requires adult bystanders and other students to understand the “red flags” of grooming behavior. The purpose of this study was to identify and describe grooming behaviors that school employees use in their quest to cross sexual boundaries with students.

3. Methods

3.1 Description of the study

If we could (or would) do postmortem examinations each time a student is sexually abused by an adult in a school, we might be able to identify the places where policies, training, supervision, and reporting failed to prevent the abuse. These are sensitive issues for school administrators and communities and, most of the time, the stakeholders just want to put the ugly incident behind them, a response which does little to prevent future abuse. However valuable direct inquiry might be, it turns out not to be feasible to get permission to interview students, teachers, administrators, victims, parents of victims, and predators when an employee has sexually abused a student. Very few, if any, organizations allow such scrutiny.

3.2 Methodological framework

This study uses documents from civil litigation where a parent or child has filed a suit against a school district for not preventing the abuse of the child by a school employee and where the school employee predator has been convicted in a criminal trial of sexually abusing a student. These documents provide the range, detail, and putative accuracy of case evidence that is otherwise unavailable to researchers. Specifically, we analyzed expert witness reports that were developed from civil legal documents. The use of civil legal documents introduces a methodological dimension that is not often deployed in education research, and thus provides an additional approach to education research. These documents provide robust documentation for undertaking these multiple case studies which allow for individual incident descriptions as well as a synthesis of variables across cases. Court and legal records are not uncommon sources of data in social science and historical research [6], but rarely used in non-legal education research.

The documents on which the expert reports used for this study came were based on multiple case records used in civil litigation that the senior author read and analyzed to produce an expert witness report. In each case, the expert report included the same topics and format and produced a report between 50 and 100 pages. It is the report that the researchers in this study used to identify red flags of grooming.

3.3 Sample

The sample was drawn from 220 expert reports written by the senior author between 2004 and 2020 as expert reports in civil litigation. Essentially, the reports represent case study descriptions of the patterns and behaviors of grooming and sexual misconduct as well as the extent that school organizations met prevention protocols. The purpose of this study was to identify red flags of grooming across cases, red flags which were described in the report.

There were six parameters for selection of the reports to be included in this study (1) a student has been sexually abused by an employee of the school district;

(2) the employee has admitted the sexual abuse and been found guilty in criminal court; (3) the school is a PK12 school; (4) the report included information on grooming red flags; (5) consent for use of documents has been given by the plaintiff attorneys; and (6) the criminal and civil cases were closed.

Although this sample is not random (a technique not available in these circumstances), it is a purposeful selection that has characteristics of both snowball and judgment sampling. The cases initially reviewed are varied and are from 33 states; represent both state and federal complaints; include elementary and secondary student plaintiffs; represent urban, rural, and suburban school districts; contain both high- and low-income schools; incorporate schools that serve predominantly white, predominantly black or Latina/o, or mixed race student enrollments. The victims in these cases are both males and females and the predators are both males and females. Thus, the sample replicates the socio-demographic properties of school districts and plaintiffs from the country as a whole.

3.4 Data sources

Litigation and trial data are commonly used in other disciplines, but rarely in education research. Never-the-less the public has a “qualified right of access to court proceedings and records, rooted in the common law. The First Amendment also confers on the public a qualified right of access”, including in civil trials [7]. Among the data points for analysis that are included in civil case documentation are school district policies, training materials and requirements, hiring policies and practices, personnel files, student files, medical/mental health files, environmental scans of the school buildings, police files from the criminal prosecution, and pictures of classrooms.

Depositions, as sworn testimony, are as close to that person’s “truth” as is likely to be available. People being deposed swear an oath to tell the truth and the penalties of perjury apply, just as they would in trial testimony. In the cases analyzed, there are depositions from the victim, family members, the abuser, members of the abuser’s family, classmates of the victim, and school personnel – teachers, coaches, custodians, school lunch monitors, teacher aids, building administrators, district administrators, and school board members. This is a broad and inclusive group of people who are “telling the story” in the civil cases/settings/contexts of sexual abuse.

3.5 Coding

We developed a set of codes that were descriptive of red flag behavior by an adult directed toward a child in these cases. Coding was done on documents in which all identifiers were removed. No school district names or names of people involved were available to coders. They were replaced with role identifiers (for instance, “principal”, “2nd grade teacher, student target”). Codes aligned with Tanner and Blake’s grooming categories.

The authors coded the documents in pairs with the senior author serving as a third coder where there were differences in coding decisions.

4. Findings

Red flag grooming strategies to gain trust of targets, colleagues, or parents are described with examples from cases. Pseudonyms are used in all descriptions.

4.1 Who gets groomed?

In K-12 school settings there is a good deal of variation when it comes to the characteristics of students who are targeted for sexual misconduct by predators and in what types of school these violations occur. In other words: students of all genders, races, academic backgrounds, and personalities are groomed and are targets of sexual misconduct in all kinds of schools at all levels. In this study, we are reporting examples of grooming from both independent and public schools in the United States where elementary, middle, and high school females and males have been targeted with sexualized behavior by school employees. The majority of the cases were male employees grooming female students and others in the environment, followed by male employees grooming male students, then female employees grooming male students. We did not have any cases of female employees grooming female students.

Not all school employees who were grooming a student engaged in grooming the environment, but most who crossed sexual boundaries with students also needed parents and their colleagues to trust and like them, and, therefore, worked to gain their trust. Before actual sexual misconduct can occur, boundaries have to be crossed. Boundary violations occur in public, in front of others. Once boundaries are crossed and trust is gained, much of the abuse occurs in private settings such as closed classrooms, cars, or via social media interactions.

4.2 Tanner and Blake grooming categories

We examined the expert witness documents for examples of the grooming patterns described by Tanner and Blake and found examples of all in these cases with bonding, reliance, and attenuation (or normalization) the most prevalent.

4.2.1 Bonding

Bonding boundary crossing is what most bystanders see and it rarely announces as sexual abuse. School employees who targeted students often start out by identifying a special bond, “you aren’t like other students”, “you are so mature”, “I can talk to you” are all phrases that were used to make students feel special. Female students often reported that male employees would talk about their personal emotional and sexual lives with a wife or girlfriend. “He told me he wasn’t happy in his marriage and that his wife didn’t understand him. He said I was different.” Bonding also came through secrets that could not be shared, “no one can know about us” and comparisons “when I was your age, I had the same problems with my mother.”

In many cases where boundaries are crossed and grooming occurs, students, parents, and other educators and administrators mistook these actions that crossed professional and appropriate boundaries as “prosocial behavior” (Tanner & Brake, 2013). Typically, prosocial behavior, such as compliments and direct attention in the classroom, are seen as positive educator behaviors when attempting to mentor students or forge beneficial educator-student relationships for the purpose of improving child learning. Thus, school employees often used tutorial help as a way to bond. A not uncommon pattern is for a teacher to talk with the student or the parent and describe the student as bright and capable, but falling behind. The teacher then offers to help the student catch up and advance. Students reported they felt special and liked the extra attention. Parents reported they were grateful for the extra time given to their child.

But the differences between prosocial and bonding grooming behaviors is the focus of this behavior –behaviors directed toward all or most students vs. a specific

student. Teachers who offer to help lots of students, in open settings, are very different from teachers helping a select student in a regularly closed environment.

A similar pattern revolves around food. A targeted student is invited to have lunch with the teacher in the classroom and the teacher brings the food. Other students are not invited or allowed. Intensity and repetition of these behaviors with a single student moves this from pro-social to boundary crossing and grooming. These boundary violations are carefully planned transgressions that scale in boldness relative to how often the predator can get away with the behavior in the presence of bystanders.

Use of personal – not school sanctioned and monitored -- social media is a common vehicle for bonding grooming. Using a private platform is much like being alone with a student behind a closed locked door. There is no way to monitor and the interactions are hidden and private. For example, in one school, observers frequently reported that a teacher, “was communicating with his 6th grade students via Facebook,” thus establishing a private, personal, out of school communication pathway to groom students. When grooming through social media, direct or private messages can escalate quickly due to the relative ease of access predators have to students who may view it as normal behavior because that is how they communicate with their peers. Back and forth texts escalate into more intimate and private conversations and often include exchanges of photos of body parts or other sexual displays. It is not uncommon for hundreds of text messages to be exchanged in a school day, with intimate, connecting, and escalating messages.

4.2.2 Reliance

Another way that victims are groomed is to increase their reliance on the school employee. Sometimes that relates to grades, as in trading grades for time, “I didn’t have to do my homework. As long as I spent time with him, he would give me a grade.” Sometimes it translates into legitimate help when the school employee is tutoring and teaching a student, but withholds that learning if the student does not comply. Sometimes it is providing food or transportation. Gifts and money are also used in the reliance process, offering students things they do not have. Often those things are cell phones and iPads that provide the adult with easy access to the student. Other times students are given trendy clothes and accessories. But in all cases, the adult is using this grooming strategy as a way to tie the student to him or her, to increase the student’s reliance on the adult.

4.2.3 Attenuate: Normalize

Predators work to normalize boundary crossing behavior. They are aided in this by schools that (1) do not teach students or other adults about what is acceptable adult to student behavior and that (2) fail to train students and adult bystanders how and when to report.

Boundary violations in the public eye, for example over public forums on social media or in full classrooms, are often defined by their subtlety--the goal of which is to progressively make children feel that these violations are “normal” or par for the course. Child targets often do not know how to code these actions, having not been taught about what is acceptable behavior from a school employee. As a result, they do not report these behaviors to authority figures who could intervene to interrupt the grooming process. For instance, a student bystander noted that a male teacher would rub up against female students: “...he [teacher] made her uncomfortable and ... he would rub his penis against her back while touching her shoulder.” Students often reported that the teacher “hugged” all the girls or “hung out” with a group

of students all the time. Sometimes the normalcy of boundary crossing blinds bystander employees to the reality of the violation. Violating school employees may give student victim rides to and from school or to other locations and are often seen by both adults and students leaving the school. And yet, this misconduct goes largely unreported even though in most schools it is an explicitly prohibited action. When queried about these actions, both students and adults would report that “I just assumed it was OK. No one said anything about it.”

Adult conversations with students – often in the classroom or to groups of students during lunch or other non-class times – include sexual topics, personal disclosure of adult sexual activity and preferences, and questions to students about their sexual lives. These are disguised as “normal” interactions and topics with students, but they are grooming behaviors that seek to normalize sexual talk. These behaviors often go uninterrupted or only lightly reprimanded by other employees who overhear the boundary crossing conversations.

Normalizing also occurs when the adult behaves the same way as the student, acting as a peer. This is often presented as romance, leading other students to believe (either overtly or covertly) that it is OK for adults who work in the school to date a student. Bystander students, as a result, see sexualized behavior between the adult and, in most cases, a high school student, and explain it as ‘normal’ romantic behavior: “They are dating...They are boyfriend and girlfriend...[the predator] didn’t molest [the victim], they were just making out.”

For instance, a male teacher who had been grooming a female student reacted when she threw a Jell-O cup he had given her onto the floor. The teacher intruded on another class the student was in and threw what was described as a tantrum, “throwing things around...slamm[ing the door]...and star[ing] at [the student].” The bystander teacher of the current class period should have recognized and reported the obvious red flags indicating teacher-student boundary violations. The behavior of the abuser resembled an angry tantrum reminiscent of teenage lovers having a fall out, rather than a teacher simply being angry at a student misbehaving. Students described these behaviors as typical boyfriend/girlfriend actions, indicating how the adult had normalized these behaviors so that they were not seen as inappropriate, but, rather, indications of normal romance.

Those who groom students look for ways to touch students. In one middle school, two female students were in a classroom with a male teacher-predator talking about “getting away from someone that’s trying to hurt you.” The teacher grabbed one of the victims by the arm and said he did it “to show...that it’s not as easy to get away from someone as you think.” After the teacher was arrested, the girls were questioned and related what had happened. They explained that although they thought it was inappropriate behavior, they did not report the teacher, assuming that it was something teachers could do and that they thought they would not be believed.

Hugs are often normalized. For example, a teacher in an elementary school who hugs students in the hallway between classes and “when the kids would come in from recess” broadcasts an image of friendliness when the intent is to normalize inappropriate touching of children. The teachers who do this often portray this behavior as giving students extra support, “letting them know we care”, a rationalization that is accepted by students, parents, and colleagues. In middle and high school, hugs are normalized across all students as praise or reward. That practice camouflages hugs for sexual purposes.

Students make sense of these boundary crossings and potentially illegal behavior from their own frame of reference. They do this because the adults in the school have not taught them another lesson, the policies of behavior (if they exist) have not been explained, and the culture of the school encourages everyone to look the

other way, rather than teaching what the appropriate teacher-student boundaries are and what to do if they see them being violated.

4.2.4 Trap

When school employees were suspected of sexual misconduct and questioned by school leadership or law enforcement, many sent messages – usually through texts – to the students they had targeted warning them not to “tell”. The messages often reminded the students that “I could go to jail if you tell.” “You would be hurting my family if you tell”. “You will get in trouble if you tell”. Although not common, some student targets reported that abusers threatened their family members – “He said he would kill my mother if I told.” “He said he would kill my sister if I told.” “I was afraid he would hurt my family.” More often, though, the employee abuser played on the student’s feelings for the abuser, “He told me he would go to jail. I didn’t want him to go to jail. I just wanted it to stop.”

4.3 Overall patterns across grooming actions

Some patterns were used across the victim grooming categories of Tanner and Blake.

4.3.1 Isolation

It is said that grooming occurs in public and sexual abuse in isolation. For the most part, that is true. But grooming can also occur in isolation. Bonding, reliance, and attenuation happen in public spaces and isolated environments. Isolation is not only a tactic to keep actions hidden, but also a strategy to remove the target from friends and family, leaving the employer abuser as the only person the student can confide in.

Isolation is a type of red flag that can go unnoticed due to its nature in being seen as “helpful” or “beneficial” to the victim from an outside perspective, or simply going unnoticed. Isolation is a way that gives the abuser access to the victim, without any suspicion or detection from outside environments. This can take many forms such as having individual coaching sessions, private tutoring, or one-on-one help after school in a classroom.

In one school a teacher, Mr. Park, offered to tutor a student, Jane Doe. This gave him access to her without other students and behind closed doors. Mr. Park began pressuring Jane Doe to meet him outside of school. Jane Doe described this pattern: “If I found a way to make it happen, he would find a place.” Jane Doe finally agreed, and they decided to meet. Mr. Park picked up Jane Doe at the 99 Cent Store” and they went to his house, where sexual activity occurred. Jane Doe was receiving tutoring from Mr. Park, which eventually allowed him to isolate her in his home away from other outside environments and interference. Isolating a victim can be especially dangerous because it can lead to sexual abuse and misconduct due to the fact that it goes unnoticed by other faculty and administrators.

There are also instances where isolation occurs on school grounds during the school day. When J.L. did not return to the classroom in a timely manner, her teacher went to look for her and found her with the male classroom aid. They were both stepping out of a dark recessed area outside an empty classroom. The male aid told J.L.’s teacher that J.L. was afraid to go to the restroom alone. The aid would watch J.L. in the classroom, looking for ways to isolate her in the building that could be explained as “helping”. J.L.’s teacher noticed that whenever J.L. left the classroom, the aid left soon after with a variety of excuses. The teacher also noticed that

whenever this happened the aid and J.L. returned to the classroom at the same time. And yet, J.L.'s teacher did not report these behaviors.

A similar scenario occurred in an elementary school when a male paraprofessional targeted a first grade boy. He isolated the male student by driving the student around in his car, which the student thought was fun. The time spent on these drives provided an opportunity to form a bond. By offering to help the family with transportation when the male student stayed late for tutoring or activities, the teacher built the trust of the parents which developed into a strong connection to this family. The boy's parents described the teacher as one of the family and reported that they were so happy the teacher was helping their son.

4.3.2 Gifts

Providing resources or gifts are very common grooming tactics used to pressure victims into gratitude for receiving this specific kind of attention from an authority figure. Gift giving is used to gain trust and make the victim feel indebted to the adult predator. Gifts serve both a bonding and a reliance function.

An example of gift giving occurred in a middle school between a teacher and an eighth grade student. Mr. Toledo targeted a female student for sexual activity and began a full on "courtship", buying her gifts and providing her with things she would not otherwise have. One day, for instance, he texted her and told her that he put a "surprise in her locker". When S.G. went to her locker, she found a pink iPad mini. And she was delighted and excited to have it. When she took it home, her mother questioned her about it. Finally, S.G. broke down and told her mother that Mr. Toledo had given it to her. S.G. felt special when she got this gift. And she wanted to keep it. And it made her like Mr. Toledo even more. Mr. Toledo counted on that. He knew that an expensive and lavish gift would escalate his access to S.G. and make it less likely that S.G. would rebuff his next steps. This gift bonded S.G. to him and also increased her reliance on him.

Gift giving to girls as a grooming step is not uncommon. But, depending upon the gift, it may be more likely to raise concerns from parents. Parents aren't aware of food and candy and privilege handouts to their child from an adult employee in the school, but they are likely to notice "things" that get brought home. For instance, teacher Park targeted Marianna and began giving her extra school supplies. When she brought these home, her mother noted them, but assumed they were part of the school package. Even when she realized that they were not given to all children, Marianna's mother treated the supplies as a way the teacher was helping her child succeed in school. However, when Marianne came home with a new purse, given to her by Mr. Park, her mother knew immediately that this was an inappropriate gift. A realization came to too late to stop Mr. Park from sexual activity with her daughter. The extra school supplies given to Marianna allowed Mr. Park to groom Marianna and make her feel special, portraying the grooming as "helping". Typically, parents and administrators would not question who supplied school supplies to a student whose family could not afford them. And yet, they served the same purpose as the gift of the purse: gaining the trust and good feelings of a child while crossing boundaries and manipulating a child's affections.

4.4 Environmental grooming

In many of these cases, parents were groomed to trust the teacher, usually because the teacher was providing their child with academic support. "We were really grateful that [the teacher] was helping our daughter with her math." Often parents commented on how friendly the teacher was. In other cases, the teacher

befriended the parent, usually a single mother, and provided support such as stopping by with dinner and conversation or, in some cases offering to babysit when the parent needed help.

A not atypical pattern was a male school employee targeting a male student who was the child of a female single parent. The teacher would contact the mother, expressing concern about her son's academic work. The teacher usually praised the boy as being bright, but who needed some extra guidance to get on track. The teacher then offered to tutor the child. The teacher would inject himself into the household, offering to bring the boy (and often siblings) home from school, provide little extras to the household – food, movies, toys – and become a confidant to the mother. The mother described the experience as a dream come true. Worried about the effects of raising a male child in a fatherless home, she felt grateful that “the teacher everyone hoped their child would get” was helping her son learn and providing her son with a good role model. The grooming of the mother was an essential part of this pattern.

Colleagues were also actively groomed by abusers. After a teacher had been arrested or convicted, colleagues reported how surprised they were. The following were typical of comments colleagues made. “He was always so helpful, offering to take care of things after school so that I could get home to my kids.” “I just couldn't believe it. He was the nicest person. Always there to help and focused on the well-being of students.” “He was teacher of the year in our school district.”

5. Conclusions

In Fall of 2019, an estimated 56.6 million children in the United States entered classrooms with 3.7 million teachers, 938,000 administrators, and other staff members (NCES.ed.gov; Department for Professional Employees, 2019). The most recent generalizable available data collected at the student level of victimization document that seven percent of students report being the target of physical abuse by a school employee, most often a teacher or coach [3]. When multiple forms of assault are combined – verbal sexual misconduct (sexual stories or talk about a student's or teacher's sex life) and visual sexual misconduct (pornography, masturbating in front of students) – 10% of students report being victims nationally. Thus, 5.66 million students report sexual abuse by employees in schools.

Prevention of school employee sexual misconduct requires that bystanders [school staff, parents, other students] understand the behaviors by abusers that would indicate that a student is being targeted for sexual misconduct. These behaviors are referred to as grooming and are red flags that should signal boundary crossing and possible sexual misconduct by an employee.

Documenting and describing these behaviors is a step toward prevention. The more able bystanders are to recognize boundary crossing and grooming – and report what they see – the safer students are from school employee sexual misconduct and abuse in school.

All of the cases reviewed for this chapter include grooming behaviors by the school employee directed toward the student. Abusers used tactics to bond with the student by forming special relationships, keeping secrets, receiving special gifts, and one-on-one attention. Abusers also worked to keep the student reliant on the abuser for emotional support as well as for academic help and gifts. Abusers worked hard to normalize boundary crossing so that these grooming behaviors would go unreported. When they were reported, abusers used traps and threats to prevent disclosure.

Individual targets were not the only ones groomed, however. Parents, siblings, and colleagues were also groomed to like and trust the abuser in an attempt to ensure that the grooming and sexual misconduct directed toward the student would go unreported. While understanding what grooming looks like will not stop all sexual exploitation of students, knowing the warning signs and red flags and reporting them immediately will go a long way in preventing sexual misconduct.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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