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When Abusers Are “Like Us” How can they be stopped?

For people in the business of protecting children, the allegations against Jerry Sandusky are sadly predictable.

While many were shocked that a well-regarded member of the football community could be accused of child sex abuse, professionals in the field say convicted offenders often appear similarly upstanding until they are caught.

"These (offenders) are not milling around looking like monsters. They are like all of us, they do a lot of good things, people love them, and then they have this other behavior that hurts people," says Deborah Rice, executive director of [Stop It Now](#), a nonprofit aimed at preventing child sexual abuse.

Given that offenders can seem so ordinary to the people around them, preventing sexual abuse is not easy. In fact, studies indicate that at least one in seven boys is sexually abused by the age of 18; for girls the number is more like one in three — and perpetrators are nearly always someone the child knows, like relative, a priest — or a coach.

But advocates say there are established ways to root out abuse. The catch is that most sports teams and other "youth-serving" groups operate without the training or systems to do it effectively.

"Ninety-eight percent of the people (working in these organizations) are good people," says Wayne McNeil, co-founder of Canadian company Respect Group Inc., which provides abuse prevention training. "The problem is those good people are not given the right tools to deal with the bad people... to look over their shoulder, see something and say 'that just didn't feel right.'"

The training provided by the Respect Group starts with the premise that coaches and youth-organization leaders have power over the kids — a power that can be abused, or used constructively. It defines forms of abuse from sexual assault to bullying and harassment. It arms "by-standers" with information on warning signs of abuse, and the obligations — legal and moral — to take action, and who to contact in different situations.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [published detailed guidelines](#) for preventing abuse in "youth-serving organizations," but advocates want implementation to be made mandatory — at least for organizations that receive federal funding.

The guidelines address employee and volunteer screening, inappropriate interaction between adults and kids, and how to respond to questionable behavior, allegations of suspicious behavior and breeches of policy, and ways that the organizations physical space should be set up to avoid blind spots where abuse could take place.

"Decision-makers have to go beyond background checks," says Rice. "It's really about people being willing to say that we are going to commit ourselves to standards, policies and procedures... If allegations are brought forward, there need to be procedures that everyone on the staff is aware of."

The Boy Scouts of America is one group advocates say has gone farthest to institute such measures to safeguard kids.

After hundreds of cases of sexual abuse cases involving its volunteers surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s, Boy Scouts of America put in place a Youth Protection Program. All adults are required to take the training before being registered as BSA leaders and must be re-certified every 2 years.

But adoption of measures to protect children from sexual abuse in the United States remain ad hoc, and reporting requirements vary from state to state.

In Canada, however, sex abuse prevention is gaining traction and federal government support, in part because of a high-profile sex abuse scandal that shook the country.

The scandal broke in 1996 when NHL player Sheldon Kennedy went public with his story of sexual abuse by famed hockey coach Graham James that took place over a five-year period when Kennedy was a teenager. The case went to court and Graham pleaded guilty to 350 counts of sexual assault of Kennedy and another unnamed player and was sentenced to three years in jail.

"It was basically the Penn State case of Canada," says Wayne McNeil, a former gymnastics coach who co-founded a sexual abuse prevention firm called Respect Group, Inc. with Kennedy. "Graham was the Joe Paterno of amateur hockey. The team went on to win the Memorial Cup. This guy went on to be Hockey Canada's Man of the Year."

After the initial conviction, other players came forward with allegations of abuse by Graham, including Theo Fleury, who tells his story in the book "Playing with Fire," published in 2010. Fleury has spoken out on the Penn State case, urging assistance for the victims, and urging swift justice for perpetrators and those who failed to take action.

For Kennedy, the takeaway is the need for education on the signs of abuse and what the legal obligations are for people who encounter it.

"We look at all the adults that surrounded the situation there and in my case and there were probably lots of people that had a gut feeling that something wasn't right. We need to give them empowerment and tools to act on their gut feeling," Kennedy told the Calgary Sun. "This is a platform for Penn State and the U.S. football and U.S. sport to get up to snuff, change and start the prevention thing."

An abuse prevention training program developed by Respect Group has been used by about 150,000 people involved in coaching, he said, and adopted by sports organization that include Hockey Canada, US Rowing and US Triathlon. The program is mandatory for every coach at every level in the province of Manitoba. Respect Group gives 10 percent of its profits to the Canadian Red Cross for a separate program.

Now, Respect Group is working with Canada's federal government on potentially creating a national program.

For Rice, of Stop it Now, the discussion needs to move beyond Penn State in this country too.

"It's not about one person, one situation, or one college scandal..." she says, but she hopes the high profile case might act as a catalyst. "Maybe this will be the tipping point in this country."