

Recognizing a Predator

Identification – Warning Signs



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Who can know the darkness of heart that dwells within anyone? Until outed through charges being laid against them, predators are usually impossible to spot. But if we can't spot the child molesters or pedophiles among us, how are we supposed to protect our children? The best we can do in identifying potential molesters is to identify common characteristics of those who have been caught and use them in a list of warning signs.

In the course of researching her book, *Identifying Child Molesters*,¹ Dr. Carla van Dam interviewed over 300 molesters who exhibited similar types of behaviors in social situations. These similar behaviors provide us with a general pattern to watch for. If an individual exhibits enough of these behaviors to arouse concern, he needs to be considered too risky to allow unsupervised around our children. No predator will exhibit all of the signs common to molesters, simply because of human individuality. However, he (or she) will generally exhibit a combination of the signs.

- There will be a general feeling of discomfort in the presence of the person in question.
- An emotionally dysfunctional adult may pay particular attention to a needy child.
- He/she may show a preference for association with children.
- The person in question maintains few friendships in his/her own age bracket.
- He/she has structured access to children. In order to groom a child and his or her parents for the abuse, a child molester has to have a legitimate connection to the child that will allow for the process of time the "grooming" takes. Teaching, bus driving, sports coaching, camp counseling and volunteering to help with children's activities, all offer opportunities to be alone with children with no parental supervision.
- He/she encourages a child to develop feelings, entrapping the young victim in a situation where the child feels that the abuse is legitimized by his or her feelings for the abuser. This is a psychological process known as the "Stockholm Syndrome" where victims develop feelings of attachment to their captors. (As the victims mature, the affection for the abuser usually dwindles and the painful truth emerges.)
- The person in question may have frequent changes of residence or jobs without much discussion about the reasons for the changes.
- While child molesters most often have failed marriages because of their sexual preference, they often stay in the marriage to mask their true intentions. The mate becomes a "front" for a respectable life. While they may indicate to the wife that they simply have no interest in sex, the reality may be quite the opposite.

- There may be a continuation of inappropriate association with children despite concerns expressed by others.
- They may appear disconnected from normal peers.
- They may make reference to children in particularly exalted terms, such as "beautiful," "adorable," or other labels that are said in a way that seem excessive.
- They may seem to have disrespect for social boundaries.
- They may exhibit behavior that seems too good to be true, perhaps being overly helpful.
- They may have a desire for hobbies that seem more appropriate for a child than for an adult, like building miniature trains, collecting toys or whatever.
- They may have either a particularly charming personality or obvious 'loner' qualities, sometimes a combination of both. The charmers are socially appealing but often lack substance in their relationships. There's no sense of genuine bonding at a heart level.
- Lack of development of the capacity for intimacy, resulting in emotional loneliness.
- There may be interaction with young teens at a peer level, engaging in conversations about sex, crushes or whatever would not be normally of interest for an adult to discuss with a teen.
- Playing with children at a peer level; tickling, play fighting etc., to gain confidence and rapport and introduce the child to touching. As the child becomes desensitized to touch in appropriate places, the touch progresses to breasts and genitals.
- Response to concerns with denial and aggression, making the concerned individual feel like a fool
- Maintenance of an image of social acceptability, often taking leadership in children's groups through which to gain the trust of parents and children alike.

Any of these warning signs need to be viewed within the context of an individual's life. For instance, if someone enjoys playing with children *in the company of other adults*, that's normal. If someone is a particularly helpful person but *doesn't seek out the company of children*, that's a wonderful thing. However, if combinations of the above qualities are evident, there's cause for concern and children need to be carefully watched around these people.

A word of caution, about jumping to judgement too quickly: accusing someone of either molesting or appearing to have perverted interest in children is a very grave step to take. Many innocent lives have been ruined through false accusations that leave lives permanently tainted. Don't be a lone-ranger. Seek wise counsel. These situations are generally highly-charged emotionally and judgment can be clouded.

*For more on this topic, order the booklet "Who is the Predator" by Diane Roblin-Lee from our store.

1. Van Dam, Carla (2001). *Identifying Child Molesters, Preventing Child Sexual Abuse by Recognizing the Patterns of the Offenders*, New York: The Halworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press.