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Treating a child who sexually attacked others

Older sexual predators are handled law enforcement, but what do you do with a 7-years old who hurt others? Therapists are here to discuss what makes kids sexually attack others, how to deal with those kids, and whether or not this behavior can be changed. “We don’t only see the sexual abuser” they clarify, “he’s also a son, a brother and a student.”

written by Orin Weinberg

A box full of dolls is placed in the corner of the room. Right next to it is a sandbox with seashells, soldier toys, animal toys and small planes. A perfect picture of a playground. Except, you’re not going to find these dolls at the regular toy store, nor is this the same kind of sandbox you’ll see at your neighborhood’s kindergarten. A closer look will shatter the innocent image and will reveal the truth – these are anatomy dolls, the kind with exposed genitals.

This entire setting can be found at the ELEM offices and is a therapy tool for kids who sexually attacked others, or were attacked by others. “The treatment has to be tailored to the age and the developmental stage of the kid, both cognitively and emotionally. I will not treat a 7-years old child the same way I treat a 30-years old sexual offender, or a 15-years old teen” says counselor Noam Nadar. His voice is soft and he has a warm presence. “Often times we roleplay with the kids to estimate the levels of danger, to process the victim’s or

attacker's trauma, or to talk about what happened. The game is the treatment."

We often hear about cases where a child has been sexually abused by an adult. When this happens, the follow-up is clear and is handled by the police and the courts system. But what happens when the perpetrator himself is a minor? Or further, a child?

It's almost inconceivable to think about a child in terms of "danger" or "attacker" but there's an entire system which deals with cases such as these. While our hearts instinctively go out to the child who was hurt, in order to get to the root of the phenomenon we must ask tough questions about the attackers themselves: How do you even approach a situation in which the attacker is a child? What makes a child sexually hurt another child? What sort of treatment can we give this child to prevent a continuous aggressive behavior? And, would a person who sexually attacked someone as a child grow up to be a sexual offender?

"Kids aren't a miniature version of adults. You can't just take the knowledge we have about adults and teenagers and copy/paste it into kids," says Dr. Talia Etgar, head of the sexual violence field at ELEM. "I will not play with a 17 years old in the sandbox, nor will I have a conversation with a 5 years old." It's hard to estimate the depth of the phenomenon in Israel. "We know of at least a few hundred cases a year, but there are probably more. It's very hard to know what's going on in the field because many do not report."

Let's clarify a few things. A minor is a teenager under the age of 18. After the age of 12 the teenagers are responsible for their criminal activities. Up until the age of 12 we're legally dealing with a child which means he can't be persecuted in court. This is where support groups and organizations like ELEM step in.

But maybe we should rewind, go back to one phone call made by a concerned mother who called the ELEM hotline. "If a

mother says ‘I’d like to consult with you, I’m worried,’ then she has a reason to be worried, she sees something, and she doesn’t think to herself ‘it’ll pass, it’s just kids’ play.’ I truly trust the mothers,” says Etgar. “If they call us, they know they have a reason to.”

“When you’re young you have many more support systems – the parents, social workers, your judo instructor. That’s not the case when you’re 45. The younger you are – the less these patterns are engrained in you.”

The line between normative sexual behavior among children and an out of the ordinary one is slightly blurry, but we must distinguish between scenarios. Often times, children will examine each other by mutually touching each other’s genitals. That will stem from equality in the situation, which origins is a healthy curiosity. That said, some cases require professional intervening.

“The idea is to start as early on as possible, and with that prevent all the obstacles of the journey and help the child. “When you’re young you have many more support systems – the parents, social workers, your judo instructor. That’s not the case when you’re 45. The younger you are – the less these patterns are engrained in you.”

Some kids have been victims themselves and attack others as a result of reliving the trauma, be it through aggressive or violent roleplaying, forced touching of someone else’s genitals, or even the usage of vulgar language. However, Etgar clarifies, “statistically speaking, only 30% of the attackers were past victims themselves.” So, what about the remaining 70%?

“A child can’t go through his life feeling like he’s defective.”

“The sexual offense fulfills an emotional need,” Nadar explains. “It’s not about sex. Each individual has their own dominant emotion which makes them operate a certain way, their own lack of something. The need for attention, boredom, anger, aggressiveness. We at ELEM do a long, thorough risk and needs assessment – we meet with the kid and his parents, we check all the factors in their lives. Emotional, familial, educational, social, neurological. We then try to understand why this specific child chose sex as a way to express his aggressiveness. Many are exposed to porn, be it by surfing the web or with friends. A boy can have low self esteem – he’s weak, he feels like he’s not “manly enough,” he’s being humiliated and insulted by a scolding teacher, and then he watches porn, in which sex serves as a tool for the man’s dominance over the woman, and the boy sees that man as someone who’s powerful through sex. And then it clicks in his mind and he goes – “there, I cracked the code.”

Nadar goes as far as to provide an example for a chain of events in a kid’s life that can create aggressiveness. “Let’s say the kid has ADHD. The kid then feels like he’s defective, uncomfortable in his own skin, doing badly at school, and the kid is also impulsive so he harasses other kids and they harass him, and there’s fighting, and hitting, a fundamental feeling of being unworthy. He just feels bad in general. And then some psychological processes occur. A child can’t go through his life feeling like he’s defective, so instead, he projects it to the outside world. The world becomes threatening, the kid projects this aggressiveness onto the world, and then he must defend himself from that world. That’s how a relationship of anger and aggressiveness begins, and it all originates in this feeling of being defective.”

That explains why a child can act violently, but why would that manifest specifically with sex violence?

“He’s somehow exposed to this idea. For example, the arousal makes him feel good. The sexual pleasure provides a sense of calm and lowers the anxiety levels. So maybe he started masturbating or he has been exposed to sexual relations, or his friends are talking about it. The major point is that it’s not about the sex. It is about a different emotional need.”

Nadar provides us with another possible chain of events that can end in sexual aggression: “Every person in this world has a dominating emotion. Let’s say the kid is hurt because the teacher yells at him. There’s a specific event that doesn’t have anything to do with sex, but it triggers that dominating emotion. Which is followed by thoughts that feed the anger. “This damn teacher, I’m a failure, I’ll slash her tires.” Another person would think “I failed the test but I’ll get a better grade next time.” Then, the kid moves on to do things that lift up his inhibitions, such as watching porn, lack of sleep, alcohol. Then he starts planning. Then there’s the manipulation of the victim, then there’s the attack, and then he keeps thinking about what happened, which is accompanied by masturbation, then there’s the low of the aftermath. It’s not enough for him anymore. Later, someone will insult him again, which will lead to him attacking again.

Does that mean that in most cases an attacker will attack others again?

More often than not he’ll hurt someone more than once. These offenses continue, and escalate. The idea of the treatment is to teach him to take responsibility for his actions in life, the feelings, these errors in his way of thinking, and he learns that he can stop, or break that chain of events at any given moment.”

It’s important to point out that up until a certain age the percentage of boys who attack is equal to that of the girls. But later on we see an increase in the number of offending boys which is why this article is using a male pronoun: “It is very evident that with older age more of the attackers are men and more of the victims are women,” says Etgar. “It’s harder to find

a female attacker because when a female sexually attacks it's in contrast to two common stigmas. That of the gentle woman, and that of a woman being a sexual offender. It doesn't bode well in our minds."

So would a boy often choose to sexually attack girl?

Nadar: "It's more about availability. Often times a boy will choose another boy and it has nothing to do with a homosexual orientation. It's unrelated. What matters is for the other person to be weaker than him, be it status or size or age, or it being a girl. It can happen at home, at school, on the school bus, anywhere."

Do you see common characteristics in kids who sexually attacked, or in adults who sexually attacked when they were kids?

Etgar: "Often times in researches we look into social-economic parameters to see if the offender belongs to certain demographics. We'll look into his parents' profession, his ethnicity, financial standing, level of education, and let me tell you, we found no conclusion in regards to sexual attackers. They can be from anywhere, Arabs, Jews, Muslims, Bedouins, Kibbuz kids, settlers, religious, secular. They can be from all throughout the country and that's the point – you just don't know."

"Sometimes the child functions normally in school, in his social life, and it all seems okay, but within him there's this secret where he stores all the excitements, the vulnerabilities and the emotions."

During our conversation in Nadar's office he receives a phone call from his patient – a teenager who notifies Nadar that he'll be late. "Try to be punctual," Nadar comments, authoritative.

Then he explains the importance of setting clear boundaries: “Anyone who sexually hurts others has a fundamental issue with comprehension of boundaries. He broke in, penetrated someone else’s body, and broke every norm and religious or state law in order to satisfy his own need. This is why the treatment itself has often times very clear boundaries.”

Those who hurt hold on to a secret, which allows them to sort of live a double life: “Sometimes the child functions normally in school, in his social life, and it all seems okay, but within him there’s this secret where he stores all the excitements, the vulnerabilities and the emotions.”

As we mentioned, when a sexual attack occurs by someone at a young age, parties other than the courts system are required to intervene. One of these parties is the welfare clerk. She sits down with the attacker’s family and together they lay down what is known as a “protective plan: “We saw that his self-policing failed, his system of inhibitions was shattered, which is why we have to form a plan to make sure he doesn’t hurt someone in school anymore, and also so he doesn’t get hurt himself. We need to find a way to supervise him according his specific needs,” Nadar points out.

If a child who attacked won’t be treated, how likely is it that he’ll grow up to be a sex offender?

“It is highly likely. Some researches also claim that he’ll be anti-social. It doesn’t have to be sexual, but there will be an escalation in these aggressive patterns. It is incredibly important that we treat these cases to prevent additional victims, but for his sake, too, which is why the treatment sees the kid as a whole, and looks at all aspect of his life. At school, at soccer practice with his coach, we look at everyone who can help him and fulfill his unsatisfied needs.”

Etgar tells us of an 11 years old who came to her after what she refers to as “five incidents of inappropriate contact with others’ bodies.” During the diagnosis, 20 incidents of full penetration came to light. During therapy that number jumped

to 60. “We must understand that treating those who hurt at present will prevent victims in the future,” she emphasized.

Do kids such as these stand a chance of rejoining society and being “normal?”

“Yes.”

Etgar points out the major thing to keep in mind when one wants to treat a kid who attacked others. “Each one of us, kids too, have aggressive parts and victim parts within us. We have to look at the kid as a sum of his parts. “We don’t only see the sexual attacker, put that label on him and that’s that. I must also see the parts that are hurt, the sad parts, the frustrated and aggressive ones. It doesn’t mean that I say to him ‘what you did was no big deal.’ Absolutely not. I believe you have to tell the truth.”

“Some kids and teens transfer from one kindergarten to another, from one school to another, from one yeshiva to another, and nobody reports that they had sexually attacked someone. ‘Because if I do, no one will accept him and he’ll stay here.’”

One of the issues Etgar points to is families who do not report about an attack: “This phenomenon exists in all demographics, but sometimes there’s the issue of the family’s honor. This term is more associated with the Arabic demographic, and in the orthodox community a girl might not be able to marry if it becomes known that her brother attacked someone.”

Sometimes there’s also no reporting when a child is being transferred from one educational institution to another. “Some kids and teens transfer from one kindergarten to another, from one school to another, from one yeshiva to another, and

nobody reports that they had sexually attacked someone. 'Because if I do, no one will accept him and he'll stay here. And I want to get rid of that hot potato.' I understand the issue, but I absolutely do not accept this line of action. When I speak with social workers or teachers I tell them 'you'll sit in front of the next victim and say to them – I knew and did nothing.'"

So as a parent, how can I tell if my child attacked someone?

Nadar: That is quite the question. You don't always see changes on the outside like you do with a victim. Those can be mood swings, eating disorders or internalizing. In the attacker's case, the incidents rejuvenates him, make him feel good, satisfy some unfulfilled emotional needs. He receives a very strong sexual satisfaction, and also a satisfaction from harboring a secret and the feeling of control. It is incredibly fulfilling. They will never submit themselves to treatment because who would want to stop something that causes this much pleasure? As parents, often time this can shatter our worlds. How can it be that my child did something like this?"

Still, the message is clear: As a parent, if you suspect an abnormal sexual activity of your child, turning to support from organizations such as ELEM while things are still treatable and flexible is crucially important. "It's important to understand that this is therapy. It's not chemical castration, nor injections nor medications," Nadar explains. "We deeply respect the child even if he sexually attacked someone. We condemn the act, but we separate the act from the child. We're practicing caution and trying to balance between the need to protect society, and labeling the kid in a way that will destroy his life and will create even more hurt all around."

ELEM's hotline: 972-3-6477898