



## The Awareness Center, Inc.

P.O. Box 65273, Baltimore, MD 20209

[www.theawarenesscenter.org](http://www.theawarenesscenter.org)

(443) 857-5560

### When A Family Member Molests: Reality, Conflict, and The Need For Support

(© 2003) By Vicki Polin, MA, LCPC, Michael J. Salamon, Ph.D., FICPP, and Na'ama Yehuda, MSC, SLP, TSHH

Among the many issues that need to be addressed when discussing Childhood Sexual Abuse, is the rarely discussed topic of family members of alleged/convicted sex offenders. Family members include spouses, children, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins, as well as close friends.

It's a tough place to be. Think about it—what would you do if you suspected that someone you are related to or are friends with is being sexually inappropriate with a child? Would you talk to him/her about it? Would you tell another family member or friend? Would you share it with your rabbi? Would your rabbi know what to do? Would you seek professional help or advice? Should you keep quiet to protect your family member or sound the whistle to protect other children? How would your community react if they knew someone in your family molested? Would your community's expected reaction influence any decision you'd make? These are just few of the numerous dilemmas and questions regularly posted to The Awareness Center.

One of our advisory board members recently received a call from a parent of a seventeen-year-old boy. The father was concerned that his son might be abusing a six-year old girl. The little girl is the father's granddaughter and the boy's niece. The father wanted to protect his granddaughter but was deeply conflicted—he didn't want to get his son in trouble. Following a lengthy discussion, the father was advised to report the situation to the authorities, but out of fear for his son chose not to, even though he was still afraid for his granddaughter. Fortunately for the child (and hopefully the teenager boy as well, who also needs help) the father had contacted a professional who is a mandated reporter (an individual who is mandated by law to call a child abuse hotline to report cases of suspected abuse), and a report was made. However, what if this father contacted someone else, someone who was not a mandated reporter, or someone who was a mandated reporter yet decided to overlook their legal obligation and accede to this father's fears for his seventeen-year-old son and his promise to keep the son away from the granddaughter? Granted, the father may be successful in keeping his grandchild safe, but by doing so he would open the door for his son to seek out other victims, let alone prevent his son from getting much needed help.

In another case, years of allegations of sexual misconduct have been brought up against a rabbi from a prominent family. The first allegations were made when he was a still teenager—individuals close to a family member reported that one of the yet-to-be-rabbi younger siblings claimed to have been sexually victimized by him and a group of his friends in a gang rape. The alleged offenders and alleged victim's parents were aware of the situation, yet nothing was done to protect other children from future harm. Given that this case happened years ago, appropriate treatment for the alleged

offender(s) may not have been available. However, the parents might have still been able to find ways to help their son stay away from children. They did not, and some years later the same alleged offender, now a rabbi, worked at a school, putting innocent children at risk, and allegedly continuing to molest. Once again, his parents kept his alleged past offenses quiet, choosing to protect their son and by doing so discrediting his victims. An agreement was reportedly made, where the "alleged sex offending" rabbi was to never be allowed a teaching position again. However, twenty years later the rabbi unilaterally reversed the agreement, and now there are new alleged victims. Did the family members (parents, siblings and close friends) of this alleged offender have a moral obligation to speak out and protect others, given their awareness of his past? Do they have a moral obligation to speak now? Does a family member who knowingly keeps quiet carry part of the responsibility for future victimization by their kin?

A neighbor of a seventeen-year old girl contacted The Awareness Center. The neighbor was haunted by an experience that happened a few years ago. The girl, whom we'll call "Marcy", used to baby-sit for the neighbor's two younger children on a regular basis from the time she was twelve to about fifteen. The neighbor told us that she had suspected the girl was depressed for some time, but couldn't quite put her finger on what was wrong. She'd tried talking to Marcy many times, yet Marcy never disclosed anything. One evening, Marcy came banging on that neighbor's backdoor, begging to be let in. Marcy was barefoot (there was snow on the ground), and was squinting and couldn't see (she usually wore either glasses or contacts, but didn't have either on that night). The neighbor let her in. Marcy ran to the windowless basement, stating again and again, "my father's after me", "he's going to kill me", "I don't know what to do or where to go!" Marcy went on to tell the neighbor about her father's violent temper and disclosed that her father took her shoes, glasses, and contact lenses, and sent her to her room. She said that her father had been hitting her and that she was afraid he'd come back to her bedroom to continue. The neighbor told us that she'd felt in a bind—wanting to help Marcy, but not knowing what to do. It was obvious to her that the girl was terrorized and needed a respite.

About ten minutes later, Marcy's father came knocking on the door. The neighbor answered the door, but lied and told the father that she was unaware of Marcy's whereabouts, and that she'd tell him if Marcy should come by. The father left and the neighbor asked Marcy if she had a relative who would help her. Marcy called her aunt and uncle, who came to get her.

A few years later, this neighbor heard rumors that the seventeen-year old girl had attempted suicide. She also learned that there were allegations of childhood sexual

abuse. The neighbor felt guilty for not making a report to the child abuse hotline in her state the night Marcy came seeking refuge in her house. She wonders if making the call would have gotten Marcy the help she needed, stopped the abuse, and prevented Marcy from getting so desperate that she tried to end her life.

A forth case comes to mind: a rabbi pled guilty to attempted child endangerment charges after being caught in a police Internet sex sting operation. Authorities said that this rabbi struck up a conversation with a police detective posing as a 13-year-old girl after entering an on-line chat room called "I Love Older Men." The rabbi was arrested and is currently in therapy, having pled guilty as part of a plea deal to avoid a prison sentence of up to four years. He is slated to be sentenced this month (October, 2003) to five years probation with treatment and registration as a sex offender. This rabbi is married and has a young child. What support system is in place to help his wife and child? If the rabbi was ready to have sex with a 13-year-old child, is his own child safe in his home? The convicted rabbi isn't in prison—where does he stay? Does his neighbors know about his criminal behavior? Are the children in that community safe? What protocols had been put in place to ensure that these important issues are being addressed? What should be his standing as a member of the community, as part of a Minyan?

It is interesting that family members are usually not mandated to report a relative whom they suspect is a sex offender. Professionals who are mandated reporters have a clear requirement: the law states that if there is any reasonable cause to suspect abuse, the mandated reporter must report. When it comes to family members, the conflict of interest is easy to understand, but the question still remains—even without a legal obligation, isn't there a moral obligation to protect children from being victimized?

Dealing with sex offenders and their family members presents complex ethical issues. What can be harder than being the mother or the father of a sex offender? Denial is clearly the first line of defense, because who in their right mind wants to believe that their offspring, someone they love and care for, could hurt a child? How can a parent even think of supposedly relinquishing their instinct to protect their child by reporting him or her to the authorities? It is a terrible dilemma. Could you as a parent turn your child over to the police? Could you force an adult child of yours into sex offender treatment? And what would friends and other family members think if they learned that you were the parent of a sexual predator? A similar between a rock and a hard place is the reality for people who are married to sex offenders. If your spouse molests children outside the home, could he/she be molesting yours, too? What about the stigma and shame if anyone learned your secret, learned that you married, live with and or bed such a person? And what about the children of a sex offender—how would you feel if you were one? How would you face your friends, schoolmates, or co-workers once your parent's criminal behavior was made public? Would you still be allowed in your friends' homes? Would you still have friends? Would you and your siblings face shunning and stigma come marriage age?

The dilemma isn't limited to blood relatives. What if it's a close friend who was charged with sex offences? A business associate? Or even your rabbi? What is one to do?

These heartbreaking and complicated issues are real, and need to be addressed. We need to address them as a community. Every sex offender has parents, family, friends and colleagues—people who are close to him/her and are faced with this reality, often unprepared, and in many ways, also victimized, hurt, confused, disillusioned, and ashamed.

Do you know of a family member or friend of an alleged or convicted sex offender? It is critical that you don't turn your backs on them. They need your support. Put yourself in their place. If you were one, what would you need?

The spouse of an alleged and/or convicted sex offender may need financial support while the offender is in prison and or treatment. If there are children in the home, the non-abusive spouse may have to keep them away from the offender to keep them safe. Can you imagine the feelings of anger, shame, guilt, and fear that the non-offending parent will need to deal with?

Every member of a family of alleged and/or convicted sex offenders will need the community's emotional, financial, and spiritual support. And what a difference such support can make in the healing process of non-offending family members; versus them being shunned for their "association" with a sexual predator and/or for helping to stop the abuse... If support is offered more cases would be reported and subsequently more children will be kept safe and those who have already been victimized will get the help they need.

There is no doubt that we all have a moral obligation to help stop abuse so that offenders cease to victimize and the victims receive the healing they deserve. It is our obligation to report abuse and protect the children. Whether we know the offender or not, hiding, denying and covering up his or her actions make us accomplices to the crime. At the same time, the pain of having a family member or friend who is a sex offender has to be one of the hardest pains to bear. How can one be expected to report an abusive family member and not only lose their previous image of this person, but also their place in the community? It is also our moral obligation, as a community, to offer a holding environment (not shunning and shame) for all families torn by abuse—those of the victims, and that of the offender.