

What is Molestation?

Molestation refers to any inappropriate intimate activity perpetrated against a child (under the age of 18) and includes:

- Inappropriate and abusive physical contact
 - o Touching a child in any private areas with any body part or object
 - o Forcing a child to touch one's private areas
 - o Any *untznias* or intimate touch with a child
- Inappropriate behaviors that do not include physical contact
 - o Speaking intimately or in a way that is *untznias* with a child
 - o Showing one's private areas to a child
 - o Forcing a child to show his or her private areas
 - o Forcing a child to look at pictures or videos of people engaging in *untznias* or intimate acts
 - o Watching a child in private or intimate situations such as undressing, bathing, etc.
 - o Forcing a child to watch one in private or intimate situations

Any intimate behavior with a child is inappropriate, illegal, and harmful, and can cause serious long term pain and damage.

Child molestation occurs more often than we might imagine; **1 out of every 3 girls and 1 out of every 6 boys**, even in *our* communities, are abused before the age of 18. Children who have been abused once are often vulnerable to being abused again by others. The abuse may be a one-time occurrence, or it may last months or years, if no one intervenes.

Who would molest a child?

There exists a myth that abuse is perpetrated by scary dangerous strangers, and therefore to avoid them at all costs: "don't get in the car with someone you don't know," "don't open the door unless you know who it is," "don't take candy from a stranger, etc." This deeply ingrained lesson is one we continue to pass on to our children in hopes of protecting them from harm. However, it is critical to know that **in 9 out of 10 cases of abuse, children are violated by someone they know and trust** (60% by family friends and acquaintances such as a babysitter, childcare provider, teacher, neighbor, or friend, and 30% by a family member such as cousins, siblings, uncles, or parents).

There is, unfortunately, no clear profile of a molester; molesters can be:

- Men or women
- Rich or poor
- Children or adults
- People who are healthy or people who are mentally ill
- People who have been victims of abuse as children or people who have had healthy childhoods
- Strangers, neighbors, or family members, etc.
- Laypeople or people in positions of authority (Teachers, Rabbis, Coaches, etc.)
- Pedophiles (people innately attracted to children) or regular people who choose to abuse
- Religious or secular people
- People who seem friendly and kind or people who seem dark and scary
- Able-bodied people or people with disabilities
- People who are single or people who are married
- Professionals or non-professionals
- People who are charming and popular or people who are introverted and withdrawn

When learning about cases of abuse, our initial thought may be "There is no way! Such a person/someone in this position would never do such a thing!" Therefore, when developing or implementing tools to protect our children and communities, we must keep in mind the inability to profile an abuser based on external characteristics. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of creating prevention policies against certain **behaviors (not people)** instead of superficially profiling. It also indicates the importance of speaking to children about safety and abuse in a more nuanced and sensitive way – teaching them to trust their feelings and speak up when anything makes them uncomfortable. Educating children is not a one time conversation, but rather an ongoing part of the parenting process.

Understanding how abuse occurs will allow us to take measures to prevent it

There are three conditions that an abuser usually needs in order to molest a child:

- a) **Trust** of the child and their family – so they can have complete access to the child
- b) **Opportunity** - to find a time and space to be alone with the child out of the view of others
- c) **Secrecy** – to ensure they will not be caught and have to stop their abusive actions

Abusers achieve this through a "grooming" process – assessing the child and his or her vulnerability, and setting the stage for the abuse to be able to take place without getting caught. Abusers groom **both the child and the child's gatekeeper** (parent, teacher, camp counselor, etc.) to ensure they drop their guards, and allow them free access, crossing limits gradually, assessing if there are any consequences.

Be aware of the following behaviors of an individual in order to identify and stop potential situations of abuse.

Grooming strategies includes:

- Identifying the potential victim - targeting vulnerable children by befriending or offering unusual attention
- Spending a lot of time alone with a specific child or a specific group of children
- Becoming friends with a potential victim, earning their trust, becoming their secret confidante
- Building a trusting relationship with the family/gatekeepers – charming them, buying gifts, helping around the house, etc.
- Spending a lot of time with the child during personal, intimate or vulnerable times such as bathing, dressing or bedtime.
- Lowering inhibitions – once trust is established, the abuser will test and blur boundaries with small intimate behaviors – jokes, roughhousing, backrubs, tickling, 'accidental' touch', to assess whether or not the child will share it with someone
- Treating the child as special and showering him or her with compliments and gifts
- Sharing personal secrets
- Isolating the child from his or her support system through the gifts, manipulation and trickery
- Intimidating - using fear, shame or guilt to ensure the child complies with their requests
- Threatening the child or their family – e.g. 'your parents will have a heart attack,' 'you will be kicked out of shul,' 'no one will want to marry you if they find out what you have done,' etc.

What kind of children are targets?

Abuse is always the fault of the abuser, **never** of the victim (no matter what they say, do, or wear). All children are vulnerable to being victims of abuse, irrespective of their gender, socioeconomic situation, geographic location, religious level, ability or disability, or position in the community.

Abusers tend to pick children who are vulnerable in some way, children who are struggling, need affection, and who are **unlikely to be believed if they do tell**. Specifically, they often look for children without an open channel of communication with their parents or guardians.

The life-shattering painful impact of abuse:

Molestation can have a very serious short and long term impact on a child¹, especially when left untreated. It can affect them:

- Physically (diseases, health issues, eating disorders, substance abuse disorder)
- Emotionally (shame, anger, mood swings, fractured sense of self, helplessness, self-disgust, guilt, self-blame, anger, lack of control, loneliness)
- Mentally (depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harming behavior, suicide)
- Behaviorally (aggression, defiance, acting out at school and home, hyperactivity, crime, promiscuity)
- Socially and relationally (disconnect from family, friends and activities, inability to trust, difficulty building and sustaining healthy relationships, vulnerability to be abused in other relationships)
- Academically (absence, drop out, difficulty focusing or concentrating)
- Career (difficulty obtaining and maintaining a job)
- Religiously (losing faith in Hashem, Torah, and the community)

Any type of abuse – with or without touching, can be extremely traumatic and requires professional intervention. Because children are resilient, there is every reason to believe that with the proper intervention and healing, they can go on to live healthy, happy and successful lives.