What Parents Can Do About Bullies and Predators

Abstract: We can help young children to name abuse of many kinds by extending the reach of those familiar rules "no hitting" and "no taking away." Doing so can encourage children to turn to us for help restoring their emotional equilibrium after an episode of teasing, ostracism, or emotional abuse. Children may not instantly recognize that illicit sexual behavior from an otherwise-trusted adult violates their own crucial psychic and bodily boundaries, but they may recognize "bad feelings"—and know what to do, which is to turn to parents for solace.

Teaching our adolescents about sexual ethics has always been difficult; warning our children about pedophilia seems nearly impossible. How can we warn them of hazards that are too devastating for a child even to imagine? And yet we must protect them somehow. Horrific story after horrific story about sexual abuse by Catholic clergy testifies in bone-chilling detail to the spectacular complexity of this problem. Abused children very seldom tell adults about what has happened to them, and furthermore adults can be slow to recognize murky complaints about other adults they themselves trust. A hesitant, guilt-laden child plus an oblivious adult is a toxic mix indeed.

Experts have known all this for decades, but news coverage no doubt has many good parents lying awake at night. Facing up to our own unconscious denial is one thing: I can't help with that. But I do have something to offer on the other side of this sad equation: we can help to equip children to recognize and to name what is wrong when someone abuses them. The challenge, however, is to do so without destroying their ability to trust and to enjoy healthy, nurturant intimacy with adults other than their parents. We can do this, I will propose, if first we name and teach them to name the psychological abuse that is commonplace school-yard bullying.

But to understand how this technique might work for preventing chronic sexual abuse, first we have to examine--and change--the interlocked metaphors that ordinarily permeate how we think about sexuality. We need to understand that marriage is a variety of friendship, so that "sex education" becomes part of our ongoing effort to teach our children about how to be friends--and how to cope when friendship is betrayed.

Metaphor and Sexual Ethics

As we all know, in the ancient world marriage was a property contract, not the culmination of a romantic relationship. The social and legal purpose of marriage was primarily to insure legitimate heirs by strictly controlling the reproductive potential of fertile women, and secondarily to facilitate and to stabilize relationships between and among extended families. The man and the woman at the nexus of these needs had a say in the matter informally if at all: parents and other elders were formally in control of the whole process.

As arranged marriage gradually gave way to romantic or companionate marriage, commonplace metaphors of marriage gradually but incompletely shifted their referent. At the core of contemporary sexual ethics, one is still apt to find metaphoric variations upon the topos of property rights. Roughly speaking, we tend to substitute interpersonal or psychic property for the material property that was once central to marriage contracts. We see marriage partners as

having an "exclusive right" to certain aspects of one another's emotions and, correlatively, exclusive rights of sexual access.

Submerged property-rights metaphors for sexual relationships generate pervasive and intriguing difficulties in our thinking about marriage and about sexuality, especially at the popular level where these metaphors are least likely to be recognized as metaphors. I explore these problems in some detail in *For Fidelity: How Intimacy and Commitment Enrich Our Lives* (Knopf, 1998) and so, albeit reluctantly, I won't stop here to explicate the patterns again. My deeper concern at the moment is how submerged, inadequate metaphors for sexual relationships serve to disguise the ways in which parents can help to protect their children from sexual predators.

Within the property-rights view of sexual ethics, sexual abuse is imagined primarily as a violation of the person's exclusive rights of control over his or her own body, especially its sexual parts or responses. While sexual abuse certainly does violate boundaries in this way, that is a partial and inadequate account of the suffering inflicted. In particular, it is an inadequate formulation if your concern is preventing the sexual abuse of a child, or teaching children to react immediately if they are assaulted. Young children, even pubescent children, may not instantly recognize that illicit sexual behavior from an otherwise-trusted adult violates their own crucial psychic and bodily boundaries.

If we can step outside property-rights metaphors, however, we can see this issue in a far more useful way: sexual abuse, especially the sexual abuse of a child, also involves the devastating betrayal of a trusted relationship. Most such abusers, after all, are not total strangers to the child. They are, at one level or another, part of the child's psychologically-crucial array of trusted adults. The pain that follows from sexual exploitation, even among sexually consenting adults, arises from the reality of interpersonal betrayal, not simply from the violation of bodily boundaries or erotic responses. (The relationship between erotic responsiveness and one's sense-of-self is explicated in detail in *For Fidelity*.)

In *For Fidelity*, I argue that sexual ethics is best understood not as some metaphoric extension of traditional property rights but rather as a subset of interpersonal ethics. The difference between the two approaches is enormous. My arguments there were designed primarily to help other parents solve a quandary I was facing in my own life: I needed to find ways to explain sexual fidelity that would effectively nurture the sexual development of my own adolescent children. I wanted to encourage their development toward a sense of themselves, a sense of their bodies, and a sense of social relatedness that would naturally culminate in a refusal to exploit or to be exploited sexually. If the fear of damnation had not restrained my sense of adventure in the late 1960s, I found it hard to imagine that the fear of AIDS would constrain them! More to the point, decades of marriage had convinced me that marital sexuality is spectacularly more nuanced than exclusive property rights to certain body parts. I wanted more for my children than merely avoiding promiscuity. I wanted them to achieve fidelity and all the blessings it entails. Neither contract law nor the fear of contagion offered any basis for naming-and claiming-the blessings of mature, committed sexual relationships.

The best way to achieve these goals, I decided, was very firmly to reject property-rights metaphors. In the eyes of the state, I admit, marriage is a legal contract that confers a wide array

of property rights. But in the eyes of the Christian community, sacramental matrimony is a variety of friendship. It is different in degree but not in kind from other varieties of friendship. As a result, all the classic virtues of friendship are relevant: loyalty; kindness; restraint; mutuality; and above all, uniquely among even serious friendships, unconditional life-long commitment.

The signal advantage of this approach is that we are teaching our children about the virtuous friendship beginning by age four at the latest. Even pre-schoolers are quick to value and to understand such qualities as loyalty, kindness, and fair play. Teens who grew up understanding what is wrong about exploiting or being exploited for access to favorite toys--or algebra homework--are well situated to recognize what's wrong with sexual exploitation as well. All we have to do is convince them that sexual desire is essentially different from the desire for new sneakers or pepperoni pizza.

Sexual Ethics, Interpersonal Ethics, and Friendship

Understanding sexual ethics in this way also opens out practical, developmentally sensitive, deeply humane possibilities for helping our children--especially our younger children--to recognize sexual abuse for what it is. In particular, how can we equip children to recognize that a trusted adult has behaved in ways that are seriously wrong? How can we teach them to see through not only the complicating layers of legitimate authority but also their own developmentally-necessary need to trust the adults upon whom they depend?

I have been haunted by that question for months and for many reasons--not the least of which is the fact that I grew up in a close-knit Irish-Catholic world where the parish priest was accepted without question as a trusted member of the extended family. My parents were both very feisty liberals, alert to all the ways in which power corrupts and quick recognize the abuse of authority--including ecclesial authority. Nonetheless, the depth of their personal deference to a priest was unmistakable. I was an adult myself before I understood how sacramental theology reconciled this personal deference to the sacramental charism with their staunch political opposition to overweening pastors, arrogant bishops, and when necessary the pope. As a child, however, I saw little of their essentially unruly independence: I doubt that I saw it clearly until Humanae Vita, released when I was in high school. When I was a young child, what impressed me most was my parents' richly deferential personal courtesy to nuns and to priests, and how they welcomed them into the house as uniquely honored guests. Nuns carried a double measure of womanly authority in what was an essentially matriarchal subculture. And every priest, any priest, was like a very special uncle. The majority of them, men and women alike, lived up to that esteem.

So how can anyone protect a child from abuse by an adult so visibly respected by parents? Furthermore, this hazard extends to include any adult acknowledged by parents as an appropriate authority or honored as a friend, as kinfolk, or as social elder. In the child's eye, that status is apt to be extended to *anyone's* father, uncle, grandfather, etc. "Do what adults tell you" is both a very dangerous rule-of-thumb to teach our children and an absolutely necessary teaching in our times, when children are so often in the care of non-parents. This is a devastating Catch-22: the

adults we must trust to protect them when we are absent are, by virtue of this trust, also the cohort of adults statistically most apt to rape or to assault them sexually. And so my question remains: what--if anything--might equip a child to ask for help after devastating abuse by legitimate authority? Until we have some ideas on this question, there is little that family ministers can do to meet this extraordinary need among the families to whom they minister.

In what follows, I want to sketch a few ideas extrapolated from the analysis I offered in *For Fidelity*. Alas, it is no guarantee. But it is a possibility. Furthermore, it can be easily incorporated into family ministry programs that are already using my work to help parents to develop within their children the capacity for mature sexual fidelity.

Interpersonal Ethics and the Preschooler

What every four-year old wants for Christmas is a social secretary and a chauffeur: at about that age, they discover the thrill of making friends outside the primary family. They desperately--and appropriately--want to "go play," but few of us live in a community where children can simply be allowed out the back door to find playmates on their own. We have to make these arrangements for them. Furthermore, the play of preschoolers needs fairly close supervision, because they are at the very beginning of a long social development: children have to be taught how to be friends. Children also have to be taught how to respond when their playmates behave in unfriendly ways. Learning how to behave, and learning how to respond appropriately to misbehavior, are among the essential social tasks of middle childhood. Parents know this. Parents live into this reality for years on end.

And so it is a solid foundation upon which to teach vocabulary and to teach responses that may help to detoxify the hazardous interaction between a reluctant, terribly confused child and a dangerously oblivious adult. What I have in mind is a metaphoric extension of those two familiar rules, "no hitting" and "no taking away."

Children will have developmentally appropriate difficulty controlling their urges to smack and to snatch, but they seem to have no difficulty understanding nonviolence as a ground rule, nor the concept that possession is 100 percent of the law unless an adult intervene. Parents cope endlessly with complaints that "Jane hit me!" or "Jimmy took my truck!" because the interlocked principles of "no hitting" and "no taking away" seem to rule out the only responses a five-year-old can imagine. In my house, we settled conflicts over toys by setting time limits to possession, enforced by a kitchen timer set on top of the television in the family room where they played. This seemed to control most of the interpersonal violence among my twins and their slightly-older brother. But we went through five or six timers in ten years or so, because frustrated children now and then took out their unhappiness upon timers that had appeared either to stop time altogether or to accelerate it unfairly. They are all in college now, but they still remember hating that timer.

More importantly, however, they remember understanding how the hated timer enforced the objective justice of "no hitting" and "no taking away." A rudimentary form of the Golden Rule

was not over their heads conceptually even then, as every parent knows who has ever had to cope with a child wailing, "that's not fair!"

By the time children are old enough to bully and to abuse one another verbally, they are probably capable of extending the principle of no hitting to include not only physical smacks but also taunting, name-calling, and all-purpose cruelty. And so, we can teach young children to name abuse of many kinds by extending the domain governed by these familiar rules. Just as it is wrong to hit someone on the outside or to hurt them on the outside, we might explain, it is also wrong to "hit" someone on the inside and to make them feel bad on the inside. What is "taken away" in such situations is the good feeling a person has about herself. And as children learn (more or less successfully) to turn to an adult for help rather than slugging the toy-thief, so also children can be taught to turn to us to recover the good feelings inside that the bully has wrongfully "taken away." In his splendid, beautifully documented, theologically sophisticated book *Bullying: A Spiritual Crisis*, Ronald Hecker Cram argues that bullies always seek to shadow or to delete some aspect of another child's identity (Cram 2003, p. 68). I agree that sometimes bullying can be quite specific, especially among older, more articulate children. But for our youngest children, the loss is less defined. That makes bullying more dangerous, not less so: the losses involved can be more nearly global in their emotional scope.

So what do we do when they turn to us? We explain, and we console. We explain that bullies are mean because they feel bad deep inside, and the only way they can cope with how they feel is to try to make other people feel even worse. Bullies don't feel good about themselves, so they try to feel "powerful" instead. But that never works. Being mean to someone makes a person small and contemptible--not powerful. This oft-repeated explanation is only part--and perhaps not the crucial part--of what parents can do. What matters most is the sympathy of our engagement with them, not its content: endocrinologists and neuroscientists investigating the physiology of stress document how our efforts to soothe one another can quite effectively ratchet down the body's complex response to anxiety, to anger, to frustration, to isolation, and so forth (Siegel 1999, Sternberg 2000, Taylor 2002). Our calm, sympathetic, responsive presence helps to restore normal chemical balances and to halt the flood of stress-related hormones.

We cannot change the outer world--ordinarily there is little we can do to stop the behavior of a bully--but our kindness can certainly can change the inner world of our children in measurable and quite important ways. It is hard to learn this practice of "presence" when what we want is a magic wand to make the world a better place. Because we cannot exert that kind of control, we are of course tempted to dismiss the child's dismay, to brush it off as whining that does not merit our attention in the first place. But there are huge benefits--physiologically demonstrable benefits--if we do learn how to provide supportive presence.

We can teach our children to turn to us for a patient, thoughtful, sympathetic hearing. We can teach them to turn to us for the essential re-affirmations that can help to restore their emotional equilibrium after an episode of teasing, ostracism, or emotional abuse. "I need a hug" is thus a useful addition to the familiar request to "kiss and make it better." "I need a hug" is a handy adjunct to requests for help because "Sam hit me!" or "Mary Beth took my doll!" Furthermore, needing a hug can generalize nicely to include the request for solace after encounters with mean teachers, snide coaches, and so forth. I hope it would also extend to include encounters with

sexual predators: even if the child cannot name and does not exactly understand what was wrong with the encounter, the child may recognize "bad feelings"-and know what to do about them, which is to turn to parents for solace. A child who does not turn for help faces instead an inexorable process whereby his or her own pain turns instead into terribly corrosive guilt and shame.

Nonviolence and Forgiveness

That all sounds so simple. It sounds so sweet, such a Norman Rockwell scene: kiss and make it better for scraped knees and bruised souls alike. But it is not simple. It is not simple at all, nor is it easy. Many parents brush aside incessant whining about what so-and-so said, or--more dangerously--the complaint that "nobody likes me." The reasons why we do so are deeply seated indeed.

We can intervene like gods to restore the pick-up truck to its rightful owner. We can set timers that tick-tock with the objectivity of Newton to enforce turns at some electronic toy. It is spectacularly more difficult to cope wisely and resiliently with how children verbally abuse one another, because we can feel powerless, or nearly so, just as the taunted child is powerless. Ranting and raging at the teacher or the principal (and in particularly egregious or dangerous situations I confess to doing some of that) often leaves the child feeling helpless and victimized: children desperately and appropriately need to feel that they can cope with these situations "on their own" even if with our moral support. Furthermore, if the bully or the truly mean teacher persists, as often they do, parental apoplexy can make the child feel actively worse because the parent is now humiliated as well.

It is difficult but important to remember that one triumphs over verbal abuse not by silencing the offender--who may be too poorly socialized to be silenced--but rather by refusing to take the abuse to heart. That means we must open our own hearts to the child's pain. We must absorb that pain and by doing so neutralize it with our own greater confidence, clearer wisdom, and stronger self-possession. Root canals can be easier to face.

Bear this in mind: telling the child "just ignore them!!" does not equip the wounded child to do so. We have to restore and to strengthen our child's essentially healthy self-perception. This can demand megawatts of parental energy. I suggest that we are tempted to brush aside our children's complaints about being teased because we are unconsciously afraid of reactivating our own childhood and adolescent memories of social cruelty.

We can muster the courage to face our children's pain only if we can muster a generous compassion not only for our own childhood selves but also for the creeps who teased us. Only if we have resolved our own anger and frustration at these events can we patiently, wisely absorb the angry frustration of a humiliated six-year-old or thirteen-year-old. Of course I realize, at least theoretically, that there may exist parents who were never humiliated by the other kids or by mean teachers when they were in school. When I was in school, such invulnerable characters appeared to be nearly the majority of my classmates. But as an adult I have yet to find anyone who sailed through those years blithely. I sometimes wonder where all the "cool kids" have gone. Maybe they are still out there somewhere, as invulnerable and suave as ever but more

successfully avoiding the rest of us. But maybe they were not as cool as I thought they were. Maybe we were all projecting "coolness" on one another.

Be that as it may. Meanwhile, however, I am convinced that as parents we need to deal with our own angry, painful memories of humiliation if we hope to help our children deal with their own, similar experiences. The most convincing definition of forgiveness that I have ever seen is that to forgive is to give up our fantasies of revenge, to douse the self-destructive energies of our own hot anger. To forgive is to stop wanting to return violence for violence. I find that definition wise and useful as I struggle to cope with people who have hurt me more or less recently. I can use the insight to stop my own angry rehearsals of what went wrong--what Shakespeare in Sonnet 30 calls "The sad account of fore-bemoanéd moan/ Which I new pay as if not paid before."

But as I look back to my childhood, and as I reflect upon what I saw as my own adult children lived through these inevitable stages, I see another dimension to forgiveness. I have come (reluctantly, perhaps) to understand that bullies are always acting out of their own pain and their own jealous insecurities. And I suspect that is true even among adults: our cruelties and our failures are often rooted in our pain. In saying that I do not mean to deny that evil is real. Evil is profoundly real, and it cannot be explained away by appealing to unhappy social history. But my own encounters with truly evil people have been blessedly rare. Egotism is far more common than evil, and the roots of egotism are pain, fear, and loneliness.

But in the face of humiliation or memories of humiliation, it is hard to imagine one's tormentors as suffering. I find it much easier to forswear fantasies of reciprocal violence--even reciprocal verbal violence--because in doing so I can draw strength from my own socialization toward nonviolence. I find it far more difficult to bear in mind that bullies (of any age) are essentially acting out of their own insecurities. I think it is difficult because this process forces me to see what I have in common with them: all of us are emotionally vulnerable in one way or another. All of us have hot buttons, and we all have deep-seated, quirky fears about our own adequacy or acceptability. More dangerously yet: if I recognize that insecurities unleash cruelties, I have to face the prospect that my own insecurities can unleash cruelties of which I may be (perhaps deliberately) unaware. This is a mirror into which I do not want to look.

And so, it will always be much easier to brush aside our children's whining about what so-and-so said than it is to open out questions this complex about our own feelings. And yet, if we do find the courage to face these complex questions, there is a blessing to be found. We realize--and honestly realizing we can convincingly explain to our children--that even good people are sometimes mean without meaning to be. We are sometimes mean because we are not paying attention, or because all we are thinking about is ourselves. We are sometimes mean because we fail to use our natural gifts of imagination and empathy. We do not hear with another's ears, nor see with another's eyes.

It is a serious mistake to brush aside the child's grief by insisting that the offender "didn't mean it." None of us intend to get into automobile accidents either, nor would we intentionally knock someone down the stairs. But the injuries that can follow are nonetheless real. We can--alas--seriously hurt someone else inadvertently. No matter what, then, we should sympathize with the

child's pain. By acknowledging the painful mistakes even of the virtuous, we can "take sides" with the child without necessarily undercutting their willingness to credit and to obey the adults to whom we entrust their practical safety day after day. These are also good moments to praise the child for turning to us for support.

Habits like this may contribute at least something to the child's willingness to turn to us immediately after any encounter with a sexual predator. In effect, we are teaching our children that even the good are sinners. Even the good are not always good. Teaching them that even the good are sinners also creates a context in which we can apologize--and ask them to apologize--for the insensitivities, forgetfulness, and nasty remarks that erupt from time to time even in the most humane and kindly households. We can teach them to accept the apologies of their siblings by saying "thank you," not "that's all right." If we decide to be just a little more intentional about teaching this lesson early, and just a bit pro-active in teaching them to ask for our emotional solace in such situations, we may be providing a significant level of insurance that sexual abuse will at least never become a silent torment for years on end.

Family ministry programs addressed to issues like these can confer inestimable benefits upon a community. But programs on such topics are difficult to present because the issues involved are so very highly charged. And so I would like to conclude with one final bit of hard-won wisdom. Adults are unlikely to come to programs to talk about sex, for instance, because ordinarily adults talk about sex only as a verbal variety of foreplay. Except in remarkably limited situations, adults do not converse--and especially not in public--about the erotic, about our responses to the erotic, or about our thinking about the erotic. Nor are most people comfortable listening to someone else discuss such intimate things.

Here, as in so many other places, family ministry needs to rely upon the truism that one teaches parents under the pretext of teaching children or helping parents to teach children. When churches invite me to lecture about sexual fidelity, for instance, the hall is quite regularly empty or nearly empty. When I am invited to talk about how to talk to our children about sexual fidelity, however, the place will always be jammed.

Because sexual abuse of a child is too horrible even to imagine, parents may give way to their own denial needs and refuse to come to a presentation on childhood sexual abuse. "Teaching our children how to cope with bullies and to recognize predators," however, reframes the issues in ways that make an important implicit promise. The promise is this: you will leave with something active to do; the evening will not--like one of those awful TV specials--simply leave you feeling frightened and helpless.

Frightened and helpless is what bullied children feel. The abuse of children--abuse of any kind by anyone--leaves scars that can last a lifetime. On topics this difficult, we must remember that "to minister" derives from the same Indo-European root as "to serve," not simply to educate or to inform. We are called upon to offer kindness and compassion, not simply to hide behind "content." We too need to find the courage to face our own fears if we are to face the fears of parents, which is to say all of us must always remember that we abide within the endless loving-kindness of God. Most of us do live with scars, but over time and with grace the scars soften into

the patina of wisdom. From such wisdom comes gentleness, kindness, restraint, and abiding hope. And that, in turn, is what our children need most from us.

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