

“Why Don’t the Girls Say ‘No!’”

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Each time another sordid story of sexual molestation of children comes to light, an inevitable series of questions arise. “Why didn’t the girls* protest? Why didn’t they tell their parents, a teacher, a trusted friend? Why didn’t they say ‘no!’ to the abuser, and fight back?”

I applaud such outrage. It tells me that the person protesting has a clear sense of ownership of her body and personal integrity. She is not likely to tolerate violation of appropriate boundaries. I only hope that she is working hard to instill the same sense of self-respect and worth in her children and students. This is exactly what the victims of sexual abuse are missing.

In this brief discussion of abuse I want to focus on two basic issues. What is going on for the molester, what is going on for the abused child? At the heart of every act of molestation lies the exploitation of an unequal relationship and a fundamental corruption of love and trust. By definition, an adult is in a position of power and authority over a child. Incestuous fathers, molesting teachers, rabbis and other adults all prey on the natural desire of children to feel noticed and loved. Determined to satisfy his perverse cravings, the sexual predator chooses his victims with skill and cunning. His emotional antennae are exquisitely tuned in to vulnerable children. He will entice and coerce girls to pay with their bodies for the attention and affection they naturally desire.

Who is a vulnerable child? Like many female adolescents undergoing the transition to womanhood, she is a girl who does not realize she has a right to demand proper respect of her body and psyche. Why not? Several potential factors come to mind. Teenage girls often feel unattractive, insecure and lonely. Even if outwardly they appear tal-

ented and popular, inside they are desperate for validation of their likeability. The need for affirmation renders a girl susceptible to molesters — often respected persons who have an aura of trust and who bestow unprotected, needy children with special attention and calculated favors. A private tutorial or chat easily becomes the scene of a sexual encounter. During the course of comforting conversation, a seemingly benign pat on the head may slip down to a hand on the shoulder, evolving into a caress of the breast or genital area. The girl feels a swirling mixture of emotion, all at the same time — surprise, disgust, excitement, fear. She may perceive that she has a

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special bond with the adult and is loath to put it at risk. She may feel terrified of retaliation if she doesn’t cooperate or worse, if she blows the whistle on the abuser.

I want to call your attention to the “Lolita factor,” the insidious tendency to blame the victim of abuse. This pernicious reversal of perpetrator and victim insinuates that by being overly seductive in her clothing or manner, the molested girl is really a lascivious nymphet responsible for her own degradation. Suggesting that a girl is “looking for trouble” is fundamentally wrong. Even when a victim is erotically aroused by her abuser, we must remember that children can never be consensual partners in sex with adults.

** While I use female pronouns for clarity, please remember that boys are also victims of sexual abuse.*

The truth is that all normal, healthy children have erotic fantasies and feelings. This is not a comfortable fact for many parents who view masturbation, curiosity about the body, and other evidence of sensual stirrings as dirty and even anti-religious. Attitudes of dismay, shock or horror about children’s erotic lives inevitably shut down open discussion in which girls can develop appropriate, healthy relationships with their own bodies. I have treated a number of young Orthodox women so infused with shame about their womanly bodies and sensations they felt it was “immodest” to use the language necessary to document sexual abuse.

A girl who does not speak up about molestation also feels that her words will not be taken seriously. She is intimidated by authority and does not want to be perceived as a troublemaker. Undoubtedly she is terrified of being humiliated or even punished for exposing the abuse. We in the religious community need to be especially sensitive to the stigma attached to uncovering shame.

My work as a psychiatrist has taught me that sexual boundary violations know no distinction of religious, economic or social status. I treated an heiress who was molested virtually every day during her primary school years by the elevator man in her luxury apartment house. A handicapped Hasidic girl was sexually abused for years by her brother-in-law, a situation which continued well into her marriage to the point that she was unsure of the paternity of her youngest child. Too many young married modern Orthodox women have come into my office to complain bitterly of intimacy issues and severe sexual dysfunction only to reveal, on careful interview, their tormented histories of molestation for lengthy periods of time by charismatic rabbis, educators or relatives. Each story is heartbreaking — both for the pain these women have endured and for the continuous burden of the difficult work of repair.