



## Inside the Mind of a Child Predator

Have you ever wondered what goes on in the mind of a child predator – What motivates their distorted needs, or how they could justify their actions?

We asked Maya Nichols, a former parole officer who worked closely with sex offenders, about her experiences and insights into the thinking of those who willingly wreak havoc on the lives of children.

### Recognizing Seemingly Unimportant Decisions

There is no “cure” for sex offenders. Instead, when released from prison, a convicted sex offender is placed on parole – a requirement of which is participation in weekly aversion therapy meetings.

A group of ten to twelve sex offenders uses a relapse prevention workbook to progress through discussions, questions, and exercises. The group is monitored by a parole officer, but allowed to self-mediate.

Together, these sex offenders work together to address their past behavior, learn relapse prevention skills, identify early warning signs of inappropriate behavior and to recognize when they’re faced with a decision that can lead to temptation and major consequences.

Maya was still in her internship when given the opportunity to attend these meetings. For an entire year, she watched the group of sex offenders as they asked each other questions, including their history with attraction to children and what led up to their offense.



## “World’s Best Grandpa”

“The goal is to help them gain victim empathy,” Maya said. “Many times there’s a disconnect. They don’t understand that they’ve hurt someone and that this is wrong.”

When asked for examples, Maya remembered one man in his mid-fifties:

“He’d repeatedly molested his granddaughters through oral copulation. The children were too young to realize what was wrong. Instead, he was caught because one day, the children went to their father and asked ‘Why don’t you kiss us like Grandpa does?’”

*“He swore that they liked it. That he wasn’t hurting them, he would never hurt them. Instead, he saw it as his way of expressing love.”*

Could that man truly not understand that his actions had been harmful to his grandchildren?

I asked Maya about the disconnect. She said, “One day I came in and that man was wearing a cap with writing on it. It said ‘World’s Best Grandpa.’”

## “She Asked for It”

Another participant, also male, had been convicted of molesting his stepdaughter. Maya recalls at one point during therapy, he’d said:

“I don’t understand why I had to take the blame. She asked for it. She wanted it. Just like her mom. The way she moved her hips when she walked. Just like a woman.”



The girl had been five years old.

## What a Child Predator Looks Like

A parent herself, I asked Maya if working with convicted child sex abusers changed the way she looked at others, especially around her children.

“Absolutely. Especially after listening to some of their stories.” Despite over ten years working in criminal justice, Maya said it was in those meetings a man had said the creepiest thing she has heard in her whole life.

“Part of therapy was discussing what they had fantasized about.”

*“One man said ‘I want to sneak into a funeral home where I can find the body of a young girl. That way she can’t tell anyone.’”*

I asked Maya what that man had looked like.

“Not what you’d expect – Just like anybody else.”

So what about the stereotype of sexual predators as easily-identified, “creepy looking” strangers?

“They’re not who you think,” Maya says. “Child predators are often white males, but there were many that you’d think were just nice-looking professionals. There were also women, though less, and even a former priest.”

## The “Sex Offender Meetings”

In addition to weekly aversion therapy meetings, once a month a panel of field professionals including psychologists, police and parole officers, and justice



department officials, put together case studies to learn more about sex offenders.

Two recently released parolees convicted of child sex abuse would be asked questions about what motivates them, what triggers them, how they groomed their victims, and the mechanics of their actions.

### **So, what motivates a child predator?**

Sexual offenders show behavior similar to those addicted to substances: a focus on short-term, immediate gratification at the expense of delayed, long-term negative consequences. Maya found that recently-released sex offenders were often reluctant to accept responsibility.

“It all boils down to they liked it,” Maya said. “They justify being sexually stimulated by children in their mind. They might claim to be intimidated by women or afraid of rejection.”

When asked what the offenders claim triggered their actions, Maya said it was often loneliness.

“Children can’t reject them or shut them down. It’s easy to be appealing to a child, especially if you give them presents and candy.”

But many of them, Maya said, also have “a type” – that might be blond boys, or girls who remind them of their mother.

I asked if any female sex offenders had appeared in the case study meetings, and if their reasoning was different.

“From my experience, the women were motivated by a different psychology. Most of the time there was a man in their life who had pushed them to do this thing, and they went along with it.”

## **How Grooming Goes Unnoticed**



Sex offenders do occasionally take advantage of an opportunity. One man Maya remembered had been convicted for fondling his daughter's friends during a sleepover.

However, often the predators will have willfully engaged in grooming a child.

It might have started by having a child sit on their lap in the company of the child's parents. After a while, the predator will get the child to sit on his or her lap in private. The predator may have given the child presents, treats, or simply showed a neglected child positive attention.

"The kid eventually realizes that something is wrong," Maya said. "But they can't articulate it. They don't know what's going on. Maybe they've been touched and it felt nice, or maybe they feel guilty because they've gone along so far, but they usually feel too overwhelmed with guilt to tell anyone."

Maya says that grooming is often so subtle, parents are in disbelief it happened right under their noses.

"You very rarely hear a predator say, 'I like kids and I'm going to figure out how to get close to them.' Most are in denial. They don't want to be 'that guy' and, in trying to be normal, they might even have a family, or look to date women with children."

## Does the Therapy Work?

I asked Maya if she ever saw improvement in any of the offenders she'd supervised.

"Some people will say 'Wow, I don't understand how I had seen things this way.' But it's only those sex offenders with a very strong desire to change."

"Regarding improvement, it's hard to tell. They're only on parole for three years. After that, we don't know if they go back into the system."



## What She Wants Parents to Know

“Just because it’s easy, convenient, or free, isn’t reason enough to leave your kids with somebody,” Maya said.

Predators often make themselves available for the opportunity to be around children and go out of their way to be welcoming to kids. She urges parents to take responsibility and be more aware of everyone who spends time with their children.

“The people who are going to molest your child aren’t sitting in the park or driving in a van. They’re in your living room.”

To parents whose children come to them and tell that they’ve been sexually abused, Maya says:

“You have to ask yourself ‘Why would my child make this up?’ Especially in cases where a child was sexually abused by a stepfather or boyfriend, you’d be amazed how often a mother will choose to disbelieve her child and side with the abuser.”

Most of all, Maya warns parents to listen to their children, especially if they show a strong dislike for being near an adult.

“If your child doesn’t want to touch or hug someone, don’t make them. You must teach your child to feel comfortable creating boundaries. Often children who are sexually abused don’t tell because what happened is a slippery slope. When it’s already gone so far, they feel a major conflict and parents may never know.”