



Abuse cases spark action

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By [Andria Simmons](#)

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For Lawrence Kasmen, an Atlanta father of 3- and 4-year-old boys, the Penn State child sexual abuse scandal was a wake-up call.

Kasmen had never experienced such abuse and didn't know anyone else who had, either. But when news of the charges against Jerry Sandusky broke, Kasmen knew he couldn't take chances with his own kids.

"It's so sick and so awful and it's really moved me," Kasmen said. "Being the father of two little boys, I never ever want them to have that experience. And I never want anyone I know to have to suffer like that."

Kasmen, an Atlanta commercial real estate lawyer, recently completed a three-hour "Stewards of Children" child sexual abuse prevention training course conducted by the Georgia Center for Child Advocacy. He also has persuaded administrators at the Weinstein School at the Marcus Center, where his children are enrolled, to put all the teachers through a similar course.

Child advocates say the scandal at Penn State and other colleges has sparked new awareness from parents such as Kasmen, as well as teachers, hospital employees and others who work with children, of the once-taboo topic of child molestation.

Advocates for child sexual abuse victims are reporting larger turnouts at community awareness meetings, prevention workshops, prayer breakfasts and support groups for victims.

At a recent meeting about child sexual abuse prevention hosted by the Georgia Center for Child Advocacy, 52 people attended. A similar meeting last year drew only six, said the organization's CEO, Nancy Chandler.

"One of the things that was so wonderful was that about half the crowd was men, and that almost never happens," Chandler said. "A lot of them were parents concerned about how to make sure their kids are safe."

Attendance also has climbed at VOICE Today's "Time to Heal" workshops. In 2009, the faith-based workshops for child sex abuse victims averaged about 10 people in attendance. In 2010, they averaged about 22, and so far this year, they are averaging about 38.

The topic of child molestation has dominated headlines since Penn State's former defensive coordinator was indicted on more than 50 counts of sexually abusing 10 boys over 12 years. Two university officials also have been charged with perjury and failure to report suspected abuse. The problem gained further attention when former Syracuse assistant basketball coach Bernie Fine was accused of sexually assaulting three teenage boys.

About two weeks ago, 7-year-old Jorelys Rivera was reported missing and later found dead at her Canton apartment complex. Authorities say she was sexually assaulted and beaten. An apartment complex maintenance man, Ryan Brunn, has been charged.

"I think this combination of the Penn State scandal and this very horrific local child abuse case really does have people thinking how can we better protect kids and are we doing everything we could do," said Kirsten Widner, director of the policy and advocacy office at the Barton Child Law and Policy Center at Emory University.

People who treat perpetrators and victims of child molestation say slayings such as Rivera's are rare, but the type of abuse alleged at Penn State — and the delayed reporting of it — are heartbreakingly common.

"My first thought is this is not unusual," said Dr. Gene Abel, a leading researcher on sexual deviance who has treated sex offenders at the Behavioral Medicine Institute of Atlanta since 1969. "People are reluctant to step forward because they aren't certain about what they observed."

Advocates say anyone who has reason to believe a child is being sexually abused should call 911 and let the police sort out the details.

There were 850 substantiated reports of child molestation last year, according to state Division of Family and Children Services reports compiled by the nonprofit Fostering Court Improvement. The organization supplies information about child welfare outcomes to juvenile courts.

Published research has shown that about 6 percent of men and 4 percent of women have been perpetrators of child sexual abuse, Abel said.

Abel said 20 percent to 30 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys have been victims of sexual abuse by age 18, according to research by David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center.

DeQuanda Sanders, who runs the nonprofit Saving Our Children and Families in Decatur, said most people are in denial about the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Sanders, who's also the group's founder, said she felt alone and never talked openly about the emotional abuse and sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of a relative until she was in her 20s. Meeting other people who had endured similar abuse gave her the confidence to speak out and start a child advocacy organization.

Providing training on the prevention of child sexual abuse is a key component of Sanders' job.

Thomas Scales, executive director of VOICE Today, a Marietta nonprofit dedicated to breaking the cycle of child sexual abuse, was molested by eight different men and raped by a woman before he was 13 years old. He wrote about the experiences in a book, "Terrible Things Happened to Me," after he began dealing with the abuse as a married man in his 50s.

Scales, now 68, is devoted to helping victims of child sexual abuse, who often suffer a lifetime of consequences including alcoholism and drug abuse, higher rates of incarceration and difficulty with intimacy.

Most sexual abuse is committed by someone close to or within the family who is known to the child — 70 percent to 90 percent. In Scales' case, one abuser was a priest and another was a Boy Scout troop leader.

He said he hopes that increased awareness around child sexual abuse will encourage survivors to begin opening up about their experiences and seek help.

"Then, the power that predator has and the silence it forces on them starts to ease," Scales said. "You see it every time. There is nothing more thrilling than watching the person begin the healing process and find themselves."

Child molestation reports received in 2010

Alpharetta police: 4

Roswell police: 15

Atlanta police: 178

[Cobb County](#) police: 246

[DeKalb County](#) police: 247

[Gwinnett County](#) police: 224

Source: Information provided by each listed police department.

Resources

For information on child sexual abuse prevention, intervention and treatment, contact:

- Georgia Center for Child Advocacy: 678-904-2880 or GeorgiaCenterforChildAdvocacy.org.
- Saving Our Children and Families: 678-487-7901 or SavingOurChildrenandFamilies.org.
- VOICE Today: 678-578-4888 or VoiceToday.org.

Advice for parents

- Parents should thoroughly check out mentorship programs that put a child in a one-on-one situation with an adult.
- Parents should ask schools, day cares and youth programs about their policies on visitor access, employee screening, and who can volunteer to work with children.
- Anyone giving a music lesson or tutoring a child should have an open-door policy.

- Parents should start talking to their kids about their private parts as soon as they are able to bathe themselves. Children should be told that no adult should touch their private parts, and that if it happens they should tell someone right away.
- If you are concerned your child might be a victim of child sexual abuse, ask open-ended questions such as “how was your time with uncle or aunt so-and-so.” Hesitation or awkwardness in their answers may signal a problem.