

Heroux: Protecting kids from pedophiles

By Paul Heroux/Guest columnist

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Sexual predation on children and youths is back in the national spotlight since Jerry Sandusky, the former Penn State football defense coordinator, has been accused of sexually assaulting multiple boys over 15 years.

It doesn't take much imagination to understand the horrors and damage caused by sex offenders. And it's hard to talk about the facts of any criminal behavior since misinformation is common and ideas contrary to misinformation are quickly associated as soft on crime. The nuances of any criminal behavior are complicated.

A lot of sex offenses involve an over consumption of alcohol resulting in sexual assault and other inappropriate behaviors that have nothing to do with children. However, concerning children, we should not worry about sex offenders as a broad category; we need to worry specifically about pedophiles. Pedophiles are a certain type of sex offender. Pedophilia is a specific mental disorder classified in the DSM, and to be clear, acting on impulses is also a crime. Pedophiles have a sexual interest in children; most, but not all, act on this interest but for those who do, it is serious crime. Not all sex offenders are pedophiles, however, by definition all pedophiles who act on their sexual interest in children are sex offenders and criminals.

Since experts estimate that only 1 in 20 cases of child sexual abuse is reported, the implication is that there are a sizable number of sex offenses and therefore sex offenders out there who are going unpunished. With this in mind it is very important: that a child knows 1) what constitutes inappropriate contact (something called "good touch, bad touch" training); 2) to say no when boundaries are crossed; 3) to report inappropriate contact to a parent and other trusted persons; and 4) that the child has done nothing wrong and should be praised for being brave enough to put aside the stigma wrongly associated with being a victim. Also, sex offenders try to find children on the Internet; kids need to be made aware of risks and parents need to monitor activity.

Most internet sex offenders target teens, not children. With this in mind, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has several resources to reduce this risk, as does the Crimes Against Children Research Center. But most is not all, so we cannot stop there.

A total of 60 to 70 percent of sex offenses on children are done by acquaintances of the child. With this in mind, an effective strategy would begin by addressing this huge proportion of victims. It should also be made clear to the child that inappropriate contact can come from strangers or from someone known and trusted by the child. It is extremely important to let the child know that anything that happens to them is not their fault; that they have done nothing wrong; and they are not going to get in trouble for reporting any and all inappropriate contact.

Since 30 to 40 percent of victims are not an acquaintance of the offender, another extremely important thing that can be done is for parents to educate their children about the risks associated with strangers and how to be smart while alone. But more importantly, according to missingkids.com, or StopItNow.org, there are several things that parents can and should do to keep their children safe.

Kids don't come with instruction manuals. Parents and caregivers need to be taught what symptoms to look for that indicate abuse.

It is important to know what works and what doesn't in keeping children safe. For example, the program "Stranger Danger" has been found to be ineffective and, consequently, is a false sense of security. Since most sex offenses on children are done by people they know, "Child Safety Zones" and even sex offender community notification laws are also a false sense of security.

As awful as high profile examples sex abuse cases are, such as Jaycee Dugard or Elizabeth Smart, it is important to remember that high profile events are high profile precisely because they are unusual and unlikely. Making policy based on high profile events is a surefire way to overreact and make inefficient and, worse, ineffective policy. A high profile event is good time find out where a shortcoming of a policy or a failure of a policy might reside, but a high profile event is not what policy should target. Doing so would result in the majority of cases being marginalized and a strategy designed around an unlikely event.

If prison is our way of dealing with sex offenders, or any criminal for that matter, it will have been too late; the crime and damage will already have been done.

Parents are their child's best line of defense against sex offenders.

Paul Heroux worked for a prison and for a jail for over four years, and with children for over seven years. He holds a master's in criminology from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's in public administration from Harvard. Paul can be reached at PaulHeroux.MPA@gmail.com.