

Six Misconceptions About Pedophiles

Experts say it's a treatable condition and that understanding it may help prevent abuse.

By [Eric Niiler](#)

Fri Nov 18, 2011

The arrest of former Penn State University assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky [and new allegations against a Syracuse University basketball coach](#) has led to hand-wringing, soul-searching and a discussion about something most of us have trouble thinking, let alone talking, about.

If you take away the anger and emotion surrounding Sandusky's alleged crimes, experts say there are some persistent myths about pedophiles that can sometimes make detecting and diagnosing them difficult. Demystifying pedophilia could go a long way toward preventing similar abuse in the future, according to the experts. Here are a few misconceptions:

- **Pedophilia is a moral failure.**

Like drug addiction, alcohol abuse and other bad behaviors, medical experts say pedophilia is a diagnosable medical and psychological condition. Researchers are investigating the idea that there may be differences in the brains of pedophiles that could be linked to brain injuries stemming from trauma or alcohol abuse.

"It makes sense," said Thomas Plante, professor of psychiatry at Santa Clara University who treats pedophiles. "If someone has a head injury, they have impulse control troubles to begin with. With diminished executive functioning they will make all sorts of bad decisions."

Plante cautioned that not all victims of head injuries are pedophiles.

- **Pedophiles cruise local playgrounds or the Internet for victims.**

The vast majority of the abuse against minors is from either a family member, or someone they know such as a coach, teacher or church leader, according to Dr. Fred Berlin, founder and director of the Johns Hopkins Sexual Disorders Clinic in Baltimore.

"This notion of the creepy stranger," Berlin said. "That's a rarity."

Several experts interviewed by Discovery News said accurate data on the incidence of child molesters or pedophiles in the general population is hard to come by since it relies on self-

reporting or hypothetical questions. However, a 2009 study by the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center of 4,500 children and caregivers nationwide found that 21.7 percent of girls and 3.3 percent of boys reported [some form of unwanted sexual contact](#).

- **Gay men are more likely to be pedophiles than heterosexual men.**

While that myth was proved wrong by the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and other professional medical groups, it persists. The state of Florida cited this myth in [banning gay adoptions](#), until the law was stricken down by a federal court in 2010.

- **Victims of child sexual abuse are "damaged goods" forever.**

Many victims can recover with proper treatment and live productive lives, according to Berlin and Plante. A [controversial 1998 study](#) that showed the ability of victims of child sexual abuse to recover was pilloried by Congress as a defense of pedophilia. The study was subject to great criticism over the next several years. At the same time, both Berlin and Plante said that many of their patients who are adult pedophiles were abused themselves as children.

"I've been treating patients long enough to see victims become aggressors," Berlin said.

- **Pedophiles can't help themselves any time they see a child.**

"Some do want relationships," Plante said. "Some have a specific target. Often they will have a certain age group that is narrow, either just boys or just girls. Some are situational generalists and will abuse whoever is handy. But this notion they abuse hundreds of victims is not true."

- **There's no cure except prison.**

Researchers are using depo-provera, a drug used to treat prostate cancer in elderly men, to lower the testosterone levels of pedophiles. This chemical castration can help reduce the urge to abuse children, Berlin said. Other physicians are using cognitive behavioral therapy, as well as aversion therapy in which ammonia capsules are broken under the noses of pedophiles when they feel sexual urges toward children. The ammonia produces violent nausea, a scenario that was played out in the 1971 film "A Clockwork Orange."

"It works pretty well," Plante said. "But you have to have booster sessions."

Both experts say they hope the Penn State developments lead to some changes in how society views child molesters, how they can be prevented from operating and perhaps cured.

"Penn State and every university will re-evaluate their policies and procedures about suspicion of child sexual abuse and that's a good thing," said Plante, who has treated Catholic priests convicted of child abuse. "It's tragic for the victims and the community, but if we can be more mindful about who is an offender, how they operate, than a lot of good will come."

