



Child-on-child sexual abuse is shocking, but not rare

By ERIN SULLIVAN

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This week, three 13-year-old boys were arrested on charges they sexually abused younger children. The cases are not related. The teenagers live in different towns.

One boy from Land O'Lakes is accused of raping an 8-year-old girl. He told authorities he "could not control his urges," a report states.

Another boy from Wesley Chapel is accused of repeatedly molesting a 6-year-old girl. He told his father he ruined the girl's life and he "learned to do what he did from sex education and watching television," authorities said.

Those two boys were arrested Sunday.

On Wednesday, a third was arrested - a middle school student in Zephyrhills who is accused of forcing himself on a 3-year-old child.

"It's always shocking," said Kevin Doll, spokesman for the Pasco County Sheriff's Office.

But the cases are not unusual, he said.

There were four forcible rapes committed by juveniles in 2009 and five in 2008, according to Pasco County Sheriff's Office statistics. Also, there were four cases of forcible sodomy by juveniles in 2009 and two in 2008. The statistics from this year were not available.

More than one third of sex offenses against children are committed by juveniles, according to a study published last year by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. The study, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Justice, said only one in eight juvenile offenders are younger than 12 and 93 percent of the offenses are committed by males.

There are many reasons why children sexually abuse other children, said Dr. Michael L. Haney, director for prevention and interventions in children's medical services at the Florida Department of Health.

"Kids who sexually act out, at least at that age, probably have been exposed to sexual behavior in some form, through their own abuse or through exposure to it - whether

intentional or unintentional," Haney said. "There is a lot of sexually graphic material available to kids through cable television and so forth. Sometimes parents have videos in the home that they try to keep hidden from their kids ...

"Any number of things could contribute to this."

Dr. Susan Swearer, associate professor of school psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, previously worked as a counselor for juvenile sex offenders at a residential treatment center in Texas. She said most of the offenders she treated had been abused themselves.

She also said a lack of supervision can be a contributing factor. Haney said it's normal in sexual development for children to be curious about their bodies and others. But it's "an entirely different scenario" when an act is done by force and against the other's will.

He said when juvenile sex offenders receive treatment from a competent therapist with experience dealing with these issues, the children "have an extremely low recidivism rate." Comparatively, adults with a history of sex offenses have an 80 percent recidivism rate, Swearer said.

Haney said parents need to have an open lines of communication with their children.

"It's important for parents to be able to talk with their children about anything," Haney said.

He said family support is key to helping victims of sexual abuse - and the offenders.

"Children are very resilient," he said. "The primary predictor to whether a child can deal with sexual abuse is the family's response."

Times researcher Shirl Kennedy contributed to this report. Erin Sullivan can be reached at esullivan@sptimes.com or (727) 869-6229.

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Sexual abuse: By the numbers

1 in 4 girls are sexually abused by age 18.

1 in 6 boys are sexually abused by age 18.

9 Median age for reported sexual abuse.

39M Estimated survivors of childhood sexual abuse in America today.

30-40 percent of victims are sexually abused by a relative.

30 percent of victims never come forward.

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Possible signs of abuse

-Redness, swelling, rashes or other irritation in the genital area.

-Physical problems associated with anxiety, such as chronic stomach pain or headaches.

-Emotional or behavioral signals ranging from "too perfect" behavior, to withdrawal and depression, to unexplained anger and rebellion.

-Sexual behavior and language that are not age-appropriate.

If you suspect abuse

Stay calm: Reacting with anger or disbelief could cause the child to shut down, feel guilty, or change his or her story.

Be supportive: Assure the child that you will protect him or her. Encourage the child to talk about what happened, but don't ask leading questions.

Seek guidance: Call the Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline toll-free at 1-800-4-A-CHILD; or the local children's advocacy agency, PASCO Kids First, at (727) 845-8080.

Report the crime: Call local law enforcement or the Florida Abuse Hotline toll-free at 1-800-96-ABUSE.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Darkness to Light National Helpline.