

Copyright © 2005 by The Salem News
Reprinted with permission

January 24, 2005

By Dr. Edward Bailey
Chief of Pediatrics,
NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital



Keep watch over kids to prevent exploitation

Recent headlines highlighting the sexual exploitation of local children surprised and troubled both parents and the most case-hardened professionals. How can children in our midst be enticed so easily into a world of prostitution, drugs and violence? Unfortunately, the story is all too common in the United States and throughout the world. UNICEF has estimated that more than 1 million children worldwide are tricked or forced into a life of prostitution every year. One of the primary rescue efforts in tsunami-ravaged Thailand is the protection of orphaned children from exploitation.

Sexual exploitation can be narrowly defined as the manufacture and distribution of child pornography, enticement of children online for sexual acts, child prostitution and molestation. Others define it more broadly and include advertisements that include sexually explicit content and provocative pictures of children.

Child prostitution is, by its nature, the least understood form of child abuse, but it is estimated that in the United States, more than 250,000 children are being exploited as such. These young victims come from small towns as well as big cities, and from all religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Some have run away from abuse or difficult home environments, and many have a history of delinquency. Many are lonely, isolated teens low self-esteem, seeking attention and fulfillment, making them targets. Predators seek out these young, naive, vulnerable victims where they hang out; online, in malls, arcades, and bus or train stations. They provide attention, money, emotional support, friendship, and romance, luring the susceptible victim into a violent and dangerous life.

Prostitution is not a victimless crime. Children do not freely choose a life of prostitution, and it is far from an exciting and glamorous life. They often end up isolated and vulnerable to use in pornography, physical assault, and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and drugs.

The lives of children exploited in this manner are changed forever. They will, in all likelihood, never know the joys of getting a driver's license or going to a prom or high school graduation. It is important that we familiarize ourselves with the issue and take steps in our personal and professional lives to protect both our own and society's children.

The first step is awareness and understanding of the issue. Recognizing which child is at risk is also critically important, as is knowledge of the signs of exploitation and abuse of a child. Changes in behavior may mean many things, one of which could be abuse or exploitation. Sudden aggressive behavior, a change in school performance, unexplained fear, school refusal, and sexually inappropriate activity are but a few signs that a child is in trouble and in need of further evaluation. A child spending too much time alone on the computer may also be at risk, as is a child who begins getting phone calls or gifts from sources unknown to the family.

We can best protect our children by "immunizing them" with words and knowledge that leave them less vulnerable. Children also need guidance and limits. Do not leave them alone for hours online where they are too often easy prey for the ever-present predator. Know your child's friends and where they are. Ask questions, be nosy and stay informed about their friends, activities and whereabouts.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (www.missingkids.org) is a good resource with numerous references on this topic. Some of the reference material used in the preparation of this article was found at that site.

Dr. Edward Bailey is chief of pediatrics at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, on staff at MassGeneral Hospital *for* Children, former board chairman of the Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund, and a father of three. For more information, you can contact him at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Avenue, Salem, MA 01907 or at ebailey@aap.org.