

The Socially Skilled Child Molester: Differentiating the Guilty From the Falsely Accused

By Carla van Dam, PhD. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press; 2006. 162 pp. \$39.95 hard cover; \$24.95 soft cover.

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An extraordinary amount of information useful to a variety of audiences is packed into this relatively slim volume. The focus of the book is on “Groomers” as opposed to “Grabbers”: in other words, socially successful individuals who attain positions of responsibility, trust, and/or power within their communities and use their positions to gain access to and groom their child victims. News headlines tend to focus on the dramatic “snatch and grab” method employed by the child molesters who take strangers as their victims. However, the more insidious threat may be the child molesters who carefully select, groom, and abuse their victims, sometimes for years, while hiding under the mantle of coach, pastor, or family friend. This book shines a light on this type of offender and offers excellent suggestions for recognizing them, intervening to prevent child molestation, and interviewing and assessing apprehended offenders. It concludes with an excellent discussion of how individuals and organizations in communities must work together closely to prevent child sexual abuse.

One of the strengths of *The Socially Skilled Child Molester* is that it is written in a jargon-free manner that is accessible to many different types of readers. The early sections of the book describe diagnostic criteria for pedophilia and the addictive mindset and behavioral patterns often associated with child molesters. This sets the stage for a description of a variety of socially skilled child molesters, using imagined individuals (based on composite case material) in vivid, highly readable language. Each type of offender is given a moniker (e.g., The Social Psychopath is named “Bold Businessman Bob,” while The Saint is named “Divine Dr. Dan”). The stories, all presented in Chapter 2, are referred to throughout the book in a highly effective manner, to illustrate the techniques used by these molesters to gain access to children and to groom them for future abuse. Therefore, the early chapters in particular may be useful to

lay readers (especially parents) who are interested in learning about how such offenders operate and how abuse can be prevented or avoided. The author also presents several composite cases of individuals who were falsely accused (e.g., “Truthful Tim” and “Innocent Isaac”) and effectively discusses how police officers and treating professionals may be able to differentiate such individuals from genuine offenders.

Beginning in Chapter 7, the author moves toward a more global view of child sexual abuse and discusses the mechanisms that allow Groomers to elude consequences, in some cases for decades. These include societal tendencies to silence suspicions for fear of offending individuals who are “pillars of the community”; the reluctance of parents to report abuse in the interest of sparing their child publicity and the need to testify; and the tendency of some Groomers to move around geographically for the express purpose of avoiding detection. Dr. van Dam also effectively discusses the fact that many individuals or organizations may have “pieces of the puzzle” when it comes to likely child molesters, but because the information is not shared with anyone, the offender can continue to operate successfully. Even more chilling, she describes how some groups (the Catholic Church is one example) may choose to transfer individuals within the organization while suppressing complaint information to avoid a scandal. The image of an iceberg is used to help the reader conceptualize the large amount of knowledge that exists regarding socially skilled child molesters long before action is ever taken. The base of the iceberg represents total secrecy, a period during which no one other than victim and perpetrator is aware of the crime. However, deliberate ignorance and denial may play a role in how this secrecy flourishes. Level Two is the shock-and-disbelief stage, during which individuals become aware of the existence of the molester, usually because of observations of odd or inappropriate behavior, but silence is maintained because of lack of knowledge, fear, or disinclination to accuse. During Level Three, individuals begin to share information, and the realization fully dawns that there may be a significant problem. At Level Four, individuals begin to make complaints to community organizations or individuals that employ the molesters, such as church elders or community sports organizations. At Level Five, individuals or organizations finally begin to make allegations to the police. Levels Six through Nine involve the arrest, conviction, sentencing, and

release-planning stages. The author deftly weaves examples of the “types” presented in Chapter 2 throughout this discussion, while also providing examples from psychological theory of the dynamics that may underlie the collective unwillingness of community members to recognize socially skilled child molesters. The whole is a fascinating depiction of the many factors involved in recognizing, reporting, and punishing child sexual abuse.

Chapters 8, 9, and 10 provide detailed practical information likely to be of particular value to police officers, prosecutors, and treatment professionals. Chapter 8 discusses appropriate interview techniques for use with child molesters, including identification of lies, phony remorse, creating rapport, and attending to inconsistencies. Examples are also given of techniques child molesters may use to thwart the interviewer, such as sharing too much information or going on the offensive. Chapter 9 provides a review of risk assessment instruments and techniques, in-

cluding a good summary of the value of actuarial versus clinical data. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the individual risk factors for sex offense recidivism employed by many actuarial instruments. Finally, Chapter 10 discusses the enormous value of corroborating evidence and information-sharing within the community to prevent abuse or to apprehend offenders when abuse occurs. Dr. van Dam highlights the unique roles played in this endeavor by a wide variety of community members, including judges, police officers, state child protection agencies, and community organizations.

The Socially Skilled Child Molester will be a highly useful reference for law enforcement officers, attorneys, and treatment providers, while the author’s readable style, devoid of technical terms, also makes it an excellent choice for educating parents and other caretakers on how to recognize, avoid, and report the sexual offenders who have successfully ingratiated themselves into communities.