

ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

SUSAN B. BIERKER

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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From 1974 to 1987, Susan worked for Children and Youth Services of Delaware County in Media, PA where she treated youth and their families, including children and teenagers who had been emotionally, physically and/or sexually abused.

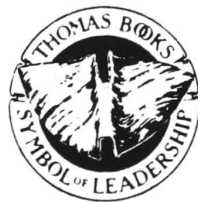
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In addition to providing sexual abuse education to various organizations—including police departments, school systems, hospitals and other community groups, Susan has appeared on radio talk shows to discuss sexual abuse. She has written several magazine articles on the topic.

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By

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*To Mike, Eric, Steve, and Matt,
my four sons, with love*

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ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION TO SEXUAL ABUSE

INTRODUCTION

SEXUAL ABUSE is a perennial feature of human life, having occurred as far back as historical records exist. Many people think of it as a very temporary aspect of modern life, like fear of nuclear holocaust, because taboos against discussing it have only been discarded within the last ten years. Unfortunately, sexual abuse of children is widespread even though taboos exist either against performing or discussing this emotionally devastating practice. For the protection of our children, the taboo that forbids performing sexual abuse needs to remain in force. Concurrently, the taboo that forbids discussion of the subject must be broken and discarded like a rusty, useless chain which imprisons its victims.

Beginning the treatment of a sexually abused child (or an adult survivor of sexual abuse) can be the most challenging and gripping moment of a lifetime. I may reach out to touch the victim and he (or she) may recoil just as if I had attempted to strike him. Even a gentle, verbal approach may elicit a parallel response of fear, pain and mistrust. This behavior occurs because these victims have been deeply hurt emotionally; very often they have been physically abused as well.

Those of us who work with sexually abused persons know they can be helped out of their painful, childhood world. We experience a great deal of empathy for the pain they have endured in the past, and the pain they experience as we treat them. I, for one, would rather try to prevent the abuse before it happens.

Therefore, I am writing this book to educate the general public about sexual abuse. The taboo that prohibits discussion can be broken by bringing the subject out of its dark hiding places into the light of day. This book, will, I hope, bring light to bear. It will provide help in overcoming the natural emotional blocks we all feel toward such trauma

to enable the reader to cope with the subject, not only intellectually, but psychologically.

WHAT IS SEXUAL ABUSE

A Definition

Sexual abuse is sexual activity perpetrated on a child by an older person using coercion. The child lacks the emotional and physical maturity to resist what amounts to abuse of the older person's position of authority and power. Abuse, by definition, causes pain to the child at the time of the abuse and, unless the abuse is disclosed and dealt with, later in his life. The pain is related to the feelings of powerlessness, perceiving himself as "damaged goods" and blaming himself for the abuse. The older person who instigates the abuse is universally known as a "perpetrator" by experts in this field. The perpetrator uses his position of authority and power to coerce the child into engaging in the activity.

Sexual abuse of a child generally moves through increasingly intimate activity. Perpetrators carefully plan not only the abuse but also arrange for a private place in which to do it. Parents often give the perpetrator access to their child unwittingly. For example, they may allow their child to engage in group activities which are lead by an unknown perpetrator or will allow their child to becomes friends with an older person they do not know.

THE HISTORY OF SEXUAL ABUSE

The Origins of the Sexual Abuse Taboo

Even primitive tribes practiced the incest taboo, which was in force before recorded history. No one knows for sure why the most primitive societies believed sexual abuse of children was against natural law. Bad fortune, such as famine or other tribal or personal misfortunes, was believed to be the consequence of breaking the taboo. Also, tribal leaders did not approve of sexual relationships between members of the tribe because of the possible jealous feelings which would be created. Dissension of this nature might threaten to disrupt the group's solidarity and, therefore, its survival. The male tribal member was taught to seek intimate sexual partners in other tribes and bring these partners into his tribe for marriage.

Biblical References to Sexual Abuse

Although incest was prohibited long before the Biblical scriptures were written, the subject was directly addressed in the book of LEVITICUS (18:1–18) where God gives Moses divine authority to be his spokesman:

1. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying:
2. “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: I am the LORD, Your God.
3. “According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do, and, according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances.”

These three verses in essence say that “you shall not live by the customs and laws of Egypt or Canaan.” As will be mentioned later in this chapter, the incest taboo was frequently broken in Egypt where intra-family marriages were customary:

4. “You shall observe my judgments and keep my ordinances to walk in them: I am the LORD Your God.
5. “You shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments which if a man does he shall live by them: I am the LORD.”

Then God gives Moses a general rule and many specific examples of “wickedness”:

6. “None of you shall approach anyone who is near to kin of him to uncover his nakedness: I am the LORD.
7. “The nakedness of your father or the nakedness of your mother you shall not uncover. She is your mother: you shall not uncover her nakedness.
8. “The nakedness of your father’s wife you shall not uncover: it is your father’s nakedness.
9. “The nakedness of your sister, the daughter of your father, or the daughter of your mother, whether born at home or elsewhere, their nakedness you shall not uncover.”

The remaining verses (10–18) go on to prohibit uncovering the nakedness of: your son’s daughter or your daughter’s daughter; your father’s wife’s daughter (sister); your father’s sister (aunt); mother’s sister (aunt); father’s brother nor his wife; your daughter-in-law; your brother’s wife (sister-in-law); your son’s daughter or her daughter’s daughter (grandchild); rival to her sister (sister-in-law).

So you can see from the passage above that the Bible not only prohibits incest but clearly defines incestuous relationships.

How the Taboo Was Broken in Ancient Society

Just because the taboo existed many centuries ago does not mean that it was not broken. A taboo is merely an ideal. Drawings obtained from the Greek and Roman Empires depict nude children waiting on adults and also embracing them.

In ancient Greek and Biblical societies, sex between children and adults was tolerated and, in some instances, encouraged. Children were frequently used as prostitutes and were favored sexual companions in the Greek, Roman and medieval societies. For instance, the Roman emperor, Tiberius, taught children to fellate him. In ancient Egyptian society, the incest taboos were broken to keep a family's bloodline "pure." For thousands of years there were intra-family marriages, especially those between brothers and sisters. There are countless historical examples of incest. Cleopatra is perhaps the best known pharaoh who married a sibling. Moses was born of a woman and her nephew. Abraham married his half-sister. Lot's daughters had intercourse with their father to perpetuate the human race. Ruling families in ancient Hawaii and the Incas of Peru practiced inbreeding. Eventually, the practice was adopted by commoners in both Egypt and Persia.

The Social Consequences of Breaking the Sexual Abuse Taboo Through History

Through the unfolding of the centuries, sexual abuse of children was taboo even as such abuse was actually practiced and, at times, in some societies, even tolerated. However, the Greeks and Romans considered it to be inspired by the devil and the perpetrator doomed to hell even as these societies tolerated the practice. One of the most poignant and greatest of the Greek dramas was "Oedipus Rex" by Sophocles. In this powerful play, Oedipus Rex and his mother, Jocasta, are separated when Oedipus is an infant. Oedipus is raised by someone his mother never knew. Fate leads him back to his mother because he longs for an older woman's (mother's) love. Jocasta is unconsciously searching for her lost son. Neither realizes they are related. They fall in love and marry. One day they discover their actual relationship. Tragically, Oedipus Rex tears his eyes out and Jocasta commits suicide. Obviously, the creation and success of this great play shows that the ancient Greeks sought to discourage incest because of a social consciousness about its psychological consequences.

Various popes have been deposed through the centuries for incest. For

instance, Pope John XII was deposed in 963 after being accused of incest with his mother and sisters. Pope Alexander VI was removed in 1492 because of sexual relationships with his daughter and son (he was also the father of one of his daughter's sons). Pope John VIII was also removed as pontiff for incestuous activities. The Catholic Church has prohibited incest among the clergy up through modern times.

The Emergence of Public Recognition of Sexual Abuse

The Work of Sigmund Freud

The first time the issue of sexual abuse was brought to the public's attention on a large scale basis was in the late 1800's when Sigmund Freud, the psychiatrist, developed his "Seduction Theory." After women patients came to trust him, many would reveal that they had been sexually abused by their fathers or other close relatives. Since Freud believed our actions are often based on our unconscious forces or wishes, he didn't believe these victims initially. He suspected they were merely expressing those wishes through fantasies because of their unconscious sexual desires for their fathers. He even named this concept an "Oedipus Complex," a term still used to describe the natural sexual and emotional attraction of a child to the parent of the opposite sex. The "Oedipus Complex" was named after the protagonist in the Greek drama, "Oedipus Rex," described earlier. At about three years of age little boys fall in love with their mothers and little girls fall in love with their fathers. Since the parent of the same sex stands in the way, the child feels jealousy and wishes to eliminate his or her rival. At about five years of age the normal child realizes he cannot possess the sought after parent.

Freud eventually believed his patients' testimony that they had been sexually abused by male relatives. In private letters to friends, he identified fathers as sexual abusers and described how they seduced their daughters. However he never felt comfortable writing publically about his discovery of incest. He felt that society would not be able to accept the fact that "respectable" family men were seducing their own daughters. He feared that such a disclosure would be harmful to his reputation since society would attempt to discredit him instead of accepting its own flaws. The clients' revelations proved that incest was quite common and even more threatening to society since it was not confined to the mentally defective or the poor.

Freud falsified incest case findings in a book he wrote in 1896 called

“The Aetiology of Hysteria” in which he confirmed childhood sexual abuse and trauma but identified perpetrators as governesses, nurses and maids. He did cite two cases in which the uncles were identified as seducers. Years later he admitted the seducers were not uncles, but actually fathers. He eventually repudiated the seduction theory altogether in 1897 reporting that sexual abuse of children did not exist at all. Freud feared society’s reaction and subsequent disapproval but part of the motive behind this repudiation was the discovery of his own incestuous feelings toward his daughter, which he revealed in letters to friends. He experienced these feelings suddenly after her mother died.

Freud discredited his patients by saying their reports of sexual abuse were merely oedipal fantasies. In other words, their desire to have a sexual relationship with their fathers was so strong that they could not tell their fantasies from reality. In this way, daughters were brushed off as hysterical and were incriminated instead of their fathers. Unfortunately, Freud’s repudiation allowed the entire subject of childhood sexual abuse to remain in the closet. Because society was too threatened by the concept to accept its existence and take aggressive action to stop it, children have continued to be victimized generation after generation. This “see no evil” mentality about sexual abuse exists even today.

Freud’s repudiation reinforced the already existing taboo and the fact that victims blame themselves for the abuse. The perpetrators were assigned no responsibility and the victims were thought to be delusional.

As a result, many people hold the belief that children are fantasizing when they report that they have been sexually abused. This attitude has been ingrained into our culture although fortunately, it is gradually changing.

The Treatise On Evidence

In 1934 a discussion of the subject of sexual abuse again appeared in written form in the most famous legal text relating to abuse ever published in the United States, “The Treatise on Evidence” by John Henry Wigmore did further disservice to sexual abuse victims by again denying the existence of abuse. In this widely read and respected text, Wigmore advised that the credibility of any female, especially a child, be disregarded if she complained of a sexual offense. Wigmore went on to write that women and girls are “predisposed” to making accusations against “men of good character.” He, in essence, said that women who make sexual abuse allegations are delusional and that they need psychiatric treatment.

Wigmore's writing only reinforced Freud's, leaving abuse victims in limbo again.

Alfred Kinsey's "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female"

In doing research on women's sexual behavior, in the 1950's, including taboo subjects such as masturbation, extra-marital sex and homosexual contacts, Kinsey stumbled upon another taboo subject unintentionally. He discovered the surprising fact that one fifth to one third of all adult females had experienced at least one sexual encounter with an adult male as a child, as the result of 4,000 personal interviews. Our culture still was not ready to absorb the full impact of these findings—a block that Kinsey's work reflected when he wrote that victims should not be upset by abuse experiences. He did not try to deny the existence of sexual abuse, but did brush off the devastating effects of victimization, even though 80% of the women interviewed reported they were very frightened and upset by the experience. He felt that there was no reason for a child to be upset by having his genitalia touched or other sexual contact or by seeing another's sexual organs. To add to the damage, he wrote that abuse was not the fault of the aggressor. He was very sympathetic toward perpetrators, who he felt could not help themselves. He viewed the perpetrators as victimized males in need of protection from malicious females, whether they be women or children. Thus, he expressed no sympathy whatever for child victims. The public was just not ready to recognize sexual abuse as an emotionally damaging experience.

Finally, in the 1970's the Women's Liberation movement brought the subjects suppressed by the taboo into the public consciousness. Subjects such as rape, wife beating and sexual abuse of children could no longer be suppressed. Since that time, child sexual victimization has been not only recognized, but studied and discussed in great detail.

HOW WE KNOW SEXUAL ABUSE IS UNNATURAL

The most blatant proof that abuse is unnatural is the very clear fact that the vaginas and rectums of children are too small for safe penile penetration; thus severe physical damage is very common. While less blatant in its obviousness, the emotional pain related to the long term effects of abuse is an obvious proof of unnaturalness to anyone who believes happiness to be a natural state of mind. Children who are drawn into sexual activity suffer extreme long term effects which hamper

their self-esteem and ability to have healthy, intimate relationships as adults. Those of us who work with victims know that these behavior patterns are associated with emotional pain (depression) and limited sexual pleasure.

Here are some ways of looking at abuse and seeing the unnatural patterns of behavior and self-image it creates:

- Children do not have the emotional maturity to choose whether or not to have sex with an adult (we know, because of the pain abuse produces, that they would inevitably say no, given the choice). This teaches them submissiveness and an inability to control what happens to their own bodies, which leads clearly to painful behavior patterns later in life.
- There is no concern for the child's welfare or his existence as a self-reliant, independent person. We know that victims who are taught in therapy to take charge of their bodies then experience great improvements in their ability to experience sexual and romantic pleasure and relief from depression. It becomes clear, then, that the perpetrator is doing nothing more than using the child in an almost animalistic, uncaring manner that denies the potential for long-term ill-effects.
- It becomes clear that children are simply unprepared emotionally for sex and cannot handle it in any way. Whenever they are denied freedom from involvement with sex prior to the time they can handle it, they suffer lasting ill-effects. Children who are drawn into sexual activity suffer extreme long-term effects which hamper their self-esteem and their future ability to have healthy, intimate relationships as adults.

HOW THE CHARACTER OF ABUSE DETERMINES THE DEGREE OF THE EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE IT CAUSES

The degree of emotional disturbance to the child is more dependent on the relationships between the perpetrator and the child than on the type of sexual abuse. For instance, a child will probably feel a greater sense of betrayal and a break in trust if a beloved uncle is the abuser rather than a stranger. He will react more strongly if the uncle exposes his penis than if a stranger caresses the child's buttocks.

WHY THE RECOGNITION OF SEXUAL ABUSE IS TABOO

Even though there has been a great deal of exposure of sexual abuse in recent years, the taboo against the subject continues to flourish among the general population. This happens because of the factors discussed under the next two headings, which are the consequences of the taboo.

People Wish to Deny the Existence of Sexual Abuse

People have been brought up to believe that abuse is a terrible event. The taboos reinforce our natural disgust for abuse. Because even thinking about it is unpleasant, people would rather deny that it exists. If we deny the reality then we don't have to do anything about the problem or accept the fact that there are children undergoing pain and hurt on a daily basis. This encourages children not to tell about the abuse they experience. Because of the secretive nature of sexual abuse, the actual high incidence remains hidden.

People Fear Their Own Incestuous Wishes

Although most of us find the idea shocking, we all have felt an incestuous desire of our parents at some time in our lives. As parents, we all have felt some degree of incestuous feeling toward our children. That does not mean we are monsters or perverted. In fact, it's normal to have these feelings. However, most of us do not act on these feelings because we realize it would be immoral and damaging to do so. If we can accept that we are not demented for having these feelings, we can be more open to recognizing abusive situations which may exist around us. Acceptance of our natural wishes lead to greater receptivity to open discussion about this emotionally laden area. As Freud so perceptively pointed out, we all store wishes we find unacceptable in our unconsciousness. We feel repulsion about the subject of sexual abuse as a way of keeping repressed incestuous desires out of our consciousness. However, the wishes are still there and they slip out in the form of remarks and behavior patterns. This results in a world in which most of us are at once fascinated by the subject and repelled by it. As a result, there is discomfort and confusion. Sometimes these ill feelings are handled by joking about the subject, i.e. "vice is nice but incest is best," "incest, it's relative" or "incest is a game the whole family can play." These fears have been dealt with extensively by the media. Bringing out the fears may be helping people to break the taboo which surround open discussion of the subject.

Because of our fascination with sexual abuse and especially incest, there have been a number of films based on incestuous themes. "Chinatown," with Faye Dunaway, Jack Nicholson, and John Huston, profoundly expresses the perverted psychology of the perpetrator of incest. Huston plays Noah Cross, a multimillionaire who has conspired to corner the Los Angeles water supply. Dunaway plays Evelyn Mullray, whose husband is the water commissioner and who has refused to cooperate with Cross. When Mullray is murdered, his widow hires Jake Gittis, a private detective played by Nicholson, to find the murderer. Gittis falls in love with Evelyn. He eventually tracks down the plot to eliminate Mullray—and the existence of a daughter/sister Evelyn has produced with her father. (Cross is the father of his granddaughter.) In the final scene, it becomes obvious that Evelyn has for years concealed the whereabouts of the inbred child to keep her out of her father's hands, and thus spare her some of the pain she (Evelyn) experienced as a child when she was sexually abused by him. Cross tries to physically take the child from Evelyn's car, whereupon she shoots her father and flees. She is killed when police shoot at her as she drives away. Cross, even though wounded, makes his way to the stopped car and attempts to comfort the child and takes her into his arms. Huston conveys at once his sympathy for the horrified child and his profound sexual desire for her. One is left with the idea that he will probably sexually abuse his granddaughter as he did his daughter.

One theme of the picture is the relationship between sexual perversion and an irrational need for wealth and power on the part of Cross. In the end, Noah Cross wins every battle. He has destroyed Evelyn's husband, assuaging the jealousy he must have felt when she married him. He has regained custody of the inbred child he desires so profoundly. He has gained control over the city water supply. And, as Gittis tries to explain what is happening to a friend on the police force, the extent of his political power becomes obvious—the policeman shrugs and allows Cross to go free. Cross is the ultimate perpetrator, having succeeded in abusing his daughter and even the entire L. A. population, and he has used the respectability of his position in the community to have the entire seduction remain a deep, dark secret.

In "The Savage is Loose," George C. Scott portrays a man whose son tries to murder him when the family is stranded on a desert island so that the son can possess his mother sexually. The movie and T. V. series, "Peyton Place," by Grace Metalious depicts a sexual relationship between

a step-father and a step-daughter and Vladimir Nabokov writes of an older man pursuing a young girl sexually in the popular novel "Lolita." Incestuous wishes were portrayed in films based on books and plays such as *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence, "Mourning Becomes Electra" by Eugene O'Neill and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" by Tennessee Williams. Love songs sung seductively by women to "Daddy" with verses such as "Daddy, You've Got to Do the Best For Me" or songs sung by a man about "Baby" may have incestuous roots.

HOW COMMON IS SEXUAL ABUSE?

At the present time, experts in the field generally believe that about one out of four girls and one out of ten boys will be sexually abused before becoming eighteen years of age. Many of those who treat abused persons, including myself, feel abuse is even more common than that since most incidents remain a secret. These are only intuitive guesses as it is virtually impossible to do a statistically valid study because of the taboo which still exists on the subject. One aspect of the taboo is that people do not want to admit they have been sexually abused because they feel shame as if it were their fault.

Another is that it is impossible to, for instance, go into a school system and ask the students if they have been or are being sexually abused. If the superintendent of our imaginary school system allowed researchers access to children to question them about this issue, he probably would be fired immediately as a result of parental shock and disapproval. Many parents do not want their children "traumatized" by this "unsavory" topic. In some cases this reaction may even result from the presence of sexual abuse in the home!

We cannot derive statistics from the number of incidents reported to authorities as most cases remain unreported. We know this because of the cases that are accidentally discovered and voluntarily disclosed long after the abuse occurs. The only method which seems able to work is to survey groups of adults about their sexual experiences as children. There has been no nationwide study which might provide us with more reliable statistics by including the widest possible sampling of victims. All studies have been local or confined to certain groups and most have been done within the last ten years.

There are several studies of the incidence of sexual abuse of children. Among the groups studied were: Texas driver's license holders (1980);

Boston parents (1981); San Francisco women (1978); and various groups of college students beginning in 1981. These studies used different definitions of sexual abuse. For instance, some included only abuse involving actual touching and some included some other forms of abuse. The wording of the questions varied from one study to another and the population surveyed was not scientifically chosen at random. Unfortunately, studies of adults do not reveal the incidence of sexual abuse in today's children. Therefore, we cannot assemble a complete picture of the nature or extent of abuse.

Is Abuse Increasing or Decreasing?

Until the late 1970's the subject of sexual abuse was taboo. It was rarely discussed and our society denied that it even existed. As the taboo against recognizing sexual abuse as a reality began crumbling and mandatory reporting of abuse was legislated, there was a leap in the number of people reporting its occurrence to authorities. As they began to hear about incidents of sexual abuse, many assumed that it had just begun to be a common occurrence. It is difficult to ascertain if sexual victimization is more common than, say, 50 or 25 years ago. However, we do know from talking with adults that abuse was common back then. There are some factors which have tended to cause a decrease in sexual abuse in recent years and others which may have tended to increase it.

As indicated previously, it is estimated by many experts in the field that one out of four girls and one out of four boys will be sexually abused before their eighteenth birthday. Some people feel the incidence of sexual abuse is declining because children are more protected in current times. In the past, children were often placed in positions of servitude by being sold and were involved in dangerous work in coal mines, factories and other work places. They were unprotected legally and quite vulnerable to use by others even sexually. When the child labor laws were passed, children were viewed less as victims.

In years past, children were not required to attend school, so many stayed home and assumed household responsibilities. There was an unquestioned obedience of the father. These two factors (staying home and obedience) combined to make it easier for parents to use children sexually. Now, with compulsory education, children are required to attend school and are no longer able to stay home all of the time. With recent child welfare legislation, which will be discussed in Chapter VIII,

children are protected legally from abuse and from their parents' requiring them to do what is harmful.

Reasons for a Possible Increase in Abuse

There are many reasons for a possible increase in the incidence of sexual abuse. Unfortunately, married couples in our society are becoming divorced at an alarming rate. Because children generally remain with their mothers, they can be more vulnerable to sexual abuse because there are more unrelated males who have access to the children. For instance, a mother may have male friends who are in and out of the children's lives or she may re-marry. Then a step-father will come to live in the house full-time. These male friends or step-fathers may consider the children fair game sexually since there is no blood relationship.

Another reason for a possible increase has to do with the so-called sexual revolution in our country. The revolution has resulted in the breakdown in external sexual controls. For example, it is more common for a sexual relationship to occur outside of wedlock, whether or not the partners are married, than it used to be. Some experts feel potential perpetrators are freer to act in a sexual way toward children since our society's controls on unbridled sex are lessened. There has also been increased treatment of sexual subjects in the media, i.e. films, books, television and newspapers.

Some experts feel that potential perpetrators get sexually stimulated by this barrage of sexual messages. They theorize that this results in the desire to obtain sexual gratification from children in those who either would rather not or cannot have a fulfilling sexual relationship with a mature man or woman. Some uninformed individuals believe women are expecting more and more from men and theorize that their aggressiveness is causing men to feel threatened. If men are threatened, the theory goes, they will be hampered in performing sexually with women. The men then, as the reasoning goes, are more likely to turn to a child, who is not so critical or demanding and is possibly more accepting and loving. It seems logical to conclude that this theory is the product of minds that have never accepted the liberation of women. One can even imagine perpetrators using such logic ("Women won't respond to me!") as an excuse to justify using a child for sexual gratification.