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Behind the Pain Nobody Talks About: Sexual Abuse of Black Boys

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In Woodbridge, New Jersey, a 3-year-old boy was sexually assaulted and beat to death by a 10-year-old boy. In Harlem, a schoolteacher sodomized a 15-year-old former student and sent sexually graphic messages to him over the Internet. In Houston, a 12-year-old boy was abused and assaulted by his cousin.

In Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Atlanta, in cities across the United States, young Black boys are being abused and assaulted in foster homes, government-run prisons and detention centers in a shocking national problem that nobody talks about.

The statistics are explosive. One out of six boys is abused before age 16, and the rates are dramatically higher in Black areas marred by systemic poverty, broken homes, high unemployment rates and sociological problems.

Scared, alone, and sometimes imprisoned by shame, these young boys often suffer in silence, choosing to avoid public awareness of their victimization. "There are elements of shame and powerlessness associated with male children who are victims of sexual abuse," says Judith Adams, principal to over 600 incarcerated students at Jefferson Alternative School, a juvenile detention center in Chicago. "Because African-American boys are in an environment that applauds 'macho-ism,' they feel powerless when they are violated and they feel as though they have failed themselves by allowing something like this to happen. So many young men who haven't been exposed to anything other than abuse think it is simply a part of life."

A major reason for the increasing rates of sexual abuse in Black America is that young Black boys are indiscriminately arrested at an early age and sent to local or state facilities where they are routinely raped or assaulted. "Sexual assault, violence and abuse occur so often in group home settings and foster homes, and rehabilitative centers, simply because you don't have the quality of care or the necessary supervision. When you don't have a controlled environment, you don't have control," says Adams, whose detention center in Chicago offers single-celled, visible rooms in an attempt to limit such occurrences.

Yet, even in the supposed confines of a family environment, where a child should be protected, boys are still at risk. Poverty, racism and broken families exacerbate the problem. "We have

young mothers who are under 30 years old who are trying to raise teenage children,” says Adams. “We see our kids coming from mixed families and transitory families where the mother or father has numerous partners in and out of the house over short periods of time.”

Part of the difficulty in dealing with child sexual abuse cases, experts say, is identifying the victim-perpetrator relationship. “In many cases, the abuse isn’t thrust upon the boy all at once. It’s often a slow process, or a courtship, where the perpetrator befriends the boy, gains his trust and creates avenues of access to him,” says Dr. Nathan Hare of San Francisco.

In fact, a recent study found that over 78 percent of child victims knew their attackers. “A predator is less likely to be the natural father, but rather, a stepfather, an uncle, cousin or family friend who has access and interest in the child,” says Dr. Hare. “It tends to be someone close by, someone they respect, and someone with the need and audacity to approach them.”

Despite the alarming rate of sexual abuse against young Black boys, most male perpetrators are not homosexual. According to a study by the American Medical Association, 98 percent of males who raped boys reported that they were heterosexual. Additional research suggests that while male child molesters may have gender and/or age preferences, of those who seek out boys, the vast majority are not homosexual. They are pedophiles.

Recent allegations against some celebrities for sexual assault indicate that power and pedophilia are the catalysts behind many headline stories and that many abusers are reliving images of their own abuse. In fact, a study conducted by the Journal of Traumatic Stress found that up to 80 percent of perpetrators were themselves abused.

In an effort to deal with the escalating problems of young Black men and sexual abuse, experts say encouraging parental involvement is integral to addressing the issue. “Unfortunately, some parents would rather keep quiet once they learn about the abuse of their child. They may choose to ignore it because the perpetrator is a respected individual such as a father, stepfather or a priest,” says Adams.

Failing to deal with the problem may be more damaging than the problem itself, says Dr. Bell. Nor is a parent’s anger or revenge an effective strategy. “I tell parents, ‘Your child needs you, they don’t need you in prison.’ They need you to be supportive and to help them through this. Quite often, when a child is traumatized, it is the parents’ reaction that shapes the child’s response, and ultimately, their healing.”

Parents, so often traumatized themselves by the abuse, often worry that their son will become homosexual or suffer from physical or emotional problems in adulthood as a result of the sexual assault. But, there is no compelling evidence, according to the Journal of the American Medical Association, that sexual abuse fundamentally changes a boy’s sexual orientation. In fact, the study found that over 80 percent of sexually abused boys never become adult perpetrators. But the abuse may lead to confusion about sexual identity and is likely to affect how the boy relates in intimate situations. “When children are abused early on in life, it alters their ability to make a decision as to who they want to be,” says Adams.

Even abuse at the hands of a woman, experts say, can have a negative impact on a young Black man's sexuality in adulthood. "Although a boy's early experimentation with a woman has often been referred to as a 'rite of passage,' it can complicate his psychological perception of impotence if he is unable to perform," says Dr. Hare. "This belief in his failure may follow him into his adult relationships."

The inability to form healthy adult relationships can have a lasting effect when abuse occurs early during a boy's formative years. "Abused children tend to form very extreme relationships," says Adams. "They are either extremely dependent relationships or extremely abusive relationships. They are accustomed to being mistreated, and they practice what they have experienced."

Dr. Bell agrees. "If you've been victimized by someone you trust, then you tend to not trust other people. At the same time, being victimized may bring you closer to people because of the need to find support and the need to find meaning and understanding."

In a child's search for understanding, both males and females may show outward signs of abuse. "Usually, kids who've been abused don't want you to get too close to them. They don't want you to touch them. Even something as small as touching their hand, they will reject. They will snatch their hand away from you," says Adams, principal at a Chicago juvenile detention center. "Then, there are kids who will lie all over you in a manner that is completely inappropriate and you begin to realize that the child has been introduced to a sexual experience."

Research suggests that young boys in particular may be extremely uncomfortable around other men and may suffer from confusion and anxiety about their own masculinity. The boy may be extremely resistant to being touched by men and may avoid situations where he will be seen unclothed or disrobing. Because of his uneasiness with males, a boy may have few male friends and may suffer in isolation, or gravitate toward people who are anti-masculine. Experts say that some boys may exhibit feminine characteristics in an attempt to avoid identifying with their male abuser.

Despite these very difficult side effects, Dr. Bell and other experts say that victims can go on to lead normal and productive adult lives. "Many men go on to become doctors, lawyers, teachers, policemen, and many other professions. They do so by turning their traumatic helplessness into learned helpfulness. It's a conscious choice that must be made in order to move toward healing. If you are a victim, you have to tell someone you can trust, be willing to fight for yourself and be willing to prosecute."

The process of empowering children and parents to tackle this crisis starts with understanding the severity of the issue and its far-reaching impact on both girls and boys. There is also a need for community-wide education for families, communities, churches, schools and social programs on awareness and prevention. Becoming familiar with some signs of abuse--guilt, anxiety, isolation, fear, anger, suicide attempts, depression, shame, eating disorders, sleep disorders, low self-esteem, alcoholism, drug addiction and sexual obsession or compulsion--also helps adults identify possible indicators of abuse.

Parents can make a major contribution to their children's safety by teaching them to have authority over their body and to beware of certain situations, not certain people. Empower your child with the knowledge that he has the right to say "no" if something feels or sounds wrong and that he has the right to tell someone if he needs help. Role-play with your child to instruct him on how to handle certain situations, teach him emergency numbers, and encourage him to travel with a group. Above all, make sure that your child is aware of his worth to you, to your family and to society. Letting a child know that he is loved, respected and wanted is the first step toward self-empowerment and prevention.

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