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Experts: Friends, Relatives a Greater Risk of Child Sexual Abuse

By Natalie Singer, Seattle Times Staff Reporter

She walked into the courtroom last week in a ponytail and a puffy jacket and settled into the witness chair. Over the next hour, the roomful of strangers would come to know her well.

The 9-year-old is a Girl Scout who loves chocolate cake and gym class. Her little brother always messes with her stuff. She hopes to dress up as a bride for Halloween.

And when she was 7, she got chlamydia.

The sexually transmitted disease happened, a prosecutor said, because a man who was a close friend of the family's had raped her.

It seems extraordinary. But nearly every month, sometimes every week, similar stories are repeated before King County judges and juries.

The details differ, but most of the cases have one key thing in common: Despite the Hollywood scripts, public-awareness campaigns and a recent spate of new state laws that focus on Internet predators and stranger abductors, nine out of 10 sexually abused children are assaulted by family members or close acquaintances, say experts. Most often, it happens right in the children's own homes.

Those who counsel victims, and arrest and prosecute accused molesters say they worry about the attention given to Internet and stranger predators. What's being lost, they say, are the crucial, and often much harder, discussions about when relatives or other close caregivers hurt a child.

Changing the Message

"Teaching our children about stranger danger sends them the wrong message if that's the only message we give," said Robert Schilling, lead detective in the Seattle Police Department's Sex and Kidnapping Offender unit. "Parents get the idea that Internet predators and strangers in the bushes are who sex offenders are. They don't realize that is one out of thousands. The message has to change."

This year, Olympia lawmakers passed a spate of legislation aimed at “stranger danger” and Internet predators, including a controversial law that gives sex offenders a 25-year mandatory minimum sentence if they meet one of three criteria: are unknown to the victim; established a relationship with the victim for the purpose of abusing him or her; or are, among other things, a teacher, counselor, coach or religious leader.

Around the region, billboards warn that one out of five children is sexually solicited online, and assault educators are inundated with questions about stranger danger from parents terrified by highly publicized incidents like the case of Joseph Edward Duncan III, charged with killing an Idaho family a year ago so he could kidnap the children for sex.

The Internet is getting so much attention because it’s new, it’s breeding sex predators, and parents often don’t know how to navigate the electronic world their children do in order to protect them, said Greg Ayco, commander of Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force for Washington and Alaska.

On the other hand, discussing abuse by a family member is an uncomfortable, often taboo thing for parents and educators, said Mary Ellen Stone, director of the King County Sexual Assault Resource Center.

“It’s much easier to be concerned about a stranger, but for us to say, ‘I really need to pay attention to my brother-in-law’ — it requires us to deal with some very difficult emotions,” she said.

“It’d be tough to come up with a marketing campaign that says, ‘Watch out for your husband or your brother, he may be a rapist,’” said Scott Fogg, a King County prosecutor who spent three years in the Special Assault Unit, which deals with rape cases and crimes against children and the elderly. “It’s easier for people to imagine strangers doing this.”

In fact, many of the same tactics used by stranger or Internet predators are used by those who are close to children.

The same way Internet predators “groom” their victims — slowly gaining trust by tapping into the child’s interests and giving him or her lots of attention — so do known molesters, said Caroline Shelton, prevention and education coordinator for the Children’s Response Center in Bellevue.

“Time and time again, you see the stepfather or the boyfriend who very consciously preyed upon a woman with kids because he wanted access to those kids. It’s not by chance, it’s deliberate grooming,” said Shelton.

Parents often develop a false sense of security because they somehow come to believe their child isn’t the type to be abused, experts say. Every kid is vulnerable.

Parents may experience denial, said Lucy Berliner, clinical director for the Harborview Center for Traumatic Stress and Sexual Assault, often the first stop for local children who report sexual

abuse. “They might know it happens, but they don’t want to deal with it,” Berliner said of incest and other similar abuses. “Parents can’t bring themselves to think of the [abuser] in that way.”

Often, though, it is a parent who comes forward to report the alleged abuse when they learn of it.

Telling Her Story in Court

That was the case with the Girl Scout, whose mother asked her what was wrong after she began wetting the bed and acting unusual.

On Friday, the family friend, Terry Callandret, 36, of Seattle was found guilty of two counts of first-degree rape and one count of first-degree molestation in King County Superior Court.

Callandret could serve anywhere from 20 to 27 years in prison. A date for his sentencing has not yet been set.

During the trial the girl, questioned by King County Deputy Prosecutor Jessica Berliner, gave the jury plenty of detail to ponder.

In the fall of 2004, the man began kissing her on the lips when her mother wasn’t around. Soon, the girl said, he had touched her “privates” under her covers while she was in bed and had made her touch him.

The type of abuse she suffered can affect victims for years, even decades, experts say.

“It has different meanings at different times,” said DeAnn Yamamoto, deputy executive director of the King County Sexual Assault Resource Center. During childhood, sexual abuse makes children feel sad and scared, she said. As they hit puberty, it can cause anger problems, and past sexual trauma can make it difficult for adults to have healthy intimate relationships, she said.

For now, Callandret’s victim is trying to move on. After spending two years repeating her story to doctors, investigators, police, lawyers and strangers in a courtroom, the 9-year-old will now begin to let the memories fade.

She spends most of her time with friends at a new school, arguing with her pesky little brother, playing outside and doing artwork. This fall, she’s going to be a cheerleader.

And soon, she can start planning that bride’s costume for Halloween.

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Possible Signs of Child Sexual Abuse

- Sleep disturbances — nightmares, fear of going to bed, fear of sleeping alone
- Depression or excessive crying
- Regression — exhibiting behavior more common to an earlier age, like thumb-sucking, bedwetting, needing a bottle, etc.
- Nervous or aggressive behavior toward adults
- Unusual reaction to (or fear of) a particular person
- Expressing explicit sexual knowledge beyond the child's age level
- Sexual self-consciousness, extreme modesty
- Drop in school grades or participation in activities
- Abrupt changes in child's typical behavior and attitudes
- Self-destructive behavior such as drug or alcohol abuse
- Running away
- Displaying an unusual interest in the genitals of peers, adults or animals
- Withdrawal or isolation from friends

For help, call: The King County Sexual Assault Resource Center's 24-hour sexual-assault resource line at 888-99-VOICE

Source: King County Sexual Assault Resource Center

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