

Guarding the gates

Sexual crimes against children have been on the rise despite efforts to curb them. A major obstacle is keeping the abusers and predators away from the children.

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THE manager could not believe her luck when Shaun* started working at their home for young boys in Kuala Lumpur - he was hard working, good with children and most importantly, willing to work for nothing.

With his pleasant personality and boyish good looks, he quickly wormed his way into the hearts of the home's residents and staff. And so when Shaun took a special interest in a few young boys, she thought nothing of it until one day, when one of his "pet brothers" came out to say that Shaun had been sexually abusing him.

After his crime was exposed, Shaun disappeared without a trace. Fortunately, his victims are beginning to put their traumatic experience behind them, albeit with a lot of counselling.



Victim of abuse: Goh was believed to have been physically and sexually abused by a caretaker at a welfare home.

Autistic teenager Brian Ghosh was not so lucky. In October, the teen died after he was physically and sexually abused by a caretaker at a shelter for the mentally disabled in Petaling Jaya. The police arrested the perpetrator after finding evidence near the shelter, including a metal rod that is believed to have been used to sodomise and beat the mentally challenged teen.

Last week, a former press photographer was sentenced to nine months jail for molesting three boys at a children's home. The 53-year-old photographer was also a worker at the home, and had confessed earlier that he sexually abused 10 boys in the 10 months he volunteered there.

Predictably, these incidents sent shivers down parents' spine. However, what struck fear in parents was not so much how the sexual predators managed to penetrate the supposedly safe environment for children to commit these crimes, but how they too may not be able to see the danger signs before it is too late.

As it is widely recorded, most sexual predators are not the gift-bearing strangers or the hooded dirty old men lurking outside the gates and in the bushes.

Many parents are now aware that a majority of those who commit violent and sexual crimes against children are known to them, and are often in the position of power or authority.

Still, it is not easy for the public to spot sexual predators, particularly paedophiles or those with the sexual preference for young children. Almost all are adept at living a double life or below the radar, making them even more difficult to weed out.

While their popular image projects common characteristics, the reality is that paedophiles come from diverse social and economic backgrounds, says Universiti Sains Malaysia criminologist Dr P. Sundramoorthy.

"There is no typical paedophile. Those who are attracted to children can be anybody, many are ordinary adults and not all are

BEWARE: Paedophile at large

Though there is no hard and fast profile of a paedophile, there are some general characteristics:

Popular with both children and adults

Appears to be trustworthy and respectable

Has good standing in the community

Prefers the company of children

Can be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual

Singles out troubled children in need of attention and affection

Rarely forces or coerces a child into sexual contact

Finds different ways and places to be alone with children

Are primarily (but not always) male, masculine, well-educated and religious

Usually work in jobs allowing them greater access to children

Are often, but not always, themselves victims of child sexual abuse

Source: Mental Health Matters

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psychologically disturbed."

The only common aspect of paedophilia is an intense interest in children, says Dr Sundramoorthy.

While the different types of sexual needs and desires in human beings are increasingly being accepted in most societies, attraction to children or paedophilia is still considered abnormal or a sexual deviance.

Mental disorder

Mental health professionals even define paedophilia as a mental disorder in which the sufferer can only achieve sexual gratification or excitement through a fantasy or actual act of engaging in sexual activity with pre-pubertal children (12 and below). The laws in almost all countries see it as a criminal act, and many courts interpret it to mean children under the age of consent (16 in Malaysia) or adulthood (18 years).

Deviant sexual fantasies and acts here include exhibiting, peeping, non-consenting sexual rubbing, sexual touching and rape.

According to Dr Raymond Choo, a senior research analyst with the Australian Institute of

Criminology, individuals who have sexual fantasies of children or erotic attractions towards children have been present in society throughout history.

Recent research, however, indicates that it may be more common than thought, says Dr Choo, highlighting a study (*Sexual Abuse by Gee DG, Devilly GJ & Ward T, 2004*) he quoted in a report he wrote on child Internet safety for the Australian Institute of Criminology: two in three men admit they fantasise about young girls. One in five university students are also sexually attracted to children at some point.

Although the survey was not conducted here, he says, it is applicable to Malaysia due to the borderless nature of the current world.

Dr Sundramoorthy agrees, "We are exposed to the same media, communication technology and resources."

In Malaysia, the problem is compounded by the lack of research conducted on sexual deviant behaviour in the country, he says.

This is a major barrier in raising awareness on paedophilia, says Child Rights advocate and former Welfare Department assistant director, P. Vijayakumari.

Citing the earlier case involving Shaun above, Vijayakumari recounts how suspicions arose only after a group of informed expatriate volunteers recognised the signs.

"The group of expatriate wives I took to volunteer there instantly noticed something amiss about his behaviour with the kids and shared their concerns. They said they recognised signs of a paedophile in him, which they had learnt to do through the campaigns they had had in their country," she recalls.

However, no one at the orphanage believed her when she relayed their suspicions to them, she adds, prompting her to conduct her own "investigation".

"I took his passport details – he's a foreigner – and got the help of a police friend to trace his records but before the other party could get back to us, one boy came forward for help," she says.

Many paedophiles get away with their crime because they go to great lengths to adhere themselves to their potential young victims. If they are strangers, they will take time – to befriend the children, showering them with gifts and kind words – in what is known as "grooming".

According to criminologist Dr Geshina Ayu Mat Saat, many will live within 2km of a school or places frequented by children to prey on them from a safe distance. Lately, she warns, many are getting jobs there to make it easier for them to get closer to young children.

And while sexual offenders are usually males, there are also some female perpetrators, says Dr Geshina Ayu. Female paedophiles usually abuse a child when partnered with adult male paedophiles. A few months ago, a taxi driver who called himself "Uncle" was caught for raping, attempting to rape and molesting seven under aged girls whom he had groomed with the help of a teen aged female accomplice.

Unfortunately, not much study

Young children are easy targets

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has been conducted on female sexual predators and many get away with the crime due to the prejudice in society.

Hampering a proper understanding of the crime here further, argues Vijayakumari, is the reluctance of the police to categorise perpetrators in sexual crime cases as paedophiles.

There is reason to worry as sexual crimes against children have spiked in the last few years: police records show that 2,507 rape cases involving minors (under 18) were recorded in 2008 compared to 1,931 in 2005. From January to June this year, 1,793 rape cases have been recorded. Out of this, 281 involved children aged 12 and below (2008) and 92 up to June this year.

Some 912 molestation cases involving minors were recorded in 2008 and 929 cases in 2009. For incest, 334 cases were recorded in 2008 and 385 cases in 2009.

Vulnerable victims

Young children are easy victims, says Vijayakumari, "Many are not able to defend themselves. When they go to court, the child is not able to testify, so the perpetrator gets off free. There is nothing to deter them from repeating their crime on another child at another place."

Most vulnerable, she adds, are disabled children but it is not clear how many out of the total number of sexual cases reported to the police involved them.

"Like very young children, many are not able to defend themselves or testify in court. For mentally-challenged children like those with autism, for example, many are not able to defend themselves even if they are above 18, because they are not able to think like an adult despite their physical maturity," she says.

The onus is thus on everyone to keep the perpetrators at bay and keep the safe environments safe, says P.S. The Children director Madeleine Yong.

Not all are paedophiles

NOT all child sexual offenders are paedophiles, warns Universiti Sains Malaysia criminologist Dr P. Sundramoorthy (pic).

"Before we tag anyone as a paedophile, we must first ascertain whether he or she has a history of serial sexual offences against children," he says.

He argues that most of the time, sexual predators in Malaysia are opportunists - going after powerless and weaker victims because the opportunities are presented to them.

He also cautions about generalising all child sexual crimes as paedophile cases.

"In Malaysia, there have been an increase in sex crimes on minors but not all of the perpetrators are necessarily paedophiles, in the sense that they are not serial offenders of sexual crime against children.

Dr Sundramoorthy says most child sexual crimes in Malaysia are not premeditated, "It came out of an opportunity presenting itself, because many parents are still not aware of safety precautions - the do's and don'ts for their young children."

Power, he opines is another issue. Many sexual offenders use the excuse of feeling emasculated to terrorise young children.

"It is a lame excuse, but there are those who say that they rape children because women now are too aggressive."



Highlighting the Child Protection Policy. Yong stresses how it is stated clearly that organisations working with children, including schools, need to implement proper recruitment selection as well as training and knowledge of child protection for all its staff.

They also need to put in place a response mechanism when they detect abuse in the organisation, and preventive programmes as well as educational programmes to empower the children, she adds.

The problem is, she argues, many are not following the rules because the policy is not being enforced.

"There is no monitoring mechanism or central governing body to ensure that its recommendations are fully implemented. The Government needs to enforce the policy, it is not good to just have a policy without implementing it," she says.

Vijayakumari proposes a psychological test to weed out anyone with a sexual deviance. It should not stop there though, she adds.

"Even if they pass the test, the administration needs to monitor them for a period of time as it is easy to take advantage of the children at a home or shelter."

Suka Society (Voices of Children Society) communication coordinator member Debbie Pereira proposes a police check on those who apply to work and volunteer with children at homes and shelters.

"This facility is not available to most organisations, though. There is also no comprehensive list of offenders easily available to check on the background of people," she says.

Hence, there have been calls for a sexual offender registry from various groups, including by the Bar Council, to keep convicted sexual offenders away from any work involving children.

Mental health studies show that paedophiles can be "treated" but never cured as their sexual preference has always been, and

will always be, children.

Vijayakumari concurs, pointing out another reason why the registry cannot work in Malaysia: the low conviction rate of sexual offenders in the country.

If a police screening or a sexual offenders registry cannot be made available, says Pereira, organisations need to conduct more thorough processing before hiring anyone or accepting any volunteers.

One measure is to have a detailed application form requiring the applicant (for work or voluntary services) to state his or her references, biodata, contact information and so on. References must be verified and interviews conducted before they are allowed access to their kids.

"Most paedophiles are not willing to go through all the trouble and risk exposing themselves whenever we do our homework.

"This process may have deterred insidious volunteers like the former press photographer," she says.

A volunteer at a children's activity centre in Kuala Lumpur agrees, relating how easy it was for her to start working with the children.

"They did not even ask me for references," says the music teacher who only wants to be known as Dee.

On alert for danger signs

Yong believes that training is needed not only for parents but also for the home administrations and management to be aware of the danger signs too so that they can be more alert.

Ultimately, says Vijayakumari, the best measure is still educating the children about the dangers and empowering them to defend themselves.

"The perpetrators can be anyone, so it is better that they are empowered to defend themselves," she says.

**Not his real name*