

Barriers Abusers Overcome In Order To Abuse

Child sexual abuse doesn't happen by accident and, despite what many victims are led to believe, they are **never** responsible for their own abuse. In 1984 the sociologist David Finkelhor proposed a model of child sexual abuse which describes the stages that an abuser has to move through in order to abuse a child. These can be thought of as barriers an abuser must overcome in order to commit acts of abuse. Look through the following typical aspects of each stage and consider how many factors were relevant in your situation.



Stage 1 - Sexual motivation (wanting to abuse)

For any abuse to happen first the abuser must *want* to abuse. They must be motivated to act in abusive ways.

- The abuser was sexually attracted to children (i.e. they were a pedophile)
- The abuser enjoyed power and control over vulnerable children (and possibly over other people too)
- The abuser had psychological difficulties (e.g. anger, depression, anxiety, impulse control)
- The abuser had relationship difficulties (perhaps difficulties managing same-age relationships)
- The abuser had been abused themselves

Stage 2 - Overcoming internal inhibitions against acting on that motivation

There are strong pressures on everyone *not* to abuse children. Aside from criminal charges, there are threats to the abuser's reputation and self-image. In order to abuse the abuser must overcome his or her internal barriers.

- The abuser makes excuses or otherwise justifies the abuse to themselves. E.g. they may have said or thought: *"We are in love", "This is a relationship", "The child is getting something out of this as well", "The child won't remember"*
- The abuser may use alcohol or drugs to overcome their own inhibitions (e.g. for 'courage')
- The abuser may have used pornography (particularly child pornography) to lower their inhibitions or normalize their behavior

Stage 3 - Overcoming external impediments to committing sexual abuse

Abusers deliberately manipulate their circumstances in order to make it easier to abuse, or to minimize their chances of getting caught. They may do any of the following:

- Deliberately gaining access to a victim, for example:
 - Starting a relationship with the child's mother
 - Through a job (e.g. a teacher, babysitter)
 - Through a community role (e.g. sports instructor, community or religious leader)
- Grooming others, such as adults, so they thought of as safe & trustworthy
- Creating situations where the abuse could happen unnoticed (e.g. childminding, trips, sports events)
- Reducing the chances of the abuse being discovered (e.g. manipulating timing, location, other people)
- Threatening the victim or their family
- Reducing the chances of the abuse being reported (threats, appearing powerful, making the victim complicit)
- Reducing the chances of disclosures being believed (e.g. doing charity work or having other roles in the community to appear to be a 'good person')
- Alienating or isolating the child from others so that the child is less likely to be believed if they do disclose
- Abuse other members of the family (e.g. the mother) so the child is more vulnerable

Stage 4 - Undermining or overcoming the child's resistance to the sexual abuse

Abusers have to overcome the child's natural resistance to the sexual abuse. If they want to repeat the abuse they have to act in ways to prevent the abuse from being discovered. They need to victim to be compliant. They may achieve this by:

- Saying threatening things or acting in threatening ways (threats to: victim, their family, their future)
- Select victims who are likely to be responsive to their advances (vulnerabilities can include: neglect, poverty, those with less power, those with disabilities or those less able to communicate)
- Making the victim feel special
- Bribes to encourage compliance (e.g. gifts, treats, compliments, trips)
- Force (ask yourself: how big were you? how big was your abuser?)
- Trickery (confusing the victim, lying) for example telling the victim:
 - *"I'm doing this as a favor to your father/mother"*
 - *"This is normal, everyone goes through this"*