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Torment of the 'red flags'

*Children are often
slow to share
stories of sexual
abuse.*

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Looking back, the mother said, "There were so many stinking red flags."

Mary's young daughter was indecently touched by a family friend years before she told anyone it happened. Experts say children often are slow to disclose that they have been sexually abused.

Mary, who asked that her full name be withheld to protect her child, said her daughter, even as a little girl, had worried about hurting the offender's family.

The man who molested her daughter, and numerous other girls, was someone no one would have identified as a sexual predator.

"He was a fun-loving, kind of easygoing guy," Mary said. "He would do anything for you."

He was a stalwart member of his church, she said, and seemed to be a devoted father to his own children.



He would jump on the trampoline with his kids' friends and help them with their homework. "He was fun to be around," Mary recalled.

"No kid will go near someone who's creepy," Mary said. "The thing with him was that it took until they were older before they realized he was creepy."

Looking back, it's easier to see the red flags — the times when this man would leave the grownups talking and go down to his basement to hang out with the kids there; or the times when he would put his hands on a girl's shoulders, or get into a hot tub with young girls.

A few weeks after Mary's daughter disclosed that this man had indecently touched her, another girl — a friend of Mary's older daughter — approached Mary at a gathering and revealed that she, too, had been victimized by this man.

More accusations from other girls followed, and within a year, the man was deemed a sexually violent predator and given a lengthy prison sentence.

Mary said the system worked well for her daughter and this man's other victims. The police, the Lancaster County Children's Alliance, Lancaster County Children & Youth Social Service Agency and the Lancaster County district attorney's office all worked together to make sure that justice was served, Mary said.

Moreover, she said, the team ensured that the victims also were cared for; the girls were assigned a counselor by the YWCA of Lancaster Sexual Assault Prevention and Counseling Center.

Mary's daughter never had to testify in court. Faced with numerous charges, including aggravated indecent assault and involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, the man pleaded guilty.

At the man's sentencing, the judge shook the hands of every one of the girls who had come forward to tell the truth about what happened to them. "For us, as parents, it was so validating. I hope it was for them, too," Mary said.

Mary said she still finds it painful to drive by the house of the man she and her husband once considered a friend. "I know that in order to be healed, to be completely healed again, there will be a time when I have to let it all go. ... But there are five stages of grief that have to be worked through."

Said Mary: "This crime, this stays with you forever. You can heal, you can survive, you can move on, but the scars are always there." ■

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