

Paedophiles, perverts and the man next door

by June Kane¹

So The Who's Pete Townshend says he is not a paedophile (*The Age*, A3, 2 February). His friends and family say the same. A group of adolescent girls demonstrate outside Flinders Street station to protest Michael Jackson's innocence. He is not a paedophile either, they claim. Are they right?

The police investigated Townshend's involvement with child pornography and did not press charges, so he is in the clear (although uninformed and reckless). In fact, despite fears that paedophile activity is growing out of control and that we are helpless to beat it, the police in many countries are becoming more and more effective in recognising and pursuing paedophiles.

The Jackson case is much murkier, though. We may never know whether the accusations of child molestation against Jackson are true. In the media and public frenzy surrounding the multiple allegations, pay-offs, rumour and hype, the truth of Jackson's guilt or innocence is likely to be as elusive as paedophiles themselves are.

As in many such cases, it may just come down to the word of the child against the word of the adult. On the other hand, there may be evidence against Jackson that we don't know of yet. For example, paedophiles like to 'fix' the age of their victims by taking photos and video images of them (the source of much child pornography over the ages, including recent stocks accessible on the Internet). They tend to keep records of their conquests: once upon a time card indexes detailing the height, weight, hair colour and responsiveness of the child, and latterly computer files with the same information. They share this among like-minded people, finding solace in the knowledge that they are not alone and using the photos and files as 'identity cards' to prove their affiliation to this abusive club.

These paper or computer trails are of untold value to law enforcement and explain why targeting users of child pornography is so important. If the materials taken from Jackson's Neverland home contain clear evidence of paedophile activity, then it would be difficult to conclude that he is just a good man misunderstood. If they turn out to be home movies of his kids' birthday parties, then we shall remain in the dark.

In short, we have to wait and see. Jackson is innocent until proven guilty. Sharing your bed with a child does not necessarily mean that you have abused that child (although it is a stupid thing to do, because it sends out a clear signal to the child that such behaviour is OK, and so potentially makes the child vulnerable to other approaches). Grabbing your crotch and getting your nose reshaped every year may mark you as wacko but not as criminal. Preferring the company of children to adults is not *per se* aberrant. In fact, even being a paedophile is not criminal – only if you act upon those impulses and molest or otherwise harm a child have you broken the law.

Sadly, just as the truth risks sinking in the quagmire of innuendo and sensational half-truths that are likely to characterize coverage of the Jackson trial, so understanding and appropriate response will also struggle to prevail. Emotions will run high – as they did in Flinders Street – and family, friends and fans will protest Jackson's innocence even though they cannot really know.

As we wait for all this to be played out in the world's media, therefore, it is as well to remind ourselves again of what child sexual abuse is and to dispel some common myths about those who abuse:

Myth #1: Paedophiles are strange and it's easy to recognise them

Wrong. You cannot roll up the sleeve of a paedophile and reveal the give-away birthmark on his arm. Or take a blood sample for testing to see if it's positive for paedophilia. Paedophiles don't have specific facial features. Despite what people might think, they don't have forked tongues, horns and a tail or otherwise look like monsters. As child rights crusader Shay Cullen once said, "Monsters don't abuse children anyway; nice men do". Just because your favourite rock star

seems so nice, it doesn't mean he can't possibly be a paedophile. Ditto for priests, teachers, youth leaders and the man next door.

Paedophiles do have a certain *modus operandi*, though, and behavioural characteristics that help in work to prevent them from abusing. The collection of images and information on children is the most obvious 'external' sign of paedophilia. The use of these as tickets to relationships with other paedophiles means that we have come to think of them as acting in packs or through networks. Paedophiles may have otherwise regular relationships, although many of them are uncomfortable around adult women. The behavioural traits of paedophiles are well documented because paedophilia is recognised and categorised as a clinical diagnostic category of sexual deviance and, as such, can be treated. Nowadays convicted paedophiles may be offered the chance to undergo treatment (it is still rare for such treatment to be proscribed), and will undergo counselling and drug therapy. The jury is still out on how successful such treatment is; relapse rates are relatively high but there is some evidence that it does work.

Most importantly, paedophiles do not all abuse children. Some do no more than fantasise about children and never act upon these fantasies. Some may progress to befriending them and just wanting to be near them. Some go further and expose themselves to children (the 'flasher in the playground' stage). Some will attempt or achieve physical violation of varying degrees. Ongoing research at the University of Cork in Ireland is attempting to measure whether the use of child pornography prompts progress along the path from fantasy to abuse. Why is this so important to know? Because the fact that there are stages in the paedophile's journey to penetration mean we have a chance to intervene before they act and before a child is abused.

Myth #2: Only paedophiles sexually abuse children.

Wrong. In fact, although statistics are difficult to pin down, it is almost certain that the majority of men (and sometimes women) who sexually abuse children are not paedophiles at all. They're just regular guys, like you and me.

This is an extremely important fact to remember, because it explains why the guy in your office who went on holiday to Thailand and had sex with a 12 year-old will tell you it wasn't wrong, that he is just a normal bloke with a girlfriend he adores and that it was the booze and the fact that 'they all do it over there' that led him astray. The truth is that he committed a crime – and can be pursued in Australia under our extraterritoriality provisions – by sexually exploiting a minor. He's a child sex abuser, along with the many others who 'didn't realise she was under 18', 'did it as an act of kindness to help out her family', 'got blind drunk and didn't mean to do any harm' or just picked up a minor on a street corner because the 25 year-old they normally buy sex from wasn't available. The French have a word for these men: they call them 'Don't-give-a-stuff-ers'. We call them criminals. And the only way to deal with them is through the criminal justice system, where they learn that the rest of society does give a stuff.

The focus on paedophiles, and the handy label we can attach to them, has meant that the enormous problem of 'normal' men abusing minors has largely not been acknowledged or addressed. Police picking up a 'john' kerb-crawling an area where young girls are known to be exploited for sex most often send him home to the wife with a warning not to be bloody stupid. The hundreds of men who come back from their holidays with stories of young flesh and cheap sex are seen as seedy but rarely labelled as child sex abusers.

Such abusers cannot be treated, as paedophiles can. They have no specific characteristics that make them stand out from the crowd. They could be standing next to you at the footy, sitting next to you on the tram, living just down the road. Or at the breakfast table telling you they'll be home late from work. The only way to deal with them is do them in and let the law do its job.

Myth #3: If a 15 year-old sells sex, she's at fault, not the man who buys it

Wrong. The man is a child sex abuser. International law considers any person under the age of 18 to be a child, and action at international level is based on that (for example new anti-

trafficking conventions specify that people under the age of 18 cannot by definition consent to being relocated and exploited, even if they initiate the travel themselves). In practice, though, each country sets its own age limits for sexual consent and for employment (where prostitution is legal). If the child is below that age, then the 'client' is breaking the law, whether or not prostitution is legal, independent of the girl's seeming complicity and regardless of whether 'she looked older'. In fact, we know that child prostitution is generally an extension of the adult sex trade and does not cater to a specific market niche.

The men who buy minors for sex are most often regular prostitute users who want to try something different, can't get the older woman they would prefer, or sometimes are egged on by mates to 'prove themselves'. They're generally not paedophiles because paedophiles target children who haven't yet reached puberty, around 13 years of age. Although there are 'brothels' in some countries exploiting such young children, generally paedophiles and non-paedophile abusers do not cross paths.

Myth #4: All this happens somewhere else anyway and it's only Australians overseas who are involved

Wrong. It's true that some Australian men (and women) do go somewhere else to abuse children. Paedophiles (usually men) have a long tradition of targeting poor countries where children are vulnerable and parents can be more easily bought off. Giving money to the family or gifts to the child also satisfies their need to justify their actions as benevolent, not deviant. Reportedly significant numbers of Australian men (and more rarely women) abuse children while they are overseas on holiday or business too, and the growth in child prostitution has led to an increase in child trafficking for sexual purposes.

But the truth is that both paedophile activity and the exploitation of children in prostitution happen at home too. No country is spared these criminal abuses of children's rights. And in so-called 'developed' countries like Australia, sexually abused children from all over the world arrive here by satellite, beamed through Cyberspace onto the desktops of those who claim to be simply curious but whose interest in child pornography contributes to a growth in this lucrative trade and a demand for more and new images of abuse.

Myth # 5: Men have sexual needs that must be met and this excuses otherwise deviant behaviour

Wrong. The Catholic church may buy this theory but we should not. This is the excuse so often trotted out by those whose lives are celibate. They may not be able to pull a woman or they may have celibacy imposed upon them by their church, but either way they are committing criminal acts if they satisfy their desire to dominate by abusing a child. Professor Julia O'Connell Davidson has dispelled this myth in a few well chosen words: "If men have sexual needs that must be met, they can do that with one hand tied behind their back".

Myth #6: Child sexual abuse only involves a victim and a perpetrator

Wrong. Sadly, there is very often a third party involved. While the tragedy of the abducted child who is raped and killed is indeed a crime that generally involves only victim and perpetrator, in many cases of sexual abuse and exploitation, there will be someone 'supplying' the child or otherwise facilitating her/his abuse. This may be a criminal outfit profiting from the demand from paedophile networks. It may be a brothel madam turning a blind eye to under-age prostitution. It may be a father or mother sending a child into exploitation to feed other children or buy a new refrigerator. It may be a parent or sibling selling pictures on the Internet for profit. Or it may be a star-struck mother who can boast that her son or daughter is a close friend of a famous person.

These are some of the most common myths about child sexual abuse and exploitation. What is important is that we recognise that the sexual abuse and exploitation of children are not simple

phenomena that can be summed up in the word 'paedophile'. Doing this completely ignores the fact that most children who are sexually abused or exploited are past the age of puberty and are the victims of 'normal' men. It is just too easy to focus on paedophiles and child sex tourists and forget the much greater reality of 'normal' men abusing children in our own country. It is way too easy to put ageing rock stars on the front page or whip up a frenzy about the rich and famous. If we truly want to protect our children – all children – from sexual predators, then we need to look beyond the headlines and see the bigger picture.

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