



## Larry Nassar Did What Sexual Predators Always Do

By **Lizzy Francis** 01/26/2018

Former USA Gymnastics national team doctor and Michigan State University physician Larry Nassar has been sentenced to 175 years in prison for sexually abusing more than 160 girls over a 30 year period. Prior to that sentencing, Nassar was confronted by 156 of his victims in Ingham County Circuit Court. Those women excoriated Nassar for his acts and also critiqued both Michigan State and USA Gymnastics for the institutional failures that led them to employ a predator for three decades and 18 years respectively. The testimonies made clear that both institution had been provided with information by children and failed to act.

There's a reason that institutions, and specifically institutions defined by competition, often fail to protect children according to Dr. Mary Pulido, the Executive Director of The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in New York City. Private and reputation-obsessed institutions, like USA Gymnastics and Michigan, ask children and parents to blindly trust experts and avoid going to the authorities when confronted with evidence of internal wrongdoing. Whether or not USA Gymnastics was aware that Nassar was grooming young girls for abuse by publicly lobbying for his "treatments," that behavior should have raised red flags — and would have if anyone in the building had been properly trained or given a protocol to employ when a child spoke up.

"We must encourage children to keep telling, and telling, and telling, until they are believed," says Pulido. "The line is, 'Keep telling until someone believes you, because that is the way you're going to be safe.'"

Dr. Pulido spoke to Fatherly about how parents can recognize signs of grooming and spot power structures that might facilitate abuse.

**So many children were assaulted by Nassar. Are there any patterns that determine what children are more vulnerable to being abused by adults?**

Children of every single age, group, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family composition, are at risk for child sex abuse. There's no child who is immune. One in four girls and one in six boys are going to be sexually [assaulted or abused](#) by the time they reach the age of 18. The most common age of abuse is between eight and nine years old. I think these numbers are an underestimate, but this is what we could come up with statistically, looking at the cases that are reported.

Child sex abuse knows no boundaries, but very often it happens to a child that might be isolated and is befriended by the perpetrator. If you look back at the Jerry Sandusky scandal at Penn State, he was going to children of single parents or children who were not popular and befriending. He groomed them until he perpetrated abuse.

**What is grooming, and how can parents keep an eye out for signs that their child is being groomed?**

Pedophiles often seek the friendship of children. They also befriend the parents. They want the parents to trust them. They try to disarm the parents. They also tend to bribe children with something, like 'This will lead to you doing something great in competition.' Pedophiles also tend to threaten children from a place of power.



The sexual abuse of children is, for most parents, so psychologically horrific it's hard to believe that it could be happening. It's not necessarily on their radar. In many cases, a parent can't fathom that a perpetrator is someone that they know, they like, and they trust.

**So what you're saying is when [a kid is abused](#), it's usually not because they don't know about "Stranger Danger?"**

90 percent of child sex abuse is committed by someone that the child knows and trusts. Of that, 50 percent is a family member, and 40 percent is someone that is known to them, like a doctor, priest, rabbi, coach, teacher, or a neighbor.

**When does grooming the parents and the child tip over into the beginnings of physical and sexual abuse?**

The perpetrator finds ways — which really resonates with this case — to touch the child as often as possible. Those touches move from being the pats on the back, under the shirt, or under the clothes. Or to the horrific medical exams that these young girls were getting. So they touch them as often as possible, confusing the child when the touch goes from being what they thought were friendly to sexual.

For little children, they may not even realize that it is child sex abuse. Fondling would be considered a bad touch but it might feel good. That's why we say "safe touches," and "not safe touches," not "good" and "bad" touch. After they start with the touching, the perpetrator often finds ways to get the child alone, potentially overnight.

**Larry Nassar's victims — some of them anyway — went to adults and absolutely nothing happened. This is clearly indicative of both failure on a human level and on a systemic level. How can parents recognize systems or organizations in which kids might be at risk?**

An important distinction is in my mind what you call "open systems" and "closed systems."

In an "open system," they have really strict levels of accountability, policy, and procedure. If it comes to a teacher's attention that a child is physically or sexually abused by a parent or a guardian, that teacher is mandated to report it. They call the hotline. Public schools also have a set of rules that say if anyone that works in a school has inappropriate relationships with a child, a call is immediately made to outside law enforcement, so that a proper investigation can be conducted.

In "closed systems," there's no set of rules for reporting to outside authorities. The institution itself is responsible for conducting the investigation, which, as you can imagine, is fraught with all sorts of complications. They want to protect their reputation. They aren't qualified. They may not even have an understanding of the dynamics of child sex abuse or know what they're looking for.

**It feels like there are a disturbing number of examples of precisely that phenomena.**

When you look at where pedophilia has really raged — in the Catholic Church, in the Boy Scouts, in private schools — those are all closed systems. Under the law, they don't have to bring in or report the abuse when it comes up. That's what the Gymnastics Association is faced with now, figuring out, in very short order, how to bring these things immediately to the attention of outside authorities.

**It's a given that parents are going to have to trust institutions or hand their children into the care of others at some point. What can they do to make sure their kids are safe?**



When you go into a school, ask to see the policies and ask, 'What happens if it's someone inside of the school that's abusing a child?' Very often, that's the protocols that's nonexistent or weak. If so, that should set off alarms for parents.

**How should parents and caretakers think about the Larry Nassar scandal? It's a [tragedy](#), not a learning opportunity. But it also feels like maybe a moment in which the issue of sexual predation has come into focus.**

This needs to be a wake-up call to all organizations serving children that this should not happen. This cannot happen under their roof and should never happen. Adults have to be held totally accountable if they know something is off and they do not take action.

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