

**REASON FOR TOPIC AND ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND  
INFORMATION  
PREDATORS IN AA**

Unfortunately complaints have been received about groups of members and individual members who are involved in the following behaviours toward other members and other groups in the fellowship. Actual or Implied Violence, Bullying, Intimidation, Stalking, Threatening Behaviour, Verbal, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse.

Some outside agencies are unwilling to refer their clients to us because they are being told by other clients of what's happening in regard to sexual abuse in AA.

There is confusion about taking legal action against perpetrators because the victims think they will be breaking anonymity, fear retribution and that they won't be believed.

Because the victims of these behaviours are the weak and vulnerable, we would like guidelines that clearly outline and define what actions the victims of these abuses are able to take, not just via the Group Conscience, but also as to their rights within the law. Although we do not like to be involved in the controversy these actions may initiate, the problem has become such that we need to take steps immediately to curb, or if possible, eradicate these behaviours from our fellowship.

The Statement, "How To Deal With Predators," that was released to the fellowship by The Central Region's 2001 Regional Forum that was specially convened on this matter seems to be no longer adequately meeting the escalation in abusive behaviours. Being a single page letter it has been overlooked and not readily available unless someone happens upon it and prints and circulates copies. We feel that more up to date and specific information combined with a stronger stance should be taken.

Following is material on this topic that was produced in the U.K.

Is there a role for the General Service Board in protecting minors who are members or potential members of Alcoholics Anonymous?

Background information for the Executive Session of the trustees of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous. July 29, 2007

Introduction

In response to the abuse of A.A. members in Great Britain, Canon Geoffrey Brown, non-alcoholic trustee of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous in Great Britain, offered a very thoughtful article ("Sledgehammers & Walnuts?") comparing abuse in A.A. with abuse in the church. He states,

It is all too easy for groups who share a common experience of renewal based upon spiritual awareness, honesty and concern for others, to believe that they run no risk of harbouring abusive conduct. As a result, they are inclined to ignore, or even worse to deny, the possibility of its existence amongst them. But the problem with caring communities is that, by definition, they are bound to attract the kind of vulnerable

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person that a very small minority can prey upon (and this must be as true of A.A. as it is of the church). It is because of this fact that such groups need constantly to be on their guard against any conduct that takes advantage of the powerless.”

This candid assessment stands as a fitting opening statement on the sexual abuse of minors in A.A. in the U.S. and Canada.

The euphemism “13-stepping” (sexual harassment) is used in A.A. to refer to older members, usually men, who pressure newer members, usually women, into dating or sex. Certainly women can take advantage of underage boys, and there are also instances of liaisons between men and boys and between women and girls. However, the vast majority of situations appear to involve men preying on underage girls. A man in A.A. who becomes sexually involved with a minor is not harmlessly twitterpated. He is taking advantage of a child at a most vulnerable time in her life, and committing a serious crime. Consider the following examples:

- Last month I spoke with a 35-year-old woman who has been sober and active in A.A. for over 20 years. As a 15-year-old newcomer she was raped by an A.A. member in his early 20s. Her sponsor told her to “pray for him.” She reported the rape to the police thirteen years later, to no avail. Her unsolicited, spontaneous and succinct recommendations to prevent the sexual abuse of minors in A.A.: “better sponsorship, attendance at women’s groups, a pamphlet about the issue and have the GSRs talk about it”
- A few years ago a woman with many years of sobriety asked me for guidance upon discovering that her daughter had been molested by a man in A.A. I encouraged her to contact the police. I was stunned when she expressed concern about breaking the molester’s A.A. anonymity.
- At a recent young people’s meeting a member told me that a 22-year-old man was sexually active with a 14-year-old girl he met in A.A. The man who told me this stated his intention to contact the police.
- At a recent A.A. meeting a woman mentioned that some years ago an A.A. member broke into her house, tied her up and raped her. Her sponsor told her to “forgive him.” The rapist was sentenced to prison.
- A number of years ago, in a well-known case, an A.A. speaker at an A.A. convention was caught in sexual activity at the convention with the 15-year-old daughter of another A.A. member at the convention.
- In July 1993 The AA Grapevine published a letter from a concerned mother who mentioned that her 15-year-old daughter had been impregnated by an “old-timer” in A.A. The mother commented, “But I do think that those with maturity and leadership in AA have a responsibility to be very vocal about the dangers of Thirteenth Stepping. No more turning a blind eye to this problem.”

Thomas Cahill, in deep despair and frustration over the pharisaical dissembling of church authorities in the clergy sex abuse scandals, presented a very graphic and shocking analogy in his recent book, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages: The Rise of Feminism, Science and Art from the Cults of Catholic Europe* (2006):

Dante bewailed the selling of church offices, describing this practice as “Christ [being] bought and sold the whole day long” in the Rome of Pope Boniface VIII. That

was, however, a far less depraved situation than the current one, where, as Dante would be forced to conclude, the twelve-year-old Christ, who conversed with the

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doctors of the law in the Temple of Jerusalem (in Luke 2:41-52), is made to give blow jobs and rammed up the ass the whole day long by the doctors of the law of the New Jerusalem, while the high priests of the Temple stand guard at the entrances, lest any uninitiated outsiders should discover what is going on. However shocking these words may sound to some ears, there can be no doubt that this is what clerical dissemblers have done to the Jesus they claim to care so much about. (pp. 315-6)

From a practical standpoint, this isn't all that different from an A.A. member abusing a minor – and the A.A. Fellowship doing nothing to stop it.

### Demographic Considerations

Our membership survey does not track the percentage of minors in A.A. The percentage of members under 21 has ranged from 1 percent to 3 percent between 1983 (the first year this category was tracked) and 2004. Members aged 21 – 30 years old (tracked between 1986 – 2004) ranged from a high of 19 percent in 1989 to a low of 7.9 percent in 2004. The “30 and under” designation, in use from 1974 – 1983, increased each period from 8 percent in 1974 to 20 percent in 1983. An overall perusal of our membership surveys, however, shows an aging population in AA, but there are still thousands of minors in A.A. meetings all over North America. The recently revised pamphlet “Young People and A.A.” (2007) includes the stories of 10 women, 7 of who joined as minors (13 – 17 years old) and 9 men, 4 of who joined as minors (14 – 17 years old).

Cocaine Anonymous conducted a non-scientific survey of 1,000 members in North America in 1996. It showed that 1 percent of C.A.'s membership was under 18 years old, with 10 percent from 18 – 24 years old and 38 percent from 25 – 34 years old.

A 2003 survey of Alateens by the Al-Anon Family Groups showed that the average age of an Alateen member was 14 years old.

The percentage of women in A.A. has remained steady at 33 – 35 percent for 30 years (1974 – 2004). But the percentage of women 30 and under, tracked in 1989, 1992, 1996 and 1998, ranged considerably higher: from 38 percent – 43 percent. The C.A. survey showed that 32 percent of its members are women. The Alateen survey showed that 62 percent of its members are teenaged girls. In the often-intersecting worlds of various 12-Step Fellowships, sexual predators have ample access to young, potential victims.

In the aftermath of the clergy sex abuse scandals, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops retained the John Jay College Research Team to review the literature on child sexual abuse in various organizations, including the church. It found that facts on the extent of child sexual abuse are elusive at best. The literature revealed child sexual abuse problems in a number of well-regarded youth agencies and programs, including religious organizations, the Boy Scouts of America, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Young Men's Christian Association, youth sports programs and child caregiving.

Of course, alcoholics are not exempt from the problems of society, and this includes child sexual abuse. Alcoholics are not well known for their even-keeled relationships, their well-defined boundaries or their maturity in sexual situations. It is not surprising

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that these problems continue into the sobriety period of some A.A. members. For all we know, the rate of child sexual abuse in A.A. may be higher than that of other organizations that are specifically set up to address the concerns of youth.

### Response of other Twelve-Step Fellowships to Abuse of Members

Narcotics Anonymous, Al-Anon Family Groups and Alcoholics Anonymous in Great Britain and Australia have taken tangible strides to deal with the problem of child sexual abuse and other such issues in their Fellowships. A brief summary follows.

In the March 2006 NA Conference Report it was noted that, "Our greatest challenge this past year was dealing with unsafe and dangerous people in local groups. The topic on sexual predators at meetings was an involved discussion, with lots of input from our groups, areas, and region and in our zone (New England Zonal Forum)."..... and "Guidelines for Inappropriate Behaviour at NA Meetings' has been regionally approved and is generating many requests at the European Delegates Meeting. Recently we also sent out copies of the UK Region's document 'Guidelines for Dealing with Inappropriate Behaviour' to all our groups."

Recently the NA World Service Office received a telephone call from the District Attorney of a California county informing NA that a registered sex offender was secretary of a young people's NA group, and if NA didn't fix the problem the D.A. would. Although generally the NA WSO wouldn't interfere with a local matter, in this extraordinary circumstance, WSO intervened and the secretary was replaced.

Narcotics Anonymous, with some 43,900 meetings in 127 countries (as of March 2007) will hold its World Convention in San Antonio, Texas over Labour Day weekend 2007. To protect minors at the young people's dance and meetings there, extra precautions are being taken. Also, NA is having legal research done on minors in NA, with an emphasis on California and Texas. NA offered to share the results of its legal research with the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.

If A.A. decides to go forward with a Fellowship-wide discussion about child sexual abuse, NA suggested that the discussions focus on communication and the creation of safe environments, rather than on predators, which has a tendency to turn into a "witch hunt."

The Al-Anon Family groups went through a multi-year process of deciding how best to protect its Alateen members. In 2004 they approved a motion that the areas institute minimum safety and behavioural requirements, which may include background checks for Alateen sponsors. During the sharing, "A Canadian Delegate shared that in Canada, groups that work with youth are required to have criminal records checks." (2004 Al-Anon World Service Conference Sharing, p. 26.) The new rules essentially require Alateen sponsors to be registered with the Al-Anon World Service Office. In 2005 they shared their "Lessons Learned," which included the importance of communication and the awareness that the majority can be tyrannized by the minority.

In 2001 the Central Region of AA in Australia published a piece on "Dealing with predators", which they defined as "AA members who take advantage of other members in various ways, such as sexual harassment, sexual attack, pressuring members to join a particular religious group, borrowing money, selling goods for personal gain, offering investment schemes and theft of group funds." It concluded with, "It is clear that older members and office holders have a moral obligation to help protect vulnerable members. It's possible they may even have a legal obligation to

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do so. Certainly we need to do everything we can to ensure newcomers know an AA meeting is a safe environment.”

In 2000 AA in the U.K distributed a discussion document about the conduct of AA members to the Fellowship in Great Britain. It included recommendations, suggestions about personal conduct and suggestions about actions to be taken personally, as groups and at group meetings. In 2001, with the approval of its General Service Conference, a “Draft Guideline on Personal Conduct in AA Meetings and our Common Welfare” and a “Draft Guideline on Violence” were distributed to the Fellowship for its consideration. The Spring 2001 “AA News” from the General Service Office of Great Britain discussed the response of the Fellowship to the discussion document, with fewer than 1 percent of the groups unsupportive of the document. These guidelines are now posted on the AA in the U.K. website.

Interestingly, this information migrated into an article on “13-Stepping:” Why Alcoholics Anonymous Is Not Always a Safe Place for Women”, by Cathy Bogart and Carol Pearce, published in the Journal of Addictions Nursing in 2003:

An internal memorandum circulated to every Alcoholics Anonymous group in the country [United Kingdom] reveals that volunteer members are increasingly being investigated by police forces examining allegations of sexual abuse. Abusers within the organization are said to have exploited their positions as “sponsors,” taking advantage of the vulnerable when they are at their lowest ebb. Contact is usually made through telephone help lines and then continued in the home. AA has guidelines governing who is eligible to become a sponsor or answer help lines and make home visits. But the memo reveals these have been broken, with some taking on the role with neither the appropriate experience nor duration of sobriety. It warns that the organization has the “potential to become a breeding ground for predatory behaviour.”

Coupled with the May 7, 2007 issue of Newsweek (“A Struggle Inside A.A.”), which described the cult-like aspects of an A.A. group in Washington, D.C., including allegations of adult male members having sex with minor females, it appears that some mental health professionals and academics are becoming increasingly wary of Alcoholics Anonymous as a safe place for women seeking recovery from alcoholism. Youth Protection in Other Organizations

Youth organizations generally have youth protection guidelines that must be followed by the staff and volunteers. The Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization requires an interview, references, a home assessment, a professional assessment, training and a criminal background check. Little League discourages one-to-one involvement with youth and also requires background checks for coaches, managers and others. In the Boy Scouts, two adults must be involved in any activity; one-to-one contact between an adult leader and a youth is prohibited; separate showers and bathroom facilities for males and females, adults and minors are recommended; no secret organizations are allowed and hazing is prohibited. I’m not suggesting that AA adopt these guidelines, because many of them would be unworkable for our Fellowship. Or would they? These guidelines do make excellent reference points as A.A. considers its responsibility to minors.

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### Other Considerations

The Long Form of our Third Tradition is as follows:

Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism.. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.

As expanded on in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, Bill W. jauntily stated, "We aren't a bit afraid you'll harm us, never mind how twisted or violent you may be. We just want to be sure that you get the same great chance for sobriety that we've had. So you're an A.A. member the minute you declare yourself." (p. 139) I don't believe this means that AA. groups and members must accept sexual harassment and criminal behaviour – especially toward minors. .

There are ways to deal with these problems when they arise. For example, some A.A. groups have developed guidelines on handling disruptive members in meetings. An A.A. member who attempts to have sex with a minor certainly qualifies as disruptive. Some churches have developed guidelines for faith communities on how to deal with sex offenders. Sex offenders who come forward to a church council about their status are allowed to participate in some church activities as long as certain guidelines are followed.

The Long Form of our Fourth Tradition is as follows:

With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighbouring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.

The Board of the Al-Anon Family Groups decided that the protection of minors was an issue that might greatly affect its Fellowship as a whole, and thus the Board approved the implementation of safety and behavioural guidelines. There is no history on how the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous might view this issue.

I doubt very much that our co-founders and early members anticipated the implications of the wholesale entrance into A.A. of alcoholics in their early and mid-teens. Otherwise, our Big Book would include references to common-sense child protection practices in the chapters "Working With Others", "To Wives" and "The Family Afterward." As it is, our literature is mute on the subject of child/youth protection in Alcoholics Anonymous. The modern child protection movement wasn't galvanized until the publication of "The Battered Child Syndrome" by C. Henry Kempe, M.D., et al in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 1962. The focus on child protection, child abuse reporting laws, sexual abuse prevention and the rights of children did not emerge until the later 1960s and 1970s. Alcoholics Anonymous today exists in a more complicated, regulated and litigious world than the

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one that existed when A.A. was founded, and part of that complication includes the status of minors. Dioceses all over the country have developed child/youth protection guidelines for the interaction of clergy and church members. Why should A.A. be exempt?

### Conclusion

Canon Brown concluded his article on "Sledgehammers & Walnuts?" by saying of newcomers, "They put their trust in the Fellowship at the very point where they are most open to the possibility of abuse, and it is a matter of the greatest importance that they should not be treated in any way that damages them still further."

The General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc., in a manner that does not turn A.A. into a social service agency nor compromise our cherished group autonomy and our expansive membership requirement, can and should investigate ways to protect minors who are members or potential members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

This multi-year project that will test the commitment of the General Service Board. Eventually some or all of the following action steps might be included:

1. Begin a conversation throughout the Fellowship on how to protect minors in A.A.
2. Have this as a topic at the Sharing Session at a quarterly General Service Board meeting.
3. Submit it as a presentation/discussion topic for the General Service Conference
4. Solicit sharing from GSO staff, GV staff and the Editorial Advisory Board.
5. Encourage delegates to hold area-wide discussions of the topic and bring feedback to the GSO.
6. Consult with lawyers, other professionals, churches and other 12-step Fellowships on this and related topics.
7. Discuss it at the World Service Meeting and zonal meetings, and seek input from other General Service structures around the world.
8. Ask for specific feedback from young people's groups, committees and conventions.
9. Place articles on this topic in The AA Grapevine, La Vina and Box 459.
10. Develop an Ad Hoc Child/Youth Protection Committee of the General Service Board or an Ad Hoc Child/Youth Protection Committee of the General Service Conference.
11. Revise pamphlets with an eye toward protecting minors.
12. Draft guidelines on how to protect minors in A.A., mail them to every group in the U.S. and Canada and post them on the A.A. World Services website.

For a host of moral, ethical and legal reasons, it is time for the General Service Board to provide leadership in addressing the issue of child sexual abuse in A.A.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul E. Cleary  
General Service Trustee  
General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc

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### **General Service Board Subcommittee on Vulnerable Members in A.A. Final Subcommittee Report October 27, 2009**

At its Trustees Sharing Session on Sunday, August 1, 2009, the General Service Board considered the topic, "Is there a role for the General Service Board in protecting potential members who are minors?" This topic had been discussed by a previous subcommittee of the General Service Board appointed February 1, 2009 whose report was received at the August 2, 2009, Trustees Sharing Session. The previous subcommittee suggested that the topic be addressed at a future Sharing Session and the focus changed to "...how can the Fellowship assure the safety of minors," rather than "...is there a role for the General Service Board" in protecting minors.

The subcommittee held two conference calls during which it broaden its scope recognizing there were numerous categories of vulnerable A.A. members and potential members in addition to minors to consider, for example, women, members with special needs, members of colour, etc.,

The subcommittee members agreed that the General Service Board in its position at the bottom of the A.A. service structure would not have a role in setting any behavioural policy or guideline for the A.A. groups or members in regards to protecting any vulnerable member including minors coming into A.A. The A.A. groups and A.A. service entities such as Areas and Districts are autonomous and direct and guide their own affairs. The General Service Board has no authority, legal or otherwise, to control or direct the behaviour of A.A. members and groups.

The subcommittee members also agreed that it is the groups and individual members that need to ensure that all members feel as safe as possible in A.A. and that newcomers are provided with strong sponsorship and made aware that A.A. is a microcosm of society of the world outside the A.A. meeting room – that they may encounter a few members who do not have their best interests in mind about getting sober through the A.A. program of recovery.

It is hoped that the areas, districts and groups will discuss this important topic and seek ways through sponsorship, workshops and assemblies and committee meetings to raise awareness in the Fellowship and encourage the creation of as safe an environment as possible for the newcomer, minors and other members or potential members who may be vulnerable.

Respectfully submitted,  
Pam Reising, chair  
Frances Brisbane  
Bill Clark  
John Kane  
Jo-Anne Lowenberger  
Don Miller