

The recent scandal at Penn State put the sexual abuse of children squarely in the national spotlight and pulled back the curtain on a silent epidemic that has struck an estimated one in six African-American men. As a young boy, gospel singer Darwin Hobbs suffered abuse by a man he was taught to trust. He says hearing his story can help you safeguard the children you love

By Jeannine Amber

NOT MY BOY



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arwin Hobbs smiles when he talks about the way he and his wife, Traci, like to watch TV: relaxing in their side-by-side recliners, hands resting on the table between them. “We hold hands,” he says, describing a tableau of matrimonial contentment. Such was the scene last November, when the couple heard the news. “The TV was on mute,” recalls Hobbs, 43. “Traci and I were talking, then I noticed the scroll across the bottom of the screen saying something about Penn State and allegations of child abuse. That’s when I turned up the volume.”

On November 5 last year, Jerry Sandusky, a 67-year-old retired defensive coordinator for the Penn State college football team, was arrested and charged with 40 counts of sexually abusing young boys. Sandusky had, according to the grand jury report, targeted children from The Second Mile, a charity he founded in 1977 to serve underprivileged and foster children. (In Pennsylvania, African-American children are six times more likely to be in foster care than their White counterparts.) The report stated that he groomed the boys for abuse by plying them with gifts and inviting them on outings, then engaging in touching and “tickling” that would eventually escalate to sexual assault. In an interview after his arrest, Sandusky denied the accusations but admitted to “horsing around” and showering with young boys in his care.

The grand jury report, which was made public in November, says school employees, including a janitor, had witnessed Sandusky’s behavior, and in 2002 he was banned from bringing children onto the Penn State campus. Still, Sandusky continued to enjoy his reputation as a family man who could be entrusted with the welfare of children. It was this reputation that gave Sandusky access to his prey and shielded him from scrutiny.

As the news unfolded, Darwin Hobbs, with his wife by his side, experienced a cold wave of recognition. Like more than 2 million African-American men, Hobbs had been sexually abused as a child. He knows what it is to feel alone and helpless and to hold a terrible secret for years. “I identified so much with the victims,” he says. “I was reliving a lot of emotions.” As more details of the scandal emerged and more alleged victims stepped forward (as of January, Sandusky was set to stand trial on 52 counts of child sexual abuse, in connection with ten different victims), Hobbs began to experience another emotion: He felt vindicated.

For years Hobbs has been speaking about child sex abuse at churches around the country, sharing his story and offering training in awareness and prevention through a program run by the national organization Darkness to Light. Sometimes his efforts were met with resistance by pastors unwilling to broach the difficult subject with their congregations. Now, suddenly, the

nightly news was filled with reports that a man praised for his charitable work with kids had targeted those same children for abuse. Hobbs looked at his wife and slowly exhaled. “Wow,” he said. “They won’t be able to sweep it under the rug anymore.”

Hobbs remembers his own history of abuse at the hands of his stepfather, a successful businessman and deacon at his church, who arrived in his mother’s life as a “knight in shining armor.” “My mother had been married for 21 years,” says Hobbs, “and after her divorce she was very melancholy. My stepfather brought her such peace.” But for Hobbs, who was 10 years old when his mother remarried, the tranquility was short-lived. “It was like standing on the beach in the sunshine,” he says. “Then suddenly a tsunami comes up on you.”

Each morning Hobbs, the youngest of six children in the family, would leave the house for school via a hallway that passed in front of his parents’ bedroom door. “Every time I passed, I’d hear this rattling sound,” he remembers. His mother was at work; only his stepfather, who worked afternoons, was home. One day the door had been left ajar. Hobbs peeked inside. What he saw shocked him. His stepfather lay on the bed, staring at the opposite wall. Cast there by a creaky film projector were images of adults having sex. “I’d never seen anything like that before,” says Hobbs. “I was captivated.” The next day, when the door was again ajar, he snuck another glimpse inside. On the third day Hobbs’s stepfather suddenly flung open the door. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, grabbing the child by his arm. “You want to know what it means to be a man? I’m gonna show you.” With that, he pulled a protesting Hobbs into the bedroom. As his stepson sat on the edge of the bed, eyes glued to the images on the wall, the man unzipped his pants and masturbated.

It’s difficult to hear the details of Hobbs’s abuse. But avoiding the issue helps perpetrators the most. Child abusers thrive in a culture of silence, manipulating, molesting and controlling children they are sure will never tell. “When I was a child, part of my fear in telling what happened with my stepfather was I thought I had no business even discussing the subject,” says Hobbs.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as many as one in four women and one in six men report having been sexually abused as children. But social worker William Ford, who counsels both victims and perpetrators of abuse through the Brooklyn-based Mustard Seed Licensed Forensic Social Work Service, thinks the actual rate is higher, especially for African-Americans. Ford notes that some of our children are at increased risk due, in part, to the prevalence of single-mother households in our communities. “It’s not the fault of the single mother,” emphasizes Ford. “It’s just the circumstances that can arise in that situation, for instance, lack of adequate supervision or boyfriends and stepfathers moving in, which is a huge risk factor. Some predators will look for a mother who is stretched too thin and gain her trust to get access to her child.” While mothers may appreciate a male coach, teacher or minister taking an interest in her child, especially if the father is absent, Ford says it’s important to be aware of potential grooming. Is this person buying your child gifts? Is he arranging to be alone with your child? Is he becoming increasingly generous with you, offering help with child care, finances or special trips?

Anne Lee, founder and former president of Darkness to Light, says when looking for an after-school or mentoring >

COURTESY OF SUBJECT

program for your child, it's imperative to check if the organization screens employees who work with children. "Ask what types of policies are in place," says Lee. "What are the rules governing one-on-one contact between adults and children? Sometimes we don't ask questions because we don't want to offend. But that's like playing Russian roulette with your child." It's a chance that Black families in particular can't afford to



Darwin Hobbs and his wife, Traci, speak at churches across the country to help raise awareness about child sexual abuse.

take. A 2010 study on child abuse and neglect, by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, reported that African-American children suffer almost twice the rate of abuse as White children, and those who live with a single parent and the parent's live-in partner are almost 20 times more likely to be victims of sexual abuse than children living with both biological parents.

But Robin Stone, author of *No Secrets, No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal From Sexual Abuse* (Broadway Books), says while studies show children of single mothers and those living in poverty to be more at risk, no child is immune. "Less privileged children may have their abuse detected by social services workers with whom they are in contact," says Stone, explaining how studies can give a skewed impression. "But in well-to-do households—the family on the hill with three cars in the driveway—sexual abuse can go on for years and nobody would ever know."

Certainly no one suspected Darwin Hobbs's stepfather of abusing a child. What happened in the days and weeks that followed young Hobbs's introduction to pornography is best understood as a predator's cunning play on a boy's sexual curiosity. Every morning Hobbs's stepfather would invite the child into the room to watch sex films. One day he motioned to a spot on the bed beside him and told Hobbs, who was sitting in a chair across the room, to come over. Hobbs wanted to stay in his chair but says, "I'd been raised to respect adults. If somebody tells you to do something, you do it, no matter what."

Ford says he knows of many predators who use pornography to set children up for abuse. "There's a physiological response that the boy is having by viewing these images," says Ford. "It

feels good in a way he's never experienced. The child is overwhelmed with stimuli and there's no way he can anticipate what's to come." Meanwhile, adds Ford, the abuser is making elaborate justifications. "I often hear perpetrators say, 'I was looking at porn, then my stepson came in the room. He seemed interested, so I asked if he wanted to see more. It's not like I forced him.' But this is how grooming works: Now

the child feels as though he got himself into the situation, so he's less likely to report the abuse. It's the ultimate manipulation."

Within weeks of his first visit to his stepfather's room, Hobbs's stepfather was ordering the child to perform sex acts. "When I told him I didn't want to come into the room, he said, 'You're off Saturday and Sunday'—when my mother wasn't working—'you're not off today.'" Afterward the stepfather would let Hobbs take five dollars from his wallet. Repeatedly Hobbs told his stepfather that he wanted to stop. The man responded to his pleas with threats. "He said, 'When your mother finds out she'll have a heart attack and die, and everyone's going to call you a fag and a sissy,'" recalls Hobbs. "I thought, *This is a mess and it's all my fault.*"

Sexual abuse does immeasurable damage to children. It alters their understanding of intimacy, their ability to trust, their sense of power over their own bodies. For Black boys these issues may be further complicated, says Stone, herself a survivor of abuse. "Many of the effects of childhood sexual abuse are not different between males and females," she notes. "But boys struggle especially with concerns about their sexuality and masculinity. And there is a fear for many of our boys that exposing a history of sexual abuse will lead people to think that they're gay."

Ford of Mustard Seed says he's witnessed adult survivors acting out sexually in an effort to deal with this anxiety. "I've seen clients who feel that if they have more sex with more women than any of their friends, they are somehow proving their masculinity," explains Ford. Experts agree that counseling is essential for recovery, not just for child victims but also for adults with a history of abuse. "The impact of abuse on a 10-year-old is going to be different than what he experiences as he matures and begins to have relationships," says Ford. "We need to help survivors deal

with the trauma on an ongoing basis, and remind them that as much as the perpetrator made them feel as though this was something they went along with, they didn't. They were assaulted."

Although Hobbs has been happily married for 19 years, he says as a teenager he, too, struggled with his sexuality, unsure about what the years of homosexual contact really meant. "I was in a world of confusion," he says now. "I knew my sexual preference was women, but the abuse made me wonder what I had done to attract a man. In fact, confusion is putting it lightly." To deal with the turmoil Hobbs ate compulsively and developed a weight problem he still struggles with today. And he began acting out. "I had huge problems with authority," he recalls. "I became very disrespectful to adults. I was fighting for power that I had lost at the hands of the abuser."

By the time Hobbs was 13 he was spending hours every day trying to figure out a way to get the abuse to end. Eventually he decided to write a letter, which he slid under his stepfather's office door in the basement of the house. The note said Hobbs was going to go to the police. "It wasn't that I thought they could do anything," Hobbs recalls. "I was just desperate." The next day when Hobbs walked by his stepfather's bedroom, the door remained closed. "Suddenly he was letting me pass every time," Hobbs says. "After a while I knew things were different. That was the end of it."

What Hobbs did was highly unusual, says social worker Ford. Most children have been so manipulated by their abusers that they wouldn't dare confront them. Indeed many African-American boys don't tell anyone, sometimes for decades. Part of the reason is the societal pressure they are under to "man up" and not appear vulnerable. "One of the most powerful things a mother can say to her son is, 'You're my child and I'm here to protect you, so if anything happens to you, you can come to me,'" says Stone. "It gives them permission to let go of that misguided notion that they're supposed to be taking care of themselves."

Hobbs adds that once we open the lines of communication with our children, we have a duty to listen, even if we don't like what we are hearing. "Sometimes children are trying to set boundaries for their bodies, but in our culture we don't allow that," he says. "So when we're leaving a family reunion and a child refuses to give an uncle a kiss, the reaction is often, 'Girl, you

better get over there and give him a hug and a kiss or I'm going to spank you.' Then what happens when you're not around and Uncle Lester is approaching little Renee and pushing up against her? She's playing back the image of you demanding that she hug and kiss him. We need to allow our children to establish boundaries. If not, we are pushing them into the arms of perpetrators."

Hobbs kept his abuse a secret from his family for almost 30 years. When his stepfather died in 2006, he wrote his mother an e-mail telling her what had happened decades before. Hobbs's mother called him crying when she got the news. "She said, 'I feel terrible that I brought this person into our home,'" he recalls. But Hobbs doesn't blame his mother. He understands that, like many people, she assumed a predator to be a shadowy "Chester the Molester" figure, not someone you trust—and certainly not the man you live with. But according to Darkness to Light, 90 percent of perpetrators are people the child already knows.

Hobbs credits years of therapy, lots of prayer and the support of his wife in helping him deal with the memories that still haunt him. "It follows you for the rest of your life," he reflects. "I'm very nontrusting and can be very temperamental, and a great deal of that my wife has to experience. Maybe if I hadn't gone through the abuse, she wouldn't have to." Traci, who learned of her husband's difficult past when he revealed it in counseling before the couple wed, calls her husband a hero. "There are not a lot of men willing to admit this happened to them," she says. "Darwin's healing is one step at a time, one day at a time, one issue at a time. It's a process, but we do it together."

In December, after weeks of watching coverage of the Sandusky scandal, Hobbs wrote an open letter to the victims, praising them for coming forward. "Dear Courageous Souls," he wrote. "I applaud you for speaking up about what happened to you. My prayer is that your lives are healed and cleansed and that the memories of the past serve only as strength." Hobbs's ultimate goal is to make sure that what he and Sandusky's alleged victims endured need never happen to another child. "I have a very dark past," he says, "but I shine bright every day. It is only by telling our stories that we can turn our pain into power." □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for ESSENCE.

PROTECT YOUR CHILD

REDUCING THE RISK, KNOWING THE SIGNS AND RESPONDING WELL ARE YOUR BEST DEFENSE AGAINST CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE. HERE ARE TIPS THAT EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW:

TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT HIS OR HER BODY

"Teach children the correct name for their body parts," says author Robin Stone. "You want your child to be able to say, 'Somebody touched my penis,' and not feel as though this is something we don't talk about." And while it's normal for toddlers to be curious about their genitals, help them understand this area is private and it's "against the rules" for others to look at, touch or take pictures of it.

BE MINDFUL OF ANYONE SPENDING TIME ALONE WITH YOUR CHILD

Eighty percent of sexual abuse occurs when an adult is alone with a child in an unsupervised setting. Anne Lee, founder of Darkness to Light, suggests that interactions between adults and children happen in rooms where the door is left open or in a place where others can easily interrupt. "An adult can take a boy on a walk around the block

if he wants to talk to him privately," says Lee. If your child spends unsupervised time with an adult, drop in unexpectedly and check your child's demeanor after the visit. Use your state's online sex offenders' registry to do a background check of people who will be spending time with your child, including your new boyfriend. It's important to understand that an abuser can be anyone. Some men who abuse children

show a preference for adult partners but target children during times of stress. Also, keep an eye on older children. For a third of abused children, the perpetrator is under 18, so monitor the time your child spends with teens.

EXPLAIN THE RISKS Warn children about adults who ask them to keep "special secrets" or offer them gifts. Tell them these adults may mean them

harm and they should tell you right away. Direct children old enough to use a computer to netsmartz.org for information on Internet safety.

RECOGNIZE ABUSE Children will often show signs of distress, such as thumb-sucking and bed-wetting. Other symptoms include nightmares, insomnia, headaches, stomachaches and difficulty swallowing. Investigate

if your young child is displaying inappropriate knowledge of, or interest in, sex or starts using new language for genitals. Adolescents and teens struggling with abuse may engage in self-destructive behavior, such as cutting, attempting suicide, excessive overeating and refusing to eat.

REACT WITH CALM "It's rare that children make up allegations of abuse," says Lee. "If a

child claims abuse, you need to tell the child you believe him or her, no matter how crazy the story sounds." Assure the child it wasn't his or her fault, then contact a trained professional. For support, call Darkness to Light at 866-367-5444 or Stop It Now! at 888-773-8368. For more information on preventing, identifying and reacting to child sexual abuse, visit darkness2light.org or stopitnow.org.

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