

# VICTIMS: Young boy was fearful of telling, even his family members

## PROTECTING YOUR CHILDREN

- Ask your children where they go, what they do, and whom they see. Every day.
- Know the people your children know. Visit their homes.
- Know what your children do on the internet.
- If someone spending time with your children makes you or your children uncomfortable, stop the visits, or go along. Every time.
- If your child says someone at day care, a relative, or other adult or older child makes him or her uncomfortable, check on it.
- Check the offender registry at your local police or sheriff's department, or on the Web. The list can only tell you whether someone in your area has been convicted of a sex crime since April 1997. The list is not always up-to-date, and may contain errors. Check with other sources, such as local courts. The list is on the internet at: [www.msp.state.mi.us](http://www.msp.state.mi.us)
- Talk to your children, and start young. The discussion need not be sexually explicit, but must be direct. Tell children where others may and may not touch them. Tell them to tell you when someone does something wrong, and that they must not keep those incidents a secret — especially when someone else says they must.
- If your child has been molested, report it. Don't allow agreements to move the offender to another school, church, or Scout troop. They'll do it again.

— Source: Michigan State Police

called police. Investigators were patient in interviews with the boys, their mother said. They immediately set up surveillance on the neighbor's home.

When the man arrived home from work, the boys were outside playing. They didn't know it, but police were watching them too.

The neighbor saw the older boy playing outside. He repeatedly tried to call the boy over. The child sneaked glances at him, but refused to obey. The neighbor stomped back into his home when the child ignored him.

A short time later, police said afterwards, while all the children were inside at a party, the neighbor walked over, stood on the sidewalk peering into the boys' home, then turned around and walked home.

The police went to the man's door. Apparently unsurprised, he held up his wrists for handcuffs and was arrested, less than 24 hours after the boys confessed to their mother.

The boys began counseling immediately, but weren't allowed to talk with their mother about what happened, for fear of jeopardizing the criminal case.

For a while, the children blamed themselves.

"I told them it wasn't right, what he did, that it's not their fault. That they were just listening to an adult," the mother said.

The criminal justice process was tough on the family.

The courtroom where a judge determined whether the neighbor would stand trial was packed with the curious, mostly neighbors, the mother remembers. But it was cleared for the testimony of the two brothers and the other neighborhood child.

The neighbor glared at the children from across the room while they testified. The chains restraining him, along with the presence of about six armed deputies helped, but not much.

The older boy was surprised.

"I didn't know he would be in all those chains, that he wouldn't be able to get to me," the boy said.

"He thought (the neighbor) was going to come after him in the courtroom," his mother said. "He is a child."

Squabbling between the defense attorney and prosecutor only made it worse. Where should the children's father sit? Next to the children, in front, behind?

By the time procedures were finally ironed out, the youngest child was nearly unable to speak, and denied anything happened at all.

The older brother dreaded the experience. He was quiet by nature. But he did it — while the neighbor "was sitting right there staring at him."

The father eventually figured out what was happening, and moved his chair to block the neighbor's view of the child.

The charge in the assault on the youngest boy was dismissed because he couldn't testify.

When the neighbor eventually pleaded no contest to one assault against each of the other two

boys, the mother wrote to the judge, seeking the maximum penalty against her former friend. She wanted him in prison for 14 years, she wrote — long enough for her sons to grow up without fear the man would return while they were still children.

The maximum penalty was a sentence of 10-15 years in prison. State sentencing guidelines called for a lesser sentence because the defendant had no prior convictions. The judge sentenced the neighbor to 2-15 years in prison.

The family plans to be out of the neighborhood before the man gets out. They never want to see him again and they don't want him to know where they are.

### Afterword

The assaults aren't discussed much at home anymore. The children remain in counseling. "It's helping them, just talking about it," their mother said.

But while the children are recovering, the man and what he did, is never really gone.

Children at school and at after-school activities teased the boys relentlessly. They knew what had happened, despite that children's names were never published.

Their mother went to school officials, asking them to teach the children that her sons were victims, not freaks. The taunts eventually ceased.

But the mother is still worried. She does not believe anything about the criminal case should have become public. She understands the need to warn others, she said, "but not at the cost of my children."

Once or twice, when he thought he would have to testify against the neighbor a second time, at trial, the older boy threatened to kill himself.

"I told him, 'Honey, if you do that, he wins. He goes free.' So he agreed. But to the end he was worried about how (the neighbor) felt about what he said about him. He still cared."

"That's the kind of kid he is," the mother said.

When the mother told the boys the eldest wouldn't have to testify, that the neighbor had pleaded out and would go to prison, the older boy jumped up and down. "I don't think he slept that whole night, he was so happy."

The younger boy "is — WAS — a happy-go-lucky child. The kind of child everybody wanted to take home," his mother said. "People called him the golden child. Now he's coming back. For a long time, he became mean, not happy. He was so lovable. In the last two, three months, he's better."

As for the older boy, "he's back, and on the honor roll again. "They're finally starting to act like they used to act," she said.

The mother knows not all families come forward when children are molested.

"I know what I did was right," she says now.

She doesn't believe the neighbor wants to change. She thinks he's done it before, and would do it again, or will when he's released. His remorse, she said, seemed only to do with the fact that "he just got caught this time."

often did when he had something weighty to discuss.

He didn't want to hurt anyone, he said, but the neighbor had molested him too. "He was very, very scared of telling," the mother said.

The family would later learn their sons and at least one other neighborhood child had been frightened into silence.

The neighbor told the older brother and one of his friends that if they told anyone what they were doing, he would go to their families' homes in the middle of the night. Something, the neighbor warned, would happen to their mothers. He didn't say what. But he showed the boys a handgun, and told them they wouldn't have a mother anymore.

The rest, he left to their imaginations.

It was enough to keep the boys quiet for what probably was more than a year.

### Prelude

This mother never entrusted her children to anyone under 18. She just didn't believe it was safe. But when she went back to work about a year after the neighbor moved into their newer Washtenaw County subdivision, and she asked around about trustworthy sitters, the man volunteered.

The children liked his home, full of children's games.

But after several months in the neighbor's company, the older boy became quiet. His mother assumed he was simply growing up, settling down. Then his grades dropped.

Then the younger boy, always a happy-go-lucky child who was warm and outgoing, changed too. He didn't want people to touch him. He was unhappy, withdrawn.

"He was always asking about me dying," the mother recalled. "I couldn't understand."

"What do you mean? I'm not dying," she always responded, not yet aware of the neighbor's threat.

This was not a mother unaware of the dangers to children targeted by predatory adults. She thought she had adequately warned her children.

"We told them to never let anyone touch you there," she said, referring to the children's private parts. "We told them, 'You need to tell us if anything happens.'"

But she didn't differentiate between molestation that includes penetration, and molestation that doesn't. She didn't talk about adults who don't just touch children, but who ask children to touch them.

She didn't tell them that no one but their parents or doctor is allowed to "check" their growth — or development.

It's hard to talk to young children about these issues, she said. But, she says now, it is important.

### The painful process

When the boys finally told their mother what happened, she reported it to school officials, who