

CALM Executive Director Weighs in on Child Abuse

By Sonia Fernandez

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The focus on violent strangers sexually abusing children takes focus off the majority of child sex abuse perpetrators, said Kokotovic. Sonia Fernandez/Noozhawk photo

Strangers committing sex offenses against minors may be the high profile stories, but for Dr. Anna Kokotovic of [Child Abuse Listening & Mediation](#), it's the people you do know that matter.

“There are several myths about child abuse,” said the CALM executive director. A small woman with closely cropped brown hair and a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana, Kokotovic has, for almost 20 years, led the Santa Barbara-based child abuse prevention service, expanding it from a largely volunteer-run group to an internationally

recognized organization.

CALM's advice for parents

Parents should teach their children that only approved caretakers or doctors can touch their private parts. Children should trust their instincts and say a loud “NO” to inappropriate touches by anyone, including relatives.

Children must be taught to tell a parent, teacher, social worker or police officer if someone touches them sexually or abusively, and tells them to keep it a secret. Parents should be alert if an adult, for example a coach, desires to be with their child unaccompanied on outings.

Every school should include education on abuse prevention as part of its regular curriculum, and parents should review the concepts with children at home. Most important, parents should openly discuss these issues with their children and assure them of their love and support.

Perhaps the biggest myth about child sexual abuse is the notion that it's an ugly stranger in the bushes, said Kokotovic.

“It’s a myth supported largely by the media,” she said. “When a child is kidnapped and raped and murdered by a stranger, it gets full media attention.”

The violent crimes are heinous, said Kokotovic, but the focus on them takes people’s attention away from the majority of sexual offenses that are not committed by strangers.

In reality, she said, the vast majority of sex offenses are actually perpetrated by people who would be familiar to the child. According to a Department of Justice study, 90 percent of offenders known to the justice system admit the abuse was toward a child who already knew and trusted them.

“In order to have access to and sexually abuse a child, other than the violent crimes that you read about, the offender has to gain the trust of the child,” Kokotovic said. According to her, most of the time the child is “groomed” by the would-be offender, who has managed to get on good terms with the family as well.

Typically, said Kokotovic, these offenders target more vulnerable children. Low-income, single-parent families, for instance, are often chosen for its instability, and opportunities for abusers to insert themselves into the family and get close to the child.

It’s because most offenders already are close to the child — a neighbor, a friend, a family member — that makes Kokotovic wary when it comes to legislation like [Jessica’s Law](#), a California proposition signed last year that prohibits registered sex offenders from living within 2,000 feet from a school or park, and to wear GPS monitoring ankle bracelets for the rest of their lives.

Pushing registered offenders to the outskirts of town and putting a tracking device on them may make makes families feel safer in their neighborhoods, but is it effective in

protecting children from sexual predators? Kokotovic thinks not.

Aside from the fact that most sexual crimes against minors are committed by people close to, often living in the same house as the child, keeping them from finding decent housing — a challenge on the South Coast regardless of who you are — forces them to go underground, said Kokotovic.

“If you look at a map of Santa Barbara,” she said, presenting a map with dots for schools and parks and circles indicating offender-free zones, “you’ll see that’s almost everywhere.

“They’ll wind up in rural areas, like Orcutt for example, and could start abusing children over there.”

GPS monitoring can also show where the offender is, but not what they’re doing, said Kokotovic. And, the legislation makes no distinction between the offender who may have made a single mistake in judgment and is not seen as a risk and the one who stands a chance of offending again. It’s an inefficient and costly method of tracking the offenders, she said.

Jessica’s Law is currently under review in Sacramento by Gov. Schwarzenegger’s Sex Offender Management Board, because the law is not clear on who should continue to monitor the offenders for the rest of their lives after they complete parole.

Meanwhile, a ban on predators within most of the city makes it difficult for CALM and agencies like it to do their job — to treat and keep tabs on these people, a method of monitoring Kokotovic says is cheaper and more effective than GPS because the agency and the offender are required to make contact several times a day, whether it be for an appointment, or just to find out where the offenders are and what they’re doing.

The likelihood of repeated offenses is greatly reduced for offenders with stable housing, secure employment and social support, she said. If an offender has gone through an assessment and is found to be at a high risk of committing another offense and is not amenable to treatment, GPS monitoring and residency limitations could be used. But to apply the same rule to all offenders “puts children at risk, in addition to being too expensive to implement,” Kokotovic said.

More than 150 registered offenders live on the South Coast, not counting the 60 or so transient offenders with no permanent address, according to the [Megan’s Law registry](#), which requires offenders to register with local law enforcement periodically and when they move.

It’s also important to remember, said Kokotovic, that for all the media exposure, sexual abuse is only about 5 percent of total child abuse reported in the county.

Neglect, on the other hand, is the vast majority — about 60 percent — of the child abuse

reported in the county, a figure associated with Santa Barbara County's growing meth use.