

H. 173 To expand the statute prohibiting luring a child to also prohibit manipulating behaviors intended to facilitate sexual contact with a child.

Testimony

Marcie Hambrick, PhD, MSW, Director of Research and Programs, Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

Prevent Child Abuse Vermont

Thank you Chairman LaLonde and Committee Members for hearing testimony on this important matter.

I am here today to encourage you to take up the H.173 to expand the statute prohibiting luring a child to also prohibit manipulating a child to engage in a sexual act or engage in lewd and lascivious behaviors.

Research has shown that victims of sexual abuse who also endured manipulation prior to and during the abuse cycle experienced “more psychological manipulation, thus leading to more feelings of confusion, culpability for the abuse, guilt, and shame” (Winters and Jeglic, 2022) and that as a result of the manipulation will be less able to disclose which blocks pathways to access interventions to heal (Winters and Jeglic, 2022). This process of manipulation can last weeks, months, and even years. The psychological toll of that can leave victims with internal scars that persist into adulthood.

Research with adult survivors of sexual abuse indicates that offenders manipulate the child victim to “doubt the perceptions and experiences” in that they may know that they are experiencing harm and be convinced by the offender that isn’t so. Part of the manipulation is convincing an impressionable child that if they seek help they will be blamed, punished, or not believed. Additionally, offenders often confuse children to view the offender as a victim who should be shielded by the child from blame for their actions (Wolf and Pruitt, 2019). Researchers found that verbal coercive manipulation was associated with statistically significant worse trauma symptoms in adulthood. Manipulation that included threats was associated not only with worse trauma symptoms, but also with worse anxiety and depression

symptoms, sleep problems, and dissociative issues in adulthood at statistically significant levels (Wolf and Pruitt, 2019).

Let me share with you some victim voices from a study to help you understand what manipulation can look like in real life and how this affects a child. One victim said “I was spending less and less time at home, more and more time with him, and. . . the trips continued, the water-skiing continued . . . I drifted away from my church, I stopped going to Sunday school, my school grades declined.” Here is a description from another victim, “Here’s me, young and naïve, and he’s giving me things I couldn’t imagine, going out for a trip, food and things . . . it’s more affection than you get from all of the rest of the world . . . it makes sense that you go after those things.” A third quote from a victim, “In the course of that process as well he became a friend of the family. I remember over a period of time he gave my parents a new stove and things like that.” (Plummer, 2018).

Although the legislature has already seen the importance of criminalizing luring a child to engage in a sexual act, manipulation is different in that it is a process that can last years. Evidence of luring is much more proximal to the sexual crime, but manipulation, which is much more deleterious than luring in terms of negative victim impact, would be evidenced months or even years prior to the act of sexual abuse. You can see from the quotes from victims that manipulation can involve socially isolating a child and the offender ingratiating themselves to the child or the child’s family over an extended period of time. This results in the cognitive dissonance when the abuse occurs and the increased psychological harm.

Since manipulative practices used by offenders who sexually abuse children cause harm that compounds the negative mental health repercussions of the sexual abuse alone, society and specifically our children should be protected. Criminalizing the act of manipulating a minor for sexual abuse will give the court a way to punitively address the added harm to the victim. Children do not have a voice. You can be the voice of victims of child sexual abuse and victims of manipulation to facilitate that sexual abuse by taking up H. 173.

References

Winters, G. M., & Jeglic, E. L. (2022). *Consequences of Sexual Grooming in Sexual Grooming: Integrating Research, Practice, Prevention, and Policy*. Springer Nature.

Wolf, M. R., & Pruitt, D. K. (2019). Grooming hurts too: The effects of types of perpetrator grooming on trauma symptoms in adult survivors of child sexual abuse. *Journal of child sexual abuse*, 28(3), 345-359.

Plummer, M. (2018). Lived experiences of grooming among Australian male survivors of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 33(1), 37-63.