

## **Israeli nonprofit gives child sex offenders 'another chance'**

by Maxine Dover/JNS.org

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On June 23, federal judge Tanya Walton Pratt upheld an Indiana law banning registered sex offenders from accessing Facebook and other forms of social media used by children—who, statistically speaking, have largely been targeting each other.

It is juvenile sex offenders who are responsible for 35.6 percent of all sex offenses against minors in the U.S, according to a recent TIME magazine report. In 2010, the federal government required all states to adopt a sex offender registry that includes juvenile offenders. Nicole Pittman of Human Rights Watch, as quoted by the Associated Press, says “most [U.S.] legislators do not believe children should be on the registry—yet it’s the kiss of death for most politicians to vote against any sex offender law.”

While child and adolescent sex offenders tend to have high recidivism rates, statistics show that 85-95 percent of them do not re-offend. In Israel, rather than viewing child sex offenders simply as perpetrators, steps are being taken to provide services to these at-risk youths.

ELEM-Youth in Distress in Israel supports five centers for prevention of sexual violence. Programs operate in Tel Aviv, Afula, Shfaram (Arab), Har Hevron (national religious) and B’nei Brak (ultra-Orthodox), providing diagnostic services and group, individual, and family therapy for young sex offenders and their families. The efforts are funded by private donations.

At a recent series of dinners in homes across the New York metropolitan region, American friends of ELEM gathered to support the program that has been led by Talia Etgar for almost two decades.

Etgar developed and has led a treatment program for child sex offenders since 1994.

“It is the challenge for my life...No one in Israel was working with child sex offenders [before ELEM],” she told JNS.org.

“Children have hands and organs,” she continued. “They touch other children. Sometimes, they use toys or sticks or simply their bodies. With kids, abusive behavior can be as simple as making another child uncomfortable... Most victims and perpetrators know each other. Even 6 year olds can be manipulative... Some were victims, and do what was done to them. For others, it’s curiosity.”

Even when identified, getting a child into therapy is not easy, Etgar explained. Parental permission is required; in some communities, the cooperation of the rabbi or the village leaders is needed. “Each case,” said Etgar, “is different. More and more, therapy is instigated by parents. Most are aware, most know.”

From Rock Island, Ill., Tammy White of the Robert Young Center told JNS.org

that young offenders are more amenable to treatment. She agreed with much of Etgar's observations. "Patterns are not yet ingrained," said White.

"The sooner a young offender is caught the better chance there is of successful treatment," she said. Using "a confrontational, non-judgmental" treatment style, White explained, gives young offenders an opportunity to "talk about their offense early on in treatment, learn to take responsibility, look at their behavior and to change that behavior."

The licensed clinical social worker said, "What works best for juveniles is that they get caught right away. The longer the behavior continues, the harder it is to change. What works best is the embarrassment, shame and guilt. Once the offense is found out, talking about it in group helps develop different behavior patterns."

Therapy, said White, "focuses heavily on empathy, teaches kids to manage destructive emotions, and promotes healthy relationships and sexual behavior."

During its recent dinner series, ELEM showed a video that featured a 12-year-old boy who admitted that he had sexually abused a girl. The boy says he is getting "treatment [from ELEM] that can help me not to sexually abuse again... We talk a lot—me and my parents—about things that we do not have the courage to talk about at home... Kids deserve another chance to learn how they can change, just like I am doing here."

The boy's mother, a past victim of sexual abuse herself, recalls in the video that discovering what her son did "hit me like thunder."

"I did not know what to do and how to cope... If you do not treat it, it does not stop, and if it does not stop, there are more victims," she says. At ELEM, she says, "somebody listens to my child, and guides him and teaches him how to control himself and his behavior, and also how to express his feelings in a positive way that is not harmful for him and others."

One of ELEM's five centers is in Israel's juvenile jail, in Ofek. Since treatment began in the jail 10 years ago, the rate of recidivism has been negligible: 95 percent of the treated adolescents did not reoffend sexually; 92.7 did not come back to jail for any reason. JNS.org asked Etgar to estimate the number of tragedies ELEM's treatment program may have prevented.

"We have treated children who had performed 20, 30, even more offenses," she said. "Some with full penetration or violence. We have saved lots of children... We can save the child."

Etgar said her dream "is to be unemployed."

"The reality is I know it will not happen soon," she said. "No social or economic group is exempt. We find youthful sexual offenders everywhere—rich, poor, Jews, Arabs, immigrants and kibbutzim, Orthodox and secular."

Through early intervention, Etgar stressed, many former ELEM patients go on to live normal lives.

“The longer one waits, the more victims there will be,” she said.

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