



A Guide for Discussion

“Personal Fouls” Episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*

The original airing of the Law and Order SVU “Personal Fouls” show in late September 2011 eerily foreshadowed many of the news stories and reactions that surfaced a few weeks later. In November, Penn State’s former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was charged with 40 counts of child sexual abuse. Then came charges of sexual abuse by assistant Syracuse University basketball coach Bernie Fine and reports of abuse at the Citadel became public.

In Sandusky’s case, there were graphic details about testimony involving multiple victims available from the grand jury report, which made it more difficult for potential supporters to defend Sandusky. On the other hand, one of Fine’s accusers was himself awaiting sentencing on child sexual abuse charges, making it easier for Fine’s boss and friend Jim Bonheim to angrily discredit the men reporting abuse. Bonheim later apologized for his reaction which he acknowledged was “...insensitive for the individuals involved and especially to the overall issue of child abuse.”

In the SVU episode, an ex-player, Stevie Harris, interrupts Coach Ray Masters’ induction into the Metro Basketball Hall of Fame. Harris publicly accuses the coach of having done something (non-specific) for which he should be in jail. Audience members initially see the Harris as disruptive...possibly crazy or drunk.

- Have you ever been in a situation where you’re confronted with negative information about someone you like or respect that’s hard to believe?
- What are the competing feelings that people in the audience likely experienced?
- What factors would make it difficult for the audience members to believe Harris while still celebrating Masters?
- How might it have changed things if Harris had directly accused Masters of sexual abuse at the event?
- What about their own view of the world would the audience members have to give up to believe Harris?
- What would it say about their own sense of judgment to believe Harris?



- How might it be for someone else present in a situation like this, who had been abused by the person being accused or abused by someone else?
- Can you think of a situation in your community where that might have happened?

For a fuller discussion about barriers to believing or acting on suspicions of sexual abuse see [Why Do Adults Fail to Protect Children From Sexual Abuse or Exploitation?](http://www.1in6.org) at www.1in6.org.

In the show, many very successful basketball players, including some professional players, had been mentored by Masters. None had ever accused Masters of abuse.

- What factors might make their silence seem more credible than Harris' accusation?
- In what ways might their positions as masculine role models of strength and success make it difficult to believe they would stay silent if they had experienced or known about the abuse.
- If they had been abused, what was at stake for them in telling? What might be some consequences?
- What other factors made their silence/denials more credible to many than Harris' accusation or the boy who died by suicide?

Often, men who have had unwanted or abusive sexual experiences in childhood fear their masculinity has been robbed or destroyed, that they'll be exposed as a 'fake.' This misconception can lead them to go to great lengths to prove their masculine image: playing aggressive sports in super-aggressive ways, sexual conquests, bulking up by lifting weights, picking fights, extreme drinking and drugging, reckless driving and other daredevil stunts, risking their lives. Disclosing abuse may be seen as undermining that image. For more see [Masculinity, Self-Esteem and Identity](http://www.1in6.org) at www.1in6.org.

How much do you think homophobia or the mistaken belief that sexual abuse of a boy by a man is somehow related to homosexuality might be a factor for boys and men who are reluctant to disclose having been sexually abused?

- How might the public response differ if the coach were a woman accused of abusing adolescent boys?



- Or a male coach accused of abusing adolescent girls?
- Why do you think people sometimes blame homosexuality but rarely blame heterosexuality for abusive behavior?

Since many boys were sexually abused by men or older boys, men who experienced sexual abuse often have a lot of confusion about whether the experience may have affected his sexual orientation, whether he was chosen because he was perceived as being gay, or whether he may somehow automatically be gay *as a result*. This fear can be true for both gay and straight men. In fact, there is no good evidence that someone can “make” another person be homosexual (or heterosexual). Sexual orientation is a complex issue and there is no single answer or theory that explains why someone identifies himself as homosexual, heterosexual or bi-sexual. But experts in human sexuality do not believe that sexual abuse or premature sexual experiences play a significant role. (See [How it Can Be Different for Men](http://www.1in6.org) at www.1in6.org.)

Men who sexually abuse or exploit boys are not expressing homosexuality – any more than men who sexually abuse or exploit girls are engaging in heterosexual behavior. They are deeply confused individuals who, for various reasons, desire to sexually use or abuse children, and have acted on that desire.

The show portrayed some business interests that might be affected by Prince Miller disclosing that he was abused by Masters.

- What other personal pressures....and from whom....might discourage a man who has some success in life from telling about present or past abuse?
- How about a man whose life is already a bit of a mess? What might discourage him from telling?

How much do you think the long-term negative effects of abuse are related to the sexual acts versus to sense of loss of power, or the ability to make choices...to consent?

- What are some different ways boys and men might react to feeling powerless, or that they weren't able to protect themselves?

Except for anger, our culture discourages boys and men from expressing vulnerable emotions like fear, depression or sadness.



- What alternative outlets - positive and negative - do men have for those emotions if they don't feel able to express them openly?
- What negative behaviors might sometimes be covers for man's feeling of fear, depression or powerlessness?
- In what ways might it be complicated for a man to get help with those underlying feelings and at the same time, still hold himself accountable for the effects of those negative behaviors?

Because of our cultural myths, guys who experienced abuse tend to find themselves in one of the two situations below. Both make it hard to move on and achieve the lives they want and deserve:

- Suffering from negative effects, but not realizing what happened was harmful or that it's related to current problems.
- Aware the experience(s) were harmful, but too ashamed to seek help dealing it.

See [How Being Male Can Make It Hard To Heal](#) at www.1in6.org.

The SVU detectives interviewed many who'd been helped by Masters and who said they hadn't been abused, some who even said that their lives had been saved by Masters.

- In situations like this, do you think some of them are telling the truth about being helped and not abused?
- Discuss the competing possibilities - that Masters was actually a complicated person with good intentions *and* a very serious problem - versus that he was just using the charitable work as a means to access potential victims.
- Is there ever a continuum or is it always either/or?
- What would be the difference in response to the coach depending on your response to that question?
- What are the implications for preventing future abuse depending on your response to that question?

For more information about people who sexually abuse children see [Why Do People Sexually Use or Abuse Children?](#) at 1in6.org or visit www.stopitnow.org.



How accurately do you think the show portrayed the likely responses to Harris' disclosure?

- What do you think are the barriers to having such a disclosure more likely to be believed?
- What would have to change in your community to make such a disclosure more likely to be believed?
- What steps might you take to educate yourself or others to make those changes?

Watching this show and participating in a discussion about it has the potential of triggering deep feelings for individuals, whether they have had similar abusive childhood experiences or not. There are many resources available to help sort through any feelings or questions that arise at www.1in6.org. Many including the [1in6 Online SupportLine](#), are listed on our Website under [Get Help](#). We encourage people to move forward at their own pace.

If you feel you may be in immediate danger of seriously harming yourself or being harmed by someone else, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital emergency room.

Information about accessing a listing of Sexual Assault Centers around the United States and other websites and resources can be accessed at [Other Helplines and Peer Support](#) at www.1in6.org.

Information about [Finding and Evaluating Therapists](#) is available on the 1in6 website www.1in6.org.