

Securing Our Future

A Character-First Framework for Protecting Children

Revised and Expanded—September 2026 | Written By Thomas Hampson

Preface

Every strong claim in the original article I wrote almost 10 years ago is preserved and sourced here. Where a claim benefits from a small change of formulation that preserves its meaning, the change is applied. No claim I made in the earlier version has been softened; several have been sharpened.

This revision additionally hardens four load-bearing arguments and states each in its strongest defensible form: the enriched-population basis that makes a pattern approach the right tool for this problem, the operational definition of psychopathy that anchors the preferential-offender claim, the convergent independent basis of the detection-rate estimates, and the classical grounding of the character standard the framework restores. Three additional primary sources are integrated in this revision: **Vance Packard's** *A Nation of Strangers* (1972) as the sociological substrate under the transient-population argument; **Erving Goffman's** *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) as the interactional-grammar backbone of grooming; and **Prentky, Barbaree & Janus's** *Sexual Predators: Society, Risk, and the Law* (2015) as the developmental-criminology convergence with the character-disorder identification of the preferential extrafamilial offender, together with a targeted rebuttal of the 87-percent/13-percent denominator-switch argument that book contains.

Introduction

Our ability to protect children from sexual exploitation is declining every day. The environment has become sexually saturated. Prime-time programs on broadcast television promote casual sex, even for teens (**Kunkel et al.,** *Sex on TV 4*, **Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005**). Pornography is impossible to avoid short of disconnecting all electronics.

A 2023 nationally representative survey found that roughly three in four teenagers have viewed online pornography, that the average age of first exposure is twelve, and that fifteen percent were first exposed at age ten or younger (**Common Sense Media, *Teens and Pornography*, 2023**); British data confirm the pattern, with an average first-exposure age of thirteen and ten percent exposed by age nine (**Children's Commissioner for England, 2023**). In both surveys, a majority of children had already seen pornography depicting sexual violence. Standards of dress and conduct have become eroticized (**American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007**). Societal taboos about sexual experimentation have eroded, and internal inhibitions have steeply declined.

In our primary and secondary schools, an all-out war over values is being waged, largely unseen by the broader public. On the one side stand those who promote the traditional virtues of purity, innocence, and sexual restraint. On the other stand the so-called sex-positive proponents, who claim to promote the sexual rights of children.

Children, they say, have the right to enjoy sexual pleasure whenever and with whomever they want as long as there is consent — even though children cannot legally give consent. These same activists encourage children to experiment with a variety of sexual activities, same-sex and opposite-sex, to explore their sexuality fully.

The sex-positive crowd is winning over a majority of school districts, primarily because the principal advocates of that philosophy — the **Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)**, **Answer**, and **Advocates for Youth** — were the driving voice in creating the **National Sexuality Education Standards (Future of Sex Education Initiative, *National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, K–12*, published as a special edition of the *Journal of School Health*, 2012; second edition, **National Sex Education Standards, 2020**)**. Comprehensive sexuality programs that carry sex-positive messages are being rapidly adopted in schools throughout the country (**SIECUS** State Profiles, annual; **Guttmacher Institute** state-policy tracking).

All of this leaves children, and especially the more emotionally fragile among them, far more vulnerable to the growing number of slick predators who seek their victims by getting involved with child-serving organizations. And a growing share of these predators are themselves children and teens — juveniles account for roughly 35 percent of known sexual offenders against minors in **Department of Justice** reporting (**Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Chaffin, *Juveniles Who Commit Sex Offenses Against Minors*, OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin NCJ 227763, 2009**).

Schools, churches, youth-service organizations, and other groups that serve minors work to provide a positive and safe environment for children and adolescents inside this hostile cultural climate. In doing so, they create a rich hunting ground for child sexual predators.

Child-protection programs at virtually every organization that serves children fail to screen out more than 98 percent of the child sexual predators who seek child- and youth-serving positions. That figure follows directly from the **Department of Justice's** own research finding that only 1 to 3 percent of self-admitted sex offenses are identified in official records (**Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittelman, & Rouleau, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 1988; U.S. Department of Justice, *Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI) Research Brief*, NCJ 247059, 2015**).

It makes no difference whether the organization is a public school, a private school, a church, a sports club, the **Boy Scouts**, or the **Girl Scouts**. And it is a floor, not a ceiling: the true miss rate can only be higher.

The reason is simple. These organizations rely, almost exclusively, on background investigations built around criminal-record checks and searches of the national and state

sex-offender registries to decide whether an applicant is “safe” (**John Jay College Research Team**, *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States, 1950–2002*, USCCB, 2004; the **Boy Scouts of America’s** “Ineligible Volunteer Files,” released in 2012 by order of the **Oregon Supreme Court** following *Kerry Lewis v. Boy Scouts of America et al.*, **Multnomah County Circuit Court, 2010**). As the rest of this article shows, these checks are wholly inadequate for identifying child sexual predators.

Even the groups that go further — checking references, verifying past addresses, interviewing former bosses, examining civil court records, and conducting extensive interviews of the applicant — still miss the mark by a wide margin, mostly because they do not know what to look for.

Most Child Sexual Predators Are Never Caught

The problem with the criminally focused background investigation is that very few child sexual predators are ever caught. They do not show up in a check of criminal records or the sex-offender registries because there is nothing there to find. According to research by **Dr. David Finkelhor** and **Jennifer Dziuba-Leatherman** (**American Psychologist, 1994**), confirmed in subsequent studies (**Hanson et al.**, *Child Abuse & Neglect, 1999*), only 3 to 12 percent of child victims ever report their abuse to the police. Only about half of those cases ever end in conviction.

In a study by **Wendy Walsh** and colleagues, information was drawn from the **Dallas Child Advocacy Center** on cases of child sexual abuse the agency handled (**Walsh, Jones, Cross, & Lippert**, *Crime & Delinquency*, published online 2008; 56(3), 2010). Of the 360 cases investigated, just 64 percent were accepted for prosecution, and of those, 80 percent ended in conviction.

The Dallas center has resources and capabilities that exceed those of most jurisdictions in the country, so its results represent something close to the best case. Outcomes elsewhere are usually worse. Even so, extrapolate the Dallas results to the country as a whole and the arithmetic lands in the low single digits: on the order of one to two percent of cases end in conviction — roughly two-thirds of the reported three percent survive to prosecution, and four-fifths of those to conviction.

The exact figure is not the point, and it does not depend on any single estimate. These numbers come from independent researchers using independent methods — **Finkelhor’s** reporting studies, **Walsh’s** advocacy-center caseload, Abel’s disclosure data — and they converge on the same conclusion from different directions. Whether the true reporting rate is three percent or twice that, the result is the same: record checks miss the overwhelming majority of active offenders. That convergence, reached by separate routes, is stronger evidence than any single number could be.

The education establishment’s own figure is worse than mine. **Charol Shakeshaft**, after forty years of studying school employees who abuse students, reports that criminal-record and licensure checks identify fewer than two-tenths of one percent of abusers (**Shakeshaft**, *Organizational Betrayal*, 2024, p. 166, citing **Abel, Jordan, Harlow &**

Hsu, 2019). In the cases she reviewed where a school employee was convicted of abusing a student, only 39 percent of the schools had even completed a criminal background check, 19 percent had checked references, 15 percent had conducted a comprehensive interview, and none had trained anyone to recognize the red flags (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, Table 7.1, p. 113). The record-check regime fails even on its own terms.

And it is worse still.

Many cases that are eventually reported are never investigated because the statute of limitations has lapsed. Some that are prosecuted end in plea bargains that reduce the charge to a misdemeanor or a non-sex offense. The bottom line holds: a tiny fraction of active child sexual predators will ever surface in a record check. Using such checks to screen them out — while still worth doing — is largely ineffective on its own.

We need to start doing something different.

A Transient Population

Until a century or so ago, most of us were born, raised, lived, and died within a short radius — a few miles, perhaps. We knew everyone in our small town or tightly knit urban neighborhood, and everyone knew us. Not only us. They knew our parents, our brothers and sisters, our grandparents, our aunts and uncles. They watched us grow up. They saw how we handled adversity and prosperity, how we behaved under stress, in competition, and through life-changing threats and losses. They knew us well enough to predict how we would act in almost any situation.

If you entered the military, sought a job, opened a business, or went to college far from home, the enlistment officer or the H.R. official or the banker or the registrar needed only to talk to a couple of people in your hometown to learn everything worth knowing about your character. That is no longer true.

Today, even people we call friends often do not know us well.

Beginning in the last half of the twentieth century, we became a far more superficial society. We do not know one another deeply, and we do not stay in one place long enough to become known. We rarely come to know one another's families, apart from our friends' children — and sometimes not even those.

This is not a nostalgic complaint. It is a documented sociological shift. **Vance Packard** described it fifty years ago in *A Nation of Strangers* (McKay, 1972), drawing on census data on internal migration, corporate relocation, and residential turnover that had, by the early 1970s, already dissolved the dense knowledge of persons that small towns and stable urban neighborhoods once produced. **Packard's** five “great uprootings” — corporate managerial rotation, military reassignment, university and professional mobility, suburbanization, and the industrialization of divorce — describe the environment where the predator now operates.

Where a hiring committee once relied on a few phone calls to people who had watched the applicant grow up, it now confronts a stranger whose social record is a sequence of short

residencies and short employments in places where no one knew him well enough to notice anything. Character screening built on personal knowledge was viable in the world Packard described leaving; it is not viable in the world he described arriving.

The rest of this article is about what to put in its place.

The Redefinition of Character

There is another reason our screening has broken down, one that runs deeper than mobility or superficiality.

We once held the adults who worked with children to a demanding standard of character. State teacher-certification statutes required “good moral character” as a threshold for entry, and district boards enforced it strictly. **The National Education Association’s** own *1929 Code of Ethics for the Teaching Profession* obligated the teacher to model, and to be personally accountable for, the very virtues the profession expected students to acquire. When a teacher fell short of that standard — through public drunkenness, sexual misconduct, dishonesty, or manifest cruelty — the profession removed the teacher without protracted proceedings, because a teacher of poor character had no business to be trusted in a classroom full of impressionable children.

That standard has been systematically dismantled. Three steps led to it.

The Redefinition of Character

How the word “character” moved from an adult professional standard to a curriculum topic delivered to children.



The three-step dismantling

- 1 Legal narrowing (1969 →)**
The adult character standard is procedurally narrowed to conduct tied to fitness.
- 2 Curricular displacement (1991 →)**
“Character” moves from the adult standard onto the child’s report card.
- 3 Redefinition (present)**
The word survives, but institutions retain programs for students while the character of adults is not screened.

Sources: NEA Code of Ethics (1929); Morrison v. State Board of Education (1969); Lickona, Educating for Character (1991); Character Education Partnership founding documents (1993). ©2015, updated 2026 Thomas R. Hampson

Figure 1. The Redefinition of Character — three steps.

The first step was legal narrowing, and it began by obscuring what the law had always required. The public-school teacher has never been treated as an ordinary employee. In law, as in common understanding, the teacher stands before children as a model of the character a community wants its children to acquire. California courts stated the principle thus: the teacher is “*regarded ... in the light of an exemplar*,” whose words and conduct the young are likely to imitate (*Board of Education v. Swan*, 41 Cal.2d 546, 552 (1953), quoted in *Watson v. State Board of Education*, 22 Cal.App.3d 559 (1971); the principle goes back to *Goldsmith v. Board of Education*, 66 Cal.App. 157 (1924)).

The office of teacher, itself, carries the obligation to model good character, whether or not the individual welcomes it. That is the standard our great-grandparents took for granted, and one the law endorsed.

That standard was never abolished. It was narrowed — once — and then abandoned by institutions that found the narrowing a convenient excuse.

The narrowing came in *Morrison v. State Board of Education*, 1 Cal.3d 214 (1969). The **California Supreme Court** held that a teaching credential could not be revoked for private conduct under vague labels — “*immoral conduct*,” “*unprofessional conduct*,” “*moral turpitude*” — unless the conduct bore a demonstrable relationship, a “*nexus*,” to the person’s fitness to teach.

The court did not strike down the character statute. It upheld the statute as constitutional once read to require that nexus, and it listed the factors a board may weigh in finding one — among them the likelihood that the conduct would adversely affect students and the likelihood that it would recur.

The decision was a limit on vague morality policing, not a repeal of the character standard. The federal courts drew the same line the same year, requiring a demonstrated connection between an employee’s private conduct and his fitness for the job before a public employer could dismiss him (*Norton v. Macy*, 417 F.2d 1161 (D.C. Cir. 1969)).

The proof that the standard survived *Morrison* is that the same court continued to use it to remove teachers of bad character. Four years later, in *Pettit v. State Board of Education*, 10 Cal.3d 29 (1973), the **California Supreme Court** upheld the revocation of an elementary teacher’s life diploma for private sexual misconduct, applying *Morrison*’s own test and crediting expert testimony that she was unfit to stand as a model before children. The court reaffirmed the framework again in *Board of Education v. Jack M.*, 19 Cal.3d 691 (1977). And a full decade after *Morrison*, the **United States Supreme Court** endorsed the exemplar principle at the highest level: in *Ambach v. Norwick*, 441 U.S. 68 (1979), the Court held that teachers “*serve as role models for their students*” and may be charged with an obligation to model civic virtue regardless of the subject they teach.

That holding has never been overruled. The legal tools to keep a person of bad character away from children remained fully available throughout. Congress reached for the same

standard in 2015. “*Passing the trash*” — moving a boundary-crossing employee to another district with a positive reference — had become so common in the schools that the **Every Student Succeeds Act** now forbids any federally funded school from recommending an employee it knows, or has probable cause to believe, engaged in sexual contact with a student (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, p. 143).

So the real question is not what the courts took away. The courts took very little away. The question is why institutions behaved as though the courts had taken everything away — why they abandoned a standard the **Supreme Court** had expressly blessed.

The answer is that no single person engineered the surrender.

It was the merging of several institutional incentives, each pulling in the same direction. A character judgment is demanding and must be defended in a hearing; a criminal-record check is objective, cheap, and lawsuit-proof. Counsel steered institutions toward the check and away from the judgment because the judgment invites a wrongful termination or discrimination claim, whereas the check does not. Education schools and certification bureaucracies had meanwhile rebuilt professional fitness around credentials and “dispositions,” handing administrators a vocabulary that never requires a character call at all. And once the vague morality clauses had been narrowed — rightly, in their vaguest form — institutions treated the narrowing as permission to stop asking the character question entirely, which the law never commanded.

That final step is the mistake.

That mistake is where a genuine civil-liberties correction was converted into a wholesale retreat. Narrowing “immoral conduct” so that it could no longer be used to police a teacher’s private life was a defensible limit on arbitrary power. Concluding from that limit that character no longer matters in deciding who may work with children does not follow, and Morrison never required it.

Institutions used the case as cover for a decision that was really about cost, liability, and convenience. Morrison did not disarm them. The institutions set the weapon down and blamed the court.

These court decisions apply directly to public schools and state licensing. Churches, sports clubs, and private youth organizations aren’t bound by them at all — which means they have even more freedom to demand good character of the people they let near children, not less. Nothing in the law prevents any organization, public or private, from restoring that standard tomorrow.

The second step was curricular displacement. Character became a topic students study rather than an attribute adults demonstrate. The character-education movement — **Thomas Lickona’s** *Educating for Character* (1991), the **Character Education Partnership’s** “*Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*” (1996), the “*Six Pillars of Character*” promoted by the **Josephson Institute** — moved character into the curriculum. That work has genuine value for students. But it arrived at the same time as the quiet retirement of character as a hiring standard for adults. Character became

something we teach children rather than something we require of the people we hire to work with children.

The third step was redefinition. “*Character*” as a professional-fitness term was replaced, over the last quarter-century, by a vocabulary of “*competencies*,” “*professional dispositions*,” and “*credentials*.” These are procedural attributes, not moral ones. A candidate who holds the right credentials, voices the right dispositions in an interview, and passes a criminal-background check is deemed professionally fit. The old character standard — which asked whether a person could be trusted, over time, with a position of trust — no longer has a home in most hiring processes. It has been replaced by a checklist that a competent predator completes without difficulty.

Together, these three actions produced the situation I address here. Schools did not merely stop requiring the highest character of teachers; they redefined character into something that no longer screens anyone out. The same pattern spread from schools into every institution that hires adults to work with children: churches, youth-serving organizations, sports leagues, tutoring services, and the fast-growing sector of paid and volunteer child-serving positions.

The screening tool I recommend is, in one sense, a proposal for a new hiring practice. In a deeper sense, it is a proposal to restore what was lost. The three-tier character framework — narcissism, predator, psychopath — is not a novel construct. It is a lay implementation of what serious clinicians and investigators have long known about the character of the people who exploit children. It puts character back at the center of the hiring decision, where our previous generations said it always belonged.

Character Indicators of Predators

Record checks have limited value in screening out those who threaten children, but they should continue with some modifications. They are simply not nearly enough.

With unlimited resources, an organization can learn almost everything there is to know about a person. That is not the world we live in. Every organization has limited resources, and those that work with children often operate on Spartan budgets.

The solution is to stop trying to prove that a person is a threat to children and to start looking for indicators that he might be. There is an uncomplicated way to do that: look at his character. Look, specifically, for the negative character qualities that point to a larger problem — and, on the other end of the scale, for the positive qualities that mark a person as likely safe.

Child molesters are a subset of the much larger category of predators. Because our objective is to identify child molesters, because virtually all of them are predators, and because no predator belongs anywhere near children, distinguishing predator from non-predator is enough. Disqualifying every predator — child molester or not — is the better approach. Predators make poor role models in any case.

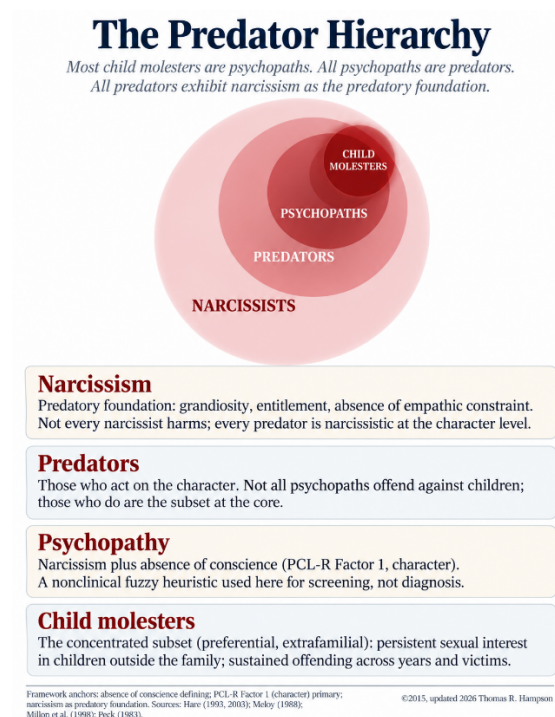


Figure 2. The Predator Hierarchy — nested character categories.

We tend to think of predators as those convicted of a crime, or those who have committed one and simply have not been caught yet. Those, we assume, are the real predators.



The composite is a screening posture, not a diagnostic tool. Records-based screening misses roughly 97–99% of offenses (Abel 1988, 1:30 arrest ratio; DOJ SOMAPI 2015). Character-based screening is the missing 97–99%.

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They are not the whole of it.

A predator is someone who exploits others to further his own purpose. Sometimes that exploitation is ruthless and savage; it need not be to qualify as predatory. Sometimes it is criminal; a person need not break the law to be a predator. And a great

many lawbreakers are not predators at all.

Predatory behavior is self-seeking rather than other-directed. It is narcissistic rather than loving.

Recognizing that difference is the most effective way to tell the good guys from the bad guys. The predatory continuum starts with narcissism, grows into a full-blown predator, and peaks in the super-predator: the psychopath.

Hare himself describes psychopaths as intraspecies predators who use charm, manipulation, intimidation, and violence to control others and satisfy their own needs (**Hare**, in **Millon et al.** eds., 1998, p. 196). This continuum tracks with the clinical literature directly. **Meloy** identifies psychopathy as a “*specific pathology of narcissism*”

(*The Psychopathic Mind*, 1988, p. 121). **Millon** and **Davis** present psychopathy as a severity continuum grounded in narcissistic pathology (*Psychopathy: Antisocial, Criminal, and Violent Behavior*, 1998).

Peck characterizes evil as narcissism at its most extreme (*People of the Lie*, 1983), taking the term “*malignant narcissism*” from **Erich Fromm’s** *The Heart of Man* (1964) — the same term **Kernberg** formalized in 1989. **Hare’s** PCL-R Factor 1 items — grandiosity, glibness, pathological lying, manipulateness, callousness — map directly onto the DSM’s narcissistic personality disorder criteria (**Hare**, *PCL-R Technical Manual*, 2nd ed., 2003).

The continuum carries a three-generation psychoanalytic pedigree: **Wilhelm Reich’s** 1933 portrait of the “*phallic-narcissistic character*,” **Ben Bursten’s** 1973 typology of manipulative narcissistic personalities, and **Otto Kernberg’s** 1989 formulation of malignant narcissism (antisocial behavior plus ego-syntonic sadism plus paranoid orientation, grounded in pathological narcissism) — all reprinted or extended in **Meloy’s** edited volume *The Mark of Cain: Psychoanalytic Insight and the Psychopath* (Analytic Press, 2001).

Ethel Person’s contribution to the earlier **Reid, Dorr, Walker & Bonner** volume *Unmasking the Psychopath* (Norton, 1986, ch. 12) is the direct **Kernberg**-lineage precursor and states the conclusion outright: the psychopath is “*motivated primarily by the need to dominate and humiliate*” (**Person**, 1986, p. 265) — a dominance-not-hedonism reading that reappears twenty years later as the animating thesis of **Babiak & Hare’s** *Snakes in Suits* (2006).

That same 1986 volume contains the first published book-form appearance of **Hare’s** twenty-item Psychopathy Checklist (**Hare**, in **Reid, Dorr, Walker & Bonner** eds., 1986, ch. 1, Table 2, p. 18) and **Hare’s** own statement that Factor 1 — the interpersonal-affective character factor — is “*at the core of psychopathy*” (**Hare**, 1986, p. 15). **Simon’s** independent field-guide taxonomy of aggressive personalities — unbridled, channeled, sadistic, predatory-psychopath, and covert-aggressive — is likewise organized around the shared narcissistic core (*In Sheep’s Clothing*, 1996, ch. 1).

Hundreds of indicators could be used to identify narcissists, predators, and psychopaths. Through a combination of experience and research, I have settled on three for each level of threat.

I chose them for two further reasons.

First, the negative characteristics are the generic core qualities used in **Robert Hare’s** Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R), the clinical instrument used to gauge a person’s level of psychopathy (**Hare**, *Manual for the Hare Psychopathy Checklist–Revised, Second Edition*, **Multi-Health Systems**, 2003). I was trained to administer the instrument by **Hare** himself, at a multi-day seminar in Canada in 1998. A large body of research validates each quality. The mapping of this article’s screening qualities onto the PCL-R item structure is direct:

Screening quality in this article	Corresponding PCL-R item
Self-serving	Item 2 (Grandiose sense of self-worth); Items 15–16 (Irresponsibility; Failure to accept responsibility)
Boastful	Item 2 (Grandiose sense of self-worth); Item 1 (Glibness / superficial charm)
Blaming	Item 16 (Failure to accept responsibility for own actions)
Deceptive	Item 4 (Pathological lying); Item 5 (Conning / manipulative)
Manipulative	Item 5 (Conning / manipulative)
Proneness to boredom	Item 3 (Need for stimulation / proneness to boredom)
Impulsive	Item 14 (Impulsivity)
Indifferent	Item 7 (Shallow affect); Item 8 (Callous / lack of empathy)
Remorseless	Item 6 (Lack of remorse or guilt)

Character Assessment Guide

A nonclinical screening rubric. Nine paired traits scored from predatory (–2) to protective (+2). Score the individual, not the situation.

	–2 Strongly predatory	–1	Unknown / 0	+1	+2 Strongly protective	
	SELF-FOCUSED			vs. SACRIFICIAL		
Self-Serving	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Self-Sacrificing
Boastful	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Humble
Blaming	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Owning
	EXPLOITATIVE			vs. SUPPORTIVE		
Deceptive	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Truthful
Manipulative	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Cooperative
Bored	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Engaged
	UNCARING			vs. EMPATHETIC		
Impulsive	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Thoughtful
Indifferent	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Compassionate
Remorseless	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	Repentant

How the qualities map to Hare’s PCL-R Factor 1 (character) — all 8 items

Boastful (charm surface)	Glibness / superficial charm
Self-Serving	Grandiose sense of self-worth
Deceptive	Pathological lying
Manipulative	Conning / manipulative
Remorseless	Lack of remorse or guilt
Indifferent (flat)	Shallow affect
Indifferent (cold)	Callous / lack of empathy
Blaming	Failure to accept responsibility

The lay qualities above are a fuzzy-heuristic operationalization of the eight PCL-R Factor 1 items. Sources: Hare (2003), PCL-R 2nd Ed. Technical Manual, pp. 76–77; Hare (1993), Without Conscience.

Non-clinical screening tool. Not a diagnostic instrument.

Character (who the person is) is scored, not conduct alone (what the person did).

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Figure 3. Character Assessment Guide — nonclinical screening rubric.

Second, the positive characteristics are the classical virtues — the qualities the Greeks named as the foundation of a flourishing city and a trustworthy citizen. Plato set prudence, justice, temperance, and courage at the center of good character four centuries before Christ; Aristotle built an entire account of the good life on the habituation of exactly these virtues; the Stoics carried them into Roman public life.

The Jewish and Christian traditions later took up the same virtues and taught them as essential to a life well lived. This is not a sectarian standard. It is the common moral inheritance of Western civilization, held across the philosophical and religious traditions alike, and it is the standard our great-grandparents’ generation applied without hesitation to anyone who asked to work with children. Pairing each negative quality with its opposing virtue gives an additional check on any character assessment.

You cannot hold dominance on both sides of the same continuum. A person cannot be, at the core, both self-serving and self-sacrificing, both boastful and humble, both deceptive and truthful. A self-sacrificing person is self-serving now and then; what we are looking for is which side dominates. The same reasoning applies to every dimension. And keep in

mind what the model is for: not a definitive diagnosis of anyone's character, but disqualifying red flags.

If predators are rare and the traits we watch for are common, will we not flag a great many harmless people? This objection rests on a false assumption: that the people who apply to work with children are a random sample from the general population. They are not. Predators go where the prey is.

Someone whose purpose is access to children does not take a job at a foundry. He coaches. He tutors. He volunteers. He seeks the collar, the whistle, and the merit badge. The applicant pool for child-serving positions is therefore enriched with exactly the people this framework is built to catch. The prior probability in that pool is far higher than the one-percent general-population figure, and that single fact reshapes the whole calculation.

Two design points complete the answer.

First, this is a pattern approach, not a test. Personality tests have been tried; an MMPI-2 study of Catholic clergy found relatively few differences between those who had abused minors and those who had not (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, p. 168). An instrument administered once does not see what a trained adult watching behavior over time sees.

A single red flag is not a verdict; it is a reason to look harder. We are not scoring applicants and rejecting everyone above a line. We are watching for a convergence of indicators — character, behavior, grooming patterns, the way a person operates around vulnerable children — and such convergence is far rarer than any single trait. Second, no one carries the decision alone.

A flag goes to a team that develops more information before anything is concluded. That two-stage structure — broad sensitivity at the first stage, then convergence and team review for precision at the second — is exactly how you catch the offender whose entire skill is masking, without branding the merely boastful or the merely impulsive.

We need to change our attitude about who gets to work with children. It is not a right to be exercised at will. It is a privilege, granted by those who bear the responsibility to protect them. When an applicant seeks to volunteer or join the staff of an organization that serves children, the burden rests on the applicant to demonstrate that he is worthy of it. Academic credentials and a clean criminal record fall far short of that burden.

We have lost sight of the purpose of a background investigation. Qualifying a person to work with the vulnerable has far more to do with character than with whether he has been caught and convicted of a crime. We must screen in the children's interest, not in the adults' who want access to them.

Used properly, this model screens out most — and often all — of the people who pose a threat to children. It also weeds out those who would exploit the vulnerable adults in our organizations. It does so without costing a fortune in money or time. And because it works in two stages, it does not force a choice between catching the predator and clearing the innocent applicant: the first stage is tuned to catch, the second to clear. Any capable

adult can perform the evaluation. It takes no expert. The principles are simple and easy to apply with minimal training.

The Self-Focused (Narcissists)

Narcissism is the defining characteristic of the predator. Narcissists are focused on themselves — on what they want and on how to get it, whether it is attention, money, sexual gratification, or power. They are self-absorbed and hold a grandiose sense of their own worth, skill, and value relative to others. Everyone else is a prop, a mark, someone to be used. Narcissism is the engine that powers predators (**Meloy**, *The Psychopathic Mind*, 1988, pp. 68 and 121; **Peck**, *People of the Lie*, 1983, chs. 3–4; **Kernberg**, “*The narcissistic personality disorder and the differential diagnosis of antisocial behavior*,” reprinted in **Meloy**, ed., *The Mark of Cain*, 2001; **Meloy**, *Violent Attachments*, 1992/1997, ch. 4, where **Meloy** names PCL-R Factor 1 “*aggressive narcissism*” — the label that fuses narcissism and predation into a single clinical construct).

This is one of the easier negative qualities to identify. One difficulty is that it applies to many of us. We are born self-centered, and through childhood socialization we learn to be self-sacrificing for the good of the community and, in the end, for our own good. Still, all of us remain self-centered from time to time.

There is a wide gulf between being self-centered on occasion and being a narcissist.

Narcissism has many facets; I have selected three key indicators — self-serving, boastful, and blaming — to represent the larger category. These qualities are not hard to see. The difficulty is that we have grown so accustomed to seeing them that we have become too comfortable with them, too accepting. Many people even strive to embrace these traits, emulating their idols in sports, entertainment, media, and politics. It is hard to find a prominent politician or entertainer today who does not display narcissistic qualities.

The check on our distorted view of these qualities is to look at the virtuous side of the scale — self-sacrificing, humble, and owning. Is the person more giving than taking? Does he consistently show humility, own his mistakes, and accept responsibility for his actions? These are solid qualities, and they lack the flamboyant, self-aggrandizing style of the narcissist.

The Exploiter (Predators)

The red flags I have selected for a full-blown predator are deceptive, manipulative, and bored (proneness to boredom). These are harder to spot than narcissistic traits because they can be subtle. Deception is sometimes difficult to detect. On the other hand, predators often lie just for the fun of it, which makes their deception a little easier to detect — though not by much. One way to screen these people out is for every organization to adopt a firm rule: any material misrepresentation or omission on an application is an automatic disqualifier. You cannot trust a liar, even one who is not a predator.

Manipulators are less trustworthy still. Manipulation always involves deception — about the person’s motives, or his integrity, or his intentions. Spotting a manipulator takes strong common sense. Manipulators work to make you believe that what they propose is good for you, that it serves your best interest.

George Simon’s *In Sheep’s Clothing* (1996) is the best available practitioner field guide to this behavior. **Simon’s** central methodological point is essential for screeners:

“Behaviors that are habitual and automatic are not the same thing as behaviors that are unconscious” (ch. 9). The manipulator is not defending against inner conflict; he is running an offensive tactic. **Simon** catalogs eighteen such tactics — minimization, lying (including by omission and distortion), denial used as a tactic, selective inattention, rationalization, diversion, evasion, covert intimidation, guilt-tripping, shaming, playing the victim, vilifying the victim, playing the servant role, seduction, projecting the blame, feigning innocence, feigning confusion, and brandishing anger. Any two or three of these deployed in a single screening interview should raise the threat level at once.

It is really only ever about what they want, what is good for them, what serves their interest. Sometimes the goal is only to make you look foolish, to embarrass you; your humiliation is their reward. Often the aim is to rob you of your money, time, expertise, contacts, or virtue — all for their exclusive benefit. They simply cast the illusion that it benefits you too.

Proneness to boredom is a key trait of the predator. We all get bored at times. Routine is central to most work, and most of us tolerate it, recognizing that it is necessary to get the job done. That kind of routine is intolerable to the predator. He seeks constant excitement, stimulation, action. On the opposite side of the continuum are the people who take on the full range of duties — whose commitment to the mission shows in their willingness to carry out every task, routine or not.

The Uncaring (Psychopaths)

Psychopaths not only have no empathy. They have no conscience. This is not a rhetorical flourish; it is the founding empirical claim of the field. **Cleckley’s** 1950 clinical portrait identified *“absence of remorse or shame”* and *“general poverty in major affective reactions”* as defining criteria (*The Mask of Sanity*, criteria 6 and 10). **Hare** titled his 1993 book *Without Conscience* to name what forty years of forensic work had confirmed: the psychopath is not a person with a damaged conscience but a person with none. The psychoanalytic tradition reached the same conclusion by an independent path half a century earlier. **Phyllis Greenacre’s** 1945 paper *“Conscience in the Psychopath”* and **Adelaide Johnson’s** 1949 clinical papers on *“superego lacunae”* — both reprinted in **Meloy’s** *The Mark of Cain* (2001) — documented the absent-conscience finding in children and adolescents long before the PCL-R existed. Two independent research traditions, using different methods over seven decades, converged on the same defining feature.

Psychopaths are, for practical protective purposes, beyond the reach of treatment as a safeguard. Any claim that they can be treated rests on weaker ground than it appears.

Cleckley documented the failure of every therapy available in his day, and four decades of research since have not reversed that finding (**Cleckley** 1988; **Hare** 1993, 2003). The success of a treatment program is almost always measured by recidivism — by whether the offender is caught again — and I have already shown here what that measure is worth.

When only a small fraction of offenses are ever detected, the fact that someone is not caught a second time means nothing, except perhaps that he has learned to avoid the second arrest. A measure that misses the overwhelming majority of offenses cannot certify a cure.

The field's own leading review makes the same point from the inside: the factors treatment programs target — victim empathy, denial of the offense, psychological distress, stated motivation — bear little relationship to reoffending, while the factors that do predict it are deviant sexual preference and antisocial character, the very features that define this offender (**Hanson & Morton-Bourgon**, 2005). From an institutional-safeguarding standpoint the conclusion should be obvious: no organization can rely on treatment to make a person of this character safe for unsupervised access to children.

Removing him from that access is the only dependable protection.

Psychopaths make up roughly 1 percent of the general adult population (**Hare**, *Without Conscience*, 1993; **Babiak & Hare**, *Snakes in Suits*, 2006, ch. 1; **Coid, Yang, Ullrich, Roberts, & Hare**, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 2009, reporting 0.6 percent in the U.K. household population), with a further 10 percent or so of the population displaying enough psychopathic traits to cause serious interpersonal harm without meeting the full clinical threshold (**Babiak & Hare**, 2006, ch. 1). They make up roughly 15 to 25 percent of the male prison population in the United States (**Hare**, *PCL-R Technical Manual*, 2003; **Hare & Neumann**, *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 2008; **Kiehl & Hoffman**, *Jurimetrics*, 2011).

The modern four-factor structure of the PCL-R — Interpersonal, Affective, Lifestyle, Antisocial — is documented in **Hare & Neumann** (2008) and in **Babiak & Hare** (2006, ch. 2), and it makes the point that the interpersonal and affective factors — character — do the diagnostic work, while the lifestyle and antisocial factors reflect behavioral consequences that a socially skilled psychopath may successfully conceal. Because they have no conscience, they have no qualms about breaking the law. As I said earlier, most of them are never caught (**Abel et al.**, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 1988; **Babiak & Hare**, 2006, on the workplace-concealment mechanism).

The character dimension is also lifelong: **Meloy's Violent Attachments** (1992/1997, ch. 4) reports that “the aging process seems to decrease Factor 2 (antisocial behavior) of the PCL-R, but not Factor 1 (aggressive narcissism).” Middle-aged psychopaths drop the arrestable behavior while retaining the character that produced it — one of the strongest available data points against the “he’ll grow out of it” register.

The clinical category responsible for the concentration of harm against children is pedophilia — the persistent sexual interest in prepubescent children. **Abel and Harlow's** analysis of 4,007 admitted child molesters, drawn from more than 16,000 assessed subjects, found that pedophiles molest roughly 88 percent of child victims and commit roughly 95 percent of the sex acts committed against children (**Abel & Harlow**, *The Stop Child Molestation Book*, 2001, pp. 12, 17, 20, 46, 51, 316). **Abel's** pedophile group is defined by persistence — more than a year of molesting (**Abel & Harlow**, 2001, p. 315) — and it includes the family molesters; 68 percent of his admitted molesters had molested a child in their own family (p. 313). The figure establishes that the persistent offender does nearly all the damage, wherever he offends.

Within pedophilia, the preferential extrafamilial subset carries the signature of psychopathy: massive lifetime victim counts, indifference to victim harm, boundary-crossing across victim type and paraphilia, and a lifetime pattern beginning in adolescence (**Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, & Murphy**, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 1987; **Abel et al.**, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 1988; **Abel & Rouleau**, in *Handbook of Sexual Assault*, 1990). The persistent offender **Abel** documents does nearly all of that damage wherever he offends; within that group, the preferential extrafamilial offender — the psychopathic offender in operational terms — carries the highest counts.

The extent of harm one such offender inflicts varies by target preference. The average pedophile in **Abel and Harlow's** assessment-clinic sample admitted to roughly 12 victims and 71 acts (**Abel & Harlow**, 2001, pp. 302, 316). Pedophiles interviewed under a federal Certificate of Confidentiality — a stronger disclosure protection than any assessment clinic can offer — reported roughly 49 victims and 114 acts (**Abel et al.**, 1987). And the highest-load subgroup, non-incestuous boy-preferential offenders operating under that same federal protection, reported an average of 150 victims and 281 offenses each across their lifetimes (**Abel & Rouleau**, 1990). These are not outlier figures produced by a handful of extreme cases; they are subgroup averages, produced under the strongest confidentiality protections in the research literature, using the most conservative counting rules the primary study operated — lowest reported values recorded, the subject's lower number retained where family reports differed, and overreport-suspected cases excluded (see **Abel et al.**, 1987, methods).

Not all psychopaths are child molesters. Most are not. Many never break the law, though they push the limits as far as they can. We want none of them in our organizations all the same — child molester or not, lawbreaker or not. They are dangerous and destructive to any organization.

Psychopaths are the hardest to detect. Many are charismatic and highly likable. Though they feel no genuine emotion, they are expert at mimicking it, whatever the situation calls for. They read people with uncanny skill and “become” whatever you most want in a relationship. They make themselves so attractive to you that you cannot entertain the possibility that their character carries red flags. It is as though they can switch off your reasoning. **Anna Salter**, drawing on two decades of clinical interviews with convicted

offenders, made the point in one sentence: “*psychopaths — offenders without a conscience — fool people for the thrill of it. Deception is not just a byproduct of deviant activities for the psychopath; often it is the main event*” (**Salter**, *Predators*, 2003, ch. 7).

Salter reports that even people who have been directly victimized by a specific psychopath and know him to be one continue to like him — which is why niceness and likability, as she writes elsewhere in the same volume, “*will override a track record of child molestation any day of the week*” (**Salter**, *Predators*, 2003, ch. 2).

We have all met people like this, or know someone who has. The primary indicators of a psychopath are impulsive, indifferent, and remorseless. Two of the nine indicators in this framework, boredom and impulsivity, are on the PCL-R’s lifestyle factor rather than its character factor. I use them as character traits all the same. They are the part of a man’s character that shows in how he lives, and a screener can see them long before any record exists.

Many of us do impulsive things — buy new clothes or a fishing rod on a whim, head to a favorite restaurant, change a hairstyle. There is no end to the small things we do impulsively.

The impulsiveness of the psychopath rises to another level. He will move across the country on a whim, drop a girlfriend, change jobs, make a large purchase, or make some huge life-changing decision with little or no thought.

He is indifferent to the harm that befalls others, whether or not he caused it. If others are watching, he will mimic the emotion the moment calls for. If he thinks no one is looking, he shows no emotion at all, because he has none. Functional MRI research has documented the underlying affective deficit (**Kiehl** and colleagues, *Biological Psychiatry*, 2001, and subsequent work).

Because he lacks normal in-the-moment feeling, you can sometimes detect that something is a little off about his reaction. There may be a slight delay, or the intensity is wrong, or he switches from sad to happy too quickly. Often you feel the incongruence at a gut level.

The better an actor the psychopath is, the harder it is to catch his fake emotions. Even so, the mask slips from time to time. **Cleckley** chose the title *The Mask of Sanity* for precisely this reason — he described the psychopath’s presentation as “*not merely an ordinary two-dimensional mask but what seems to be a solid and substantial structural image of the sane and rational personality*,” which nonetheless fails to hold under sustained observation (*The Mask of Sanity*, 5th ed., 1988). Do not dismiss those slips as “*out of character*.” What you see in those moments is the character.

The only remorse a psychopath feels is remorse over a lost opportunity, or over getting caught. He feels none for breaking the law, hurting someone, abusing a child, or even killing another human being. He is entirely without conscience.

Any emotion that suggests otherwise is a testament to his skill as an actor. Do not be fooled by insincere expressions of regret or apology.

The clinical criterion — the PCL-R diagnostic threshold, or the older DSM antisocial-personality checklist — is not the operational criterion the screener needs. **Simon** puts it plainly in his case study of “*Mr. Jackson*,” an aggressive-personality manipulator: “*We don’t know that he is so devoid of all conscience that we can call him psychopathic or sociopathic. But he certainly meets all of [the aggressive-personality criteria]*” (*In Sheep’s Clothing*, 1996, ch. 6).

The person who is without conscience toward his intended victims is the threat, whether or not he meets the narrow DSM criterion. This is why the framework treats the PCL-R as a fuzzy heuristic rather than a diagnostic instrument. A candidate for a child-serving position who shows the signature — grandiosity, deception, manipulation, absent remorse toward those he has wronged — is disqualified from access to children regardless of whether a clinician would score him at PCL-R 30.

People who are narcissistic, or even predatory, retain the ability to change. The established psychopath is a harder case. It is always within God’s power to transform someone — that is a matter of faith, and I hold it — but it is not something an organization can build a child-protection policy on, even a faith-based organization.

Where treatment programs report gains, they report reductions in reoffending among supervised offenders in controlled settings; not one of them shows that the underlying character has changed or that the man has become safe for unsupervised access to children, and the interpersonal-affective core — the very signature that defines this offender — is the part that responds least (**Cleckley** 1988; **Hare** 1993, 2003; **Meloy** 1988).

Not All Predators Are Child Molesters, But All Child Molesters Are Predators

Screen out every narcissist, predator, and psychopath, and you screen out every child molester along with them. The more people you train to recognize these, the better you will keep them away from the vulnerable members of your organization.

Shakeshaft spent her career arguing against profiling abusers by who they are — sex, age, role, marital status — and I agree with her. But she found consistent characteristics that set them apart, starting with this: they are takers, not givers. Drawing on the Jesuit writer **James Martin**, she names the two traits that recur, narcissism and grandiosity — the Pied Piper, the charismatic founder or beloved teacher or energetic Scoutmaster whom adults trust because of his standing (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, pp. 47–49). She would not call that profiling. Neither do I. It is character, and it is what an adult can see.

Her data also show whom the framework has to catch in a school. Most school employees who cross sexual boundaries with students are opportunists, not fixated offenders: emotionally arrested adults who exploit a vulnerable student and a school that looks the other way, and who usually target adolescents rather than young children (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, pp. 23, 49). The opportunist is the first- and second-tier man in this framework,

the self-focused exploiter, and the character indicators catch him before the psychopathy question ever arises. That is why the framework has three tiers instead of one. The indicators apply to women as well as men. By student report, women account for close to four in ten cases of educator sexual misconduct, usually with adolescent boys, and they are less often recognized and less often reported (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, pp. 52–54).

Some will still get through, and some are already inside. Identifying and removing them takes constant vigilance and continual evaluation.

Too often, screening operates as though it were a discrete event: an initial screening, then periodic re-screening. Between those events, everyone focuses on the mission and on following policy, and supervision stays task- and policy-focused.

That is the wrong approach.

What is required is continuing observation of staff and volunteers to gain deeper insight into their character. You can never be certain you have missed nothing, because predators actively mask their negative qualities. We need to know one another in depth, and that is a continuing process. Knowing a person engages both the emotions and the intellect. And you need to know exactly what to look for.

The character-assessment guide is there to focus your observations.

Why the Preferential Extrafamilial Child Molester Is a Psychopath

Virtuous people do not sexually abuse children.

Someone who takes a position of trust with children, wins the confidence of their parents and the institution that employs him, and uses that confidence to get a child alone and use him, demonstrates what he is. The charm was a tool. The reputation was a tool. The child was a tool. The goal of this section is to inform you what the people who have studied predators like this for eighty years have called people that fit this description, and whether they were looking at the same thing.

They were.

What each discipline measured, and what none of them measured

The research on this kind of offender comes from disciplines that do not share the same perspectives or tools. **Cleckley** described him from the clinical interview.

The clinicians who followed **Cleckley** through the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s assessed him with the Rorschach and the MMPI, and many of them went on using those instruments after **Hare's** checklist appeared, because the checklist was a Canadian research tool and American forensic practice did not take it up for years.

I came to the PCL-R through a case.

In 1998 my son, who was working for me as a research assistant at the time, gave me a book and told me I should read it. It was **Robert Hare's** *Without Conscience*, a book about psychopaths. **Hare**, a Canadian researcher, also created a test, the PCL-R, to measure psychopathy.

The reason my son alerted me to the book was that I was working on a case that required me to conduct a threat assessment of a man who had become a great concern to my client. The man didn't fit the normal profile of someone who might pose a threat. He wasn't mentally ill; there were no indications of paranoia; he had no criminal history; there was no documented pattern of violence in his past; he didn't drink or use drugs. On the positive side, he seemed likable, easygoing, helpful, and made friends easily.

But there was something very off about him, and I could not put my finger on what it was exactly.

My client was terrified of him, while everyone else involved in the case—the lawyers, the court, the psychologists, the other experts—thought my client was seeing things that weren't there.

I read the book, and it opened me to a new perspective.

By then, I had been an investigator for almost thirty years, and I had met men like him before. What I had not had was a name for what I was seeing, or a way to measure it. So I went to Canada and took **Hare's** training. Based on everything I learned in the case, I evaluated the man and prepared a threat assessment. I was called to testify and put on the record what I thought, the danger the man posed, why, and what I thought he might do next.

The judge was incredulous and called my testimony outrageous, overreaching, disconnected from any facts. I didn't have the court-recognized clinical credentials to arrive at such conclusions, you see. We had to bring in a nationally known forensic psychologist.

My client retained **Reid Meloy**, a published academic with a long record, whom I had found and recommended. **Meloy's** testimony rested mostly on the Rorschach and the MMPI; the PCL-R was a supporting instrument behind them, which is how it was used in American courts at the time, when it was used at all. **Meloy** learned to administer the PCL-R on that case. He later became a trainer for it. **Meloy's** books rested on psychoanalytic interviewing and Rorschach data, although he adopted **Hare's** factor language for features he was already seeing in the protocols.

Despite the testimony offered, the court failed to impose the restrictions recommended, and the man went on to do everything I predicted he would. It was inevitable.

Hare measured character and never counted victims. **Abel** counted victims — under a federal Certificate of Confidentiality, with the most conservative counting rules in the literature — and never measured character, because his instrument was built to measure sexual interest and that was his question. **Carla van Dam** interviewed three hundred admitted molesters and described both. **George Simon** watched the manipulation tactics in his consulting room. **M. Scott Peck** watched the same tactics and called them evil.

No one has ever put the character instruments and the victim counts on the same men. **Abel's** preferential offender has never been scored on the PCL-R or anything like it. The research community has studied rapists, pooled samples of child molesters, incest

offenders, and pedophiles defined by arousal, and it has left the man who does the most damage to children almost entirely unstudied as a man.

Since the exact studies were never conducted to conclusively answer many of the questions, the only approach available is that of an intelligence analyst: look at all the information available and decide what it most likely means.

The lineup

Here are the observers, in order, with the instrument each one used, the word each one chose, and what each one saw.

Observer	Year	Discipline and instrument	His word for it	What he saw
Wilhelm Reich	1933	Psychoanalysis; character analysis	Phallic-narcissistic character	Arrogant, self-assured, contemptuous of others, aggressive in relationships
Hervey Cleckley	1941, 1950	Clinical psychiatry; case interviews	Psychopath; the mask of sanity	Superficial charm, untruthfulness, absence of remorse or shame, egocentricity, poverty of affect, a convincing surface with nothing behind it
Phyllis Greenacre	1945	Psychoanalysis	Conscience in the psychopath	Conscience absent, not damaged; charm and plausibility in its place
Adelaide Johnson	1949	Child psychiatry	Superego lacunae	Holes in conscience visible in adolescence, long before adult offending
Erich Fromm	1964	Social psychology	Malignant narcissism	Self-worship that treats other people as material
Ben Bursten	1973	Psychoanalytic typology	Manipulative personality	Deception and “putting one over” as the organizing pleasure
M. Scott Peck	1983	Clinical psychiatry	Evil; malignant narcissism	The lie as a way of life, scapegoating of victims, refusal to examine oneself, respectability as cover
Robert Hare	1980, 1986, 1991, 2003	Psychometrics; Psychopathy Checklist	Psychopathy, Factor 1	Glibness, grandiosity, pathological lying, manipulation, callousness, absent remorse, failure to accept responsibility

Ethel Person	1986	Psychoanalysis	Need to dominate and humiliate	The drive is dominance; sex and money are its vehicles
Gene Abel	1987, 1988, 2001	Behavioral research; confidential self-report	Paraphiliac; pedophile	Adolescent onset, lifetime persistence, dozens to hundreds of victims, boundary-crossing across victim type, respectable concealment
Otto Kernberg	1989	Psychoanalysis	Malignant narcissism	Pathological narcissism plus antisocial behavior plus ego-syntonic sadism plus paranoid orientation
J. Reid Meloy	1988, 1992	Psychoanalysis; Rorschach	Aggressive narcissism; predatory aggression; malignant pseudoidentification	Planned, emotionless, cortically driven violence; mirroring the victim's values to manufacture trust
Carl Gacono and Reid Meloy	1994	Rorschach assessment	Psychopathic personality	The same absence of attachment and affect, read from the protocols
George Simon	1996	Clinical practice	Covert-aggressive; character disturbance	Eighteen named manipulation tactics, run deliberately and habitually
Theodore Millon and Roger Davis	1998	Theoretical typology	Psychopathy as a severity continuum	Ten subtypes rooted in narcissistic pathology
Carla van Dam	2001, 2006	Forensic interviews, 300+ molesters	Closet narcissist; social psychopath	"Too good to be true"; cultivation of community standing; migration between institutions; unchanging pathology
Anna Salter	2003	Interviews with convicted offenders	Predator	Deception as the main event, not a byproduct; likability that overrides a record
Paul Babiak and Robert Hare	2006	Organizational psychology	Corporate psychopath	Assessment, manipulation, abandonment; gatekeepers groomed first

Robert Prentky, Howard Barbaree, Eric Janus	2015	Developmental criminology	High-rate chronic offender	Early onset, persistence across every age band, coercion
William O'Donohue and Cynthia Bromberg (eds.)	2019	Forensic evaluation of civil commitments	Sexually violent predator	High Factor 1 scores predicting sexual recidivism independent of record

Read down the last column. Every row contains the same three or four features: a convincing surface, deception and manipulation as a way of operating, other people used as instruments, and no conscience toward the people used. The vocabulary changes with the decade and the discipline. The object does not.

What the lineup shows

The character description in that table comes from the people who study psychopaths. The offense pattern comes from **Abel** and **van Dam**. When I put the two side by side, I reach one conclusion, and I hold it with high confidence after more than fifty years of investigating predators of every kind, scores of child molesters among them: all of these researchers are looking at the same man. Every preferential extrafamilial child molester I have investigated, interviewed, or studied had this character. He could not have done what he did without it.

A man with an ordinary conscience does not spend twenty years working his way into a congregation, a coaching staff, and a circle of parents so that he can get at their children. His conscience stops him at the first lie. The charm, the grandiosity, the lying, the manipulation, and the absence of remorse are not side effects of what he does. They are what make it possible.

Whether a clinician would give such a man a score of 30 on the PCL-R is not the question we need to ask. The cutoff of 30 is a line used to compare researchers' samples. Nobody loses his conscience at 30 and keeps it at 29. The heart of the disorder lies in how the man treats people and how he feels toward them. **Hare** called that part "*the core of psychopathy*" in 1986 and later showed it is the part of his scale that best separates psychopaths from everyone else (**Hare**, in **Reid et al.** eds., 1986, p. 15; **Hare**, in **Millon, Simonson, Birket-Smith & Davis** eds., 1998, p. 193). **Hare** also faulted the DSM for swapping a list of bad behaviors in place of the character traits **Cleckley** said define the psychopath (**Hare**, 1986, pp. 20–21).

The screener has one job here: decide whether the candidate matches the profile in the last column of that table. If he does, he is disqualified from access to children. It does not matter whether the profile comes from a clinical disorder, from a sexual drive that has burned out his conscience toward children, or from plain wickedness. The result is the

same in every case, because this framework screens on character, and character is what every observer in the table saw.

Cleckley: the original portrait (1941, 1950)

Hervey Cleckley, a professor of neuropsychiatry at the **Medical College of Georgia**, wrote the first full description of the psychopath in *The Mask of Sanity* (1941; final form 1950). He listed sixteen traits. His central finding is one I have already mentioned: the psychopath is not a man with a damaged conscience but a man with none. Two of his sixteen traits, “*absence of remorse or shame*” and “*general poverty in major affective reactions*” (criteria 6 and 10), became the emotional core of every instrument that followed.

Hare built the PCL-R to measure **Cleckley’s** portrait. **Meloy** places his own work inside **Cleckley’s** frame. Every serious modern authority names **Cleckley** as the starting point (**Cleckley**, *The Mask of Sanity*, 5th ed., 1988, criteria 6 and 10).

Hare: the scale (1993, 2003)

Robert Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist–Revised is the standard instrument in the field. Its Factor 1 items, the ones about how the man deals with people and what he feels, are the character core this framework rests on: glibness, grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, cunning and manipulative, lack of remorse, shallow feelings, callousness, and refusal to accept responsibility (**Hare**, *PCL-R Manual*, 2003; **Hare**, *Without Conscience*, 1993).

A reader who checks the PCL-R literature will quickly find a number that seems to contradict me. **Hare’s** manual reports that only 5 to 10 percent of “*child molesters*” in research samples score as psychopaths. Read at face value, that seems to say most child molesters are not psychopaths.

It says no such thing, for four reasons, and **Hare’s** own writing supports each one.

First, the “*child molester*” group in those studies is mostly incest offenders and situational offenders, the very men this article sets aside. The preferential extrafamilial offender is a small minority inside that group. Average him in with the incest majority, and you get a number that describes the group, not the man. **Hare’s** own figures show what happens as the sample approaches the dangerous offender. In one federal prison sample, 5.4 percent of incest offenders, 18.3 percent of mixed sex offenders including child molesters, and 26.1 percent of rapists met the cutoff (**Forth & Kroner**, 1994). Among child molesters a court had already found sexually dangerous, the figure was 30.5 percent (**Prentky & Knight**, 1991). Both are reported in **Hare**, in **Millon et al.** eds., 1998, pp. 200–201. The closer the sample gets to the dangerous offender, the higher the number climbs. No one has yet drawn a sample from the top of that ladder.

Second, **Hare’s** numbers came from men who knew their scores would affect sentencing, parole, and civil commitment. That is a strong reason to hide exactly the traits the PCL-R measures. **Langevin** (2001) showed the effect directly: offenders who managed to fake the penile plethysmograph scored higher on PCL-R Total ($p < .05$) and on Factor 1 ($p < .01$)

than offenders who did not. The men with the strongest Factor 1 traits are the ones best able to beat the test.

Third, **Hare's** own text supports my claim from the other direction: "*Among psychopathic sex offenders the primary problem may not be that they are sex offenders but that they are generalized offenders whose sexual offenses are part of a general propensity to violate the rights of others*" (**Hare**, 2003, p. 138). The preferential offender's sexual predation is one expression of a general character disorder. That character disorder is what this article calls psychopathy.

Fourth, when researchers combine a high PCL-R score with measured sexual arousal to children, sexual reoffending climbs to 60 to 71 percent (**Rice & Harris**, 1997; **Hildebrand, de Ruiter & de Vogel**, 2004; **Olver & Wong**, 2006; **Gretton, McBride, Hare, O'Shaughnessy & Kumka**, 2001). Those are mixed samples of rapists and child molesters. They show what deviant sexual interest and the psychopathic character do together.

Hare's 5-to-10-percent figure is a floor, produced by the way the samples were built and scored. It is not a ceiling on the preferential offender.

Abel: the numbers (1984–1993; Abel & Harlow 2001)

Gene Abel's research is the backbone of what we know about the preferential child molester. He worked under a federal Certificate of Confidentiality, which let admitted offenders tell the truth without legal risk. His team assessed 561 male paraphiliacs through the 1980s (**Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau & Murphy**, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 1987; **Abel, Mittelman, Becker, Rathner & Rouleau**, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 1988; **Abel & Rouleau**, in *Handbook of Sexual Assault*, 1990). He later wrote the findings up for the public in *The Stop Child Molestation Book* (**Abel & Harlow**, 2001).

Abel's data show the profile I describe here. The boy-preferential offenders who molested outside the family, the highest-count group he found, averaged 281 offenses and 150 victims apiece over a lifetime (**Abel & Rouleau**, 1990). About 90 percent had more than one paraphilia. About half molested both boys and girls outside the home. More than half of the boy-preferential offenders started in adolescence.

The pattern went on for decades. The cover was respectability: most of these men were married, employed, and active in their communities. For child molestation, **Abel** found about one arrest for every thirty offenses (**Abel et al.**, 1988), and that is a floor, since these men had already been given federal protection to tell the truth.

Abel and Harlow's 2001 book confirmed the big picture: pedophiles commit about 95 percent of the sex acts against children and molest about 88 percent of the child victims (**Abel & Harlow**, 2001, pp. 12, 17, 20, 46, 51, 316). The persistent offenders **Abel** documents do nearly all the damage, and the boy-preferential offenders who work outside the family have the highest counts.

Abel says “*pedophile*.” He does not say “*psychopath*.” That is a difference of vocabulary, not of substance. Every feature **Abel** found in the preferential group, the enormous victim counts, the indifference to harm, the crossing of every boundary, the respectable cover, the pattern that starts in adolescence and lasts a lifetime, is the psychopathic signature in **Hare’s** Factor 1 terms.

Abel did not stop at the assessment clinic. Twenty years after the confidential studies, he turned to the hiring committee. With his colleagues he built and validated a screen for hidden child molesters applying for jobs and volunteer positions in organizations that care for children, and tested it on more than 19,000 people (**Abel, Jordan, Harlow & Hsu, Sexual Abuse**, 2019; **Abel, Wiegel, Jordan, Harlow, Hsu & Martinez, Children and Youth Services Review**, 2012). His statement of the problem is mine: organizations “*sometimes unknowingly accept hidden child molesters as staff or volunteers because they have no reliable way to identify these individuals*” (**Abel et al.**, 2012). He put the share of children sexually abused by adults caring for them outside the home at about 10 percent (**Abel et al.**, 2019). **Abel’s** screen looks for the sexual interest. This framework looks for the character. They look for different things in the same man, and an organization can use both.

Abel’s four causes, and why they do not divide this offender

Anyone who reads **Abel** and **Harlow** will find, on pages 44 and 45, four causes of child molestation: sexually curious older children; adults with a medical or mental disorder; “*opportunists, who lack feelings for others and who have an antisocial personality disorder*”; and adults with an ongoing sexual interest in children. **Abel** puts the antisocial man in a separate bin from the pedophile. He reports that the first three bins together account for 12 percent of victims, and he says of George, his model pedophile, that George follows the rules in most of his life and so does not belong with the antisocials.

That looks like a contradiction of this section. It is not, and the reason is the one **Hare** gave in 1986 and again in 1998. **Abel’s** “*antisocial personality disorder*” is the DSM category, a list of rule-breaking behaviors. It is what **Hare’s** Factor 2 measures, and it is what **Hare** criticized the DSM for using in place of character. A man can follow the rules in nearly every part of his life and still have the Factor 1 core: the glibness, the manipulation, and no conscience toward the people he uses. George is that man. **Abel** sorted his molesters by what they wanted, because sexual interest was what his instrument measured. This framework sorts them by what they lack, because character is what a screener can see. **Abel’s** pedophile and **Abel’s** opportunist both lack the virtue in question. **Abel** simply never measured it.

Two points need to be said. First, **Abel’s** 88-percent and 95-percent figures describe the persistent molester. His pedophile group is defined as men who kept molesting for more than a year (**Abel & Harlow**, 2001, p. 315), and 68 percent of his admitted molesters had molested a child in their own family (p. 313). These are not extrafamilial statistics. They show that the persistent offender does nearly all the damage wherever he offends.

The 150-victim average for the boy-preferential offender outside the family comes from **Abel's** earlier confidential interviews (**Abel & Rouleau**, 1990).

Second, only 5 percent of **Abel's** admitted molesters said they had molested a child left in their care by an organization (p. 314). That figure describes who gets sent to an assessment clinic. **Abel's** subjects were referred by employers, lawyers, courts, and clinicians, and the institutional offender who is never caught is never referred. It does not describe who is applying for a job.

van Dam: the interviews (2001, 2006)

Carla van Dam is a clinical and forensic psychologist who has personally interviewed more than 300 admitted child molesters. Her two books, *Identifying Child Molesters* (2001) and *The Socially Skilled Child Molester* (2006), describe what preferential extra-familial offenders look like.

In 2001 she called her prototype the “*closet narcissist*,” borrowing **Masterson's** clinical term (**van Dam**, 2001, p. 146). In 2006 she moved the label up a step. Chapter 2 of *The Socially Skilled Child Molester* is titled “*The Social Psychopath*,” and she cites **Millon, Simonsen, Birket-Smith**, and **Davis's** 1998 volume *Psychopathy: Antisocial, Criminal, and Violent Behavior* for the change (**van Dam**, 2006, p. 10). Her Chapter 6 is titled “*The Unchanging Nature of the Groomer's Pathology*.” That chapter title, from a clinician who has sat across from more than 300 of these men, is this article's core claim in her own words.

Her case-study offenders, Mr. **Smith**, Mr. Clay, Mr. Cook, Robert Noyes, Margaret Caruthers, Fred, Dr. Dan, and Bob, show the full Factor 1 profile in detail: easy charm, a sense of entitlement, constant lying, calculated manipulation, shallow feelings, no concern for the victims, and a total refusal to accept responsibility. She also describes how these offenders get inside institutions: they build standing in the community, they use that standing against their victims, they move from one institution to the next by design, they deceive their treatment providers, and they feel nothing for the children they harm.

Meloy: what goes on inside the man (1988, 1992/1997, ed. 2001)

Reid Meloy's *The Psychopathic Mind* (1988) supplies the piece that ties the others together: what is going on inside the man. **Cleckley** described him, **Hare** put him on a scale, **Abel** counted his victims, and **van Dam** interviewed him. **Meloy** explains why he does it.

Meloy divides violence into two kinds. One is the hot kind, the reaction of an aroused, frightened, or angry man to a threat in front of him. The other is the cold kind, planned in advance, carried out with a calm pulse and no emotion, and unaffected by anything that happens around it. His Table 6-1 lists thirteen ways to tell them apart (**Meloy**, 1988, Table 6-1, pp. 205–206). Preferential extrafamilial molestation is the cold kind on all thirteen. Not one point matches the “*ordinary person under stress*” story that defense lawyers rely on.

Meloy's term "*malignant pseudoidentification*" (ch. 5, pp. 148–149) is the inside view of grooming. The psychopath mirrors the victim's own values back at him to build trust, then uses the trust he has built. The preferential molester who takes a scoutmaster or teaching job, wins the parents' confidence, reflects the child's own interests back at the child, and makes himself part of the family is running exactly that cycle.

Violent Attachments (1992/1997) is the middle book of the three and the one that names Factor 1. In Chapter 4, "*The Psychopath as Love Object*," **Meloy** takes **Harpur, Hare,** and **Hakstian's** two-factor breakdown of the PCL-R and gives Factor 1 its name: "*I call this factor aggressive narcissism.*"

Factor 2 he calls "*antisocial behavior.*" That name joins the two ideas this framework rests on — that character is the primary thing and that narcissism is the root of predation — into one clinical concept. Chapter 1 (p. 14) gives the plainest statement of the absent-conscience finding: "*Complete failure to make an attachment in infancy, whether due to the absence of a maternal object or biological predisposition, may lead to affectionless or primary psychopathy.*" The same page describes the psychopath's violence as "*a psychobiological mode of violence that is planned, purposeful, and emotionless,*" as against violence that erupts in the heat of the moment.

Chapter 8 gives three case studies of women who stayed attached for years to men who fit primary psychopathy, including one spousal murder in which, as **Meloy** puts it, "*such a relationship might endure for years without the mate being consciously aware that she is deeply attached to a primary psychopath and is consequently at great risk.*" *Violent Attachments* extends *The Psychopathic Mind* with the attachment frame, the case material, and the name for Factor 1.

Meloy's edited volume *The Mark of Cain: Psychoanalytic Insight and the Psychopath* (2001) reprints three generations of psychoanalytic evidence for the same finding: **Greenacre's** 1945 paper "*Conscience in the Psychopath*," **Adelaide Johnson's** 1949 papers on "*superego lacunae*," the holes in an adolescent's conscience, and **Otto Kernberg's** 1989 description of malignant narcissism. Two separate traditions, the psychoanalysts with their interviews and the researchers with their checklist, working across seven decades, arrive at the same defining feature.

O'Donohue & Bromberg: the men the states lock up (2019)

William O'Donohue and **Cynthia Calkins Bromberg's** *Sexually Violent Predators: A Clinical Science Handbook* (Springer, 2019) is the current standard handbook for evaluating sexually violent predators, the men **Congress** and twenty state legislatures singled out for civil commitment because the ordinary criminal system could not hold them. Several chapters document the pattern this article describes. **Winters** and **Jumper's** chapter reports that a large majority of committed SVPs meet the PCL-R criteria for psychopathy, with median scores well above the average for prison populations.

Boccaccini and colleagues report that among SVPs, the highest Factor 1 scores predict the highest rates of sexual reoffending, and that this holds no matter what the man's

criminal record looks like. These are not the pooled “*child molesters*” behind **Hare’s** 5-to-10-percent figure. They are men committed after an offense against a child or a non-consenting adult, whose cases survived expert forensic review. That is the preferential-predator stratum I discuss here, and on that stratum a modern, well-controlled literature documents exactly what **Abel** found under federal protection forty years earlier: enormous victim counts, high Factor 1 scores, every boundary crossed, and ordinary sentencing that failed to protect the next victim.

Babiak & Hare: the psychopath at work (2006)

Paul Babiak and **Robert Hare’s** *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* (Harper, 2006) carries the PCL-R research into the setting this framework operates in, the organization. They report the same 1 percent of the general population, and they add another 10 percent or so who have enough psychopathic traits to do serious harm to organizations and to people without meeting the full clinical threshold (**Babiak & Hare**, 2006, ch. 1). They describe the three steps a socially skilled psychopath uses to get inside an organization: he sizes people up, he manipulates them, and he discards them when they are no longer useful. That matches, step for step, what **van Dam** describes for the preferential child molester (**van Dam**, 2001; 2006). Their conclusion is the one this framework depends on: character, not criminal record, is the signal. A socially skilled psychopath in a child-serving organization will look exactly as **Babiak** and **Hare** describe: charming on the surface, grand in self-presentation, careful in building relationships with the gatekeepers, quick to adopt the institution’s habits and language, and unmoved by the people he harms.

Reid, Dorr, Walker & Bonner: where the checklist first appeared (1986)

William Reid, **Darwin Dorr**, **John Walker**, and **Jack Bonner’s** edited volume *Unmasking the Psychopath: Antisocial Personality and Related Syndromes* (Norton, 1986) is the turning point in the modern literature, and it gives this article two separate supports. First, **Hare’s** opening chapter contains the first book-form appearance of the twenty-item Psychopathy Checklist (**Hare**, in **Reid et al.** eds., 1986, Table 2, p. 18), the instrument that became the PCL-R within a decade and remains the standard. In that chapter **Hare** says outright that Factor 1, the character factor, is “*at the core of psychopathy*” (**Hare**, 1986, p. 15), and he faults the DSM-III for having “*substituted*” a list of behaviors for the character traits **Cleckley** identified as defining (**Hare**, 1986, p. 21).

Hare said in 1986 what I say here: the character signature is the signal, and a clean record does not erase it. Second, **Ethel Person’s** chapter, which stands in the **Kernberg** line ahead of *Snakes in Suits*, states the conclusion in the simplest terms: the psychopath is “*motivated primarily by the need to dominate and humiliate*” (**Person**, 1986, p. 265), not primarily by pleasure. That reading closes the gap between the research on sexual arousal in preferential offenders and the research on character disorder. The sexual behavior is the vehicle. The need to dominate is the engine, and the engine is what **Hare’s** character factor measures.

Prentky, Barbaree & Janus: the same man, seen from the criminology side (2015)

Robert Prentky, Howard Barbaree, and Eric Janus's *Sexual Predators: Society, Risk, and the Law* (Routledge, 2015) approaches the same offender through criminology and risk assessment and reaches the same small group by a different route. **Prentky** co-developed the **Massachusetts Treatment Center** classification systems for child molesters and rapists. **Barbaree** was editor-in-chief of *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. **Janus** is a law school dean who has criticized SVP civil commitment statutes at length. Their book calls **Hare's** development of the PCL-R "*a model of good science*" and sends readers to the **Patrick** (2006) *Handbook of Psychopathy* (**Prentky, Barbaree & Janus**, 2015, pp. 141–142). It adopts the two-part model of sex-offender risk that **Rice** and **Harris** (1997), **Hanson** and **Bussière** (1998), and **Hanson** and **Morton-Bourgon** (2005) established: deviant sexual interest plus psychopathy or general criminality are the two things that matter most.

And in their tenth chapter they identify, from the research on criminal careers (**Moffitt**, 1993; **Sampson & Laub**, 2005; **Lussier, Tzoumakis, Cale & Amirault**, 2010), a small "*high-rate chronic*" group that starts offending in early adolescence, keeps going at every age, and is "*disproportionately more likely to engage in coercive and forced sexual behavior*" (**Prentky, Barbaree & Janus**, 2015, p. 287, citing **Boutwell, Barnes & Beaver**, 2013). That "*high-rate chronic*" group is the preferential extrafamilial offender, seen from the criminology side instead of the character side. When two traditions that share no methods, the **Cleckley-Hare** character tradition and the **Moffitt-Sampson-Lussier** career tradition, arrive at the same small group, that is not a coincidence. The preferential extrafamilial offender is where the two meet.

I want to draw attention to one argument in their book. **Janus's** Chapter 2 (pp. 42–43) argues that only 13 percent of new sex crimes come from men previously confined for a sex offense, and that 87 percent come from men with no prior sex-offense conviction. He uses that to criticize civil-commitment policy. It is a fair observation about sex crimes as a whole. It is not a claim about the preferential extrafamilial offender, nor does it say anything about character.

Read against everything this article has shown, **Janus's** 87 percent is not an objection to character screening; it is the strongest argument for it. If nearly nine in ten new sex crimes come from men with no prior sex-offense conviction, then a record check cannot find the dangerous man, and the preferential extrafamilial offender is over-represented in that 87 percent precisely because he is so rarely caught. His sexual interest in children is fixed; it does not go away (**Abel**, 1984–1993; **Abel & Harlow**, 2001; **van Dam**, 2001, 2006). The 87 percent measures the failure of the record; it says nothing about the character of the men who produce it.

Whether a state should run a civil-commitment program has no bearing on who should be allowed to work with children. Character screening is warranted either way, because it works upstream of arrest, at the point of hire.

What the collective literature shows

The one authority whose numbers appear to contradict the claims I make here — **Hare's PCL-R Manual** — supplies, in its own text at page 138 and in the interaction data with measured deviant arousal, the reasoning that resolves the apparent contradiction in this article's direction.

I can speak with some personal knowledge of **Hare's PCL-R**. I was trained to administer it at a multi-day seminar in Canada in 1998 that **Hare** led himself with **Adelle Forth**, his former doctoral student, by then a professor at **Carleton University** and the **Forth** of the **Forth** and **Kroner** prison sample cited above. I had many opportunities to talk with both of them during and after the training. I also learned the screening version, the **PCL:SV**, for occasions when a full interview and file review are not possible, and the youth version, then in development, for ages twelve to eighteen. The **PCL-R** was built for use in court and in threat assessment, and its purpose is to gain insight into the people we encounter. That purpose is fully consistent with the collective findings of dozens of researchers over the last eighty-plus years, as reflected in the table above.

Every preferential extrafamilial child molester this framework is designed to screen out will show the profile in the table: grandiosity, deception, manipulation, indifference to the people he uses, and absent remorse. The lineup gives the screener eighty years of authority for knowing the profile when he sees it. The framework gives him the nine indicators, the two-stage review, and the standing rule that access to children is a privilege the applicant must earn. Anyone who meets the profile does not earn it.

That is what this framework does, and it is what virtuous people would have done without such a documented framework, in the world before we stopped asking the character question.

This is common sense.

The “Ordinary People” Objection Answered

The strongest opposing thesis in the modern literature is **James Waller's** *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford University Press, 2002). Drawing on **Milgram's** obedience studies, **Zimbardo's** Stanford prison experiment, and the psychosocial history of twentieth-century mass killing, **Waller** argues that ordinary people commit extraordinary evil — that social psychology, group dynamics, ideology, and institutional pressure account for the great majority of atrocity, and that the assumption of extraordinary perpetrators is empirically wrong. His Chapter 3 explicitly disputes psychopathy explanations of mass violence, noting that formal antisocial-personality prevalence is only about 3 percent of the population and cannot account for the far larger perpetrator base observed in genocide.

So, how does the claim that all preferential extrafamilial child molesters are psychopathic survive **Waller's** evidence? It does, for three reasons.

First, scope. **Waller's** population is state-conscripted or state-mobilized participants in mass killing — draftees, police reservists, ordinary neighbors caught up in a genocidal machine already running. That population is defined by external mobilization: participants did not select themselves for the atrocity role, and, in most cases, could not decline it without personal cost.

In this framework, the population is the exact opposite. The preferential extrafamilial child molester self-selects, over years, into positions of trust with children. He is not mobilized; he mobilizes himself. He cultivates community standing to obtain access. He migrates from one institution to another as suspicion accumulates. He builds the entire predatory apparatus from scratch.

The mechanism **Waller** documents — situational compliance under external pressure — does not describe this population, and **Waller** does not claim it does.

Second, instrument. **Waller's** 3 percent figure is a DSM-based estimate of antisocial personality prevalence. It is not a PCL-R psychopathy prevalence estimate. That distinction is the exact conflation error **Hare** himself first corrected in *Unmasking the Psychopath* (1986, ch. 1, pp. 20–21), restated a decade later with the base rates that settle it — 50 to 75 percent of forensic populations meet the APD criteria, against 15 to 25 percent for psychopathy (**Hare**, in **Millon et al.** eds., 1998, pp. 189–193), and that **Cleckley** identified as the definitional problem forty years earlier: DSM antisocial personality is a behavioral checklist that measures criminal-lifestyle consequences, while PCL-R psychopathy measures the interpersonal-affective character signature **Cleckley** identified as defining.

A person can exhibit the full **Cleckley** character outline and never accumulate the DSM behavioral profile — indeed, the socially skilled preferential offender does exactly that, which is why his prevalence is systematically undercounted in criminal-justice samples (**Babiak & Hare**, 2006, ch. 1). The two measurements are of different constructs, and this claim is calibrated to the character construct.

Third, residue. **Waller's** own text repeatedly reserves a small predatory-architect population that his situationist thesis does not try to explain. He notes that atrocities require organizers and architects who plan, direct, and escalate the violence beyond what situational mechanisms alone would produce (**Waller**, 2002, pp. 23, 47, 61, 71). He describes this residual population as small and treats it as outside the scope of his book.

That residue is the population described here. **Waller's** book studies the situationally mobilized majority; this article is a framework for identifying the small predatory-architect minority who organize the machinery within which the majority acts. The two accounts are complementary, not opposed. The situationist account leaves a predatory residue **Waller's** method cannot see. The approach I describe here helps us see the rest.

Waller's work makes one further contribution I adopt here. His Chapter 7 — drawing on **Gibson**, **Haritos-Fatouros**, and the Greek torturer studies — documents how ordinary institutional structures can normalize predatory behavior in staff and volunteers who do

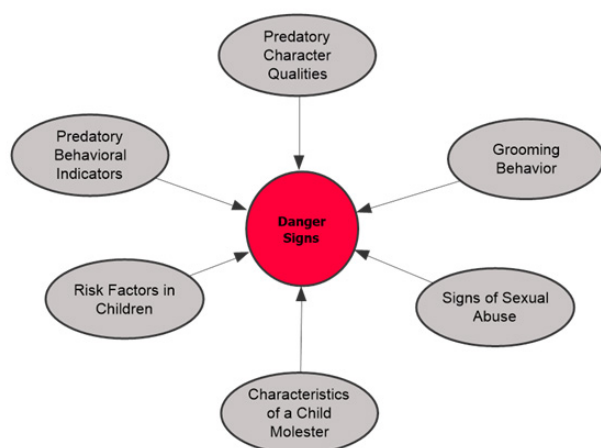
not themselves carry the predatory-architect signature. That situational-normalization mechanism is precisely what allows a psychopathic organizational insider to convert an institution into a grooming environment for the majority of staff who are not themselves psychopathic.

The framework shows that a child-serving organization comprises two populations that must both be addressed: the small predatory core that must be screened out, and the larger, situationally normalized body of staff and volunteers who must be trained to recognize and resist the normalization mechanisms **Waller** documents. The core claim is preserved in full — every preferential extrafamilial child molester is psychopathic. The **Waller** contribution is an additional layer that explains why the surrounding institution so often fails to stop him.

The schools have their own name for the second population's failure. **Shakeshaft** calls it willful blindness: a culture in which teachers protect colleagues, principals protect the faculty from parents, and everyone looks away from an adult's closed-door hours with a chosen student (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, pp. 5, 83–84). **Jennifer Freyd's** term for what the organization does to the child when it looks away is institutional betrayal, a failure to protect when protection would be a reasonable expectation, and its cure, in **Shakeshaft's** last chapter, is institutional courage (**Smith & Freyd**, 2014; **Shakeshaft**, 2024, p. 9 and ch. 10). School administrators know those words from **Title IX** training. They describe exactly the second population **Waller's** work identifies.

The Indicators

Character is the best and most reliable indicator, but behaviors also raise red flags, and we need to recognize them. Behavioral indicators are often the only way to see that someone is a likely child sexual predator. The hard truth is that by the time we see these red flags, the predator has usually already had access to the children we are trying to protect. What everyone needs to know are the red flags that indicate that a person could



pose a threat to children or someone else in the organization. There are six of them—Grooming Behaviors, Signs of Sexual Abuse, Characteristics of a Child Molester, Risk Factors in Children, Predatory Behavioral Indicators, and the most important, Predatory Character Qualities. Together, these indicators converge to clearly identify who in the organization should not be trusted with children.

The hiring side adds three indicators that belong on every screener's list, drawn from the applicant risk characteristics **Shakeshaft** compiles from **Praesidium** and the **Department of Justice** (2024, pp. 164–170): the applicant is overqualified for the job and willing to take any position, or a lower-paying one, to be near children; he describes children as helpless, needy, or vulnerable; and he

turns defensive, angry, or evasive when asked about boundaries. Add the application itself. Gaps in work history, vague reasons for leaving, supervisors left off the reference list, and references who turn out never to have supervised him are red flags in their own right, and, in an October 2022 **Praesidium** survey, 58 percent of people seeking work in education admitted to having lied on a résumé at least once (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, pp. 164–168). That is the reason material misrepresentation disqualifies.

Grooming

Start with grooming. Grooming is another word for seducing. Most predators try to seduce, or groom, their potential victims. Con men — short for confidence men — gain your confidence by seducing you into trusting them. **Bernie Madoff** is a classic confidence man. He conned billions from trusting people and organizations by convincing them he was an investment genius who could grow their money better than anyone else. It was a lie.

Erving Goffman explained grooming in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday, 1959) long before the child-protection literature had a vocabulary for it. **Goffman** described social interaction as staged performance: a person maintains a “front-stage” self for the audience whose favor he needs, and a “back-stage” self kept out of view. Impression management is the work of keeping the two sides sealed off from each other.

The confidence man, **Goffman** observed, is the limit case — a performer whose front-stage self is engineered from the ground up to earn a trust the back-stage self intends to exploit. The predator I describe here is **Goffman’s** performer whose target audience is not a mark for money but a child and the adults around the child. He recruits “team members” (parents, colleagues, supervisors, board members) who unwittingly support his front-stage performance; he curates the “regions” (the classroom, the gym, the after-hours office, the overnight trip) where front-stage access to the child can be converted, off-stage, into offense; and he treats disclosure by a child — a break in the frame — as a stage-management emergency to be managed by discrediting the child’s account.

Grooming, in **Goffman’s** terms, is the deliberate construction and maintenance of a false front-stage relationship designed to shelter a back-stage offense. Naming the mechanism this way clarifies why likability, warmth, competence, and enthusiasm are not evidence of safety: they are precisely the qualities a competent performer would cultivate. Van Dam’s “too good to be true” observation, developed later in this section, is the mark’s side of the same interactional grammar **Goffman** described from the performer’s side.

The scholarly literature has formalized what the interview and case material describes.

Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist, in their canonical review of the sexual-grooming literature, distinguish three overlapping stages the offender operates in parallel rather than in sequence: self-grooming (rationalizing his own conduct in advance), grooming the environment and significant others (parents, colleagues, supervisors, the institution itself), and grooming the child (**Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist**, “Sexual Grooming of

Children: Review of Literature and Theoretical Considerations,” *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 12, no. 3 (2006): 287–99).

These grooming behaviors now carry numbers. **Jeglic, Winters, and Johnson** compared adults who had been sexually abused as children with adults who had not, and asked what a trusted adult had done with each of them. Every grooming behavior was more common in the abused group. Time alone with the child away from other adults, showers of attention, favoritism, and overnight outings ran 1.7 to 3.5 times more common; questions about the child’s sexual experience, dirty jokes, drugs or alcohol, getting close to the family to gain access, and rewards other children did not get ran 3.5 to 6.7 times; sexualized touching, exposure, showing pornography, and telling the child about past sexual experiences ran 6.7 times or more. Children abused by a trusted adult outside the home were nearly 33 times more likely to have been separated from their family and peers (**Jeglic, Winters & Johnson**, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 2023; reported in **Shakeshaft**, 2024, p. 91). Isolation is the tell.

Anne-Marie McAlinden, working from the institutional side of the same phenomenon, shows that grooming is not merely a dyadic act between offender and child; it operates through institutional cultures — the church, the school, the sports club, the youth organization — that furnish trusted roles, cover for one-adult/one-child access, and the presumption of good faith that the offender exploits (**McAlinden**, *“Grooming” and the Sexual Abuse of Children: Institutional, Internet, and Familial Dimensions*, Oxford University Press, 2012). The offender described in the article is doing all three of these things at once, and doing so inside institutions built for other purposes.

Jerry Sandusky, a notorious child sexual predator, is a model of predatory grooming. **Sandusky** groomed governments, institutions, donors, and children. His **Second Mile** organization was recognized under the initiative President **George H. W. Bush** launched with his 1988 “*thousand points of light*” nomination-acceptance speech; President **Bush** recognized the **Second Mile** as the nation’s 294th Point of Light on November 8, 1990. According to the **Freeh** Report, he groomed his employer, **Penn State**, and his supervisor, **Joe Paterno**, to endorse his efforts (**Freeh**, *Report of the Special Investigative Counsel Regarding the Actions of The Pennsylvania State University Related to the Child Sexual Abuse Committed by Gerald A. Sandusky*, 2012). And he groomed some of the children he was supposed to be serving into a sexual relationship.

Sandusky is **McAlinden’s** institutional-grooming pattern in its clearest American form: the offender did not merely groom victims; he groomed the philanthropy, the university, the coaching staff, and the surrounding culture of deference to a beloved figure, and each of those layers of institutional grooming widened the field of access.

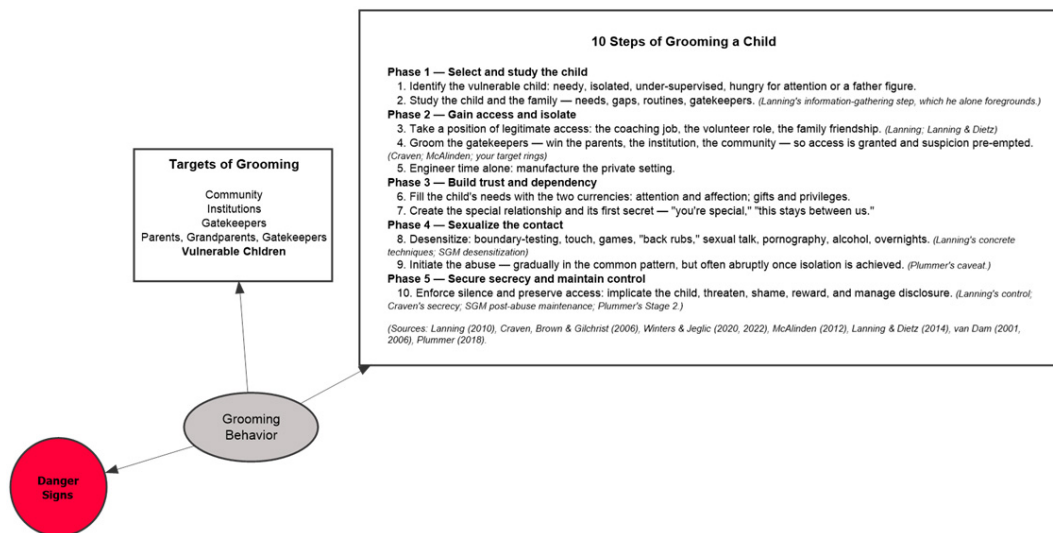


Figure 4. The 10 Steps of Grooming and its five target rings.

Every adult should stay alert to predators' grooming activities, especially those directed at children. In most cases, you will not see the sexualized steps of grooming. The experienced predator uses your organization to build an innocuous relationship with a child, then carries most of the grooming off the premises and out of view. That is one reason it matters so much to screen him out before he ever gets the chance to build a relationship with children.

Parents and guardians in particular need to be sensitive to grooming, because parents are themselves targets of the predator's efforts. Single mothers are often targeted as a route to their children (**van Dam**, *Identifying Child Molesters*, 2001; **van Dam**, *The Socially Skilled Child Molester*, 2006). Coaches, teachers, pastors, and scout leaders may work to earn parents' trust in hopes of opening an unobstructed path to their children. All of us need to know the signs and be fully educated on the subject.

Predators target the most vulnerable children and identify them quickly. Because of that, adults need to learn to see children the way a predator sees them.

Among the most vulnerable are children who have already been sexually abused. Everyone in the organization should know the signs an abused child exhibits — both to put extra layers of protection around that child and to create the opportunity to help him: to stop the abuse and to begin therapeutic intervention. Many of these signs can also stem from other kinds of trauma. Either way, every person who works with children needs to know them, watch for them, and know what to do when they appear.

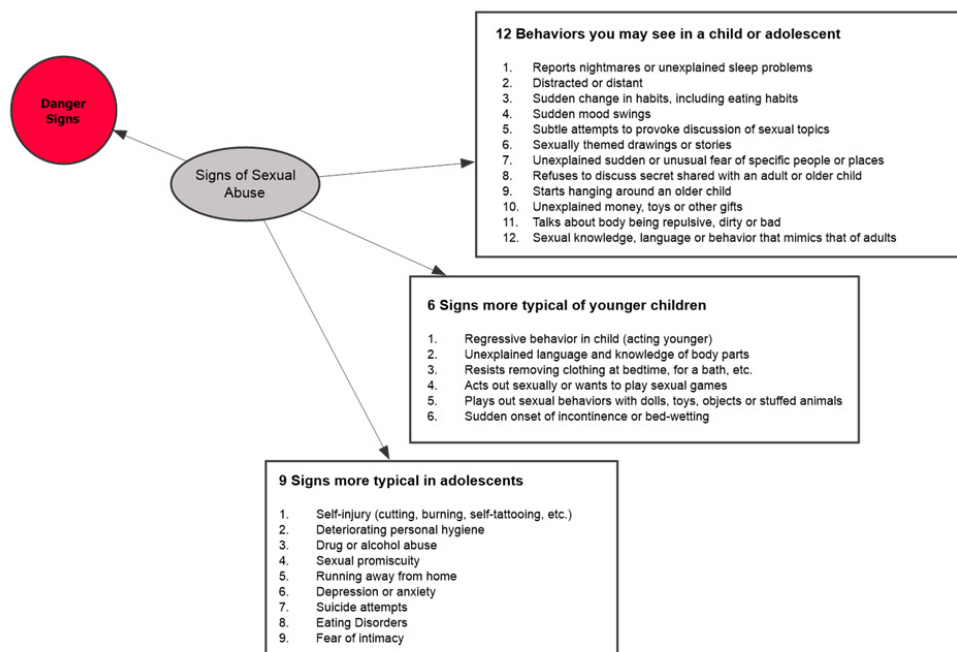


Figure 5. Signs of Sexual Abuse — general, younger, and adolescent bands.

Children at risk for abuse and exploitation fall into two broad groups — those with environmental risk factors and those with relational risk factors. Staff and volunteers need to know both, so they can give extra protection and attention to these children.

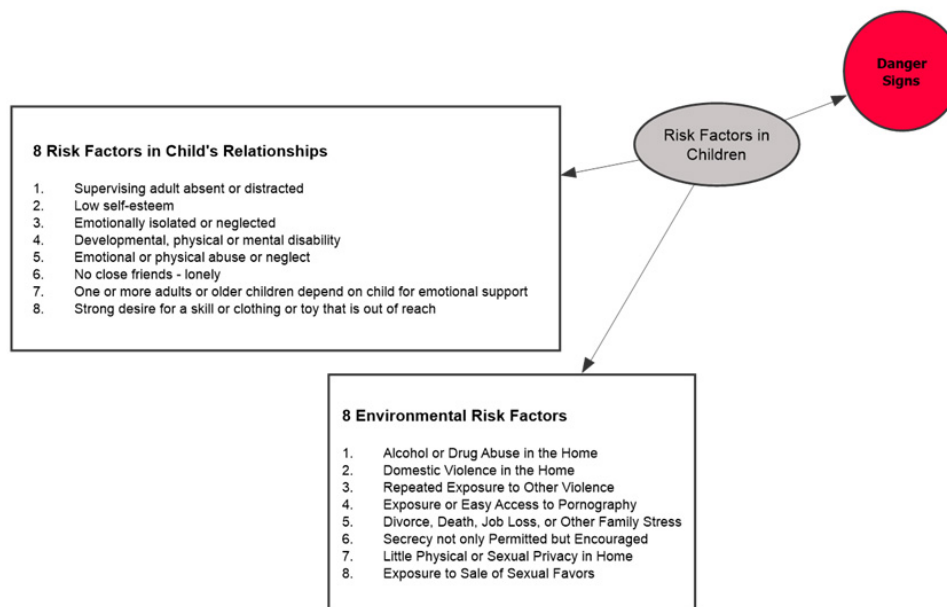


Figure 6. Risk Factors in Children — relational and environmental vulnerabilities.

Adults should also be wary of anyone who pays special attention to children who are at risk or who show signs of abuse. These children are magnets for predators, so we all need

to notice who gives them special attention — adult or another child — and give those people extra scrutiny.

Whenever adults and children are together, and whenever you watch children play with one another, be aware of the interactions. Behavior in those moments can reveal whether there is a problem. Rather than losing yourself in your own activity, keep situational awareness and stay alert. The chances to intervene are usually fleeting. Children also pose a substantial risk to other children: juveniles account for roughly 35 percent of known sex offenders against minors in **Department of Justice** reporting (**Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Chaffin, OJJDP, 2009**) — and most psychopathic child molesters began the pattern in adolescence (**Abel, Osborn, & Twigg, in *The Juvenile Sex Offender*, 1993; Abel & Harlow, 2001, ch. 2).**

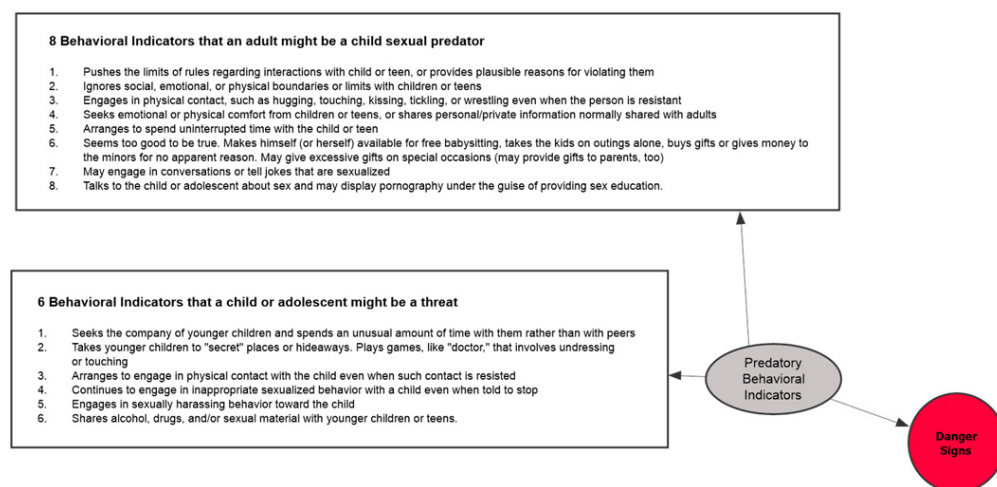


Figure 7. Behavioral Indicators — 8 adult and 6 peer signals.

Talking to a person about inappropriate actions will not necessarily stop him. It will more likely drive him to become more covert. When you see suspicious interactions, make a concerted effort to look for other red flags in other areas — predatory character issues in particular — and review the other lists for grooming behaviors, risk factors in the children, and the rest.

One more list is worth keeping in mind. **Dr. Carla van Dam** observed that child molesters tend to come off as “*too much*” of everything (**van Dam, *Identifying Child Molesters*, 2001; *The Socially Skilled Child Molester*, 2006).**

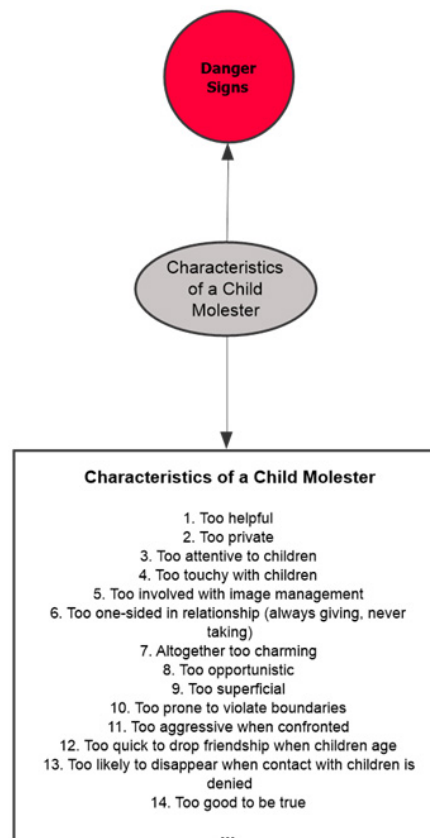


Figure 8. Characteristics of a Child Molester — Dr. Carla van Dam.

The last item on **van Dam's** list — “*too good to be true*” — is a common mark of the predator. He works to make himself indispensable to the organization, to the parents of his targets, and to the child he is grooming.

Predators often seek to be deeply loved and appreciated by their marks. Adults who were sexually abused as children frequently express conflicting emotions about the predator.

On the one hand, they loved him. Most of the relationship, they recall, was positive. But the sexual abuse is often remembered as troubling. Sometimes the whole relationship is remembered fondly, and the confusion and pain enter only when the relationship ends and the child is abandoned by the predator. The relationship was wonderful and it was terrible.

To a child, this is profoundly confusing, and it often remains so when the child becomes an adult.

Children cannot protect themselves from these predators. You must be their protector, and you can be so only if you stay vigilant.

Bringing It Together

The elements we have discussed — character qualities, behavioral indicators, risk factors — combine into a comprehensive screening tool that anyone can use and every adult should use to protect our children.

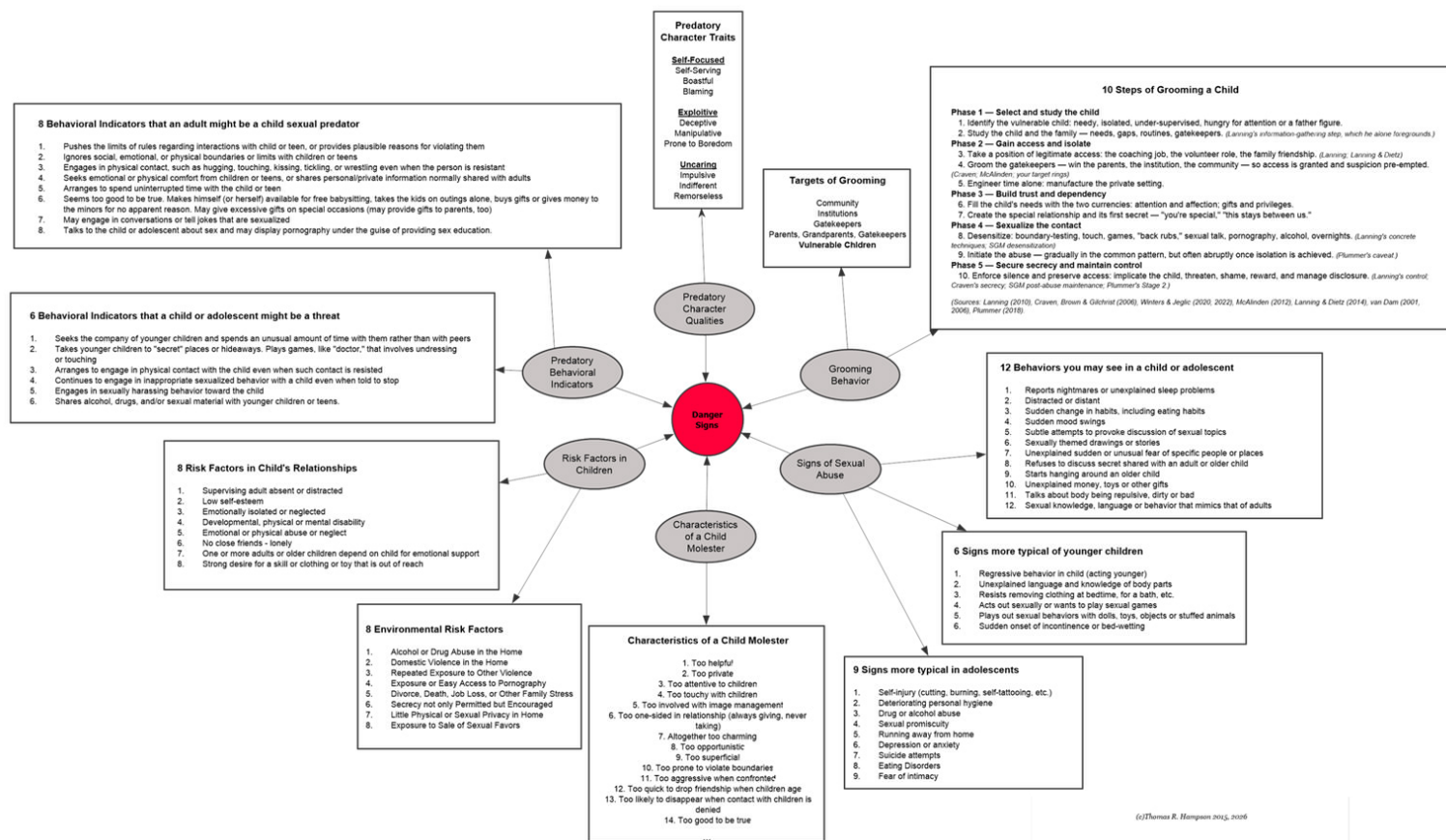


Figure 9. The Screening Mind-Map — all six lenses converging on Danger Signs.

There are many elements here, many red flags to watch for. But it is the character of the person that matters most. We need to take the time and make the effort to get to know the people who engage with our children, whether they are adults or other children.

Do that, and you can readily tell whether a person can be trusted. Do not be fooled by likability. Protecting children requires the discipline to examine these qualities, characteristics, and behaviors. No one can do this for you, and you cannot hand the responsibility to someone else. Unless all of us are watching for these indicators, some of us will miss the danger signs.

Many of us have a natural tendency to give people the benefit of the doubt, especially people we like. We worry about finding fault, about judging someone unfavorably. We are all sinners, so who am I to look for another's flaws?

Simon names five specific gatekeeper vulnerabilities that predators exploit in the very people who are supposed to screen them: naive over-optimism about human nature; over-conscientiousness, the willingness to accept an excuse rather than confront; low confidence in one's own judgment; over-intellectualization, the tendency to explain behavior rather than name it; and emotional dependency on being liked or approved (*In Sheep's Clothing*, 1996, ch. 10). Every screening team should audit itself for these five. The most dangerous position on a screening committee is held by the well-meaning person who believes he is above being fooled.

In virtually every case I have investigated or read about in which a predator was finally caught, one or more people came forward to say they had sensed something wrong — but they could not explain what or whom to tell. This framework helps you name what is causing that gut feeling. **Shakeshaft's** numbers say the same thing. In 70 percent of the cases in which a school employee was convicted of abusing a student, red flags had been seen and reported to an adult beforehand and nothing was done; in nearly 75 percent, others had seen them; supervision was increased in 2 percent (**Shakeshaft**, 2024, Table 7.1, p. 113).

Alongside your own evaluation, every organization needs a team to whom concerns can be reported — the organization's threat-assessment team, or a group set up specifically for child protection. People must feel safe to report even a vague suspicion. These are indicators, not hard evidence. Acting on them may mean gathering more information, interviewing the person, monitoring more closely, or taking another step. It often takes a group of knowledgeable people to weigh the indicators together and work out exactly what they are seeing.

These indicators must not be ignored.

Here is what to do with all of this. Adopt the character-first standard as your organization's screening policy, in writing, and make character — not the mere absence of a record — the center of every hiring and volunteer decision. Train every adult in your organization, not just the screening committee, to recognize the character qualities, grooming steps, and behavioral indicators laid out here; a predator counts on the untrained bystander.

Create a threat assessment or child protection team that receives reports, protects the people who make them, and weighs the indicators together. Treat screening as an ongoing practice rather than a one-time event, and re-evaluate as you get to know people over time. Make material misrepresentation on an application an automatic disqualifier, and treat access to children as a privilege the applicant must earn, never a right.

A word to every kind of organization that takes children into its care, because the duty here does not depend on what kind you are. A public school bound by civil-service rules and due process, a private academy hiring at will, a church staffing its youth ministry, a travel team, a scout troop — each of you assumes the same responsibility the moment a child is placed in your care, and that responsibility does not rise or fall with how much legal room you have to act on it. The latitude differs; the duty does not.

Public schools work within constitutional process and collective-bargaining rules, and for them these indicators are grounds to look harder and to act through the channels the law provides, never a shortcut around them.

Private and religious organizations have far wider latitude: they may hire, decline, and remove on frankly moral grounds no public school can invoke, and they can put this framework into practice directly and at once. That freedom is not a luxury. It is an obligation. The organization that can screen for character and chooses not to has failed its children more plainly than the one whose hands are partly tied. Every organization that serves children could do this. Every one of them should.

Do these things and the improvement is not marginal — it is dramatic. What our children need is not one more child-protection program layered onto the last. It is a child-protection culture, carried by every adult in the organization. That culture is what will secure the safety of our future generations, and building it begins the day you decide that character comes first.

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Short-form list; full academic citations are available in the companion Article Citation Architecture.

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