

## Sandusky's lawyer resorts to victim-blaming tactics

*By Delilah Rumburg, CEO of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)*

With Jerry Sandusky's criminal trial approaching, his attorney, Joe Amendola, is conducting a "fishing expedition" by issuing subpoenas to find documentation about victims' backgrounds, such as behavioral issues, mental health problems, arrest records and drug or alcohol use. The information contained in these records is protected by state and federal privacy rights. It is not relevant to the case but serves to intimidate current and future victims from coming forward.

Amendola's questioning of victim credibility directs the attention of the press and public to the boys' personal histories rather than focusing on Sandusky's alleged abuse. This victim-blaming tactic relies on the public to focus on victim behaviors and distracts from the actions of the offender.

Amendola is wagering that the public's understanding of the horrible nature of child sexual abuse does not extend to victims who have a complex personal history or any signs of an imperfect past.

Misconceptions about abuse, trauma and victimization are often used in defense of offenders, and in this case, the goal is to get Sandusky acquitted on these charges.

Judging and labeling of victims is always problematic, but it is important to take this opportunity to better understand why offenders often target victims with vulnerabilities to exploit.

Offenders may purposefully select victims with characteristics the public may be willing to judge harshly. While factors like family structures and difficulties in school never excuse an act of abuse, offenders target those who could be viewed with skepticism when they report abuse or easily be labeled because of "issues."

Research shows that sexual victimization and other traumatic life experiences are highly correlated with negative life outcomes. The unfortunate nature of sexual trauma is that it affects all areas of an individual's life. While this struggle can be used to misinform, understanding this reality can also better equip us to protect children and prevent sexual violence.

The reality is, one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old, and in nearly 93 percent of cases the perpetrator is known by the victim. Frequently the perpetrator is also known and trusted by the victim's family and community; in fact, the perpetrator can be a member of the family.

Child sexual abuse is not “horse play,” misunderstanding or miscommunication. It is abuse, secrecy and harm. It is deliberate penetration of the vagina, mouth or anus of a child. It is touching the sexual parts of a child, and showing the genitals of an adult to a child. It is not a one-time, test-it-out occurrence, but a pattern of behavior that is repeated over and over and over again until there is an intervention.

It’s time we stop it.

It is important to support fair and just trials. The facts in sexual assault cases should be presented and the court should be given all the tools needed to make an informed decision. It is one of the reasons the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) advocates for expert witness testimony to be permitted in sexual abuse cases in Pennsylvania.

It is time for the all of us to become more educated so we can stop excusing offender behaviors and acquitting criminals because of misplaced blame.

It’s time we prevent it.

To protect communities and children from sexual abuse, we must learn the facts. This includes learning to recognize signs of “grooming,” the process used by sex offenders to gain trust and access to the people they want to abuse. In addition, it is important to have open communication and recognize “red flags.”

PCAR works to educate the public on sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, warning signs, and what to do if child sexual abuse is suspected. For more information, visit [www.pcar.org](http://www.pcar.org) or [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org).