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July 27, 2007

Dear Subscribers:

Here's the lineup for this last full week of July:

- [Juvenile sex offenders & Net registries](#)
- [Web News Briefs: Web video hot; Personal, pro lives online; Worldwide socializing; Recommended kid communities; People-tracking phones; MP3 Barbie; Oxford fines Facebook users; Rating teachers ok in Germany....](#)
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Juvenile sex offenders & Net registries

As if to punctuate an important New York Times Magazine article on juvenile sex offenders this Sunday, [CNN reported](#) that two 7th-graders in Oregon were charged with felony sex abuse after running down a school hall after lunch, swatting "three to four" girls in the rear end (the mother of one of the boys said in an interview that one of the girls had done the same thing to her son earlier but hadn't been charged). A student hall monitor took them to the principal's office, and they were later taken from school by the police in handcuffs. They were held in juvenile detention for five days, according to the CNN report, and they face up to 10 years' detention. Under Megan's Law, if they're convicted as sex offenders, they could be placed in a public sex-offender registry for life.

A decade or so ago, probably the harshest punishment immature, impulsive behavior like this would've received would be school suspension, maybe expulsion. But times have changed. Our children are living in a time when such behavior can lead not only to arrest and adjudication but also public notification via online sex-offender registries. And some parents - thinking minor's records are sealed, kids need to learn lessons - are unwittingly exposing their children to this new reality. The New York Times looks at all aspects of this in ["How Can You Distinguish a Budding Pedophile From a Kid With Real Boundary Problems?"](#)

Here's the current environment for kids deemed sex offenders:

- "Juveniles are subject to the same [sex offender] registration requirements as adults without the benefit of a jury trial or similar protections."
- "At least 25 states apply the sex offender community notification law to juveniles," which means "their photos, names and addresses and in some cases birth dates and maps to their homes" are in public Web sites for any school peer to find and ostracize them with (kids love to "stalk" each other - do casual background checks on each other - in social sites; see [this](#)).
- "States that have excluded adolescents from community-notification laws may no longer be able to do so without losing federal money" - within about two years from now. So the other 25 states may follow suit.
- Under the 2006 Adam Walsh Act, a teenager adjudicated for a sexual offense "will remain on the national [sex offender] registry for life. He will have to register with authorities every three months. And if he fails to do so -- not an unlikely prospect for some teenagers, especially those without involved parents -- he may be imprisoned for more than one year."

All this even though for more than 100 years minors' records have been sealed from public view by juvenile courts. That was long before we even knew that adolescent brains aren't fully developed until people are in their mid-20s. "The last part of the brain to develop is the frontal lobe, which is responsible for impulse control, moral reasoning and regulating emotions - the things that adolescents lack when they decide, if they make a conscious decision, to molest a younger kid," the Times reports, citing the National Institute of Mental Health .

Ninety percent or more of young people who have been through the courts for sex offenses won't become adult rapists or pedophiles, according to an expert the Times interviewed. The recidivism rate for juvenile sex offenders is "about 10%," compared to 25-50% for adult offenders (50% or higher is the rate for "the most serious offenders"). Not all, but many of these young people are "naïve experimenters," a term therapists use for "overly impulsive or immature adolescents who are unable to approach girls or boys their own age; instead they engage in inappropriate sexual acts with young children," sometimes because they have been abused themselves, the Times reports. And then some of these - "how many is unclear" - are in the legal system "for what some therapists would say is 'playing doctor' or normative 'sexual experimentation'," inappropriate behavior that

has always been a part of teenage reality but is getting reported and adjudicated a lot more now.

A huge problem is the fact that we - society - know almost nothing about the impact on minors of placing them on public registries on the Web, at the same time that research is beginning to show that they are different from adult offenders in several ways. One thing we do know: Public humiliation tends to marginalize people, particularly adolescents, which in turn tends to harm more than help kids and society. Check out the article to see how they're different, to see how and why minors need different kinds of treatment from what adult offenders receive, and to read the stories of individual teenage boys and girls who have been adjudicated for sexual offenses.

Related news

- **Arizona's new sex-offender law.** Starting in September, registered sex offenders in Arizona will have to disclose their social-networking and instant-messaging screennames as well as their email addresses because of a new law in that state, the [Arizona Republic reports](#). "Anyone can go to the state government site and search an individual or screen name against its database" of sex offenders.

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