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Jewish Family Service leadership: Perry Ohren, Ellen Yashinsky Chute and Shari-Beth Goldman.

Ronelle Grier

## Coping With Concerns

While Kuppe is denied bond, JFS advises JCC camp parents.

**Ronelle Grier**

Contributing Writer

Thinking about their child falling victim to a sexual predator is one of the worst nightmares for parents, and the recent arrest of former Jewish Community Center day camp counselor Matthew Kuppe for posting nude locker-room photos of JCC campers on a foreign website turned the nightmare into a terrifying reality.

To provide support and guidance for parents concerned about how to discuss the situation with their children, a family forum was held Aug. 24 at Jewish Family Service (JFS) in West Bloomfield.



**Matthew Kuppe**

About 20 parents gathered to hear information and have their questions answered by a panel of JFS staff members, including CEO Perry Ohren, Chief Program Officer Shari-Beth Goldman and Ellen Yashinsky Chute, senior director of behavioral health services.

"We're here to help parents arm themselves with words," Chute said. "When bad things happen, the test of a community is how do we respond and help each other to move forward."

While emails from the JCC indicated that three campers had been identified from photos posted by Kuppe under the username "JCCLOCKERROOM," several parents at the forum expressed fear their children had also been abused and/or photographed by Kuppe.

This was Kuppe's second summer at JCC Center Day Camps; last year he spent a session working first with teens

and then spending second session with campers with special needs, a cause for concern among several parents at the forum. This summer, he was assistant unit head for Trekkers, a program for middle school children.

JFS staff advised parents of campers unable to communicate effectively, such as very young children or those with special needs, to watch for changes in their children and be aware of new behaviors or acting out, sexually or otherwise.

"You are the expert on your child," said Goldman, who told parents of children with special needs to insist their children are never left alone with an adult in a camp or school setting.

Chute also cautioned parents against becoming overly anxious or vigilant, or trying too hard to determine if anything happened.

"The goal is to create a place of safety for your child," she said. "The goal is not to know. We may never know ... In the overall, does he [the child] seem OK? We don't want to become obsessive parents who focus on every bad thing."

Ohren said parents will be updated as additional support services are made available, such as parent support groups or informational sessions geared for parents of children with special needs.

Kuppe, 21, is Jewish and became a bar mitzvah at Congregation B'nai Moshe in West Bloomfield. He was arrested in his West Bloomfield home on Aug. 12 as the result of an investigation by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

He was taken into custody and charged in U.S. District Court the following day for production, possession, receipt and distribution of child

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pornography. Kuppe would have been a senior this fall at Michigan State University.

According to court records, Assistant U.S. Attorney Sara Woodward said investigators believe some of the photos were taken by Kuppe during a camp overnight in early August. The government also offered evidence Kuppe had “familiarized and positioned himself with the young boys even though he had no duty to supervise them,” a situation that also concerned some parents at the JFS forum.



Dani Gillman

“They allowed him near the most vulnerable campers,” said Dani Gillman of West Bloomfield, the mother of a 10-year-old daughter with special needs.

Parents at the forum discussed that Kuppe was given a green staff shirt. The parents said the green shirt connotes more authority and allowed Kuppe to go anywhere in the camp without being questioned.

Chute said it is common for sexual predators to ingratiate themselves in order to earn trust and gain access to their victims.

#### JCC Response

The JCC said they were unable to comment because of the pending investigation; however, their spokesman Michael Layne issued a statement, which is excerpted here:

“The Board of Directors, leadership and staff of the Jewish Community Center cares deeply about the well-being of JCC Day Camp children and families. The health, safety and welfare of our children have been and remain our highest priority.

“We are heartsick that this incident occurred and are thoroughly evaluating our policies and procedures to ensure that it does not happen again.

“The JCC pledges to maintain proactive, open and honest communication with camper families and the greater community. At the appropriate time, we will share information.

“We are here for the campers and their parents or guardians as well as our staff.”

#### Positive Response

Some parents expressed confidence in the JCC, endorsing the way the organization handled the crisis and expressing confidence about their children's safety and well-being.

“I still feel very comfortable sending my kids to the JCC. I'm very confident in their leadership,” said Melissa Ser, mother of two JCC campers and a former director of Ramah Jerusalem Day



Melissa Ser

Camp. “We did the same kind of background checks [at Ramah], and I trust the JCC is doing the best they can with the information they have.”

Ser added that camp administrators are often not free to provide information to parents or the general community when a criminal investigation is pending.

“I don't fault the camp; they did their due diligence during the hiring process,” said Nancie Rakotz Becker, parent of a 6-year-old camper. “I feel my child is safe; she's there now [for mini-camp]. I love their programming.”

#### Bond Denied

At an Aug. 18 bond hearing, Kuppe's attorney Walter Piszczatowski asked that his client be released on bond into the custody of his parents, who work from home and agreed to monitor him around the clock. Piszczatowski argued Kuppe was an A+ student from a close-knit family who would not flee the area or pose a danger to the community.

Federal Magistrate Judge Elizabeth A. Stafford denied bond and ordered Kuppe's detention continue on the grounds he had engaged in “covert and exploitative conduct” and that similar offenders had found ways to continue their criminal behavior despite stringent supervision and restrictions. The detention order also cited that Kuppe lived within 400 feet of a school as another reason for denying his release on bond.

According to Lt. Curt Lawson of the West Bloomfield Police Department, the investigation is ongoing, including continuing interviews with JCC campers by trained professionals at CARE House, an Oakland County facility that specializes in helping victims of child abuse, including sexual abuse.

If evidence of sexual abuse is found, Kuppe could be charged and prosecuted by Oakland County in addition to the federal child pornography charges he now faces.

At press time, a preliminary examination was scheduled in U.S. District Court for Thursday, Aug. 27, at 10 a.m. □

Those with information or questions may call the West Bloomfield Police Department at (248) 975-9200 or the 24/7 U.S. Attorney's Office hotline at (888) 702-0553, or email [usamie.victimservices@usdoj.gov](mailto:usamie.victimservices@usdoj.gov).

Counseling or other support services are available through Jewish Family Service Resource Center at (248) 592-2666.

See related story, page 22.

# Imagining The Unimaginable

Professional tips to help keep children safe from abuse.

**Ellen Yashinsky Chute**

Special to the Jewish News

**R**ecent local incidents have put the issue of child sexual abuse in the spotlight. As a community, we are shocked and saddened, and we are curious about how we can best protect and support our children.

As parents, grandparents and friends, we can do many things to both minimize the likelihood of child sexual abuse and

to reduce the negative effects of child sexual abuse if it has occurred. There are three key areas of influence:

- Reducing opportunity,
- Improving child self-protection,
- Responding to possible abusive situations.



**Ellen Yashinsky Chute**

## Reducing Opportunity

In terms of reducing opportunity, the Darkness to Light foundation, a child protection organization, offers the following suggestions:

- Understand that abusers often become friendly with potential victims and their families, enjoying family activities, earning trust and gaining time alone with children.
- Think carefully about the safety of situations in which older youth have access to younger children. Make sure that multiple adults are present who can supervise.
- Monitor children's Internet use. Offenders use the Internet to lure children into physical contact.

- Drop in unexpectedly when the child is alone with an adult or another youth, even if it a trusted family member.

- Make sure outings are observable — if not by you, then by others.
- Ask adults about the specifics of planned activities before the child leaves your care. Notice their ability to be specific.
- Talk with the child following the activity. Notice the child's mood and whether he or she can tell you with confidence how the time was spent.

- Find a way to tell adults who care for children that you and the child are educated about child sexual abuse. Be that direct.

## Improving Self-Protection

These suggestions may challenge our usual ways of thinking and doing things. We may wonder how we protect our children when it seems unavoidable that they will be in one-on-one situations with older youth or adults.

In these instances, we must empower our children by teaching them about self-protection. This is done through open, candid and casual conversations: Teach children it is never OK for adults to act in a sexual way with them, and use examples.

- Teach them what parts of their bodies others should not touch.
- Be sure to mention that the abuser might be an adult friend, family member or older youth.
- Teach children not to give out personal information while using the Internet, including email addresses, home addresses and phone numbers.
- Start early and talk often. Use everyday opportunities to talk about sexual abuse.
- Be proactive. If a child seems uncomfortable or resistant to being with a particular adult, ask why. (Darkness to Light)

This means we have ongoing conversations with our children about the sanctity of their bodies; that others are not allowed to touch or see the private places on their bodies without permission from their parents. Many parents talk about private places as anything that is covered by a bathing suit. These empowering conversations teach children they are important and they are entitled to say “no” to anyone, including people they may know and trust, or to whom they may be related.

## Know How To Respond

Sometimes sexual abuse happens despite our best efforts. In these instances, we must know how to respond in the most helpful way. Research has shown that the most dramatic factor in the reduction of negative effects from child sexual abuse is the response from people in the child's environment.

First, we must know the possible signs of sexual abuse. According to Darkness to Light, physical signs of sexual abuse are not common, although redness, rashes/swelling in the genital area, urinary tract infections or other such symptoms should be carefully

investigated. Also, physical issues associated with anxiety, such as chronic stomachaches or headaches, may occur. Emotional or behavioral signals are more common. These can run from “too perfect” behavior to withdrawal and depression, to unexplained anger and rebellion. Sexual behavior and language that are not age-appropriate can be a red flag. We must also be aware that in some children there are no signs whatsoever.

Next, our response to the child is critical. Most children who have been sexually abused are very confused by the experience and don't identify what happened as sexual abuse. Our goal is to create a safe environment for our children to speak to us. This does not mean we are seeking a disclosure of the abuse. Trying to get our children to talk about their experience before they are emotionally ready to do so may inadvertently revictimize them. Instead, focus on the observable behaviors, like, “I notice that you seem sad lately” or to an older child or teen, “It seems like you are spending a lot of time in your room lately.”

We have to calm our own emotions and know that if we are open and accepting, our children will tell us what they need to. Very often, children never disclose the abuse and are helped back to feeling more like themselves through patient, supportive parenting that recreates a sense of safety in the world for them.

It is important to understand why a child might not disclose. Some children have been shamed or blamed by the abuser, and the child may feel that the abuse is their fault. Abusers often trick the child into thinking that the abuse is a game, or that it is a loving thing. Some abusers threaten the child or their family members if the child does not keep the secret. Children may be afraid that their parents may be angry at them or that their disclosure will disrupt the family. Some children love their abusers because the person has been a beloved person in their life.

Children who disclose sexual abuse often tell a trusted adult other than a parent. For this reason, training for people who work with children is especially important. At times, children will pretend that it happened to a friend or tell a small portion of what happened. Children will often shut down

## Getting Help

If you have questions or would like to talk about your specific situation, call Jewish Family Service at (248) 592-2666.

### Additional resources:

- Children's Protective Services, (855) 444-3911
- Crimes Against Children Research Center, [unh.edu/ccrc/](http://unh.edu/ccrc/)
- Darkness to Light, [d2l.org](http://d2l.org)
- Magen Yeladim International, [mychildsafetyinstitute.org](http://mychildsafetyinstitute.org)
- U.S. Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website, [nsopw.gov/en-US/Education/RecognizingSexualAbuse#child](http://nsopw.gov/en-US/Education/RecognizingSexualAbuse#child)

if the response is overly emotional, or feels negative or critical.

If you suspect sexual abuse but your child does not disclose, watch for the observable signs mentioned above. If your child seems anxious, depressed or is acting out, you may want to seek professional help.

Psychotherapists do not seek disclosure, but rather try to create a safe space for the child or teen to act out or talk out their feelings. If a child does disclose abuse, it must be reported to the local police or to Children's Protective Services, who will engage law enforcement. At times, children do disclose to a mental health professional, a trusted teacher or rabbi. All these professionals are mandated reporters who must notify Children's Protective Services of the disclosure.

Many children who are victims of childhood sexual abuse are resilient and are able to move on with normal development, without lasting emotional effects. In any case, it is important that we always maintain vigilance when it comes to protecting our children. □

*Ellen Yashinsky Chute is senior director of Behavioral Health Services at Jewish Family Service of Metropolitan Detroit.*