Preface

When we proposed this book idea to the publisher, IGI, Inc., our first line was simple, straightforward, and honest – “We wish this book wasn’t necessary.” The topic of sexual misconduct in school education and human service agencies is difficult to read and to write about. That difficulty pales in comparison with the experiences of those whose lives have been torn apart, those who trusted and had that trust betrayed.

Understanding and preventing sexual misconduct is extremely complicated. In many ways, solutions are unclear because the nature of the problem itself is unclear. Further, in schools and human service agencies, there is not often a solid line of demarcation where normal relationships cross into abusive relationships. Professional to student/client relationships are filled with gray areas and “slippery slopes.” Licensed professionals such as psychologists, counselors, and social workers have known this for decades and have used multiple methods to warn providers, prevent crossing boundaries by establishing strict ethical standards, and removing offending professionals from their ranks. In schools, however, where time spent with students is greater and in less formal settings, knowing when one has crossed a boundary is more problematic. Should a teacher offer a ride home to the student who has missed the bus? Should a college professor be friends on Facebook with his/her students? When should colleagues report suspicions of boundary violations?

Complicating the picture is the fact that there is no typical “look” of sexual predators. In fact, in education and human services they are people who look exactly like every other professional. Predators can be of any age, male or female, gay or straight. What causes the inclination towards becoming a sexual predator is the basis of much research. How to prevent and reduce the prevalence of sexual misconduct is another area of intensive investigation, but as the authors of the chapters continuously point out, there is much research yet to be completed.

While the three editors are special education professionals, we sought from the beginning to include perspectives not only from education, but also from other human service professions. It was and continues to be our hope that professionals in differing but related fields can learn from each other to stem the growing incidence of sexual misconduct. We are pleased that the book includes authors from K-12 education, higher education, school and mental health counseling, social work, and legal professionals. Many authors echo similar themes, yet their individual perspectives will allow the reader to see the problem through several different lenses.

Not surprisingly, the impact of social media on the topic is not lost in the chapters. Authors cite both the promise and the challenges of dealing with social media. Social media may be used by those who wish to “groom” others to encourage them to be open to sexual encounters by beginning with seemingly innocent messages that escalate into dangerous face-to-face meetings. The use of social media by
children and teens combined with their naiveté and gullibility can make them particularly vulnerable to online predators. Add to this the naturally trusting nature of individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities and the vulnerability increases.

This book is only a beginning. Much discourse and research is needed. We are honored to have been asked by IGI Publishing to join this important conversation. We hope that the chapters in this book will inform many. We thank the authors who have contributed and trust that their hard work and expertise will result in increased awareness of the topic and a further commitment to protect the individuals whose lives are entrusted to us.

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