



Five Important Lessons from HBO's *Leaving Neverland*

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The 2019 HBO documentary on sex abuse by megastar, Michael Jackson, *Leaving Neverland*, is a valuable tool for educating parents, the public, and lawmakers on the ways in which child molesters operate. In the documentary, Wade Robson and James Safechuck describe their child sexual abuse in searing detail that bolsters their claims. They had previously supported Jackson, but that is typical of survivors, who need until the average age of 52 to disclose the abuse.

1. Child sex abusers "groom" their child victims.

Child sex abusers are patient and cunning, and often the "nice guys" you want your kids to spend time with. In the film, Wade and James say that Michael Jackson offered classic gifts that are used to groom child victims: cash, candy, jewelry, special clothing (his Thriller jacket), trips, adopting endearing nicknames like "my son," telling the children he "loves" them and their families, and other special treatment. They were told that the sex abuse was how they showed "love" to each other. Jackson also reportedly used showers, alcohol, and pornography to lower the boys' defenses. He also told the boys and the families that God meant for them to be together. Jackson even went so far as to hold a mock wedding ceremony with a ring to "seal" their love.

2. They groom the families of the victims to get access to the children.

The mothers say that Jackson spoke to them for hours at a time, curried favor with other family members, and befriended the families. He also paid for everyone's travel expenses to ensure the boys came to him. Jackson played the successful but "lonely man" for the mothers, obtaining their solicitude and sympathy.

3. They seek to separate their victims from their support systems.

According to Wade and James, Jackson tried to drive a wedge between them and their families by telling them that parents are bad and that in particular women and mothers are evil. He told them not to trust women, meaning their mothers. They said he even cut off cell phone access when boys were alone with him, and he told the boys not to tell anyone, because no one else would understand.

4. They work very hard to get and keep children alone.

Jackson is said to have placed one mother in a hotel suite that was far from the one where he had her son, or in the guest suite that was in a different building from the main building at Neverland. Jackson had a system that permitted him to take a child through several doors into a closet; they would hear a series of warning bells if anyone approached. He kept boys with him at Neverland for as long as their parents would permit. He even begged one family to leave their son alone with him for a year.

5. They play on the fact that children do not understand what sex abuse is.

His victims have struggled most of their lives to put the abuse into context. One of the survivors said that "standard instincts and judgment went out the window" when with Jackson. When with Jackson, for example, when Jackson had his hands in his pants it didn't seem that strange. It is not uncommon for children to be confused by what is happening to them, especially when they revere or love the perpetrator.



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