

## Men's Bad Thoughts About Children

The following is adapted from 'The Imp of the Mind: Exploring the Silent Epidemic of Obsessive Bad Thoughts' by Lee Baer

I have seen several men, both with children and without, who are tormented by such thoughts. Several married men have told me that, although they have never admitted it to their wife, they have continued to delay having children because of their fears of harming a newborn.

Gary, a deeply religious man in his thirties, came to see me for help with tormenting obsessions about sexually abusing his young daughter or her friends. He described a recent episode of his bad thoughts this way:

I was driving my daughter Jane and her best friend, Katie, home, and the two seven-year-old girls were singing and joking and having a good time—it was great. But then the awful thoughts came into my head once again: "How can you be sure you don't really want to rape Katie?" The thought disgusted me. I told myself, "I don't want to molest her!" But my thoughts asked, "How can you be absolutely certain?" and "For that matter, how can you be sure you haven't already done it!" This really freaked me out.

I was only vaguely aware of the girls talking to me, asking why I was driving so slowly, but I was too upset to answer them. As I tried to remember not having raped Katie the graphic image formed in my mind of having sexually molested her! I tried to force the image from my mind, but it continued, and I began to feel sick to my stomach. Then, the image turned into the one that I dread most in the world—molesting my own daughter! Why me, who is revolted by mention of any kind of sexual molestation? Surely, I must be destined for hell.

Finally, the thoughts passed, but I knew I would still be shaky for several days, keeping my distance from my little girl, until the aftershock of having these horrible thoughts slowly subsided. What if my wife ever found out?

Gary, like most men with such thoughts, suffered in silence with them for years before seeking help. When he spoke to me, he had still not told his wife the details of his obsessions, for fear that she would divorce him and prevent him from ever seeing his daughter again. It is impossible to estimate how many men suffer from obsessions of physically or sexually harming young children, since men are less likely to seek treatment for any psychological problem than are women. In many of the cases I have seen, the men came into treatment for alcohol or drug addictions they had developed in unsuccessful attempts to self-medicate their obsessions. Only much later, when they learn that their violent or sexual obsessions toward children are not uncommon or criminal, will they sometimes admit to these thoughts. In recent groups, I have seen a couple of men who abused alcohol to try to deaden their obsessions. One was a teacher who worried that he would, or that he already had, unknowingly sexually abused his male students; another

worried that he would stab young children he was left alone with. (In a rare event, when this man told his wife about his obsessions, she was unable to accept them as obsessions and asked for a divorce, telling him that she could never trust him to be around any children they might have. Happily, nearly all spouses are a lot more understanding of their partners' irrational obsessions.)

We turn to the fundamental question of how you can be certain that the bad thoughts you are suffering from are simply irrational fears caused by the Imp of the Perverse. After all, anyone who watches the evening news or reads a daily newspaper knows that some people (mercifully very few) do kill or sexually attack children. If no one ever did these things, then there would be no reason to worry about having bad thoughts. As Sigmund Freud pointed out, there would be no need for "Thou shalt not . . ." taboos or Commandments if mankind did not occasionally act on its primal instincts. Thankfully, as you will see, the two facts that:

(1) you are upset by your bad thoughts, and

(2) that you have never acted on them, are sure signs that you will never act on them.