

**Testimony Before the Congressional  
Subcommittee on Children and Families  
Washington, DC**

**Sheldon Kennedy  
Co-Founder, Respect Group Inc.  
December 13, 2011**

Good morning Chairwoman Mikulski, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me as a witness today.

For many Canadians, hockey is everything. It is our passion, our culture and our national pride. Like most boys growing up on the Prairies, I dreamed of playing in the National Hockey League and luckily for me, that dream came true. I played for the Detroit Red Wings, the Boston Bruins and the Calgary Flames.

But it's not my dream that I'm best known for – it's my nightmare. As a junior hockey player, I suffered years of sexual abuse and harassment at the hands of my coach, Graham James.

Despite the nature of the abuse, the hurt I experienced and the fact I knew what was being done to me was wrong, it took me over 10 years to come forward to the authorities. Why didn't I say anything?

This is the question that I asked myself again, and again, and again. It's the question I know everyone else was asking. And it's the question that plagues the millions of sexual abuse victims around the world.

Even though I wrote a whole book on the subject, the answer is quite simple – Because I didn't think anyone would believe me.

In my case, my abuser was *International Hockey Man of the Year!* In Canada, that gave him almost God-like status? Sound familiar?

The man who preyed on me took advantage of his position as a coach to look for children who were especially vulnerable (single parent households, families with drinking problems, boys who needed a father figure, etc).

These kids - and often their parents too - looked up to him as a hero. This was someone who could make their dreams come true and he used that trust to hurt them.

This imbalance of power and authority creates a deeper problem and it's the one that I think this subcommittee has to deal with head-on if you truly want to prevent child abuse.

In every case of child abuse – certainly in my own – there are people who had a “gut feeling” that something was wrong but didn't do anything about it.

Their attitude was “I don't want to get involved”, “It's not my problem”, “He couldn't possibly be doing that” or “the authorities will take care of it”.

And that's what pedophiles and predators are counting on. They are counting on the public's ignorance or – worse yet – their indifference. That's what keeps child abusers in business. And that, Senators, is what you have to address.

From my experience, a child who is being abused has to tell – on average – seven people before their story is taken seriously. Seven! That is completely unacceptable.

When my story became public in 1997, there were people who refused to believe it. Many were angry that I had exposed an ugly side of their beloved sport.

Fortunately, Hockey Canada responded seriously to my situation and made abuse prevention education mandatory for their 70,000 coaches. And this is the positive message that I want to leave you with this morning.

Seven years ago, I co-founded Respect Group Inc. in partnership with the Canadian Red Cross, internationally-recognized experts in the prevention of child abuse.

Together, we launched an on-line training program for sport leaders called Respect in Sport. It focuses on educating all adult youth leaders on abuse, bullying and harassment prevention including a sound understanding of your legal and moral responsibilities.

Our belief at Respect Group is that we may never fully eliminate child abuse, but by empowering the 99% of well-

intentioned adults working with our youth we can greatly reduce it.

I am proud to say that, through Respect in Sport, we have already certified over 150,000 youth leaders which represents a high percentage of all Canadian coaches.

Many sport and youth serving organizations have mandated the Respect in Sport program and the list continues to grow; Hockey Canada, Gymnastics Canada, the entire Province of Manitoba, School Boards and some early adopters here in the United States including USA Triathlon and USRowing. In addition, organizations like Hockey Canada and Gymnastics Canada have implemented our Respect in Sport program designed specifically for parents.

We are also seeing proactive initiatives by the Canadian Government to combat child maltreatment. Not just tougher legislation and minimum sentences for perpetrators but a federal approach to prevention education that spans the multiple Ministries that touch our most vulnerable, Canadian youth.

We have learned that social change takes time and has to occur at both the grassroots level and from the Government on down. I am pleased to say that is exactly what is happening in Canada and I hope it's what will happen here too.

Over the years, through my work at Respect Group, I've learned that:

- Educating the good people - the 99% of our population - is our best defence to prevent abuse;
- Training must be mandatory to ensure full compliance and reduce liability;
- The education has to be simple and consistent;
- All forms of abuse leave the same emotional scars so training has to be comprehensive;
- Education is best delivered on-line to ensure consistency, safety of the learner, convenience and the greatest reach; and finally,
- Training must be ongoing, it's not a one-time thing.

Too often, society's response to child abuse is to focus on punishing the criminal.

If the teacher, priest or coach is sent to jail for a long time, then we feel that we've done our jobs as citizens or as politicians. Punishing the bad guys makes us feel good, but it does not fully solve the problem.

Senators, you need to give all adults working with youth and all parents, the tools to recognize and respond to abuse when it first arises.

I am under no illusion that such an approach will fully eliminate child abuse, but I do know that mandatory education creates a platform within all organizations for that conversation to happen.

Empower the bystanders and you'll be taking an important first step in breaking the silence on child abuse!

Thank you and I would be happy to take your questions.