



Young, female & guilty of sexual abuse

All these women have broken the sacred teacher/pupil trust – and the law – by having sex with boys as young as 13. What's worse, this alarming trend is on the rise. **Catherine Gray** investigates

Classroom
cradle
snatchers
(clockwise
from bottom
left): Debra
Lafave, Jo
Gorman, Traci
Tapp, Carrie
McCandless,
Nicola
Prentice,
Pamela Rogers
Turner and
Julie Pritchett

As PE teacher Traci Tapp, 26, folded up the ping-pong tables in the school gym in New Jersey, she spotted 15-year-old star athlete, Jason Eickmeyer, doing laps. When he jogged over to help, she thanked him and asked his name. He told her. "So the rumours are true... I've heard you're cute," she replied with a grin. "You're not bad yourself," he stammered. After all, Tapp was the hottest teacher in school. This set in motion a chain of sinister events. Jason reported that it started with playful teasing and culminated in sex at her house.

Traci Tapp is not alone. "More cases have been reported in the past few years than ever before," reveals Professor Robert Shoop, who's worked on 60 such cases and wrote *Sexual Exploitation In Schools: How To Spot It And Stop It*. America watched with

bated breath as Tapp was charged with sexual misconduct involving three boys, including Jason. But she denied the sex and was only charged with one count of 'offensive touching', then fined \$225 (£160).

Other abuser teachers include Julie Pritchett, 34, who was accused of having sex with eight of her baseball team, aged 15 to 19, and convicted on two counts. Pamela Rogers Turner was 27 when she was convicted of the statutory rape of a 13-year-old pupil. Debra Lafave had sex with a 14-year-old student when she was 23. Carrie McCandless, 29, took a group of 17-year-old students camping, gave them a bottle of whisky and had sex with one boy in his sleeping bag.

These stories are just the tip of the iceberg. In March 2008 alone, there were three cases reported in Tampa, Florida – a city smaller than Cardiff. One ▶

◀ report estimates that as many as 4.5 million students out of the 50 million in US schools are victims of sexual misconduct at some point. Most abusers are male, but a tenth are female.

And it's not just happening Stateside. In the UK, sexual abuse by female teachers is, disturbingly, on the increase. In Nottinghamshire, 22-year-old Nicola Prentice was put on the sex offenders register for her two-year affair with a 16-year-old student. The boy said it "wrecked his life". Devon-born Jo Gorman, 28, was cautioned and sacked for 'intentional sexual touching'. Male journalists said they wanted to high-five the boy who she did it to because she was "cute". In Oxfordshire, Catherine Armstrong, 33, promised her student a "birthday bonk" when he was 16, but couldn't wait and had sex with him when he was 15. She wasn't jailed, despite admitting two counts of sexual activity with a child.

What kind of women do this? "The media showcases the young, blonde, attractive cases to shift papers," says Professor Shoop. "But I've worked with just as many middle-aged, overweight and unattractive molesters." So, what do they have in common? "They're narcissists," says Professor Charol Shakeshaft, an authority on sexual abuse. "They satisfy their immediate needs rather than think about society as a whole."

Professor Shoop adds that they're also often arrested in development, as if they're frozen in adolescence. He's seen thirtysomething women inking 'tattoos' of boys' names on their arms, doodling hearts on their diaries or talking in baby voices. "They may be able to hold down adult relationships, and many are married, but inside they're teens living out prom-queen fantasies they didn't fulfil the first time round."

There's always a trail to trip up these abusers. Jason Eickmeyer showed off the scratches on his back to his friends, and once the rumours spread, his mother uncovered reams of incriminating evidence. The most astonishing aspect of these cases is that often, as in the Tapp case, the school is apparently aware of what's going on. They keep quiet because they don't want bad press – or inspectors looking too closely at the school. When it is exposed, often



Jason Eickmeyer (right) has struggled to rebuild his life after being abused by Traci Tapp (above)



the guilty female teachers are allowed to slink off quietly.

So why is this disturbing trend rising? Social networking sites and text messaging could be playing a part. Websites like Facebook blur the teacher/student boundaries and text makes it easier to say things you'd never dare say face to face. It doesn't help that our TVs are full of US

“The media focuses on the young, blonde cases to sell papers, but I've worked with molesters who are middle-aged and unattractive”

shows starring hot, twentysomething actors (*High School Musical*, *90210*) posing as schoolboys.

And the legal system is shockingly indifferent. "In my experience, if a 40-year-old man has sex with a 14-year-old student, he gets 13 years' jail time," says Professor Shoop. "But women get a slap on the wrist and are out of jail in months, if they go at all." It helps if they're attractive – lawyer Bernie Grimm, who has worked on cases like

this, says good-looking women get lighter sentences.

In the UK, women tend to be vilified for sexual abuse, but across the Atlantic, they're often portrayed as sexy cougars. "Chat-show hosts like Leno and Letterman make a punchline out of these cases. Their attitude is, 'I wish that had happened to me when I was school!'" says Professor Shoop.

Of course, teen boys echo this locker-room encouragement. One of Jason's friends said, "We couldn't believe it! We were still virgins, and he was hitting it with teachers. It was pretty fucking sweet." But Jason was ostracised and laughed at. He has since admitted: "You're a guy, it's not supposed to bother you. But it did mess me up." Jason went from being tipped for an athletic scholarship, to smoking pot and self-harming, to working as a stripper and becoming mired in debt. And Oprah recently interviewed a 15-year-old male sex abuse victim, who echoed Jason's feelings of confusion, guilt and shame.

A male teacher having sex with an underage girl may present a starker power dynamic, but abuse is abuse. "Yes, the boys have huge sexual urges and probably welcome the sex itself," says Professor Shoop. "But the emotional fallout can be just as severe as that of a schoolgirl. Their trust of authority figures has been forever broken." ©

Teacher 'had sex with boy, 13, in her little girl's room'

Teacher had sex with eight pupils on baseball team