

Sandusky case puts emphasis on adults' duty to keep kids safe

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IOWA CITY — The guilty verdict in the Jerry Sandusky child sexual abuse case was certainly good news to local abuse prevention professionals.

And now they're hopeful that the case's conclusion will empower future abuse victims — and the adults around them — to speak up.

Jerry Sandusky, a former assistant football coach at Penn State University, was found guilty Friday of sexually assaulting 10 young boys over 15 years. He's likely to spend the rest of his life in prison.
(AP)



On Friday, Sandusky, a former assistant football coach at Penn State University, was found guilty of sexually assaulting 10 young boys over 15 years. Sandusky was convicted on 45 of the 48 counts he faced. His sentencing will come within the next 90 days, and many, including defense attorney Joe Amendola, have said he will end up spending life in prison, according to the Associated Press.

Some Iowa sexual abuse prevention experts expressed resounding relief this weekend that the jury and the public believed the victims in Sandusky's case.

Steve Scott, the executive director for Prevent Child Abuse Iowa, said he was glad that jurors believed the victims' statements even though the trial came 10 to 15 years after the abuse occurred.

But he said the verdict won't necessarily lead all other victims of sexual abuse to come forward.

"It could go either way," Scott said. "The victims were believed, and that could reinforce someone coming forward. On the other side of that, the experience of the victims shows how hard it is to be believed."

Scott said the victims had to face how difficult it is to testify and potentially have their names laid out in the public.

"It's not an easy path for anyone," he said.

And though the verdict doesn't "roll the clock back" on the events that led to the trial, Scott said it does "all that it can do for people."

"That kind of definitive verdict has to make a difference," he said.

Karla Miller, the executive director of the Rape Victim Advocacy Program in Iowa City, said she hopes the case will be a catalyst for the implementation of more policies to protect children in school, in camps and elsewhere.

But just policies aren't enough, she said.

"You can have the best policies and procedures, but if people don't follow them, you've got the same problem you had before, except it's worse," Miller said. "It leads to a second betrayal to victims. It leads to them feeling isolated, hopeless and still vulnerable. Perpetrators watch the results of these cases and become emboldened."

Miller said the verdict gives Sandusky's victims validation, and she thinks it will lead to more abuse reports elsewhere.

And Susan Tesdahl, the former director of the St. Luke's Child Protection Center, said she is optimistic about increased reporting of future incidents because victims now see their anonymity is protected.

But perhaps the most important take-away from the case, the experts said, is the significance of adults and mandatory reporters — those required to report suspected abuse or neglect to the state.

"We're the gatekeepers," Miller said. "If we're not there to protect these kids, then there's nobody."

Scott agreed.

"The Sandusky case shows us as clearly as can be — adults have to be primarily responsible," he said. "You had all kinds of behavior that should have raised red flags ... This is just a call for adults to recognize children aren't in a position to protect themselves. Some did what they could to avoid it, but it was the failure of adults around them that allowed this to keep going for an unfathomable amount of time."