

MEDIA DISCUSSION GUIDE



WCSAP
Washington Coalition of
Sexual Assault Programs

Examining the Film “Spotlight”

In this discussion guide, we examine the highly acclaimed film “Spotlight.” We hope this guide helps spark more conversations around our state about the issue of child sexual abuse (CSA).

The film “Spotlight” delves into the issue of CSA and due to recent awards it’s likely a large audience may choose to see this film. Now is a great opportunity to build on that momentum!

Included in this guide you will find:

- Considerations for facilitators
- Summary of the film
- Key points to highlight
- Discussion questions

One of the taglines from this film is “Break the story, break the silence,” and we hope this guide can be another tool to add to your community engagement toolbox.



Note to Facilitators: Considerations before Beginning

When hosting a film screening, it's important to consider several factors when promoting and preparing for the discussion. We've compiled a few considerations to get started. As always, review the film before hosting a screening and discussion.

This film has a MPAA rating of R, which means it is designed for a more mature audience and may not be suitable for those under the age of 17. There are graphic conversations about sexual violence in the film that may be triggering to survivors of abuse. Be prepared with information about your advocacy services, and consider having advocates on site, for those who disclose or need support.

The events in this film are true and for many folks this information may be surprising or alarming. It's important to be honest about the prevalence and impact of sexual violence but also be aware that this information could make people feel hypervigilant and unable to trust people. We must also highlight the resiliency of survivors and the potential to create change in our communities.

While this film is specifically about sexual abuse cases related to the Catholic Church, it's important to emphasize in the discussion that religion, and specifically Catholicism, did not cause the abuse to happen. Internal beliefs and/or bias about religion can make this discussion challenging. The focus of this discussion guide is to bring light to the epidemic of sexual abuse and examine the ways in which people played a part in creating an environment of silence. The film also demonstrates how this silence became embedded in the organizational practices of the Church, but that does not mean it is a part of the spiritual aspect of religious practice. People can both hold perpetrators accountable and still have deep religious faith. If you sense the discussion is turning into a religious debate, facilitators should redirect the conversation to focus on the impacts of the sexual abuse and systemic unchecked power. By sharing your advocacy expertise, you can also help participants understand sexual violence is in no way isolated or unique to the Catholic Church.

Some scenes in this film convey victim blaming, bystander inaction, and dismissal of the violence. We suggest addressing these scenes in order to debunk commonly held beliefs. For example, in several scenes we see that the survivor from the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) was not completely trusted or believed by the Spotlight team; they even want to run a background check on him. There are also times in the film where people did not take the disclosures of abuse seriously. These are good opportunities to talk about the importance of believing victims and the significant role an advocate can play.

Before beginning a discussion, lay out group expectations and agreements that foster respect and comfort with one another. This will help prepare the group to engage in the conversation with an open mind about respecting different values and opinions. As a sexual violence expert, sometimes it can be challenging to translate the available data and on-the-ground knowledge to our communities. We have created a child sexual abuse fact sheet to distribute at these screening discussions. You'll find this information in the guide and also at the end as an appendix page for easy printing. Additionally, you may want to review WCSAPs Advocacy Station document, '[Advocacy Station: Using Statistics to Support your Work \(PDF\)](#)', for additional reference.

Summary of the Film

The film opens on a scene of 2 young children sitting and coloring in an interrogation room at the local police station while a detective talks to their mother.

“Sheila, you know what good work the church does in the community. I give you my personal guarantee that I’m going to take Father out of the parish and this will never happen again.”

“Spotlight” tells the true story of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Boston Globe investigation that would rock the city and cause a crisis in one of the world’s oldest and most trusted institutions. Directed by Academy Award-nominee Tom McCarthy and written by Open Road Films, “Spotlight” is a tense investigative dramatic-thriller, tracing the steps to one of the biggest cover-ups in modern times. When new editor in chief, Marty Baron, comes on board, he instructs the team of spotlight reporters, Robby Robinson, Michael Rezendes, Sacha Pfeiffer, and Matt Carroll, to put all current work on hold and begin investigating sexual abuse allegations by a local Catholic priest against a minor. As the team begins to dig into the allegations, they discover the abuse was committed by more than one priest and the number of potential victims rises to extraordinary amounts. “Spotlight’s” year-long investigation uncovers a decades-long cover-up at the highest levels of Boston’s religious, legal, and government establishments, touching off a wave of revelations around the world. ([Spotlight the Film Website](#))

Main Characters

Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams)

Marty Baron – (Liev Schreiber)

Michael Rezendes – (Mark Ruffalo)

Mitchell Garabedian – (Stanley Tucci)

Phil Saviano – (Neal Huff)

Peter Conley – (Paul Guilfoyle)

Walter 'Robby' Robinson – (Michael Keaton)

Matt Carroll – (Brian d’Arcy James)

Jim Sullivan – (Jamey Sheridan)

Addressing Facts about Child Sexual Abuse

Broadly, child sexual abuse (CSA) is using children (under age 18) for sexual gratification. This can include sexual touching, penetration, and sexual acts such as flashing, masturbation, peeping, or exposure to pornography that may not involve touching. Child sexual abuse can be perpetrated by older youth as well as adults.

Prevalence

- National surveys of adults suggest that between 9-32% of women and 5-10% of men report that they were victims of sexual abuse and/or assault during their childhood.
- 86% of sexual abuse incidents perpetrated against 12-17 year olds were not reported to any authority.
- 74% of sexual abuse incidents perpetrated against 12-17 year olds were committed by someone that the child knew well.
- 80% of Washington women's sexual assault experiences occurred during childhood.

Perpetrator Information

Most perpetrators of child sexual abuse have spent some time building a trusting relationship with the child and family they victimize. This process perpetrators take to increase access to a child is called grooming and may include:

- Identifying and targeting the victim
- Gaining trust and access
- Becoming a significant person in the child's life
- Isolating the child from others
- Creating a relationship that is cloaked in secrecy
- Initiating sexual contact
- Maintaining power and control over the relationship

A perpetrator can be a relative, teacher, medical provider, neighbor, priest or pastor, coach, or other person. The vast majority of perpetrators of CSA are known or related to the victim and family through various settings.

Abusers that are connected to reputable institutions will many times manipulate systems to increase access to children. We know that an imbalance of power leads to sexual violence; within many institutions there is an embedded hierarchy that is greatly respected. When the person abusing has institutional power and respect, it can lead to increased feelings of shame, isolation, secrecy, and fear in those who they victimize.

Key Points

Below we highlight some of the significant scenes and language from the film you may want to integrate into the discussion.

Institutions

A survivor describes a time when a priest sexually abused him in his home as a child. He disclosed the abuse and the archbishop visits the home as a result. Sacha asks the survivor what did his mother do? "Do?" He replied incredulously, "She put out freakin' cookies." And when asked how she felt when Cardinal Law (who was the archbishop at the time) visited, she said, "God came to our house."

"They say it's just physical abuse but it's more than that, this was spiritual abuse. You know why I went along with everything? Because priests are supposed to be the good guys." – Pete Canellos

Similar to other large institutions, there is political influence and cover-ups happen. This is not exclusive to the Catholic Church:

"Look, I'm not crazy. I'm not paranoid. I'm experienced. Check the docket. You'll see. They control everything." – Mitch Garabedian

"Good old boys" network:

"This is how it happens, isn't it, Pete? A guy leans on a guy, and suddenly the whole town looks the other way" – Robby Robinson to Pete Conley

Community Awareness and Response

The Boston community refused to accept or address the abuse that was occurring due to its unexplainable horrific nature. The community's lack of accurate information surrounding the prevalence of child sexual abuse created an additional element of isolation and silence for victims.

Matt finds out one of the Church's "treatment centers" is near his family's home. He is deeply disturbed and proceeds to tape a photo of the house to the fridge with a note stating, "Kids. Stay away from this house at 276 Pelton Street, and stay away from the men who live inside it!"

There is an underlying theme of the community's misbelief that child sexual assault perpetrators are strangers. This creates a barrier to recognizing, accepting, and holding accountable perpetrators of the disclosure of abuse within a trusted system, such as that of the Catholic Church.

"If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse them. That's the truth of it." - Mitchell Garabedian

It took people from outside the Boston community to uncover and tell the stories of hundreds of victims of clergy abuse. At times, a new and fresh perspective, someone far distanced from the grooming, is needed to advocate. "He comes in [referring to newly hired Globe editor Marty] suddenly everybody is interested in the Church. You know why? Because it takes an outsider. Like me. I'm Armenian. How many Armenians do you know in Boston?" – Mitch Garabedian

"Come on. This is our town, Jimmy. We all knew something was going on and no one did a thing." - Robby Robinson "Don't tell me what I gotta do! Yeah, I helped defend these scumbags, but that's my job, Robby. I was doing my job!" – Jim Sullivan in response

"Sometimes it's easy to forget that we spend most of our time stumbling around in the dark. Suddenly a light gets turned on, and there's fair share of blame to go around." - Marty Baron

Grooming Tactics

The Church had a prominent presence in the Boston community. Many within the church structure had invested years of time and resources in grooming the Boston community and families.

Throughout the movie there are various conversations surrounding the priests' process of seeking out, grooming, and victimizing children from especially vulnerable families: those in poverty, single mothers, and LGBTQ children.

"But you have to understand, this was the first time in my life that someone told me it was okay to be gay. And he was a priest." - Survivor, Joe

"When you're a poor kid from a poor family and when a priest pays attention to you, it's a big deal. How do you say 'no' to God?" – Phil Saviano

Phil Saviano of SNAP tells the Spotlight team what it meant for him at eleven years old, a kid from a poor family, to attract the attention of a priest. He takes them through the steps by which a pedophile priest "grooms" a victim and explains that molestation at the hands of a priest is spiritual as well as physical abuse, a theft of the victim's faith as well as their innocence.

Discussion Questions

Survivors and Perpetrators of Child Sex Abuse (CSA)

- How does child sexual abuse affect survivors?
 - **Facilitator's Note:** this would be a great opportunity to address common physical, mental, and emotional responses to CSA. Be prepared to debunk the myth that CSA impacts a person's sexual orientation, if it arises in discussion.
- Who are perpetrators of child sexual abuse?
 - How is this different from society's message about what people who sexually abuse children look like?
 - Why would these myths about perpetrators of CSA prevent community members from responding?

Systems

- The Catholic Church is just one example of how a powerful system functions to maintain the status quo and hide sexual violence. What other systems can you think of where this same process might occur?
 - How can these various systems create an environment that puts children at risk for abuse?
 - In what ways do these systems naturally provide protection for children?
- Throughout "Spotlight," one of the main barriers for addressing CSA is the positive role that the church plays in communities. In the film, this contributed to the silence and lack of action.
 - What positive qualities did characters talk about the church bringing into the community and into their lives?
 - How can communities still hold the Church and the perpetrators accountable?
 - As a community member, how might you balance the positive relationship with an institution and accountability for the violence?
 - How might you imagine this experience is for survivors?
- Why are community members so protective of the Catholic Church's image?
 - What would make community members protective of any institution's image/reputation?
- When Mitchell Garabedian says, "If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse them. That's the truth of it." what do you think he means?
 - How does this directly apply to the film?
- Identify which members of the community contributed to hiding the sexual abuse?
 - How did these individuals hide the abuse?
- Which levels of the community and church's hierarchy were identified as having played a role in hiding the abuse and silencing survivors?
- In what ways did the church support and protect the priests?
- In what ways did the church support and protect the survivors?

Community Response and Accountability

- At the end of the movie many characters realized that they played a role in keeping the abuse silent.
 - How did each character identify their own level of responsibility?
 - How do you think they rationalized not responding before that point?
- In this film, why is it so difficult for characters to challenge authority within systems, such as legal or educational?

Breaking the Silence

- How was the importance of sharing stories evident in the film?
- In the film, Sacha believed the survivors she spoke with and reminded them the abuse was not their fault. Do you think this was a caring way to respond to a survivor who discloses?
 - Why or why not?
 - Is there anything you would have done differently?
- What were the reasons that some survivors wanted to share their stories with the Spotlight reporters?
- What are possible positive outcomes of a newspaper investigating and reporting on cases of child sex abuse?
 - What could be potential negative outcomes of a newspaper/reporters having access to child sex abuse case information?
- At the end of the film, many survivors called in to share their story with the spotlight team. What do you think inspired them to come forward?

Ethics

- How are ethics used throughout the film as an excuse to keep secrets?
- In what ways did community members manipulate their power and confidentiality requirements to support keeping the abuse silent?
- When Mike requests the courts release the sealed public records, the Judge questions the ethics of releasing sensitive public documents. Mike then counters, wondering what the ethics of NOT releasing this information are.
 - Why was the judge concerned with the release of these records?
 - What did Mike mean by his response?
- Did the reporters act in an ethical manner when conducting interviews with the survivors?
- What were the different professional roles showcased in the film?
 - What were/are the ethical professional obligations in regard to disclosures of child sexual abuse in these various roles?
- What kind of supportive behavior toward survivors was effective in different professional roles?
- During a scene in the movie, the spotlight reporters speculate whether they should run a background check on survivor and SNAP member, Phil Saviano.
 - Why would the reporters consider this?

- How do you think a survivor would respond to a request for a background check before telling their story?

Dynamics of Power and Privilege

Facilitator's note: It may be helpful to briefly discuss the definitions of oppression and sexual violence before engaging in discussion on the questions in this section.

Oppression is ... the ongoing unjust and cruel treatment and or control of a person (Racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism, and poverty).

Sexual Violence is ... typically, not about sex, but about manipulation, exploitation, and exerting power and control over another person. Sexual assault is a tool of sexism, or sexist oppression, and perpetrators use sexual assault as a weapon to humiliate and dominate others.

- Does oppression make survivors more likely to be targeted by predators? How?
- How did the intersection of oppression and sexual violence play out in this film? In regards to class? Sexual orientation?
- In a different context, how might race, gender identity, or ableism make someone more likely to be targeted as a result of the oppression they experience?
- In this movie every survivor was a child. How might adultism, or the way society places more legitimacy on what adults say rather than children, support the prevalence of child sexual assault?

Handout: Addressing Facts about Child Sexual Abuse

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To find local advocacy support for survivors of recent or past sexual trauma visit: [WCSAP's website: Find Help](#).