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Sex abuse issue emerging in Orthodox Jewish community

By [Postmedia News](#)

Published Jul 26, 2011 Last updated 13 years ago 3 minute read

**By Marian Scott**

MONTREAL — A rabbinical court has brought the long-hidden issue of sexual abuse in Montreal's Orthodox Jewish community out into the open.

In an advisory issued at the start of the summer-camp season, the Beit Din, a religious court, told parents to teach children about inappropriate touching, whether it's by another child, a relative or an authority figure.

The written notice said parents should explain to children it's an obligation — not a sin — to tell a parent or rabbi if an incident occurs.

The move is a departure for a community that's been accused in the past of sweeping the sensitive topic of sexual abuse under the carpet.

"That already is a huge step for the Orthodox community," said Diane Sasson, executive director of Auberge Shalom, a centre for women and children affected by conjugal violence.

That the Jewish court is acknowledging the existence of sexual abuse is a sign of progress, Sasson said.

But an expert on sexual abuse in the Orthodox community criticized the religious court for not telling parents to report incidents to police or youth-protection authorities.

"The Beit Din hijacks the criminal justice system because it supplants it and usurps the authority," charged Amy Neustein, editor of *Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child Sex Scandals*.

Neustein lost custody of her six-year-old daughter in 1986 after she alleged her ex-husband molested the child. The sociologist also accused rabbinical courts of hushing up abuse.

"The Beit Din have become very proficient at obstructing justice," Neustein said in a telephone interview from Fort Lee, New Jersey.

But Rabbi Saul Emanuel, executive director of the rabbinical court, bristled at the suggestion the Beit Din should have told people to contact authorities.

"The notice doesn't discuss an incident. The notice talks about education," he said.

"There have sometimes been incidents that perhaps may have been inappropriate, so people are told to be on guard, to make sure they protect their kids," he said.

Emanuel said it's up to people to decide for themselves whom to call if an incident arises.

"That's not our purview to discuss what people should do," he said.

The rabbinical court is a branch of the Jewish Community Council of Montreal, which is also responsible for certifying kosher food and Jewish conversion.

Howard Nadler, a liaison manager at Batshaw Youth and Family Centres, welcomed the advisory — but said it should have told people to contact the proper authorities.

"I'm impressed they're informing their community in this way," Nadler said. "But they should be reporting it to Youth Protection."

Michael Whitman, senior rabbi of Adath Israel Poale Zedek Congregation in Hampstead, Que., agreed.

"Although these incidents are rare, they happen and we should not ignore that they happen," he said.

Rabbis lack training to deal with the sensitive issue of abuse, Sasson said.

"They need to have the right professional working with them," she said.

The debate unfolded as New York was rocked last week by the horrific killing of eight-year-old Leiby Kletzky in Brooklyn, abducted as he walked home from a Jewish day camp.

Media reports have suggested that members of the close-knit Hasidic community kept a list of alleged child molesters that it had not turned over to police.

On Tuesday, the Rabbinical Council of America stated that those with reasonable suspicion or first-hand knowledge of abuse or endangerment have a religious obligation to report that abuse to the secular legal authorities without delay.

"False accusations are harmful to those falsely accused — but unreported abuse or endangerment can be life-threatening, as we have recently been tragically reminded," the council said in a statement.

Montreal Gazette