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**NATIONAL CENTER FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME URGES CULTURE OF  
ACCOUNTABILITY TO PROTECT SCHOOL CHILDREN FROM ABUSE**

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**Washington, DC--**The National Center for Victims of Crime today called on the nation's school systems to adopt a culture of accountability to protect children from abuse. The arrest of a Los Angeles elementary school teacher for horrifying forms of child molestation, reported today by the [Associated Press](#), suggests the urgent need for schools to improve their approach to preventing child abuse.

The teacher, Mark Berndt, will be arraigned today on charges that he committed lewd acts on 23 boys and girls, ages 6 to 10, from 2008 to 2010. The investigation of Berndt began when a film processor turned over to police 40 photos of blindfolded children with their mouths taped and large cockroaches crawling over their faces. The photos were taken in Berndt's classroom at Miramonte Elementary School, which serves poor, mainly Hispanic children, more than half of whom are still learning English. Authorities reported that "the children didn't know they were being violated...They just thought it was a game." Until the film processor turned in the photos, police had received no reports of the abuse.

"It is up to the criminal justice system, of course, to determine this teacher's guilt or innocence," said Mai Fernandez, executive director of the National Center for Victims of Crime. "Yet like Penn State, this case raises questions about our institutions' readiness to protect children from abuse. We simply must do more to prevent our schools from harboring predators."

All institutions -- especially schools -- can take many steps to raise awareness and prevent abuse. They can ensure that employees, students, and volunteers know what to do if they suspect a child is being harmed. They can institute whistle-blower policies, actively encourage reporting, and respond immediately to allegations of abuse. They can follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [best practices](#) for preventing sexual abuse in youth serving organizations, and they can train all staff to be alert to signs of abuse. They can learn how to use the [Situational Prevention Model](#) (SPM) for organizations to identify key risk areas, and they can use the [National Center for Victims of Crime](#) as a resource in instituting policies to prevent abuse and hold abusers accountable. Because abuse flourishes in secrecy and silence, schools must act openly and consistently to protect the children in their care.

"For too long, institutions have sought to protect their reputations by failing to face the problem of child sexual abuse," said Mai Fernandez. "Yet by adopting a culture of accountability for these crimes, institutions can actually protect themselves and the children who depend on them."

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*The National Center for Victims of Crime, established in 1985, is the nation's leading resource and advocacy organization for crime victims and those who serve them. For more than 25 years, the National Center has led this nation's struggle to provide crime victims with the rights, protections, and services they need to rebuild their lives. For more information, visit [www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org).*