

Healthy Child Protection Programs Age-Appropriate, On-Going

By Peter Feuerherd



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Pam Church
Vice President
Parent Education
Childhelp



Catholic leaders in parishes and schools acknowledge a sad reality of modern life: Protecting children from sexual predators cannot be taken for granted.

The result: Education programs and new regulations to protect children are being instituted throughout U.S. parishes and Catholic schools.

What makes such programs healthy and effective?

Pam Church, vice president of parent education for Childhelp, an organization that addresses the needs of abused and neglected children, notes that education on child protection should be age-appropriate and ongoing.

“One-shot deals don’t work,” she says. Children need to get the message that abuse is not their fault. They also need to be taught the skills necessary to promote their own protection. At the same time, education on protecting children should be “inviting and kind” with a focus on the message that “God wants people to be safe and have happy lives.”

Parents, she says, should teach children about asserting themselves on a regular basis, much like they teach them to eat their vegetables, clean up their rooms and maintain other healthy habits. Parish and school child protection programs need to enlist parents, who have the best interests of their children at heart.

Training programs for teachers and other professionals who work with youth should focus on empowering children to say “no” to those who would take advantage of them. For very young children, education should emphasize the dangers of inappropriate touching while acknowledging that “most touches are good touches and that most people don’t harm children.” Especially as children grow into early teen life, they should be encouraged to come forth with questions about the kinds of touch that make them feel uncomfortable.

“Why does it feel so icky?” “Why am I so confused?” These are the kinds of questions that children ask when they are being abused, says Church, who says that child protection programs should focus on encouraging troubled youngsters to come forward and state their concerns.

Monica Applewhite is president of religious services for Praesidium, an Arlington, Texas, based firm that consults with organizations developing child protection policies.

Good child protection programs, she says, emphasize the urgency of acting to intervene in potentially abusive situations. One

problem is that seemingly minor behavior that makes people uncomfortable is often socially awkward to point out. She says, people usually feel there are two alternatives: dismiss the offending party or do nothing.

That's why, she says, it's important to have well-established rules regarding adult-children behavior in any educational or youth setting. For example's: Wrestling, rude or suggestive comments and encouraging the addressing of adult leaders by their first names, are sometimes red flags suggesting even more inappropriate behavior.

Those who violate these rules can be talked to gently once the regulations are in place. For example: An adult supervisor in a youth program can gently be told: "We have a policy against wrestling with children."

According to Applewhite, it's easier to say that than it is to start accusing someone of being a sex abuser when there is no clear evidence.

"You can create an environment where abusers are not comfortable," she says. When regulations are in place, the early-warning behaviors of abusers can be curtailed. Good policies, she says, can define appropriate boundaries. The goal is not to ignore problem behavior.

Stereotypes of abusers need to be confronted. Often, notes Applewhite, there is a tendency in the popular imagination to make sex abuse a simple case of bad people doing bad things.

"The truth is that it's very complicated," she says. Abusers are often, paradoxically, very concerned about children and often do valuable work. They can even develop a reputation for good work with young people. There is even a tendency among some in a community to defend offenders once they have been exposed because their reputations can be so positive.

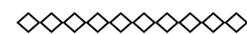
The fact is, notes Applewhite, that evil and good elements can exist in the same person, a reality that is difficult to accept for a public reared on stories of creepy-looking strangers grabbing children on playgrounds.

Since appearance doesn't provide many useful clues, "it has to be about what the person does," says Applewhite. Serious warning signs include children spending the night alone with an adult authority figure, or children getting pot or alcohol from an adult. Older children, she notes, can be taught about the patterns that sexual abusers will use to dupe their victims.

Adolescents, she says, are wary of being educated about pure safety concerns. They will, however, respond positively to an approach that counsels them about the dangers of being duped by a predator. No one in that age group wants to be known as an easy mark.

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Church, the creator of the widely-used Good-Touch/Bad Touch program for providing a safe environment, emphasizes that adults need to be informed that, yes, sexual predators can gain access to their parish or school, no matter how seemingly idyllic their communities may be.

“Adults need to be informed. They need to know it’s prevalent. It’s not unusual. There’s a need to get rid of the denial,” she says.

For Catholics, the media focus on priest offenders may skew their perspective, notes Church. “It is not a priest problem. It is a human being problem. Most offenders are not priests.”

For all faith-minded people, the imperative to establish effective child protection programs is clear. “God wants us to watch out for our children,” says Church.