

Dear Facilitator,

This guide is intended to provide the Facilitator of the Protecting God's Children[®] (PGC) Program with direction on incorporating additional information about Vulnerable Adults.

An important goal of the Protecting God's Children (PGC) Program is to create safe environments for all, including those who work and minister in parishes, schools or other programs. The question that is often raised when the title is introduced is, "Who are God's Children?" The answer is simply "everyone!"

Although the PGC Program is primarily designed to address the issues of creating safe environments for children and youth, much of what it promotes is also applicable to the vulnerable adult population as well.

These adjustments are being provided as additions to the Protecting God's Children Awareness Manual for use solely within the context of a PGC session. The supplemental material is available for verbal presentation to those in attendance who are exclusively staff and volunteers working with vulnerable adults, or when the session participants include those providing services to this special population.

Please note the following:

- *This vulnerable adult content should only be integrated into a PGC Program with the permission of the safe environment coordinator of the overarching organization.*
- *When adding this material to a PGC session, additional time should be added to the Program to accommodate any additional talking points.*
- *For an in-depth training specifically focused on vulnerable adults, VIRTUS also offers a "Vulnerable Adult Training 2.0" program that can be delivered in a live session by a facilitator or completed independently by the participant online.*

Thank you for all that you do as facilitators, and protectors of children and vulnerable adults.

Sincerely,

The VIRTUS Team

Information relevant to Part 1 of Protecting God's Children (PGC) 4.0

Although the PGC videos and the basic information apply specifically to child sexual abuse, much of the material will also be useful for persons working or volunteering with vulnerable adults.

Who is a vulnerable adult?

While each of us can be vulnerable in any given set of circumstances, the phrase “vulnerable adults” has a wide and varied definition, it can apply, but is not limited to:

- Persons 18 years of age and older, with physical, mental, emotional or behavioral conditions or deficiencies,
- Including adults living with intellectual or developmental disabilities,
- Adults with an infirmity or illness, or situation that renders an inability to defend, protect or get help when injured or abused, or even a deprivation of personal liberty that, even if only occasionally, limits their ability to understand or want to or otherwise resist an offence,
- Individuals whose condition or disability impairs their ability to provide adequately for their own care,
- Adults who habitually lack the use of reason,
- Individuals who have a court-appointed guardian.
- (The term can also apply to) the elderly, whose various circumstances might make them susceptible to persons or situations that cause them harm,
- People who receive services within ministerial or shelter-type environments, including persons who are homeless, or who are residents of shelters,
- Individuals who are residents or patients within hospitals, group homes, nursing homes, day service facilities, day activity centers, adult foster-care homes—
- Adults who receive care services from a licensed home care or personal care service within their own homes.

A person may be living with circumstances that make them permanently vulnerable, or, they may be temporarily vulnerable due to injury, illness, abuse or even unforeseen circumstances, such as natural disasters. It is important to remember, however, that at times we can all be considered vulnerable (especially when considering power differentials) and it is thereby important to treat all individuals with respect and dignity.

What types of abuse does a vulnerable adult suffer?

Vulnerable adults do suffer from sexual abuse, but they also suffer from physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect just as children do. In fact, only a small percentage of abuse of the elderly is sexual. With this population, sexual abuse is not typically due to a sexual fixation or attraction, and is usually a tool used to exert power and control in the situation. However, financial exploitation is a major form of abuse within this group. During our discussions, we will provide you with additional relevant information about the nature and scope of the broader problem of the abuse of vulnerable adults.

Why do vulnerable adults have difficulty from telling anyone about the abuse?

1. The fear of retribution. The people who commit these acts are relatives, business professionals and institutions, con artists, and care providers. Vulnerable adults who fall victim to one of these people are often afraid to communicate—sometimes because of fear of retribution.
2. They may have feelings of shame.
3. They may have some debilitating physical and/or psychological impediment, or may be living with an intellectual or developmental disability that prevents them from communicating or coming forward to report an abusive situation.
4. They may not remember what happened or become confused about events that occur.
5. They may not know that they have been victimized and therefore don't know they should tell anyone.
6. Perhaps they don't have the vocabulary
7. Perhaps they have not been informed or educated about how abuse looks or feels.

How common is the abuse of vulnerable adults?

Each year approximately 500,000 allegations of abuse of vulnerable adults are reported to Adult Protection Services. Some experts, however, estimate that a very small percentage of cases are ever reported. Studies indicate that as many as 10 percent of the vulnerable adult population is subject to abuse and that only one in six will be reported.

What do we know about the abusers of vulnerable adults?

Among vulnerable adults, the patterns and methods used by abusers are similar to the behavioral patterns of those who abuse children. In particular, there are those who seek out and “groom” vulnerable adults and those who take advantage of particular situations by abusing others. These abusers are primarily found among the family members, care providers, and others who are known and trusted by the adults.

When the victim is an adult with intellectual or developmental disabilities, the offender is often a care provider.

However, when the victim is an elderly person, the most likely perpetrator is a family member.

Information relevant to Part 1 of Protecting God’s Children (PGC) 4.0

Many of the principles addressed in Part 2 of the Protecting God’s Children Program can apply to the protection of the vulnerable adult population. Below is information on the specific differences for how each step may be applied through this supplemental material. First, we list the title of the step for the program dedicated to children, and then, there will be an explanation and/or helpful tips.

Step One—Know the Warning Signs of Adults

Some of the warning signs of an inappropriate relationship with a vulnerable adult are the same as those that indicate someone is a potential risk of harm to a child. Warning signs that apply to both populations are:

1. Discourages other adults from participating or monitoring.

2. Attempts to be alone with, or isolates, the vulnerable adult, often in areas where they cannot be monitored.
3. Behaves or speaks as if the rules do not apply to them (ignores policy, bends rules).
4. Uses bad language or tells inappropriate or sexual jokes around the person.
5. People who victimize vulnerable adults can also groom the victim and the victim's family.

Some additional signs that indicate a care provider could be a risk of harm to a vulnerable adult are when the person:

1. Acts with indifference toward the vulnerable adult in his or her care, pays little attention or shows little patience toward them.
2. Prevents the adult from speaking to visitors.
3. Gives the vulnerable adult “dirty” looks or “stares down” to intimidate them.
4. Uses fear, or a threat of force to get the vulnerable adult to follow instructions.
5. Takes privileges away from the vulnerable adult.
6. Suddenly seems to have a larger cash flow or more expensive things, whereas the vulnerable adult may appear to have less or is struggling financially.
7. Isolates the vulnerable adult from other people; refuses to allow visitors; keeps the vulnerable adult away from others who might observe warning signs.
8. Yells at the vulnerable adult.
9. Uses excessive or frequent physical force to restrain the adult or “force” them to “comply” or follow instructions.

(For #9, instead, the care provider should attempt to operate at the level and skillset of the vulnerable adult, rather than using physical methods—unless the vulnerable adult is causing harm to themselves or others.)

Step Two—Screen and Select Employees and Volunteers

The elements in this step are the same for protecting children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Step Three—Monitor All Environments, Including Activities Involving Technology

The monitoring techniques listed for children and youth apply equally to facilities and organizations that provide services to vulnerable adults. Substituting the word “vulnerable adults” for “children” provides some indications of how this Step applies to that population. The facilitator can further explain that the following is helpful...

Be observant when among vulnerable adults:

- Take note of the environment,
- Watch for warning signs of abuse, and,
- Assess if there are any grooming behaviors present.

Technology safety must also be utilized for those interacting with vulnerable adults. The same standards for communicating with vulnerable adults on behalf of the organization still apply.

Step Four—Be Attentive to Children and Youth

This step could easily be denoted as “Be Attentive to Vulnerable Adults” or simply “Be Attentive.” It is important to talk to, listen to and observe the vulnerable adults in our environments. Being aware of what is happening with vulnerable adults who are being neglected, or physically or sexually abused includes noticing:

- Injuries such as cuts, bruises, and other wounds that appear to be uncared for or never seem to heal.
- Poor skin color, sunken eyes, dehydration or apparent malnutrition.
- Frequent trips to the hospital (for reasons unassociated with a chronic medical condition).

- Soiled clothing, apparent pain from touching.
- Lack of social contact.
- Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, and confusion.
- Apparent disorientation or confusion and far-fetched stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances.

In addition, there are environmental signs that a vulnerable adult is being abused. Living conditions that are inadequate or consistently unclean is cause for concern. Other environmental causes include room temperatures that are too extreme in both winter and summer, and foul odors in the house.

Financial abuse is cause for concern when the vulnerable adult suddenly changes his or her will in favor of a care provider or family member that is keeping the person isolated. Other warning signs of financial abuse are the purchase of expensive gifts for the care provider, the disappearance of personal items from the home and financial issues such as credit card problems, missing bank account funds, and/or bounced checks.

Step 5—Communicate Your Concerns

Adult Protective Services are now part of almost every state's program for protecting vulnerable adults and elders from abuse, exploitation, and/or neglect.

In many states, the law mandates that anyone who suspects that a vulnerable adult is being, or has been abused, report those suspicions to Adult Protective Services. Just as with reports of suspected child abuse, the law protects those who make reports in good faith from civil liability and allows for anonymity in reporting.

Regardless of the legal mandates, everyone has an ethical responsibility to report suspected abuse of vulnerable adults to the authorities.

In addition to reporting suspected abuse of vulnerable adults, we must also communicate concerns that arise about the behavior of their care provider or other adults visiting and/or providing a service to vulnerable adults. If we notice that a care

provider, family member or another adult is behaving in a way that indicates that they are a risk to the vulnerable adult (even if it is just one time, or the risk seems minor in comparison with others), we must communicate our concerns. In this case, communicate your concern to someone who can do something about it, such as the supervisor of the care provider, or the supervisor of the adult who is visiting or providing a service. If you are not sure with whom to communicate your concern, contact the organization the individual in question represents.

We communicate to the right person (or place) when we see or hear something that looks suspicious, questionable, inappropriate, unsafe, abusive—or that simply makes us feel uncomfortable. Even if abuse isn't occurring, it is still important to address concerns—we should always err on the side of caution to protect vulnerable adults.

Additional resources

Administration on Aging (AOA) is an agency within the Administration for Community Living (ACL) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that promotes the well-being of the elderly by providing programs and services. Found at: <https://www.acl.gov/>

Adult Protective Services (APS) are programs and services provided by state and local health departments to vulnerable adults. Each state has some type of APS program. Contact information for each state can be found under the NAPSA entry.

Federal resources for care providers are varied across the different federal agencies. A list of options can be found at: <https://archive.whitehouseconferenceonaging.gov/happening/resources-caregivers.html>

National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA) is a social services organization that assists APS programs to recognize, report and respond to the needs of vulnerable adults. Found at: <http://www.napsa-now.org/get-help/help-in-your-area/>

National Center on Elder Abuse aims to improve the national response to vulnerable adult abuse with a variety of efforts. Found at: <https://ncea.acl.gov/>

National Council on Aging (NCOA) is an organization dedicated to promoting the dignity, self-determination, well-being and contribution of the elderly. Found at: <https://www.ncoa.org/>

National Institute on Aging (NIA) provides resources for care providers, to learn best practices on how to be effective but also provide self-care. Found at:

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/caregiving>

Programs for people with disabilities and a variety of resources are outlined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Found at:

<https://www.hhs.gov/programs/social-services/programs-for-people-with-disabilities/index.html>