

Adults working together to protect God's children

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Americans obtain most of their information about sexual abuse from news reports. News reports often focus on the most sensational aspects of high-profile cases but pay little attention to the millions of victims suffering from day-to-day sexual assaults by the people they know—neighbors, family, friends, and childcare providers.

Eager to “right the wrong,” the first action many people turn to is the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, this system is designed to punish criminals—not to prevent crimes. And the rise in reports of sexual abuse seems to indicate that emphasizing criminal prosecution hasn't helped prevent the problem of child sexual abuse.

Victims turn to civil litigation. Civil litigation is also a tool for punishing the offenders. However, visits to the courthouse do not protect God's children from future harm, and monetary awards do nothing to remedy the emotional damage that permanently scars abuse victims.

There is no quick fix. For prevention to occur, we must broaden our view of child sexual abuse beyond punishment. We must see this as a public health issue and a societal challenge where prevention is possible.

We tend to relate to sexual abuse as if it is *only* a sexual issue. Child sexual abuse consists of many complex issues. It is a health issue, a gender issue, a social issue, a political issue, a religious issue, a spiritual issue, and much more.

Sexual abuse is more common than most people realize and more difficult to identify than other forms of abuse. Many symptoms of sexual abuse are also indicators of other physical and emotional illnesses. When adults see these symptoms, they generally

react in one of two ways. Either they overlook sexual abuse as a potential problem, or they see sexual abuse in *every* symptom and *every* behavioral change a child exhibits. Neither of these is an effective response to help prevent and/or mitigate the effects of child sexual abuse.

Awareness, education, and training are the keys to preventing child sexual abuse. A commitment to shift the paradigm—to change community perception *and* behavior—calls for a community-wide, long-term investment of time and effort. But how can a church or organization secure the commitment needed to get individuals to invest their time and effort? Although prevention is the goal, the first step is raising awareness.

This means teaching adults about the nature and scope of child sexual abuse and how to recognize the symptoms of sexual abuse. Parents and other adults must learn to trust their instincts and voice concerns when they see something that *seems* strange or makes them *feel* uncomfortable.

The second step is education. Empowered by awareness, we can use education to examine our own opinions, ideas, and points of view. These are the strong, personal points of view that can blind us to abuse and prevent us

from offering potential abusers the resources that can make a difference and help stop the abuse *before* it occurs—while the abuse is still an idea in the perpetrator's mind and has not, yet, been acted upon.

The third step is training. Training creates clear distinctions regarding lines of communication, reporting mechanisms, and policies and procedures. The Church should adopt effective policies and procedures for hiring staff and selecting volunteers to



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Smart practices for religious leaders and supervisors:

The Core Principles of the VIRTUS® programs support community awareness

The English statesman Disraeli once told Queen Victoria, “The one with the most knowledge has the greatest advantage.” There is no better place to apply this reasoning than in efforts to protect children from sexual abuse. Knowledge truly is power, and The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc., is committed to providing knowledge about the issue of child sexual abuse. While child sexual abuse is a complex issue, the core principles of the VIRTUS programs provide a simple framework that can assist you in recognizing the risks of child sexual abuse and empower you to help prevent harm to children and others.

awareness

from the risk of child sexual abuse and where relationships between children and adults are healthy requires both individual and institutional change. Raising awareness among all adults about the nature and scope of the problem of child sexual abuse and the signs and symptoms that can indicate sexual abuse is the first step toward prevention. Awareness is crucial to preparing both adults and children to deal with the potential risk of child sexual abuse. All the awareness, education, training, and responsible parenting in the world may not protect a child from being abused. But, our best chance of preventing harm begins with our commitment to train adults—to teach parents, clergy, teachers, coaches, parish staff, volunteers, and anyone else who interacts with children—to recognize both the warning signs of abuse and the methods abusers use to manipulate their victims.

The road toward preventing child sexual abuse begins with bringing the issue “out of the closet” and into the public spotlight. Too often, people are reluctant to mention suspicious activities or uncomfortable circumstances because they don’t want to falsely accuse someone of child sexual abuse. False allegations, though rare, often generate news headlines and frequently leave the public questioning its commitment to prosecuting abusers. Communicating your concerns and asking questions about disturbing incidents are not the same as making accusations. Communicating your concerns—to those responsible for the programs or activities that concern you—is the key to identifying potential risks to children before damage occurs. If you see or hear something that raises concerns, talk to a supervisor or call the child abuse hotline in your area and share your concerns. Remember, discussing your concerns is NOT an accusation.

communication

timely response

process and prevent harm; therefore, communicating concerns as they arise is the best chance of stopping abuse before it happens. Don’t be sorry! Be safe! Sharing your concerns can save a child and can help protect an innocent adult from the risk of false accusations.

As with many adults in the Church community, you may currently find yourself frustrated and angry over the growing number of sexual abuse allegations. You don’t know where to turn or what to do. You are confronted with a horror that has, for the most part, occurred behind closed doors in “other people’s” families.

Child sexual abuse is now “out of the closet” but, in many ways, it is still a mystery. In the current climate, sexual abuse prevention seems like a daunting task. Creating a world where children are safe

Every state has a reporting law mandating certain individuals to report suspected abuse. The usual timeframe for reporting is “immediately.”

Although a report to child protection officials is not always the appropriate action, communicating your concerns “immediately” is always the best road to take. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse groom their victims and, in many cases, they groom the victim’s parents or other guardians as well. Grooming takes time. Communicating concerns can interfere with the grooming

EDITOR’S NOTE: We now promote a monthly theme on the free home page of our VIRTUS *Online*™ website. Within that monthly theme, we introduce a new featured article, training scenario, poll question, and other new content each week designed to help forward the mission of the VIRTUS programs. Our theme for the month of October 2002 is Awareness. We invite you to visit www.virtus.org on October 7 to read: *Be Aware of Your Vulnerabilities: Keep Your Computer Pornography-Free.*

When does ‘normal’ begin to look like a warning?

The Core Principles of the VIRTUS® programs can help make a difference

Scenario begins: Sarah and Mike married 16 years ago and have two children—Jerry, 14, and Michelle, 11. Although the family was active in St. John’s Parish for several years, the demands of Mike’s job have changed and he is now traveling almost two weeks out of every month. He is not able to spend much time with Sarah and the children, and everyone is feeling the strain of his absence.

Jerry has been an altar server at the parish for about five years. Fr. Steven recently promoted Jerry to master server and asked him to help train the new, younger servers. Sarah and Mike are proud of Jerry’s “promotion,” but are concerned about how they will get Jerry to the parish every Wednesday for the “new server” training.

Fr. Steven has offered to pick Jerry up from school and bring him home—which seems to work fine. After about a month, Fr. Steven starts inviting Jerry out to eat before bringing him home. Mike is relieved that Jerry has an adult male role model to spend time with while he is traveling. And Sarah is grateful for the “mother-daughter” time every Wednesday evening. So, Mike and Sarah are thrilled that Fr. Steven wants to spend Wednesdays with Jerry.

Exercise #1: Are there any risks of harm to Jerry or Fr. Steven in this situation?

Scenario continues: About two months later, Sarah and Mike invite Fr. Steven to Sunday dinner. Mike notices that Jerry decides to sit next to Fr. Steven rather than at his regular place at the table.

During the dinner conversation, Mike becomes painfully aware that Fr. Steven’s relationship with Jerry has grown closer and closer. They seem to have become very good friends. Although Mike is uneasy with the apparent casualness of the relationship between Jerry and Fr. Steven, he wonders if his concerns are being triggered by his own guilt about being away from home so much of the time.

Later, Mike mentions his concerns to his wife. Sarah says she has noticed that Jerry seems really close to Fr. Steven, but she discounts Mike’s concerns. After all, they have known and been friends with Fr. Steven for many years, and he is their priest.

Exercise #2: How could Mike further explore his concerns?

Scenario continues: Throughout the summer, Fr. Steven and Jerry go to movies together and work together on projects around the church. A couple of weeks before school starts, Fr. Steven invites Jerry to go camping on a Sunday and Monday—the last week of the summer vacation. Sarah and Mike don’t think it’s a good idea for Jerry to go away alone with Fr. Steven, but they have no apparent reason for concern. Jerry seems comfortable with Fr. Steven and they appear to have a good time together.

For Jerry, making friends has always been difficult. Since spending time with Fr. Steven, Jerry seems happy and is growing socially. Besides, he really loves camping. Plus, Mike is gone the entire week and the family didn’t

insists that nothing is wrong and that nothing unusual happened on the camping trip.

The following Sunday when they go to church, Jerry wants to sit in the back and leave as soon as Mass is finished. He refuses to talk to Fr. Steven or to serve Mass.

Exercise #3: What actions should Mike and Sarah take?

Application of Core Principles: The Core Principles of the VIRTUS programs—Awareness, Communication, and Timely Response—can help you reduce liability and prevent abuse.

Awareness—There are certain “red flags” that indicate an adult is crossing appropriate boundaries in relationships with children. Knowing these indicators is the first step to eliminating the risk of harm. Be watchful and ask questions no matter who is involved or how much you think you should trust that person. Perpetrators may groom the victim and the victim’s family over an extended period of time. Sometimes the grooming goes on for months before any sexual contact occurs. Don’t be lulled into complacency and overlook the little things. Those “little things” could be the clues to preserving a safe environment for your child.

Communication—Often we discover that perpetrators get away with abusing children because the adults in their lives are not trusting their own instincts about the warning signs, about the source of their own feelings of discomfort, or about what seems “right” in a particular situation. Any time you have concerns, talk to someone else. Listen to your inner voice and communicate your concerns to someone who can listen objectively and help you sort it out. Your silence may make you an unwilling partner in a growing risk.

Timely Response—When something happens that raises concerns about the appropriateness of a relationship between an adult and a child, remember the old adage “don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” One report by one observer can prevent abuse. And no amount of hindsight, wishing, or remorse can undo the damage to the child and the faith community when a child is victimized.



take a vacation this summer. So, Sarah and Mike agree to let Jerry go camping.

On Tuesday, a different Jerry returns home from the trip. He is sullen and withdrawn. He goes to his room and refuses to talk to Sarah. When she asks him what’s wrong he says, “Nothing.” He claims he doesn’t feel well and blames it on food he ate on the camping trip.

On Wednesday, as the time approaches for Fr. Steven to pick Jerry up for server training, Jerry tells Sarah that he doesn’t feel well enough to go—and he asks Sarah to call Fr. Steven for him. Sarah notices that Jerry’s mood improves a little over the next few days, but he begs out of going to Mass on Sunday because, again, he “doesn’t feel well.” Then, the following Wednesday, Jerry again refuses to go to server training. No matter what Sarah or Mike say to him, Jerry

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work with children. Additionally, the Church should provide training on those policies and procedures and strictly enforce them.

The Church can put into practice simple and straightforward preventive measures such as: requiring that at least two adults work together to supervise youth events; having two adults work together to provide daycare during Church activities; and encouraging parents to drop in, unannounced, on youth activities, daycare centers, and classrooms. By *eliminating* the opportunities for individual adults to be alone with children or youth, we can greatly reduce the *opportunities* for abuse to occur.

When parents become aware of what is needed to deter sexual predators from exploiting children, parents eagerly support school-based education programs that teach children about a variety of personal safety issues. Additionally, well-informed parents adopt "touching rules" in their own homes—rules that provide children, from a very early age, with appropriate boundaries—to help children understand when a touch from an adult or older child is okay and when it is not. Through a comprehensive training program, all the right messages can be focused toward target groups within the Church population. When adults fully understand the scope of child sexual abuse, simple prevention measures become routine.

The Church community can call the world into action and make a powerful difference in the prevention of child sexual abuse. What will *you* do? Will *you* raise your voice? What forces will *you* set in motion? What resources will *you* dedicate to this cause?

You *are* the Church. You *can* make a difference.



EDITOR'S NOTE: National Catholic offers VIRTUS® programs and services to support you in this cause. Through its Protecting God's Children™ program and other available tools, National Catholic provides churches and religious organizations with an opportunity to succeed where others have failed. Through the VIRTUS programs, the faithful—with the support of the bishops—can be the voice that brings child sexual abuse to the forefront as a public health issue. We invite you to join us in protecting God's children. For more information, contact Jack McCalmon, director of VIRTUS programs and services, at 888-847-8870, or send email messages to jmccalmon@virtus.org.

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