

Diocese of Rapid City

Keeping God's Children Safe

A Safe Environment Newsletter

December
2014
Volume 2
Issue 2



Advent is a time of preparing our hearts and minds to Christ's second coming and the anniversary of the Lord's birth on Christmas. It is also the beginning of the Church's liturgical year. My thoughts go to Mary, pregnant with her first Child, and all the changes a mother experiences and thinks about as she prepares for the child's birth. What does this have to do with Safe Environment? I think of all of you – reaching out through this ministry to help protect and shepherd our children, as Mary and Christ are always present to guide and support our efforts. So at the end of time we can each know we did not turn away in time of need, but said "Yes!" to protecting children and vulnerable adults with Christ's love brought to all of us that First Christmas!

We have completed the first year of our new Safe Environment program "Keeping God's Children Safe" in the parishes and our schools; in fact, the second year of fall lessons are completed! As I reflected over this time, I came across an article on how safe environment programs are preventing abuse. I will be using excerpts (*in italics*) from the article found in the *America Magazine*, "Children First," published in the August 12-19, 2013 magazine. It begins with comments some of us may have heard ourselves:

The reverberations can be heard nationwide. As church employees and volunteers receive notices requiring them to attend safe-environment trainings, their responses have become familiar: "Again?" "Didn't we just do that?" "I went through this where I teach; do I need to do it in the parish too?" "I barely come in contact with kids; why do I need the program?" "I've been doing this work for 40 years; don't they trust me?"

A decade into dealing with child protection efforts, I have come to expect such complaints. I see eyes roll and hear audiences sigh. On occasion, however, there is a more positive reaction: "Thank you. I was abused as a child. I'm here tonight because I have kids. You are now a part of my healing journey."

As trainings are held, one may hear similar comments, and yet people stay for the training, even enhancing it for all with their input! Remember those as well who have lived this pain and hurt here in our midst, and grace us with their strength and courage; you are such a model for others!

While the safe-environment trainings may strike some volunteers as an imposition or an inconvenience, there is good reason not to take them for granted: Child protection programs work. ... With dramatic proof of the effectiveness of its efforts, the church cannot go back. Indeed, the bishops will press forward, seeking to improve the effectiveness of child safety programs. ... The terrible problem of child abuse may never go away in society at large, but efforts to make the church the safest place in town will go on.

Initially dioceses and eparchies rushed to find or develop such training programs. In 2002, a variety of programs were selected by different dioceses, as is the case today. Several purchased commercial programs, some had people develop their programs, and some dioceses chose to use local government or other human services agencies for training materials.

Using one or a combination of these approaches, dioceses and eparchies assembled programs to teach adults the nature and scope of child sexual abuse and how to prevent it. The programs showed how to teach children to recognize abusive behavior and, more important, how to tell someone what was happening. Programs like these launched dialogues between youth and their parents and the church and the community. The parish dialogues evolved to include conversations on bullying, Internet safety, anti-pornography and even elder abuse and suicide prevention. Unexpectedly, people felt empowered to tell their stories and found a safe place to share them.

Research and Recommendations

Despite all the good in safe-environment programs, the programs have drawn a number of criticisms through the years. ... Some still doubted the effectiveness of programs. The answer has two components: An effective program offers a basic curriculum; it also roots itself in strong connections with the community.

In 2012, the [National Review Board] N.R.B. commissioned a white paper on its research from the

"Children First"

Find the entire article with more information at:

<http://americamagazine.org/issue/children-first>

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If you have knowledge of a sexual abuse incident of a minor by a cleric, church employee or volunteer, please report the matter to:

Barbara Scherr
Victim Assistance
Coordinator
605-209-3418 (cell)

USCCB Office of Child and Youth Protection
<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/index.cfm>

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Safe Environment**
<http://www.rapidcitydiocese.org/safe-environment/>

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Children at Risk Institute. The resulting report captured the core elements of effective training programs for children and adults.

According to the institute's initial recommendation, such programs should detail the nature and scope of sexual abuse of children (1 in 4 females and 1 in 6 males will be sexually abused by 18; 39 million survivors of sexual abuse in the US; family members are responsible for the majority of sexual abuse cases). ... adult programs should include a working definition of child sexual abuse based on federal and state law, ... behavioral warning signs of offenders, ...grooming behaviors, ...understanding personal boundaries (diocesan code of conduct), ... and how to report violations. Participants also need to know rules for safe use of facilities (unused rooms locked, controlled access to facilities, and adequate number of chaperones attending youth events), ...and (C) consequences for inappropriate behavior...need to be stressed.

Programs ... must include a review of diocesan policies that relate to creating and maintaining safe environments for children and a review of diocesan requirements concerning how background checks are conducted and how frequently they are repeated. They must include information on how an adult can report concerns or violations; state laws ... who is required to report abuse; ... child protection numbers; and the name and contact information for the diocesan safe-environment coordinator.

What Children Should Know

The Children at Risk Institute also listed "must" components for programs for children. Among them should be achieving age-appropriate understanding among children of child sexual abuse without graphic descriptions of abuse. The institute stressed that children need to hear from a variety of adults that people who make them feel uncomfortable or whose touch is confusing should be reported to parents.

It called for developmentally appropriate discussion of the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch, that children need to know that there are very few people (safe adults like parents and doctors) who have the right to touch a child in their private areas and that those few people do so only to keep a child safe and healthy. In a discussion in cooperation with parents, children also need to learn who their "safe" adults are.

Children at Risk offered specific self-protection skills and said children need to hear from a variety of adults that it is O.K. to say no to someone who is making them feel uncomfortable or uneasy. It suggested that a program should do this through role-playing that teaches children how to recognize and get away from dangerous situations, how to report abuse to adults—and how important it is for them to do that—and what to do if a friend tells them he or she is being abused.

Since repetition is important with children, the institute reports that children need to hear from a variety of people that abuse is never the fault of the child and always the responsibility of the adult. Children should be exposed to multiple lessons over time. Once-a-year discussions are not adequate to prepare children fully to protect themselves against a skillful predator.

With the white paper in hand, the N.R.B. plans to refine the core elements and distribute this information to safe-environment offices of dioceses and eparchies. ... With the addition of the missing pieces, the N.R.B. believes that programs will be stronger and children safer.

The elements above are curricula-based, but information alone is not enough. Programs need to reach the heart and soul of parishes and families. That takes place through relationships.

It's About Relationships

Even the best safe-environment program cannot operate in isolation. It must be connected to the environment it strives to make safe. Everyone from the bishop to the janitor, from the principal to the crossing guard, is vital for a program to thrive. The diocesan and parish safe-environment officials need to communicate clearly and precisely. They need to show mutual respect as partners in the mission to protect children.

Diocesan and parish directors of safe-environment programs need to be in direct relationship with their leader, whether that is the bishop, pastor, director of religious education, principal or parish office manager. Their interaction needs to be candid, honest and frequent. The safe-environment coordinator has to walk in a wide world that includes parents, pastors, religious educators, teachers, principals, janitors, bus drivers and playground supervisors because all need to work to protect children. It takes work to build relationships, but it is precisely those relationships that will create and maintain safe environments.

...To create an effective safe-environment atmosphere, the leaders must convey that a safe environment and victim assistance stand as priorities. The more the broader church community becomes involved, the easier it is to establish a pervasive safe-environment attitude, where all adults are protecting children.

*A decade ago, the establishment of safe-environment programs marked a significant cultural change in parishes and schools. Parents, employees and volunteers were suddenly being asked to learn about the sexual abuse of children and how to prevent it. ... **People came to realize that they were not asked to go to training and have a criminal history check because they were thought to be the problem; they were asked to step up and become part of the solution.** (Bold added for emphasis.)*

— Deacon Bernard Nojadera is executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Child and Youth Protection.

Nojadera, Bernard V. "Children First." *America Magazine* Vol. 209. No. 4; Whole No. 5019 (2013):19-22. Print.
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