

# America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REVIEW

## CHILDREN FIRST

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How safe-environment programs are preventing abuse

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.”



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. In 2002 the U.S. bishops established stringent policies for the church in the United States that require staff and volunteers to be educated in child safety awareness and protection and to undergo background checks. The policies also demand that safe-environment instructors educate children on what is acceptable and unacceptable touch and how to report what makes them feel uncomfortable. The result? A decline in the reported number of new victims of sexual abuse and of perpetrators. In addition, with a call for men and women abused decades ago to seek help, the church is now seeing a decline in the number of old cases coming to the light.

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. History will report the horror that children experienced abuse at the hands of clergy, but it also will report that through their efforts to build and enhance safe-environment programs, the bishops dealt sternly with the problem. 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.

When I worked in the Diocese of San Jose, Calif., I realized that the diocesan safe-environment program needed to be part of a wider community effort and had to expand within the church and beyond. I had coffee with directors of religious education and lay leaders. I talked to community groups and businesses outside of the church community. I visited parishes and also spoke with Jewish and Protestant communities, collaborated with the local Young Women’s Christian Association and got to know key individuals in the sheriff’s department and the district attorney’s office.

Since their adoption of the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” in June 2002, the U.S. bishops have called on every U.S. diocese and eparchy to provide safe-environment training (Article 12). Article 13 requires all members of the clergy, paid staff and volunteers who have ongoing contact with minors to undergo background checks. The articles are not suggestions; they are “musts.”

Initially dioceses and eparchies rushed to find or develop such training programs. Several commercial programs for both adults and children were available, and many dioceses and eparchies purchased them. Other dioceses and eparchies tapped competent

people to develop their own tailor-made programs. Still other dioceses and eparchies used local government or other human services agencies to provide 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. To assuage some concerns, a statement was added to the first revision of the charter to assure that the training had been approved by the U.S. bishops and was in accord with Catholic moral teaching. Some still doubted the effectiveness of programs. Could sexual abuse of children actually be prevented through training? What comprises effective training programs for adults and children? The answer has two components: An effective program offers a basic curriculum; it also roots itself in strong connections with the community.

The 2002 charter established the National Review Board, a lay panel to oversee the work of the bishops' Secretariat for Child and Youth Protection. The N.R.B. began to answer doubters by looking at current research. After speaking with bishops, diocesan personnel, theologians and psychologists, the N.R.B. in 2007 published the "Safe Environment Training of Children in the Catholic Church." The report listed criteria for the selection of training programs for children, outlined challenges and made recommendations.

David Finkelhor, a professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire who is a renowned researcher on the topic of sexual abuse of children, affirms the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention training. He has downplayed suggestions that children could be more harmed than helped by prevention training. The noted moral theologian John Grabowski, of The Catholic University of America, rejected the idea that the charter's emphasis on child sexual abuse prevention violates church teachings. But some critics still challenged the programs' effectiveness; a few still argued that training harmed children and wanted it dropped.

The N.R.B. faced the issue again in 2010, grappling with the age-old problem of how to prove a negative, as it evaluated what did not happen because children and adults learned to avoid, spot and deal with predators. Some critics worried that an effective program would result in more allegations being made. Then they argued over whether that would be a positive or negative result: good that more people could come to grips with past damage in their lives or bad that they would have to face old wounds and that the church would not be sure of how to work with them. The N.R.B. took their questions to organizations in the fields of prevention and psychology. Several organizations responded and gave the N.R.B. research committee a jumpstart as the board set out to determine what makes an effective safe-environment training program.

In 2012, the N.R.B. commissioned a white paper on its research from the Children at Risk Institute, a nonprofit organization based in Houston that studies health, safety and economic indicators affecting children and educates public policy makers on how to improve the lives of children. 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: for example, that one in four females and one in six males will be sexually abused before his or her 18th birthday, that there are 39 million survivors of sexual abuse in the United States and that family members are responsible for the majority of sexual abuse cases.

According to the report, adult programs should include a working definition of child sexual abuse based on federal and state law. The white paper called for discussion of the behavioral warning signs of offenders. They include, for example, grooming behaviors like giving gifts to children without a reason or permission; preferring to be with children; manipulating situations so they are alone with children; giving children drugs, alcohol or pornography; and allowing children to do things their parents would not allow.

Programs should help adults understand personal boundaries through a discussion of diocesan codes of conduct and how to report violations. Participants also need to know rules for safe use of facilities: for example, that unused rooms should be locked, that

access to school and parish facilities and children must be controlled and that an adequate number of chaperones should attend youth events. Consequences for inappropriate behavior, like loss of position at a school, parish or diocese, also need to be stressed so that adults know that the diocese takes seriously its commitment to keeping children safe and that allegations of inappropriate behavior will likewise be taken seriously.

Programs for adults 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; the state reporting laws outlining who is required to report abuse; local, state and federal 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. It also plans to evaluate programs to determine how many of the core elements are included. 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.

A successful change in a culture demands strong leadership, the kind of leadership that has a passion for a mission and complete understanding of how to carry it out. 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. And if their youth programs did not include such training, the programs were suspended. For those in the pew, it became an easier pill to swallow when the bishop and pastors were convinced and passionate that having safe-environment training and background checks on staff and volunteers was the right thing to do. 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.

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