

We Need to Talk Why Children Need to Hear from Us as Church

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In the years since the first *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* was established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, there has been much debate about the education of children in abuse prevention and personal safety. The debate looks at whether or not education by the Church contributes significantly to the safety, well-being, and spiritual growth of our children. What does education by the Church uniquely contribute to the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of our children?

Differentiation of human failings from the message of Christ and the Church

Sexual abuse can have a devastating effect on the spiritual development of children. When abuse occurs in a setting or at the hands of an individual not associated with the Church, it often raises questions about God's love or even God's existence. If an individual who abuses represents the Church, the impact becomes more devastating to children's spiritual development. Given the nature of children's thoughts, it is often difficult for youngsters to separate the actions of a fallible human being from the message and the institution that they represent. Children need to hear consistent messages that they are deserving of dignity and respect; that God and the Church want them to be safe and involved in right relationships; that we want to help them if a relationship isn't right. Such messages can help children retain their faith in the face of disappointing or even devastating behavior of an adult.

Increased Resiliency

One of the most damaging aspects of sexual abuse is the destruction it causes in how children interpret relationships. When a trusted adult uses a relationship with a child for selfish means, it

challenges a child's interpretation of the meaning of relationships. The more adults they encounter who model right relationships, the less likely they are to generalize their experience of abuse. As a Church we have the opportunity to be the face of God in a relationship that models the Gospel message of Christ. Communicating to children as Church helps to build safe, stable, nurturing relationships with adults, building children's resiliency in the face of adversity. Children who are victimized by sexual abuse have been found to experience better outcomes as adults if their disclosure of abuse is met with a supportive and protective response from an adult. Communicating as Church helps our children to be confident that all of the significant adults in their lives will respond with the same support and protection.

Breaking Down the Barrier of Silence

Often there are barriers to keep children from disclosing abuse. The child victim likely has been held to secrecy by the perpetrator. Children may fear the consequences of reporting – fearful that they will be in trouble or that the perpetrator (whom they may care greatly about) may be in trouble, that their family will be devastated, that they will not be believed, that they will be rejected. Silence or failure to communicate about abuse gives the message that abuse is something that is not to be spoken about. One achievement attained in communicating to children as Church is breaking that silence. Children need to hear from the Church that we want them to report abuse even if the perpetrator is one of our own. They need to hear that we, as Church, want them to be respected and protected, and that we will take actions to keep them safe. If we can support children in reporting warning signs or indicators that a relationship isn't right, we have the opportunity to monitor, problem solve, and address concerns before an abusive relationship progresses to the point of physical harm or significant emotional injury.

What You Can Do

Find Out More—Contact your Diocese or Parish office to find out more about the Abuse Prevention Education and Comprehensive Safe Environment Program and training provided in your diocese.

Become Involved—Participate in your diocese or parish Safe Environment Program. A key aspect of such programs is providing adequate supervision of children and educating adults to be aware of the signs of abuse and what to do in response.