

Awareness and Education Empower Adults to Better Protect Minors

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Child sexual abuse is a reality in our society and within our Church. While we may not be able to completely eliminate this reality from our society, or from our Church, as caring adults we have the opportunity to recognize questionable behaviors and to identify possible symptoms or behaviors displayed by children who may have been sexually abused. Awareness and education are significant steps toward identifying sexual abuse and the short-term effects caused by sexual abuse. Such awareness and education can help in eliminating the long-term effects of sexual abuse if not the reality of sexual abuse itself.

The *Protecting all God's Children*[®] program is for adults. The educational component helps prevent child sexual abuse by first making every adult who attends a training session aware of the issues surrounding child sexual abuse. This includes awareness of the many ways that sexual abuse harms its victims, their families, the parish, and the community. The awareness session also helps adults learn to recognize the warning signs of abuse and appropriate ways to respond to suspicious behavior. The goal of the awareness session is to empower each person with five steps to help prevent sexual abuse within the church environment and/or within society in general.

A Plan To Protect God's Children, which includes protecting all children and youth, includes five steps:

Step 1 Know the warning signs

Step 2 Control access

Step 3 Monitor all programs

Step 4 Be aware

Step 5 Communicate your concerns

All adults are needed to protect children and youth, but it is those who interact with children and youth who become the core of the prevention effort within each parish or community. It makes sense that those who spend the most time with children and youth are those who have the greatest opportunity to watch over and protect them.

Protecting God's Children for adults helps caring adults become part of the solution by allowing for a "healthy suspicion" about anything that causes concerns in their surroundings. Such "healthy suspicion" can assist adults in protecting all children, youth, and vulnerable adults from being abused. The hope of the *Protecting God's Children* program is to empower adults to better protect children and youth.

While it is important to raise public awareness of the reality of sexual abuse, it is also important to try and understand who may be vulnerable to being sexually abused. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Article 9 of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* states: "To understand the problem more fully and to enhance the effectiveness of our future response, the National Review Board will also commission a descriptive study, with the full cooperation of our dioceses/eparchies, of the nature and scope of the problem within the Catholic Church in the United States, including such data as statistics

on perpetrators and victims.” To this end, the National Review Board commissioned John Jay College of Criminal Justice to study the nature and scope of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and deacons in the United States from 1950 through 2002. This is historic as it is the first study of its kind in society with 97 percent cooperation of the dioceses and eparchies representing 99 percent of all diocesan priests in the United States since 1950 and the cooperation of 64 percent of religious communities covering 83 percent of religious priests in the United States since 1950.

The John Jay study identified that 75 percent of the allegations of sexual abuse were alleged to have occurred between 1960 and 1984. The study also identified that 50.85 percent of those abused during this time were between the ages of 11 and 14, and 26.7 percent of those abused were between the ages of 15 and 17. So, from 1950 through 2002, 77.55 percent of those abused in Catholic Church settings were between the ages of 11 and 17.

While it is vitally important to have awareness and education about sexual abuse and about developing a “healthy suspicion” of those who interact with all minors, it would appear that we need to be vigilant in giving special care and protection to youth between the ages of 11 and 17. As adults, it is our duty and responsibility to protect children and youth and not to abdicate our responsibility to youth to protect themselves, each other, or children.

The five-step process as explained in *A Plan To Protect God's Children* was developed after careful analysis of situations and events that have occurred in churches and church-related programs of many faiths. These five steps provide concrete, effective solutions to an extremely difficult problem. As adults, it is our duty and responsibility to protect all children and youth, and all caring adults must work together to accomplish this important task. Now though, armed with the additional information from the John Jay study—which identifies that 77 percent of those abused in the Church from 1950 through 2002 were between the ages of 11 and 17—we have a golden opportunity to specifically target our use of the five steps toward protecting those who are at greatest risk or are most vulnerable.