

Changing Society's View

By Sharon Womack Doty, J.D., M.H.R., Consultant to the VIRTUS® Programs

Most of us would not be surprised to find out that the maltreatment of children is a phenomenon as old as humanity. However, because the issue is so much a part of the news today, it is sometimes more difficult to realize that, for the most part, child abuse and neglect only became a issue for society as a whole in the mid 1970 and that the public attention to child sexual abuse came even later.

The problem of child sexual abuse started to become highly visible in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Professionals began to develop and implement programs that educated children about ways to protect themselves from abuse. For the last 20 years or so, child sexual abuse prevention education has focused on empowering children and there is evidence that the approach has helped. During that same timeframe, the education of adults who work with children has centered on teaching them how to recognize the behaviors that indicate a child might have been abused, giving them tools for dealing with children's disclosures, and advising them of when and how to report suspected abuse.

Until the VIRTUS® programs began to create a new approach in the late 1990s, prevention of child sexual abuse had been primarily left to children. Even though child focused prevention programs have had an impact on the problem protecting children is the responsibility of the adults who care for them. So, finding a way to educate those adults was the only direction that had the potential to stop most of the child molesters who harm our children. Educating adults is more difficult—especially when there is already a “tried and true” approach in place that appears to be having an impact. To change the approach requires changing society's view and that is not easy.

The traditional way to change how society deals with a problem is to bring the issue to the attention of the legislative branches of government and ask that laws be changed to impose a new approach. This approach raised the issue of child abuse initially and is the way society has dealt with many other problems such as drunk driving, environmental issues, etc. However, this issue is different. Reframing the direction of *prevention education* is not a political issue and no new laws can change society's view about this problem.

First it was necessary to create a new approach. The development of the VIRTUS programs between 1997 and 2002, before the child sexual abuse crisis erupted in the Church, laid the groundwork for a new approach. However, it was not until the initiation of a mandate for adult prevention education by the bishops of the Church that the new approach had a good opportunity to create an impact.

In the years since the adoption of the June 2002 *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, millions of adults have been introduced to a new approach to a very old problem. And yet, society's approach to this issue has been slow to change. Schools, child protection organizations, and other interested parties still focus their prevention education on teaching children. Adults continue to be educated about how to deal with the problem *after* it happens.

The fact that this massive effort has not yet achieved the “tipping point” that would completely change the way society approaches the problem gives us an idea of the

tremendous effort and perseverance required to change the way society deals with a problem once it has set out on a particular path.

The Church has an idea for the rest of the world. It has an approach to the problem of child sexual abuse prevention that can dramatically improve the safety of our environments. Staying the course can make a real difference in how society as a whole learns to protect children from sexual abuse. It is important to keep up the effort—to keep up the good work—to keep promoting adult focused prevention as the foundation for protecting children. Eventually the world will come to see that educating adults about how to prevent child sexual abuse is the best means to really protecting children.

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