

## Who is in the center of the circle?

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The Protecting God's Children® (PCG) program does not place the burden of protecting children on children themselves. It places the responsibility on safe, caring adults who become barriers between the child and any other adult who may want to cause them harm. Feeling free, safe, and secure in their environment is critical to the proper development and natural progress toward maturity in children and young people. The freedom to discover, be creative and imaginative, and the ability to explore new and exciting frontiers is what every child needs and deserves as they grow and discern.

Worrying about when the next incident of abuse is something no child should ever have to suffer. Moreover, worrying and feeling responsible for their siblings and what might happen to them at the hands of an abuser is a significant stressor we want no child to experience. It is difficult enough for adults to bear this burden, yet imagine how difficult it is for a child cognitively and emotionally to navigate such tumultuous waters alone.

As adults, it is often difficult sorting out our feelings and expressing appropriate responses in our relationships. We can feel overwhelmed with nowhere to turn. Imagine now a child, who has not fully developed emotionally, intellectually and physically trying to figure out what has happened to them and what is going on with their emotions when an adult sexually abuses them. It is a horrific thought.

While the PGC program is full of ways to protect children and vulnerable adults from perpetrators, one of the most important steps we need to follow is reporting our concerns when we suspect or know if a child is being sexually abused. We are often so fearful of the horrors of child sexual abuse that we dread to think it could be happening to a child we know and love. When you find it difficult to report your suspicions of possible child sexual abuse, I propose that you use this method using a simple circle or donut diagram. When we make a decision not to call in or report our concerns to the proper child protective services, what happens? Who are we putting in the center of the circle? The center is reserved for the most vulnerable person in the situation. Around the center are ways in which we protect this vulnerable person from harm. Monitoring programs, knowing the warning signs, talking to and listening to your children, controlling access—these are all ways in which we form a barrier around the vulnerable person in the center of the circle. When we chose to do ANYTHING ELSE, we remove the child from the center and place another person there. When we call and report our concerns we place the child in the middle of the circle of concern where they ought to be. No matter what our fears, our greatest fear should be that of another innocent child hurt. Asking the simple question of “Who is in the center of the circle?” is a way for you to check out each uncomfortable situation you are faced with. Be mindful, of course, that your suspicions, what you see and experience is what matters—not what others say and what gossip is spread. Each person is responsible for reporting his or her concerns, not spreading gossip and asking others to do so.

Be confident as you move through the steps of the Protecting God's Children program, knowing that each time you put a child in the center, you are carrying forth the primary message and duty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Brought to you through the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. and its VIRTUS® programs with the goal to help prevent, address, and mitigate wrongdoing in the community of faith and to help adults become protectors of children and to help communities become safe havens for children.*