

## Parental Technical Support

*By Sr. Meg Cole, SSJ, MS, LMFT, Consultant to the VIRTUS® Programs*

The earliest videos of the **Protecting God's Children®** program were an eye-opening, and shocking account of child sexual abuse. Many of the messages were relayed through the victims, the victim's families, Drs. David Finklehor and Barbara Bonner, and of course the perpetrators. Hearing the myths, the warning signs, and statistics, urged participants to be more aware. The open communication about child sexual abuse made all of us more vigilant about caring for our precious children.

Bishop Boland encouraged parents to have a **“healthy suspicion about every program to which they entrust their children.”** In addition, Dr. Finklehor informed the audience **“It is rare for an adult to actually witness abuse. Most abuse occurs in private with no other adults or children around. In fact, molesters often go to great lengths to make sure they are not observed...”** These quotes from the first version of the **Protecting God's Children** program always directed my thinking towards those occasions when children were at school, play, or just living the daily routine of life. The information seemed to point to all of us to become more aware when children were present. Now, in the second edition of PGC, there is expanded information explaining the very scary and dangerous aspects of the sexual abuse of children using the Internet and other forms of electronic communication; these warnings are gaining greater depth and meaning.

In the second edition of PGC, I find the most chilling statement in the program to be the one given by the narrator who boldly announces **“... While providing almost limitless opportunities for children to learn, the Internet has also become the new schoolyard for molesters, seeking boys and girls to victimize. Unfortunately, innocent children are only a click away from victimization and exploitation.”** Wow! What a potent directive to all parents. Added to the above warnings, I see and hear this statement as being the one that needs to have the greatest impact on the parents, teachers and other caring adults who are in the audience. It is my greatest worry that some adults don't heed the warning because they are not well versed in matters related to technology. These adults often justify their lack of involvement by pleading ignorance to the ways of any type of technology, whether it be a computer, cell phone, portable media player, tablet computer, or Internet. Many adults will dismiss their ability to engage in dialogue with their children using the excuse, “I didn't grow up with it.” and so they take a back seat to technology and act as if they are unable to pursue the ongoing education that is needed. If adults are going to keep kids safe, and be the “parental technical support” an innocent child needs, they must show interest in investigating and advising their children's electronic technology use. Not doing so puts a child in jeopardy of being the victim of abuse and exploitation.

On a recent broadcast that featured the television psychologist Dr. Phil, he related that some TV channels often have a public service announcement that asks something to the effect of, **“It's 10 o'clock, do you know where your children are?”** Dr. Phil suggested the message should ask, **“It's 10 o'clock, do you know where your children are in cyberspace?”** Given the narrator's alarming claims about the danger of the Internet, I tend to agree with Dr. Phil on this one. Many parents and caring adults seem to despair and give up on attempting to oversee their children's Internet use using their lack of technology skills as an excuse. When it comes to following technology and seeing where, when, and what time, their child was using the Internet and the sites they have been visiting, who they were chatting with, the social networking sites they used, and God “really” knows doing what else,

parents cannot take a back seat. They must become the “driver of the bus”, get on board and delve into their child’s technology and Internet use.

Having now been the facilitator several times for the second edition of PGC, the audience always give a polite chuckle during the scene where a curious elderly woman with white hair is trying to learn how to text message. I sometimes wonder if the laughter is because the audience is over-identifying with her. I also sometimes hear a slight murmur from the audience when the scene shows a mother taking a cell phone away from a teenager after reading the messages.

Emphasizing the pertinent information that the Internet is the new schoolyard for molesters, I asked the audience if they check their children’s text messages, take their phones away when its time to go to bed, and remove the mouse from the computer at bedtime as a way to shut out technology and have a safe night. In doing these things, parents will be setting boundaries between technology and the child, thus warding off a possibly troubling situation. Most parents respond that they trust their child, and that their child uses the cell phone as an alarm clock in the morning. Once again, it seems parents and caring adults want to avoid conflict, take the easy way out, and give a pass to the perpetrators who are more knowledgeable then we can imagine. It is the perpetrators who are leveraging technology, showing interest in kids, talking their language on the computer and on cell phones, social networking sites, music and video sites, and all the other avenues that are available on electronic devices.

We as facilitators and we as parents and caring adults need to get on the fast track. We need to become more adept at using the Internet, communicating with our children, and being able to clearly answer the Dr. Phil’s question, “Yes, I know where my children are both in physical space and in cyberspace.”

*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.*