

Beyond the Myth of the Bathing Suit

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In the past, child sexual abuse prevention programs focused on teaching children and young people that their “private body parts” are those parts of the body covered by a bathing suit. The definition of the word private: “away from public view; secluded,” has helped to perpetuate the myth that children, and young people would be safe if they did not let anyone touch them in these areas. Many programs of the past and even some current ones, offer resources such as coloring books, teddy bears, etc., with bathing suits which are meant to illustrate those parts of the body that need to be protected.

The enormity of this error was brought to my attention at a VIRTUS® Facilitator Training when one of the participants, a dentist, stated he had joined the program because, as a mandated reporter, he was deeply concerned about the increase in the number of suspected “oral sex” abuse reports which he had filed in the past couple of years. He wanted to be a part of the solution by warning people to watch out for their children’s safety especially in the area of the mouth which is so often overlooked. That was an “Ah Ha” moment for me. Until that moment I had not really focused on the importance of teaching children and young people “total body safety” to help them to protect themselves against child abuse perpetrators. As I began studying different child abuse prevention programs, it became apparent that even when a program does not specifically promote the “bathing suit” myth, it is often not explicit enough in teaching the concept of “total body safety”, which encompasses all parts of the body including the head, mouth, legs and arms which are usually overlooked. Child abuse perpetrators can use any part of the body to stimulate a child or young person or to arouse themselves.

We cannot discount the importance of teaching the concept of “total body safety” to our young people as well. Increasing amounts of research are being conducted each year by federal agencies and universities on the topic of the rise of oral sex among teens and the health risks involved. Many teens consider this to be “safe sex.” As Catholic educators, we cannot ignore this alarming trend in today’s world. It is our responsibility to help our young people realize their bodies are a gift from God and, therefore, sacred and special. Teaching them to value and respect their own bodies helps them to value and respect others. Here are some ideas for making this “paradigm shift”:

- Be specific about teaching “total body safety” in all of your child abuse prevention programs. Even if the program you use does not perpetuate the “bathing suit myth,” your participants may have learned that myth in the past.
- When teaching parents, stress that their child’s entire body is private and to be watchful of adults who might be “grooming” a child by constantly tickling, kissing, or hugging them. A child will often tell a parent he or she does not want to hug or kiss someone. Teach parents to listen to their children and respect their wishes!
- Stress to teens the importance of “total body safety” in their relationships with others. Tell them, “Just because a person is a close friend or even a girlfriend or boyfriend, that does not give them a right to touch you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable.”

By teaching “total body safety” to adults, children, and young people, we are furthering our efforts to stop child sexual abuse and to make the world a safer place for all of God’s children.

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