

The Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect—Its Place, Our Commitment and Challenges

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There is a story that I'm sure many of us have heard in one form or another about a group of people relaxing by a fast moving stream. Suddenly, a small child comes in view, floating and sputtering down the river. A quick thinking adult jumps in and pulls the child to safety. Then, another toddler comes floating by—and another adult jumps to the rescue. Soon two, then three more children appear and are quickly rescued. Finally, someone decides to go upriver to find out *why* the children are falling into the water. The story, of course, is about the wisdom of not just looking at how children can be harmed, but actively working to prevent it from happening; about assuming a proactive rather than a reactive mindset.

A few months ago, I was invited to attend the annual meeting of one of my state's child abuse prevention agencies. The speaker for the evening was a department administrator from the Mayor's office and, as she rose to the podium, I settled in for what I thought would be a "cookie cutter" speech about the Mayor's commitment to support the agency's work and what a fine job they were doing in the community. Instead, she began her speech by saying that she wanted to leave us with these three thoughts:

1. We know how to prevent child abuse and neglect;
2. The *cost* (not in dollars) of not doing all we can to prevent child abuse and neglect is more than our society can bear; and
3. We know how to prevent child abuse and neglect.

It was one of the best speeches I've ever heard on the subject. She resisted the obvious temptation to frame the dialog in the political or financial realm and shifted it to the human experience. In her three talking points, there are lessons implied for all of us, as we continue to support our parishes, schools and institutions in the nationwide effort to keep our children safe. We *do* know how to prevent child abuse and neglect, and that knowledge occupies a special place in our evolution as a Church, requires an ongoing commitment over time, and comes with its own particular set of challenges.

Place—As a church, we have worked hard and in unprecedented ways to understand the multi-dimensional issues of child abuse and neglect in order to:

- create and maintain an atmosphere of vigilance in parishes, schools, and institutions that protects children by preventing child sexual abuse before it occurs (primary prevention);
- equip children in our care, and their parents, with sufficient knowledge to stop abuse, i.e., to distinguish safe from unsafe touching and to have the ability and language to report abuse and to seek assistance from trusted adults; and
- to put into place policies, procedures, and training such that, should child abuse be suspected, observed, or disclosed to any clergy, employee, or adult volunteer—that individual will possess the knowledge, information, and resources to help the child and ensure the situation is reported to the appropriate civil and Church authorities.

We know that these actions are the keystone to a robust framework that educates, informs, and empowers the entire faith community; that puts structures and practices in place to keep lines of communication open; and that maximizes the safety of our children through a unified effort focused on their protection. This new emphasis on child safety now occupies a place of permanence in Church consciousness, and rightfully takes that place as “part and parcel” of our ecclesial culture, but its future is not without challenges and the need for ongoing commitment.

Commitment—We know that investments in prevention work. But we also know that the investment is dependent on the strength of leadership and, most especially, on the willingness of individuals in the community of faith to get—and to *stay*—involved in becoming part of the solution. Whether by answering the pastor’s call to volunteer to be trained to facilitate the Protecting God’s Children® program, attending the program because you are in one of the ministries that enjoys the privilege of regular contact with minor children, or are a parent, grandparent, or other caregiver who participated simply out of a desire to be better informed, tens of thousands in our parishes, schools, and homes have committed themselves to the creation of a safer environment and a safer future for our children. We have seen the tragic consequences of child abuse in our midst and the human cost that it demands. But as a child looks to a parent for protection and reassurance in times of uncertainty or fearfulness, our children continue to look to us to “walk the talk” and demonstrate that we will do *anything*—even if it’s outside our comfort zone—to keep them from harm. The loss of one child’s innocence diminishes all of us. I believe they can and do take comfort in seeing your commitment on their behalf.

Challenges—The church now finds itself a little over nine years removed from the revelations of early 2002. The crisis-oriented, high-energy atmosphere in which we hurried to find and implement prevention programs, revise policies, mobilize our communities, and commit ourselves to attacking the problem of child abuse head on, has faded for many. The human tendency is, of course, to put our most painful experiences behind us, and to look toward the future. But while I believe that the Catholic Church in the United States has done more than many other institutions of comparable size to address the complex societal issues of child abuse and is, consequently, a safer environment for children than ever before, there is danger in assuming that the problem has been dealt with. We are challenged to not become complacent. Healing takes time, as does the restoration of trust. Part of the price is vigilance—and that vigilance is visible to all through the example of your ongoing ministry as VIRTUS® facilitators and participants. It’s not glamorous work, and it’s sometimes hard, but you embody the principle that the well being of our children and the prevention of child abuse and neglect is the shared responsibility of each and every one of us. I wish you continued blessings on your ministry as you continue to “walk up that river” our children are counting on it.

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.