

Education in Sexual Abuse Prevention It's Not What You May Think

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There is little argument that adults want children to be safe and grow up in healthy nurturing relationships. As a parent, catechist, or volunteer, the idea of educating children in sexual abuse prevention may make you a little anxious and may evoke the following thoughts: “I can’t talk to children about sex.” ... “I don’t know what to say.” ... “I don’t want to take away their innocence or make them anxious.” ... “Shouldn’t adults be responsible for protecting children?”

Here are some thoughts to alleviate anxiety:

Prevention Education is not Sexual Education—Often, when adults are anxious about sexual abuse prevention education, it is because they are focusing on the word “sexual,” rather than “abuse prevention.” Effective sexual abuse prevention programs do not teach sexual education, nor do they provide children graphic details about sexual activity or sexual abuse. Effective programs focus on the dignity of the human person, the qualities of right relationships, and what to do if a relationship isn’t right.

Most sexual abuse occurs in the context of an established relationship between an adult and child. Often, the adult has worked to secure the trust of the child, to desensitize the child to boundary intrusions, and to coerce the child through threats, or, more commonly, enticements. Effective programs seek to educate children about the signs of abusive relationships that are observable well before any sexual contact occurs. Such programs encourage children to communicate concerns about relationships to their parent(s) or another trusted.

Sexual Abuse Prevention can be discussed in terms of safety concern. There are many rules that help keep us safe. Some of the rules that help prevent abuse are the same as those we follow to prevent other dangers. For example: there is “safety in numbers;” it is important to let our parent(s) or other caregivers know where we are and who we are with; there are people we can go to for help. In addition to knowledge of safety, we as Catholics also have a shared understanding with our children of the language of Scripture and the Church. When we talk to our children about right relationships and signs of abuse, we can talk about the importance of truth, our children’s unique and special creation in the image of God, the Ten Commandments, and the Gospel message of love.

Prevention Plans Reduce Anxiety—You may be concerned that children will become anxious or lose some of their innocence when they learn that child abuse occurs. The possibility of children experiencing anxiety or distress at the thought of abuse is not unlikely; abuse is a terrible thing. It helps to liken abuse prevention education to other areas of safety education, for example, fire prevention. Some children become anxious when they first learn of the concept of a house fire. The possibility of instilling anxiety, however, does not limit the value of their knowing how to escape a fire, or the value of remembering to “stop, drop, and roll” if their clothing catches on fire. Much anxiety can be alleviated by communicating to children that there is a plan.

Educating Children in Abuse Prevention Does not Replace Adult Responsibility—The USCCB *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* clearly directs all dioceses and eparchies in the United States to train and educate clergy, staff, volunteers, parents, children and youth in abuse prevention in the context of a comprehensive safe environment program. The burden of prevention falls on the adults who strive to maintain a safe environment for children and youth. Such education does not place the burden of preventing child abuse on children, but gives them life-saving information in the event that prevention efforts fail.

Find Out More—Contact your Diocese or Parish office to find out more about Abuse Prevention Education and Comprehensive Safe Environment Programs.