



## HOW TO RECOGNIZE, RESPOND TO, AND PREVENT CHILD ABUSE – THE THREE “R’S”

### What is Child Abuse?

Generally speaking, *child abuse* is injury of a child by an adult or older child that might not be intentional, but it is not accidental. It is usually classified as physical abuse, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse. Harm caused by withholding life's necessities - food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education - is called *neglect*.

### How can I tell if a child has been abused?

Each child reacts to abuse differently. In *physical abuse*, injuries to the child might be evident, but with any kind of abuse, children often give only behavioral cues. You should be alert to changes in the child's behavior. Any abrupt change in behavior that is maintained for a week or longer is a sign that the child is experiencing stress that could stem from a variety of causes - including child abuse. If you notice this kind of change in behavior, you should consider seeking help for the child. Some of the specific signs for each kind of abuse are listed below:

**Physical Abuse:** A child who has been physically abused might exhibit suspicious injuries. These injuries are different from those normally associated with childhood "wear and tear."

**Burns:** Burns that might indicate a child has been abused include cigarette or cigar burns on the soles of the feet, the palms of the hands, the back, or the genital areas. Other burns associated with abuse are *friction* or *tether burns* on the wrists, ankles, or around the neck caused by ropes used to tie the child. *Wet burns* on the hands and feet that appear to be glove-like or sock-like are caused by forcing the child to bathe in water that is too hot. *Dry burns* leave distinctive marks in the shape of the instrument used to inflict them. Commonly, in child abuse cases, these include electric irons, radiator grates, and stove burners.

**Bruises:** Bruises of different colors, indicating infliction at different times and in different stages of healing, often indicate abuse. This is particularly true if the bruises are on the abdomen, back, or face. Bruises, like burns, also might have distinctive shapes indicating the weapon used to inflict them.

**Lacerations and abrasions:** Children often have scraped knees, shins, palms, or elbows - predictable injuries. When children have lacerations or abrasions in soft tissue areas, such as on the abdomen, back, backs of arms and legs, or external genitalia, it is a strong indicator of physical abuse. Human bite marks, especially when they are recurrent and appear to be adult-sized, are also strongly indicative of abuse.

**Fractures:** Unexplained fractures are cause of concern. A child with multiple fractures is almost certain to be a victim of abuse. Other signs include swollen or tender limbs and spiral fractures caused by jerking of the arms.

Children who have been physically abused also are likely to show signs of childhood stress. Childhood stress can result from any upsetting situation in the child's environment such as family

## How to Recognize//Respond/Prevent Child Abuse

disruption, death of a pet, or even a move to a new neighborhood. It can also be a result of child abuse. If a child abruptly changes his behavior for more than a few days in a manner you feel is inappropriate, you might want to ask the child if something is wrong or if you can help. Do not immediately jump to the conclusion that the child has been abused.

**Emotional Abuse:** The indicators of emotional abuse are hard to detect. Some visible signs are lagging physical development and habit disorders such as thumb sucking or rocking.

**Neglect:** As with emotional abuse, the signs of neglect are usually very subtle and hard to detect. A neglected child might show up for a church program inappropriately dressed, lacking in personal hygiene, and consistently hungry.

## Warning Signs of Child Sexual Abuse

### *Physical*

- Torn, stained or bloody underwear
- Pain, swelling or itching in the genital area
- Pain in urination or defecation, or urinary or anal bleeding
- Sphincter control problems
- Pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease
- Increase in physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, abdominal pain)

### *Behavioral*

- Age-inappropriate sexual behavior
- Use of names for genitalia that differ from those taught at home or used by family
- Changes in school performance
- Delinquency or running away
- Sleep disturbances
- Changes in eating patterns

### *Emotional and Relational*

- Poor peer relationships
- Fear of certain formerly comfortable people or places
- Regression
- Anxiety-related illnesses
- Secretive talk in and about relationships
- Poor self-concept
- Depression
- Signs of decompensation

### *Spiritual*

- Anger at God
- Refusal to pray for a specific person
- "Flight into religion"
- Belief that one is uniquely and specially sinful
- Misconstrued theology

## How to Recognize//Respond/Prevent Child Abuse

### **What should I do if I notice any of these signs?**

First, you should not jump to any conclusions. The signs of child abuse are often ambiguous; they can mean something other than child abuse. Consider stating your observations to the child's parents. For example, you could say, "For the past two weeks, Johnny has been very aggressive with the other boys and uses foul language. This behavior is very unlike him. I hope that everything is okay."

You should **not** make any accusations to the parents that the child is being abused. Even if you file a report with the authorities because you suspect child abuse, you should not make accusations or state your suspicions to others who are not responsible for determining if abuse is occurring.

### **What should I do if I suspect that a child is being abused?**

If you suspect or hear that a child in your church program is being abused, you should follow your diocesan policy as to whom you should contact first, Child Protective Services or your parish/diocesan designated authority (principal, DRE, Youth Minister, diocesan official, etc.). **Ultimately all confirmed or suspected incidents of child abuse must be reported to your local Child Protective Services agency.** If you suspect that a child who is not in your church program is being abused, you should contact your local child abuse hot line or local Child Protective Services agency. Generally, the telephone number to report child abuse is listed in the white pages under "child abuse."

### **What if I am not sure that the child is being abused?**

The law requires only that you have a reasonable suspicion that a child is being abused. Once a report has been made, the appropriate agency will investigate and determine if abuse can be substantiated. Unless you make a report, the child might remain in grave danger.

### **How can I tell if a person is a child molester?**

*Child molesters*, individuals who sexually abuse children, do not fit the common stereotypes that we hold; i.e., strangers, dirty old men, mentally disabled, etc. There is no test or other screening mechanism that will identify a child molester prior to committing an offense. Child molesters come from all walks of life, all social and ethnic groups, and all occupational categories. Child molesters might have positions of prominence in their communities. The vast majority of molesters are known by the children they victimize and might have a position of authority over children, such as a teacher, clergy member, youth group worker, or police officer.

### **How can we protect our children from child molesters?**

Child molesters often try to gain access to children through legitimate means such as becoming involved in youth activities. They use this access to identify children who they perceive to be vulnerable to sexual abuse. To protect our children, we must establish and maintain open lines of communication so that they feel free to report any inappropriate or worrisome contact with adults or older children. We also must educate our children to enable them to understand what abuse is and that they have the right to resist any offensive contact.

## Suggested Policies for Preventing Child Abuse

Below are examples of policies aimed at eliminating opportunities for abuse within church related programs. These policies focus on leadership selection and on placing barriers to abuse within the program.

**Leadership:** Being a leader in a church community is a privilege, not a right. The quality of the program and the safety of our youth call for high-quality adult leaders. Strive to recruit the best possible leaders for your program.

Create an adult application that requests background information and references that should be checked before accepting an applicant for leadership. While no current screening techniques exist that can identify every potential child molester by learning all we can about an applicant for a leadership position - his or her experience with children, why he or she wants to be a leader, and what discipline techniques he or she would use.

**Barriers to Abuse Within Church Programs:** The following policies provide security for everyone. These policies are primarily for the protection of our youth; however, they also serve to protect our adult leaders from false accusations of abuse.

- Adult leaders must respect the privacy of youth members in situations such as changing clothes and taking showers, and intrude only to the extent that health and safety require. Adults must protect their own privacy in similar situations.
- Proper clothing for activities is required for both youth and adults.
- Discipline should be constructive and reflect Christian values. Corporal punishment is never permitted.
- Adult leaders must monitor and guide the leadership techniques used by youth leaders and ensure that policies are followed.
- In youth programs and gatherings, there should always be a good ratio of adults to young people. Most often this would be eight youth to one adult. More adults are usually necessary for overnight events or trips.
- Adults never buy alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, videos, or reading material that is inappropriate and give it to young people.
- A "buddy system" of a young person with another young person is a good safety requirement.
- It is never appropriate for an adult to share a bed with young people when on a trip and sharing a bedroom, other than a dormitory-style room, should always be avoided.
- If a young person is uncomfortable with a hug, then adults should not hug or ridicule that young person.
- Youth ministers and all adults always meet with young people in areas that are visible and accessible.
- It is always a safe practice to have two adults in the area where youth are present.
- One-on-one meetings with a young person are best held in a public area, or if that is not appropriate, then the door is left open, and someone on the parish staff is notified about the meeting.
- Driving alone with a young person should be avoided.
- Be proactive in identifying young people who may be vulnerable or at risk for unhealthy relationships. Youth ministers can have a very positive influence on young people by sharing the message of how important youth are in God's eyes, and that they are created with dignity. This

## How to Recognize//Respond/Prevent Child Abuse

can reduce the possibility of them falling into the traps of those who tell them love is just "physical."

### How can parents help protect their children?

Parents participate in the protection of their children in a variety of ways. We have already mentioned the need for open lines of communication so that children are encouraged to bring any trouble to their parents for advice and counsel. In addition, parents need to be involved in their children's church activities. All parents should receive information concerning the youth program. If any deviations are noted, parents should call these to the attention of a priest, youth minister, or DRE. If the problems persist, parents should contact the local chancery for assistance.

### Why do most child victims of sexual abuse keep the abuse secret?

A victim of child sexual abuse is under a great deal of pressure to keep the abuse secret. In many cases of child molestation, the molester has threatened to harm the child or a member of the child's family. The molester might have told the child that he would not be believed even if the child did tell. Another common situation is that the molester will tell the child that if the child tells about the abuse, he will get into trouble. The clear message is given to the child that if another person finds out, something bad will happen to the child. This pressure to maintain silence can often be successfully overcome by establishing open communication between children and adults through a proper educational program for children.

### What should I do if a child tells me that he has been sexually abused?

How an adult responds to a child when he tries to disclose abuse can influence the outcome of the child's victimization. By maintaining an apparent calm, the adult can help reassure the child that everything is going to be okay. By not criticizing the child, we counteract any statements the molester made to the victim about the child getting into trouble. Reassure the child that you are concerned about what happened to him and that you would like to get him some help.

Allegations by a youth concerning abuse in the program must be reported. Since these reports are required, the child should be told that you have to tell the proper authorities but that you will not tell anyone else. It is important that you not tell anyone other than the designated authority or the child protective services agency about allegations of abuse - if the allegations cannot be substantiated, you could be sued for defamation of character.

### How do I know what my reporting responsibilities are?

Every state, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories have different reporting requirements. As part of this training, you will receive reporting instructions for your area. People are often concerned about being sued for reporting child abuse. You are not required to know for certain that a child has been abused. All that the law requires is that you have a reasonable suspicion and are reporting in "good faith". When these requirements are met, all states provide immunity from liability for child abuse reporters.

### What are the "Three Rs" of Youth Protection?

The "Three Rs" of Youth Protection convey a simple message that adults should enable youth to learn:

- **Recognize** situations that place him or her at risk of being molested, how child molesters operate, and that anyone could be a molester.
- **Resist** unwanted and inappropriate attention. Resistance will stop most attempts at molestation.

## How to Recognize//Respond/Prevent Child Abuse

- **Report** attempted or actual molestation to a parent or other trusted adult. This prevents further abuse and helps protect other children. Let the child know that he or she will not be blamed for what occurred.

### **Call appropriate number if actual or suspected abuse has taken place**

Police Department.....	911
Diocese of St. Petersburg Victim Assistance Minister .....	866-407-4505
Florida Abuse Registry .....	800-962-2873
ChildHelp USA National.....	800-422-4453
Girls and Boys Town National Abuse .....	800-448-3000
Senior Helpline.....	727-576-1533
Florida Council Against Sexual Violence.....	888-956-7273

Materials adapted from the following sources: The Boys Scouts of America, *Youth Protection Guidelines*.  
*Restoring the Trust: A Response to Sexual Abuse*, from the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

## How to Recognize//Respond/Prevent Child Abuse

*Caring for Sexually Abused Children - A Handbook for Families & Churches*, by Dr. R. Timothy Kearney, ©2001 InterVarsity Press.