

Prevention, Prevention, Prevention

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Witness editor

Most of the cases of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy or church personnel took place 30 to 60 years ago. Much has been said about that!

However, one part of the story that doesn't grab the headlines is the protection program that has been put into place in the past three years to prevent child abuse.

Following the adoption of the new policy for the prevention of the abuse of minors in 2003, the Archdiocese of Dubuque, along with the other Iowa dioceses, adopted a training program called "Virtus — the Protection of God's Children."

This program, developed by the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc., includes a three-hour training session to help adults prevent the sexual abuse of children by recognizing situations where this could occur and by learning how to respond when it is suspected or has occurred. There are 24 trained facilitators in the archdiocese who conduct these sessions. There is no charge for attending Virtus.

All school and parish personnel — including volunteers — are required to take the training. Attendance is expected as soon as possible upon employment or volunteering. Updated materials are also provided frequently so continuing education occurs. Sessions are offered on an ongoing basis for new employees and volunteers. Upcoming Virtus training sessions are listed on the home page of the archdiocesan web site (arch.pvt.k12.ia.us) under "Protection of God's Children."

In addition, the archdiocese has done criminal background checks for almost 10,000 persons. The parish, school, or program where the employee/volunteer works pays for the background checks and the Virtus program. This is a very significant financial investment in the safety of children!

The Catholic schools and religious education programs have provided training to their students through "The Human Growth and Development" curriculum for several years. This program has been updated in the areas of positive attitudes about sexuality and appropriate types of behavior and boundaries.

Other safe environment programs are also used in the schools. These help students become less vulnerable and more aware of the tactics used by sexual predators —whether they be in a school/parish setting, in their own homes, or other environments. The majority of abuse cases involve immediate or extended family members or someone known to the victim.

In July, 2004, Archbishop Jerome Hanus, OSB, established the Office for the Protection of Children and appointed Joyce Connors as the director. The protection program and verifications of those required to take the training sessions are coordinated by this office, in collaboration with the Office of Catholic Education.

It is hoped that this leadership by the Catholic Church will encourage other entities to adopt similar measures.

The Feb. 16 *Des Moines Register* carried an article about a part-time Capitol guide who took a 4-year-old child to an isolated part of the building, without the knowledge of the parent.

This incident revealed the fact that criminal background checks were not being conducted on tour guides. Now such checks are being considered for these positions.

Today's children need special guidance and protection because of innumerable contemporary dangers — the increase in drug, alcohol abuse and sexual activity among youth, the frequency of divorce, violence in families and in the media, children having more unsupervised time alone while both parents are working, and access to dangerous sites on the Internet.

The Archdiocese of Dubuque is committed to assisting parents in safeguarding their children by making its schools, parishes and institutions safe places.

The budget of the Catholic Education system — approximately \$60 million annually reaching over 37,000 pre-school, elementary, and high school students in Catholic school and religious education programs — reflects the high priority that is placed on the education of the total person in a Catholic environment.