

KEEPING KIDS SAFE

*The Safe Environment Program
Diocese of Brooklyn*

Fall, 2005

Important information for Parents, Grandparents, Guardians, Caretakers and anyone who cares about kids.

The Diocese of Brooklyn has presented the program VIRTUS to clergy, employees, and volunteers over the past two years. Often after a VIRTUS session is over, the comment from many people is, "Why don't you show this to parents?" We have heard their concerns and now offer it to parents as well as to every adult person in the Diocese.

We are extending an invitation to all of you to bring your neighbors and friends. *Safe neighborhoods* can be created by making people more aware of *Safe Environments*.

Please Do Your Part to Help Create a Safe Environment
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The following information comes from the VIRTUS website and is available at www.virtus.org.

The problem of child sexual abuse

All children are vulnerable to the advances of child molesters. The men and women who prey on children often believe they actually love the children. But, the damage they inflict is devastating, and the scars can last a lifetime.

The child molester skillfully convinces or *grooms* the child that he or she is genuinely interested in sharing a supportive and healthy relationship with the child. Through the grooming process, child molesters trap children in a cycle of secrecy. Then they rely on their power over their victims to control the children and convince them that the victims are to blame for what happened. Unlike adults, children do not realize that nothing could be farther from the truth.

One of the most difficult facts to confront is that the greatest risk to children is from people who are known and trusted by children and their parents. Many people grow up believing that strangers pose the greatest risk to young people. But, the truth is, strangers commit only 11 percent of sexual abuse.

Child molesters *look* like everyone else. They do *not look like* scary people that anyone should know to avoid. Rather, they live with their families in our neighborhoods. By all appearances, they are typically upstanding citizens and leaders within their communities and neighborhoods. We come to respect them

and trust them and, unfortunately, we fall victim to their *act* and fail to adequately monitor their interaction with children and young people.

To prevent child sexual abuse, adults must know the truth about this kind of abuse. It is only when we know the truth and take steps to prevent adults from abusing children that we can be assured that the children in our communities will grow up safe.

The prevention of child sexual abuse

There are five steps that adults can take to help create and maintain safe environments for children. These five steps go a long way toward preventing child sexual abuse:

1. Know the Warning Signs
2. Control Access
3. Monitor All Programs
4. Be Aware
5. Communicate Your Concerns

One of the most important ways to assure the safety of children in our environments is to know the warning signs of adults who present a risk of harm to children.

Among the signs are:

- People who always want to be alone with children. They discourage others from participating in activities and make sure that their time alone with children cannot be monitored.
- People who give gifts without permission and then convince the children to keep the gifts a secret.
- People who go overboard in touching children—particularly wrestling and tickling children they do not know very well.
- People who think the rules don't apply to them. Not only do they ignore standard policies and procedures, but also they are convinced that the rules of society don't apply to them.
- People who routinely allow children to engage in activities that their parents would not allow.

In addition to knowing the warning signs, it is important that parishes, and schools in the Brooklyn diocese, continue to implement comprehensive screening procedures that control *who* has access to our children.

Screening must include, interviews, background checks, reference checks, and communication to the applicant regarding the Church's commitment to creating and maintaining a safe environment. All employment candidates must show a willingness to sign a code of conduct.

We must also monitor all the programs and places where children are engaged in activities. Remember that while there are some activities in ministry that other people should not be able to observe or

overhear, we should do nothing in our children's ministry that others cannot observe—at least through a window.

It is vitally important that we are constantly vigilant—that we always observe the behaviors of those who interact with children. Additionally, our children give us clues of when something is wrong. Being aware of what's happening with our children means talking to, listening to, and observing them—at every opportunity.

Communication is also important when we have specific concerns about an adult's behavior or when we suspect that a child is being abused or *has been* abused. Adults must communicate their concerns when they witness questionable or risky behavior in the other adults interacting with children in the parish or school environment. Communication is essential to preventing harm.

When any adult in the faith community has reason to suspect that a child is being or has been abused, he or she has a moral (and often a legal) responsibility to report those suspicions to civil authorities. Reporting suspected abuse takes courage. However, adults who take a stand *for* children and make the call are often responsible for saving a child from terrible torment.

Put what you have learned into practice—daily practice. You can create a safer world for children when you work together with others as a Catholic community. Do your part by remembering and using the tools provided through the *Protecting God's Children* program.

*Please check on the web site www.virtus.org, to register for a VIRTUS presentation in your neighborhood. Perhaps you are going to have one in your own parish. Check your parish bulletin for scheduled workshops. If you are interested in having a workshop in your parish, contact your parish priest. **All workshops must be authorized by the Pastor.** The Safe Environment Office and 60 trained and generous volunteers are willing to come to your parish and present a VIRTUS workshop. Call the Safe Environment Office at (718) 965-7300 X1312 if you have any questions.*

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