

# At the parish: Making Safeguard the Children a way of life

—*Twentieth in a series.*—

In her work as a pediatrician, Dr. Helen DuPlessis-Taylor has seen plenty of what she calls “the back end” of the child abuse cycle — the physical and emotional damage done to child-victims (and their families). That, and the followup reporting and (when necessary) testifying she does, is admittedly the “less than pleasant” part of her job.

So when an opportunity arose to be involved in the “front end” — the preventive end — of child abuse, it was no problem for DuPlessis-Taylor to say yes. The opportunity was provided by her pastor, Msgr. Joseph Greeley at St. Pancratius Church in Lakewood, in the course of establishing a parish Safeguard the Children Parish Committee as mandated by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

DuPlessis-Taylor was one of several St. Pancratius parishioners who, through the archdiocesan Safeguard the Children Office, became trained to conduct VIRTUS® “Protecting God’s Children” Awareness Sessions for Adults” at the parish. It is a ministry that the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center doctor finds as rewarding as any she has ever served in, if not more so.

“What we are able to do,” said Dr. Taylor, “is provide, through ‘Protecting God’s Children’ training, clear, concrete, action-able steps for responsible adults to take in order to prevent children from becoming abused.”

The process for establishing a Safeguard the Children (STC) Parish Committee at St. Pancratius has involved establishing a committee of parish volunteers, clergy, school and church staff, as well as both mission and vision statements toward fulfilling their goals. The principal goal, according to the mission statement:

“...to protect the dignity of God’s most precious gift, our children, and to prevent child sexual abuse by creating a culture of awareness through training, education, monitoring, communication, policy development and coordination of resources all aimed at eliminating the circumstances that would allow child sexual abuse to occur.”

That is accomplished by creating what Msgr. Greeley has called “a culture of awareness” toward fulfilling the STC vision: that “all children in the St. Pancratius community will be protected from the occasion of and concerns about child sexual abuse.”

“When you think about it,” Duplessis-Taylor says, “there are very few adults who do not in some way have contact with children, whether or not they have children of their own. So it is critical that all adults be aware of the potential for harm to our youth.”

Since 2004, St. Pancratius has hosted VIRTUS training sessions attended by some 200 adults, including all parish and school staff, clergy and volunteers who work with children. Some of the meetings Duplessis-Taylor and her

fellow facilitators have led have been for specific groups (e.g., school faculty or coaches), but all are open to adults, whether they are parishioners or not.

The training sessions are publicized in the parish bulletin and from the pulpit, and the parish committee works with the archdiocesan STC office to ensure that handout materials are available. The parish religious education office handles the registration aspect of the sessions, an example of the cooperative, inter-disciplinary effort that allows parishes to present this essential training most effectively. This component is also stated in the St. Pancratius STC parish committee vision statement:

—*All parish programs and ministries will reflect the culture of awareness in their policies and procedures aimed at the prevention of child sexual abuse.*

—*All ministry and program directors, church and school staff will be able to manage a child sexual abuse report.*

—*All ministry and program directors, church and school staff will be aware of and know how to access resources to support children and families affected by child sexual abuse.*

In addition to the VIRTUS training sessions, “we continue to increase their awareness and vigilance through regular educational updates about preventing child sexual abuse,” says Duplessis-Taylor. “We are also in the process of reviewing all parish policies that involve children and youth.”

Several people have told Duplessis-Taylor how the training led to positive changes. A school principal, for example, was motivated to install a new office door with a glass window that allowed more “see-through” capability when it was closed, and rearranged her office furniture so that, even with closed-door meetings with children, she and the children were visible to anyone looking in.

All the VIRTUS sessions provide a special focus on the role of parents and introduces a section which questions and resources specifically attuned to help educate parents on how to protect their children. The response from those who have attended, Duplessis-Taylor says, is overwhelmingly favorable.

“The most frequent comment I hear,” she notes, “is, ‘Every parent ought to go through this training.’ They leave feeling much more invigorated and confident that they can do something worthwhile, that they can take proactive steps to prevent children from being sexually abused.”

*For information on Safeguard the Children, contact Joan Vienna at [jvienna@la-archdiocese.org](mailto:jvienna@la-archdiocese.org).*

*This weekly series of feature stories, commentary and analysis is compiled and edited by an advisory group to the Media Relations Office of the Archdiocese, through which the articles are distributed.*