

Positive steps: Archdiocesan adult training programs

—Twenty-second in a series.—

The national statistics are overwhelming. It is estimated that one in every five girls is molested before she reaches her 18th birthday. For young men, the figures are almost as grim: one in ten boys is molested as a minor. In 90 percent of all cases, the abuser is known to the victim.

This snapshot view shows the breadth and depth of this social ill. What can we do? How can we as Church combat these horrendous crimes against our children? What strategies do we readily have at our disposal to fight this evil?

Education is the greatest force the Church can use to confront the evil of child abuse. Education is foundational to transformation and is critical at every level — clergy, parish ministers, teachers, directors of religious education, youth ministers, music ministers, parents, youth and children — if the Church is going to address the social sickness of sexual abuse.

Since 2003, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has aggressively implemented educational programs at all levels. With more than 300 trained **VIRTUS® Facilitators** in parishes throughout the Archdiocese, there is a VIRTUS Training Session scheduled almost daily somewhere in the three-county Archdiocese. More than 30,000 Church workers and volunteers have received VIRTUS Adult Awareness Training.

This program trains adults to be aware of the warning signs that indicate an adult is engaged in an inappropriate or abusive relationship with children or youth. Among the signs:

- The adult always wants to be alone with children or youth.
- The adult gives gifts to children without parental permission.
- The adult wants to wrestle or tickle children or goes overboard touching.
- The adult thinks rules do not apply to him/her.

VIRTUS Adult Awareness Training likewise places emphasis on the safety of the parish plant for all parish programs for children and youth. Adults are educated to be alert to arranging for safe arrival and drop-off procedures, providing well-lighted facilities, placing glass doors/windows in all parish offices, and providing proper and adequate adult supervision at all times.

While this effort is reaching every adult working directly with or around children and/or youth, it is only one piece of the Archdiocesan educational plan. Teachers numbering more than 5,000 in parish elementary and secondary schools and religious education programs

are being trained to identify the signs that may indicate a young person is being sexually abused:

- nervous, aggressive, hostile or disruptive behavior towards adults;
- suicide attempts;
- apathy, tiredness, fatigue;
- sleep difficulties;
- sexually acting out;
- reluctance to be with a certain person.

All teachers and catechists working with young people are trained to report to **Child Protective Services** or the local police department if they even suspect a child or youth is being abused. The three County Child Abuse Hotlines are:

- Los Angeles, (800) 540-4000
- Santa Barbara, (800) 367-0166
- Ventura, (800) 754-7600

All adults working or volunteering in parishes/programs are required to sign a **Code of Conduct: Guidelines for Adults Interacting with Minors at Parish and Parish School Events**. These Guidelines delineate acceptable behaviors and appropriate boundaries. Adults are coached to:

- Ensure that minors are properly supervised at all times, thus providing them a safe environment. Minors must be viewed as “restricted individuals” because they are not adults and are not independent.
- Avoid assuming the role of a “father or mother figure,” which may create an excessive emotional attachment for all parties.
- Not be under the influence of alcohol, consume alcohol in the presence of persons under age 21, nor offer alcohol to them when supervising minors or young adults at parish or parish school-sponsored activities.
- Avoid engaging in games or sports activities with minors except in the presence of other adults or in a place openly accessible/visible to others.
- Not have minors in their homes without parental and parish/school administration permission.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles has designed and implemented these adult education programs to ensure that our parishes and communities are safe for all children. Local Parish Safeguard the Children Committees can be contacted for more information.

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.