

Archdiocese launches ‘Touching Safety’ to empower children

Nearly 2,000 religious education catechists were recently trained in Touching Safety, an educational program to empower young people to recognize safe and unsafe touches and to seek help when they are in a vulnerable situation that could lead to abuse.

Touching Safety has been developed by VIRTUS®, which also developed the program used in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to train adults to recognize the characteristics and behavior patterns of potential child molesters. More than 40,000 adults working with or around minors in parishes and schools have been trained in child abuse prevention in that past four years.

The next phase is to empower children K-12 to recognize the warning signs that they may be in danger, to speak out on their own behalf, and to find the help necessary to prevent abuse from happening.

The program Good Touch/Bad Touch® already is being used in 100 Catholic schools. Touching Safety has been selected as an affordable, easy-to-teach program that will be implemented in parish religious education programs. It is fully bilingual, offers many materials online, and provides continuity between the VIRTUS® program for adults and the VIRTUS® program for youth.

Touching Safety is not a sex education program. It is a personal safety education program. Speaking to parents and catechists, Sister of Charity Mary Elizabeth Galt, chancellor, recently said: “You taught your children how to cross the street safely — ‘Look both ways. Don’t stand too close to the curb. Don’t run across the street.’ That’s a safety. You taught them not to touch something hot. You taught them all these rules to protect themselves. Touching Safety is just another aspect of protecting our children.”

Touching Safety is based on research into how the abuse of minors is able to take place. In the landmark book “Child Sexual Abuse,” author David Finkelhor, the foremost authority on preventing child sexual abuse in this country, describes four elements necessary for child abuse to occur:

1. An adult has a propensity, desire and willingness to enter into sexual activity with children.
2. The adult doesn’t do anything to stop themselves and to inhibit their own behaviors.
3. A secluded and private opportunity presents itself in which the offense can occur.
4. The offending adult is able to overcome any

resistance the child has to his or her overtures.

“The point of Touching Safety is to empower children to resist those overtures,” said Sharon Doty, a trainer with VIRTUS®, who was in Los Angeles a couple weeks ago visiting parishes and training catechists.

Touching Safety was developed to be consistent with the Catholic Church’s principle that parents are recognized as the primary educators of their children. Teachers, catechists and youth ministers become partners with parents in ensuring that children learn how to resist the overtures of persons in the community who might want to prey on them. Parents attend a parents’ meeting prior to the program being implemented at their parish. They sign a permission form for their child to receive the lessons, or they can choose to receive the materials to teach their own children in lieu of attending the classroom lessons.

Touching Safety consists of six age-appropriate lessons over a three-year period as well as age-appropriate videos. The videos help catechists to “break the ice” on this sensitive topic.

Children are reminded that they have the right to be safe. They learn the difference between a safe touch like a hug from a parent or a ‘high-five’ from a friend and an unsafe touch that is meant to harm, scare or confuse a child. Young people learn how to be aware of appropriate personal boundaries and to respect one another’s boundaries. They learn to recognize and resist any touch that could harm them.

“If someone tries to touch your private body parts or wants you to touch their private body parts, you should say ‘No!’ and run away and tell your parents or another safe adult what happened,” says the speaker in one of the videos.

Even if a molester tells the child the touch was an accident, children are taught to tell an adult about the incident anyway.

Touching Safety is a collaborative effort of various archdiocesan departments, including the Offices of Chancellor, Religious Education, Safeguard the Children, Family Life, Assistance Ministry and Catholic Schools. For more information, contact the Office of the Chancellor at (213) 637-7460.

This 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.