



What Every Parent Needs to Know

Presented below is a series of Questions and Answers intended to provide parents with essential information that they need to know about abuse, how to protect and guide their children, and how to help their children in the face of crises. (This is an excellent overview for educators as well.)

1) Why is it important for me to teach my child about safety if the school/PSR offers safety training?

For maximum protection, the safety information children receive must be built upon and associated with an open and stable relationship between the children and the parents. Many argue that **the greatest defense against child abuse is the healthy relationship between parent and child itself**. Simple information is not enough. Children need the ongoing guidance of their parents to assimilate and apply the information they have learned, as well as to process and deal with the various situations they will encounter in their lives. (see next question)

2) How can I help to protect my child from abuse? What information should I communicate?

Perhaps the most important factor that parents should focus on is the development of open communication with their child flowing from a healthy and stable relationship.¹ The Church is very firm in its conviction that parents themselves are the most important teachers of their children, especially in the areas of sexuality (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 2223, and *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, #'s 23 and 43). Because of the innate and ongoing relationship between the parents and the child, they are the most effective instruments for teaching information about sexual matters.

Furthermore, from an strictly educational point of view, the most effective instruction for any child occurs when the information presented in the classroom is reinforced in the home. Parents who wish their children to internalize information about safety procedures need to repeat and reinforce that information.

As to what information should be communicated to the child, parents must use their own judgment to discern that, based on the development and needs of their child. A convenient resource from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children containing basic safety instructions is provided along with this information. In addition to these safety tips, parents are strongly encouraged to discuss appropriate rules for modesty and decency with their children.

3) What should I know about sexual offenders?

Understanding how sexual offenders approach and prepare their victims may assist parents in being more vigilant with their children. Research has shown that the vast majority of abusers are actually known to the

victim and the victims family. Shockingly, the abuser is sometimes even invited into the victims home by unsuspecting parents.² Typically abusers will spend a great amount of time and energy into preparing their victims to be assaulted, referred to by professionals as a “grooming period.” During this period abusers attempt to desensitize the victim by gradually exposing them to more and more sexual information or materials.³ Once the actual abuse is perpetrated, the abuser may use a variety of means to continue or hide the abuse.⁴

Abusers can come from all walks of life, be male or female, and even be related to the victim himself or herself. Oftentimes the parents of the victim are themselves deceived by the abuser. Because of this, it is important not to expect children to protect themselves without parental involvement and guidance.⁵ Parents must remain vigilant with their children and must strive to maintain open lines of communication built on trust and respect.

4) What are the potential signs of abuse that I should recognize?

Child sexual abuse cases can be very difficult to recognize because instances where definitive, objective evidence exists are the exception rather than the rule. The first indicators of sexual abuse may not be physical signs, but emotional/behavioral changes or abnormalities. And, because it is usually so difficult to accept that sexual abuse may be occurring, even an involved, caring adult may misinterpret the signals.

Sexual abuse is usually discovered by either direct disclosure (i.e., statements from the victim, a member of the victim’s family or a parent seeking help) or by indirect methods (i.e., someone comes forward who has witnessed the abuse, the child contracts a sexually transmitted disease or the child becomes pregnant). Children often do not tell us in words that they have been sexually abused. In addition to little or no knowledge of the terminology of sexual abuse, there are many reasons children might hesitate or be afraid to tell us about what has happened. These include: their relationship to the offender (often an authority figure within or outside of the family); fear of the consequences of revealing the situation due to the fear of retaliation by the offender; or uncertainty about whether or not they will be believed even by their parents, teachers or other adults they respect. Children need to know that they can speak openly to a trusted adult, and that they will be believed. Children who are victims of sexual abuse should always be reassured that they are not responsible for what has happened to them. They should not feel ashamed or guilty, as the shame and guilt rightfully belong to the perpetrator.

While there may be one or several signs of sexual abuse evidenced by direct or indirect disclosure, the actual diagnosis of physical abuse is best left to a pediatric physician while the treatment of emotional, psychological and behavioral symptoms is best handled by a licensed psychiatrist, psychologist or clinical social worker who specializes in abuse cases. We must recognize that despite our desire to protect children, the majority of us are not experts in the identification of child sexual abuse. However, we all must be aware of signs of possible sexual abuse. As non-medical personnel those signs that might be most apparent to us, especially parents, teachers and counselors, would be the emotional/behavioral signs of abuse.

Signs that indicate that sexual abuse may have occurred include:

- Actual reports that sexual abuse has occurred
- Sleep problems, including: insomnia, nightmares, and refusal to sleep alone or sudden insistence on a night-light
- Delinquency or running away from home; Truancy from school
- Difficulty forming new relationships; difficulty retaining old friends
- Talk of hurting oneself; Actual self-abuse (This includes alcohol or drug addiction, self-mutilation and suicide attempts)
- An attitude that he/she deserves punishment; Self-imposed isolation

- Excessive eating/lack of appetite; Sudden change in personality
- Inappropriate sexual behavior, i.e., excessive masturbation or sexual acting-out with younger children
- An impaired ability to trust; Discomfort with or complete rejection of typical family affection
- Hyperactive/disruptive behavior; Failure to thrive socially or physically
- Wariness of adult contact, fear of a specific adult or an entire gender of adults
- Afraid to go home or to those locations where the suspected perpetrator may be (church, school, youth group, scouts, teams); Extreme clinginess or other signs of fearfulness
- Sudden use of sexual terms or new names for body parts
- Regressive behaviors, including: thumb sucking; bed-wetting; infantile behaviors or other signs of dependency
- Change in personal hygiene habits, excessive cleanliness/lack of cleanliness

None of these signs listed above should be viewed in isolation. Any one of the previous signs could indicate that there has been a sexual assault or be indicative of another problem. In general, when you see a dramatic change in behavior in a child, it is a signal that something is wrong. Whatever has caused the change in behavior should be explored by parents and trained professionals.

5) What Do I Do If My Child Tells Me He/She Has Been Sexually Abused?

At the time of a child/adult victim's disclosure, the listener's reaction will play a very large part in how the child/adult survivor heals from the abuse experience. The most important and helpful reaction is to accept and acknowledge the survivor's experience. The most harmful reaction that a person can give is verbal disbelief; this communicates that the child's internal sense of right and wrong is not to be trusted. Reactions such as, "How could this happen?" and questions such as, "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" can unintentionally intensify

feelings of blame and guilt. When adults directly or indirectly blame the survivor for causing the abuse, they are, in effect, shifting the blame from the responsibility for the abuse from the perpetrator to the victim. It has been found that, in general, sexually abused children recant disclosures and information when they feel that what they have said is not accepted or heard by significant adults.

If the abuse has been perpetrated by a priest, deacon, teacher, coach, volunteer or other clergy or church personnel, please contact the civil authorities (the police or children's services). We also ask that you contact the Vicar General of the Diocese of Steubenville (740-282-3631) so that we can provide pastoral support and cooperate with the civil investigation.

6) What Do I Do If My Child Tells Me Their Friend Has Been Sexually Abused?

When someone tells a peer they have been sexually abused, they usually tell a good personal friend. This is not a situation that a child should attempt to handle by himself/herself. It is best for the child to immediately involve an adult whom he/she trusts for the sake of the person who is making the allegation as well as for that of the person who has been accused. No one should try to investigate if what the person is saying is true or confront the person who is accused of the abuse. Leave that to the appropriate government authorities. *A child should never promise to keep a friend's allegation of abuse a secret.* When someone tells another that he has been abused, the confidant should believe that he/she is telling you the truth and that this is a "cry for help" even if he/she asks that the confidant pledge secrecy. If a child has actually been abused he/she is best served by

trained medical professionals who specialize in the treatment of abuse. *If you or your child has made a secrecy promise, this is a promise that you need to break for the good of the person who was allegedly abused.*

7) Why do I need to monitor my child's access to the internet?

The internet is a wonderful tool for learning, but it poses many dangers to young people. It is important that parents assume responsibility for their child's on-line computer use both at home and at school. Parents who are concerned about their children's use of electronic resources should provide guidance to their children. It is imperative that parents keep the lines of communication open so that they can talk to their children about the opportunities and pitfalls that use of the Internet provides.

Recognize the fact that everything your child may read on-line may not be true. Any person can start a Web site regardless of his expertise in a certain field.

- Know your children's on-line friends. If someone sending your child e-mail or inviting them to "chat" makes you suspicious, follow your instincts. If you have concerns you can contact your, or the sender's, Internet service provider and ask them to monitor the situation.
- Never allow your child to give out identifying information such as home address, school name or telephone number without your permission.
- Be aware that people who are communicating with your child may not be who they appear to be on-line, i.e., someone who claims to be a teen-age boy could be a 50-year-old man.
- Never allow your child to send photos of himself/herself to anyone on-line or post photos of himself/herself anywhere on-line without your approval.
- Never allow your child to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone via the computer without your approval.
- Monitor the amount of time your child spends with the computer. Excessive use of on-line services, especially late at night, may signal a potential problem. Do not rely on filtering systems to prevent inappropriate items from getting to your child. It is important to realize that filtering programs cannot protect your child from all dangers in cyberspace.
- Set family rules for the use of the Internet. Discuss the many types of information that are available and discuss with your children which topics you consider off-limits. Unfortunately it is commonplace for even elementary age children to "trade" pornography sites among each other. The best location for a computer is in the family room rather than a child's bedroom.

The following Internet sites may be helpful to you:

www.netsmartz.org

The NetSmartz Workshop is an interactive, educational safety resource from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) and Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) for children aged 5 to 17, parents, guardians, educators, and law enforcement personnel that uses age-appropriate, 3-D activities to teach children how to stay safer on the Internet. The goal of the NetSmartz Workshop is to extend the safety awareness of children to prevent victimization and increase self-confidence whenever they go on-line.

www.childlures.org

The Child Lures Prevention Program utilizes and consolidates effective personal safety resources available for parents, educators, professionals, and, most importantly, children.

This cyber tip line handles leads from individuals reporting the sexual exploitation of children. Please contact them if you have information that will help in our fight against child sexual exploitation. Your input will be kept confidential and will be forwarded to law enforcement for investigation and review, and, when appropriate, to the Internet service provider. The U.S. Congress has funded these initiatives for reporting child sexual exploitation.

8) What does all this have to do with dating?

Dating directly relates to both dimensions of efforts to keep the youth safe: helping them to avoid potential abusive situations, and helping them to make healthy choices for themselves and others.

Young people should be instructed in pre-marital purity and married love because they must know how to cope with the widespread non-Catholic attitudes toward sexual promiscuity and marital instability. St. Paul reminds us: "Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received Him from God. You are not your own property; you have been bought and paid for. That is why you should use your body for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Dating is a small part of the overall discovery process of determining God's will for one's life. Marriage, the single life and a vocation to religious life are all viable choices. Allow the Holy Spirit to direct you and your child.

- Discuss dating freely and openly with your children.
- Teach your children to respect themselves, body and soul, as special creations and children of God. He loved them enough to die for them. They are worthwhile and loved.
- Always ensure that your child has enough money for a cab ride home in case a situation gets out of hand. If he/she does not have a cell phone, make sure he/she carries enough cash to make a phone call.
- Get to know the person your child is dating. Invite the person your child is dating to Mass and family outings. Know his/her parents and their contact information, while your teen learns of their friend's faith, their value system and their expectations, so that all involved can be on the same page when setting limits for dating.
- Encourage your children to "date" in groups at first.
- Encourage them to base their relationship on God.
- Encourage and model those behaviors and values that you want your children to replicate.
- Ensure that your children dress modestly.
- Encourage your children to save themselves sexually for a life-partner in marriage. The gift of self to a spouse on the wedding night is the most special possible commitment of oneself.

9) Why Should I Discourage My Child from Inappropriate Television Programs, Movies, Videos, Games and Other Forms of Entertainment?

Every day children are bombarded with messages from the media about how to behave, what choices to make and what to think. Children even try to emulate what they learn from television, video games and the Internet. Youngsters are more susceptible to these messages than adults because they usually have not developed good

judgment or the ability to process the information they're given. They are most interested in being cool, popular and accepted by their peers.

For children the degree of realism in any entertainment can have a significant impact on their development. A situation perceived as being like reality — that is, one viewers can imagine being in themselves — is more frightening and affecting. For younger children, however, the lines between fantasy and reality are less sharply drawn. Children frequently need adult help to distinguish between fantasy and reality and to interpret the events they see portrayed. In addition, sexually violent material is a hazard for younger children who may be introduced to skewed views of relationships they are not yet fully prepared to evaluate.

Parents need to be aware that video store versions of R-rated films often have added material that was originally cut to make a film acceptable for theatrical release. But even if ratings can be taken at face value, the rating system is confusing and often inadequate.

10) Are Video Games really a danger to my child?

Video and computer games are everywhere. Many of them involve innocent entertainment and learning. But a great number (and more than you might think) involve extremely graphic displays of violence and sexuality. In many of the most popular games the players are often encouraged (and even *rewarded* in the game) for brutal displays of violence, even sexual violence. (For example, in the game *Grand Theft Auto*, gamers can decapitate police officers, massacre them with a chainsaw, and set them on fire. And this is not some rare game: 35 million copies have been sold!)

In many people's thinking these games present a more substantial moral threat than movies and television where children are mere passive observers since in the games they themselves become the agents perpetrating the grotesque immoral behaviors they witness.

Parents are strongly encouraged to learn about the dangers of video games and monitor their child's exposure to them. A great first step is to write down the names of the games their children currently own and read reviews of these games on the internet (see www.almenconi.com and www.pluggedin.com). Additionally parents should consider the following tips:

- Know the rating for the game, but **BEWARE!** You cannot simply go by the ratings. The ratings for games are NOT always accurate.
- Read trustworthy reviews before you purchase the game. (Don't simply trust the information provided by the manufacturer.)
- Put video games and computers in common areas (not in bedrooms). Doing this will help avoid two problems: (1) playing inappropriate games, and (2) developing unhealthy isolationist behaviors.
- Watch your children play or play with them so that you see the content.
- Talk to your children and listen to what they say about the games they play so that you can determine if they are developing an unhealthy obsession with video games.
- Teach your children what is acceptable and what is not and explain why. Establish guidelines for what games are allowed and what are not (inside the home and when visiting friends).

11) How Do I Help My Child Say No to Drugs and Alcohol?

Talk to your children about the dangers of alcohol and drugs. Remind them that their body is a temple and creation of God. Teenagers who say they've learned a lot about the risks of drugs and alcohol from their parents

are much less likely to try illegal substances and alcohol than those who say they learned nothing from them. If an addiction problem develops, seek a licensed counselor who specializes in addiction.

12)Why Should I Discourage My Child From Using Birth Control?

Speak to your children about living chaste and celibate lives. Teach them the incredible value of this choice.

The practice of prayer and reception of the Sacraments helps us to preserve chastity because it obtains for us the grace of God. The best practice for Christian marriage is the practice of chastity before marriage.

Contraception is sinful because it contradicts the divinely ordained purpose of marital intercourse, the fostering of procreative love.

Physicians do, at times, prescribe the birth control pill for medical reasons apart from contraception (such as to regulate hormones). This is not a sinful practice because it is not being used as a contraceptive, but rather a treatment for some problem. However, parents must be very clear and vigilant with their daughters so that they do not view this as some sort of “free pass” to engage in sexual activity, supposedly without the risk of becoming pregnant. Extramarital sexual activity is not only gravely sinful, but it exposes her (and the boys in her life) to serious dangers: a whole host of sexually transmitted diseases that can lead to a life-time of suffering and even death; the slim but still-possible risk of pregnancy because no contraception is 100% full-proof; and the (guaranteed) emotional and relational difficulties that arise from sexual activities divorced from a committed relationship, as well as a distorted view of relationships and sexuality. In addition to these problems, many birth control pills act as abortifacients, meaning that they cause newly fertilized eggs (human beings at the very earliest stages of their development) to be expelled (aborted) from the mother’s body where they cannot survive.

13)If My Child Is Pregnant, How Should I Assist Her In Dealing with the Situation?

The Catholic Church has always held that abortion, the deliberate killing of an unborn child at any time after conception, is a grave sin as the Catholic Church has always taught that all life is sacred. If your child does become pregnant, do not complicate the situation by encouraging her to have an abortion. It is never morally permissible to have an abortion. There are many options for a children facing the challenge of pregnancy, one of which is the adoption of the child by a couple who will love and care for him/her with joy. Never insist upon marriage when pregnancy is involved, as the relationship may be too unstable for that sort of lifetime commitment. Speak to the people at Option Line at 800-395-4357 to explore options. Encourage your teen to go to confession to confess the sin of having sex outside the Sacrament of Marriage. Applaud their efforts to go through the months of pregnancy and to give the innocent child up for adoption.

If you learn that your child has had an abortion, encourage her to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and to get help from a Post-Abortion Healing group. For many women, an abortion leads to post-traumatic-stress symptoms, including anniversary reactions, feelings of fear and anxiety and troubled relationships. Contact Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries toll free at 877-HOPE-4-ME (www.rachelsvineyard.org)

14)What If My Child Says He/She Wants to Kill Himself/Herself?

For some individuals, especially those who are enduring or have endured sexual abuse, experienced severe depression, divorce, confusion about their sexuality or experienced an unexpected pregnancy, suicide may appear to be a solution to the problems and stresses of each day.

If a child says, “I want to kill myself,” “I want to die,” or “I’m going to commit suicide,” this “call for help” should be taken seriously and immediate assistance should be sought from a qualified mental health professional. Most people usually feel uncomfortable talking about death, so such direct disclosure is unusual. More subtle communication, such as, “I think the family would be better off without me,” is more common. It

is imperative that you affirm the child and assure him/her that your family members, his friends, and most of all God love him/her and that his/her life has meaning. Depression and suicidal feelings are treatable mental disorders.

For advice, assistance and support you can contact the Suicide Hopeline at 800-784-2433.

NOTES

¹ In its report on sexual abuse, The Catholic Medical Association has highlighted the importance of the parent-child relationship for preventing abuse: "Securely attached children and adolescents are carefully monitored by their parents who give them adequate love, attention, and discipline for mastering aggression, anger, and anxiety and for recognizing violations of their innocence. Competent parenting enables children to modulate, resolve, and articulate their emotions, to regard others with empathy, to work collaboratively, to respect legitimate authority, and to avoid associating with individuals whose behavior deviates from moral norms. Competent parents are attentive and observant and quickly detect any change in their child's behavior or emotions. They perceive when their child is troubled about something and engage the child in a conversation in order to uncover and resolve the problem. Because securely attached children and adolescents have trusting and reflective relationship with persons of integrity, they are not easily deceived nor are they in need of the counterfeit love, comfort and attention offered by sexual abusers. Children are taught by their competent parents to recognize a situation that is puzzling, frightening, or in violation of moral norms and to report it to a trusted person in authority. For these reasons, children and adolescents who are securely attached to competent parents and caregivers are not the targets of abuse" (*To Protect and Prevent: The Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention*, page 72).

² "The offenders devised ways to be invited to the child's home (33%). Often they obtained access to the child through teaching, tutoring, or playing sports. An alarming number of offenders isolated the child through babysitting (48%). Children were sexually assaulted in an extensive variety of situations: in parks and child recreational areas, during the walk alone to and from school, in restaurant bathrooms, in the predator's home, and in the child's home" (*To Protect and Prevent: The Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention*, pages 15-16).

³ "To overcome the child's resistance the offenders used a period of time – often as long as a year or more – of grooming the victim. Grooming is a premeditated strategy intended to manipulate the potential victim into complying with the sexual abuse....To create a normalization of sexual activity they subtly increased sexual touching during the grooming period. They desensitized the child by talking about sex or showing sexual materials including explicitly videos and magazines" (*To Protect and Prevent: The Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention*, page 16).

⁴ "To maintain the abusive relationship, the offenders instructed the children in secrecy (33%) or portrayed the abuse as a game or as education (42%). They used threats of dire consequences or physical force (24%) and some (19%) actually used physical force. Twenty percent of offenders blamed the child for the abuse or threatened to withdraw their "love" from the child" (*To Protect and Prevent: The Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention*, page 16).

⁵ "There is no foolproof profile of an abuser or his strategies. Education cannot adequately prepare children for the variety of locations, strategies and approaches used by offenders. The danger of sexual abuse is far too pervasive to expect that children can be taught through child-empowerment programs to recognize and protect themselves from offenders. This is particularly obvious when considering that too often parents are disarmed by the benign appearance of the offender and failing to recognize the danger to their children, invite the offender into their home" (*To Protect and Prevent: The Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention*, page 16-17).

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