

Common Myths about Child Sexual Abuse

Here are some common myths about sexual abuse and information to help you understand the facts.

MYTH #1

- The myth is only girls are sexually abused.
- The fact is that many sexually abused children are boys, but these abuses are not reported as often.

MYTH #2

- The myth is that strangers are the most frequent perpetrators of sexual abuse.
- The fact is that 80% of molested children are abused by a person they KNOW. About 51% of these perpetrators are NATURAL PARENTS.

MYTH #3

- The myth is that most cases of sexual abuse are reported.
- The fact is that only 1 in 10 to 1 in 20 incidents are reported, and even fewer are reported if the perpetrator is a relative.

MYTH #4

- The myth is that perpetrators are usually dirty, old, single, homosexual men.
- The fact is that around 97% of reported perpetrators are men. The typical offender is married, heterosexual, and employed. It is almost impossible to identify an abuser by appearance.

MYTH #5

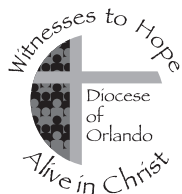
- The myth is that the physical injury of the child is the main focus of treatment.
- The fact is that the greatest injury in an abuse may be long term emotional and psychosocial damage. Only about 5% of sexual abuse cases present medical findings. That is because abuse generally consists of exposing, stroking or touching, or mutual masturbation which is often disguised as a game.

MYTH #6

- The myth is that males cannot control sexual feelings or behaviors.
- The fact is that as with any impulse, or urge, it often takes self-discipline and support to keep from acting on feelings.

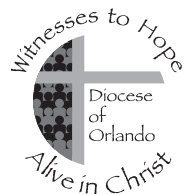
MYTH #7

- The myth is that female children can "seduce" adult males.
- The fact is that an adult is responsible for his actions, and is aware of consequences for his behavior.



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MY DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,

Children are one of our most precious gifts. We recall Jesus' words from the book of Matthew, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Our Church has always welcomed families and traditionally been a place of sanctuary. It is here, where children can learn, grow, and be nurtured. Creating a safe place for everyone, especially for our children, is very important to me. It is an ongoing process that does not happen by just writing policies or reading them. Creating a safe place requires each of us to take action to protect our children.

The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, and the strength of our own policies of this Diocese, are a first step in keeping our Church a safe haven. I assure you that in these policies, we have very strong wording to safeguard our vulnerable populations. In the case of child sexual misconduct, the offender is removed from his/her position. If the offender is a priest, he is removed from the ministry and his faculties are taken away. We no longer call him "father" and he is not allowed to wear clerical clothing.

But assurances in words also require action. It is everyone's responsibility to safeguard those around us. I am counting on each one of you, as I know you are counting on me and other Church leaders, to work together toward this end.

Most Reverend Thomas Wenski



Bishop of Orlando

Standards of Conduct for Church Personnel

Any form of sexual misconduct is sinful in the eyes of God. Certain forms of sexual misconduct can be criminal as well. Church personnel who engage in any form of sexual misconduct are violating the ministerial relationship, misusing their authority and power, and taking advantage of the vulnerability of those they meet. In these circumstances there is an absence of meaningful consent to any sexual activity, even if the person is an adult. It is the responsibility of church personnel to maintain appropriate emotional and sexual boundaries with those with whom they work or serve.

While it is not possible to identify every form of inappropriate conduct that violates a person's boundaries, based on the foregoing, it is inappropriate for church personnel to:

- perform any type of sexual act with anyone.
- give inappropriate gifts (such as lingerie).
- offer a prolonged hug when a brief hug is customary behavior.
- kiss on the lips.
- invite children and young people to their home unsupervised or for overnight stays, even with the permission of the parent or guardian.
- offer drugs to anyone.
- use the internet for pornographic access.
- show sexually suggestive objects or pornography.
- tell tales of sexual exploits, experiences or conflicts.
- make sexual propositions.
- use sexual vulgar language.
- offer children and young people rides to their homes, even with the permission of the parent or guardian.

We recognize some of these restrictions would not apply due to marital status.

THE SEXUAL PREDATOR

Sexual abuse is also referred to as sexual molestation, sexual assault, or sexual battery. Sexual abuse betrays a child's trust and may result in long term emotional or physical damage that affects every part of his or her life. Sexual abuse occurs if a person uses bribery, trickery, power or authority to engage a child in sexual acts or to teach sexual information that is beyond what is normally taught to a child at that age. Sexual abuse is **NEVER** the child's fault.

A sexual predator is typically an acquaintance or family member who is in a position of trust or creates a relationship of trust with individuals. Normally, the sexual predator is very engaging with the children in front of parents or guardians.

The sexual predator will try to win the trust of the parent or guardian first before gaining the trust of the potential victim. The individual will cultivate relationships with the family over time, before coercing the child.

The sexual predator can be of any age or race. Typically, sexual predators are male. Their victims can be either male or female.

The sexual predator is very willing to assist parents or guardians with certain aspects of child rearing, like participating in trips outside of the home, recreation, overnight stays, and other family activities. A sexual predator will separate the child from the parent or guardian in a casual setting.

Some sexual predators will acquaint themselves with a child at a playground or backyard or other area where the child feels safe. The sexual predator may wave to the child each day for a period of time, or bring a small animal to visit the child. Once the sexual predator approaches the child, the child already has established a comfort level with this person.

The most effective ploy used by the sexual predator is gaining the confidence of both parent or guardian and victim through the use of friendship and secrecy.

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PREVENTION

The ultimate responsibility of any adult is to ensure that abuse does not occur. The most effective tool parents have is their natural parental instinct to protect their children. Always be vigilant and aware. The following are some of the preventive measures you can take.

Tell the children that “if someone tries to touch your body and do things that make you feel funny, say **NO** to the person and tell me right away.”

Teach children that respect does not mean blind obedience to adults and to authority—for example, don't tell children to “always do everything the teacher or baby-sitter tells you to do.”

Encourage professional prevention programs in the local school system.

Teach your children the names of their body parts and that their body is private and not supposed to be touched without their permission. Practice saying “no” to a touching request that they do not like or understand. Give them your unconditional permission to say “no” even to a family member.

A number of sexual assaults occur when the child is going to or from school, and the child may be outside the presence of his or her parents. Your child's bus stop should have an adult chaperone whenever possible.

Ask your child to follow your established route to and from school and not to take short-cuts through woods or yards.

If possible, walk with your child to the bus-stop and wait with him/her or walk with your child to and from school.

Teach your child to walk in groups of two or more on the sidewalk walking against the flow of traffic.

Tell your child to speak with you or a teacher about anything that seemed different or made him/her feel uncomfortable on the way to or from school or other daily activities.

Know the adults with whom you entrust your children. Have a back-up plan, if your primary caregiver or babysitter is unavailable. You should know the alternate caregiver or babysitter as well as you know the primary one. Do not automatically assume that the sibling or parent of your usual babysitter will make an appropriate alternative when scheduling difficulties occur.

Inform your child's caregiver or babysitter of boundaries for your child, such as those with whom your child can visit, play, speak, etc.

Monitor e-mails sent to your child by teachers and family members. Be sure they are appropriate in content and frequency.

ASK QUESTIONS. DON'T ASSUME.

Don't be afraid to ask questions of other parents or adults about planned activities for your child. For example:

- What is the chaperone per child ratio?
- Do you know the chaperones or have they been processed through a fingerprint and background check program?
- Do the chaperones have medical authorization and release forms as well as permission slips for your child?
- What are the cell phone numbers of the group leaders and the phone number of where the event will take place?
- If the function involves over night stays—do the planned transportation and accommodations meet your own standards?
- Is there a “buddy” system of groups of three or more youth?
- Is there a plan in place for a large scale emergency?
- Have the chaperones reviewed the rules and guidelines for behavior with your child and shared a copy with you?

SIGNS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A child who is the victim of prolonged sexual abuse usually develops low self-esteem, a feeling of worthlessness, and an abnormal perspective on sexuality. The behavior of sexually abused children may include:

- unusual interest in or avoidance of all things of a sexual nature
- acting out/delinquent behavior
- sleep problems, nightmares
- depression or withdrawal from friends or family
- pseudomature and/or sexually provocative behavior
- statements that their bodies are dirty or damaged, or fear that there is something wrong with them in the genital area
- refusal to go to school, delinquency
- secretiveness
- aspects of sexual molestation in drawings, games, fantasies
- unusual aggressiveness
- bed-wetting
- refuses to leave people alone in bathroom
- forces child to play doctor, to take off clothes
- displays fear or anger about babies or intercourse
- exposes self in public or refuses to put on clothes
- touches or rubs self in public or private to the exclusion of normal childhood activities
- in drawings, features genitals as prominent
- bruising or swelling of genitals
- protestations over being left alone with an acquaintance
- academic or social difficulties at school
- suicidal behavior
- other severe behavior changes

PAY ATTENTION. AND LISTEN.

For parents and other adults, the most significant contribution you can make to a child's healing is to watch and listen for signs that indicate something is not right. Children almost never invent stories of sexual abuse. They do not have the knowledge to invent details of this type of assault. When a child tells an adult that he or she has been sexually abused, the adult may feel uncomfortable and may not know what to say or do. Here are some suggestions for responding to children who have been sexually abused.

WHAT TO SAY

If a child even hints in a vague way that sexual abuse has occurred, encourage him or her to talk freely. Don't make judgmental comments.

- Do not lead your child in his or her discussion. Let the child tell the story.
- Show that you understand and take seriously what the child is saying. The response to the disclosure of sexual abuse is critical to the child's ability to resolve the trauma of sexual abuse. Hold the child's hand or offer a hug of reassurance after the child is finished.
- Assure the child that he or she did the right thing in telling. A child who is close to the abuser may feel guilty about revealing the secret. The child may feel frightened if the abuser has threatened to harm the child or other family members as punishment for telling the secret.
- Tell the child that it is not his or her fault for the sexual abuse. Most children will believe they somehow caused the abuse in an attempt to make sense out of it.
- Offer the child protection and promise that you will promptly take steps to see that the abuse stops.

WHAT TO DO

Call law enforcement or the Child Abuse Hotline immediately. The phone number of the Child Abuse Hotline is 800-962-2873. When you call, make a note of the person with whom you spoke and the number assigned to your case.

- Make the child feel safe, so the child can talk freely.
- Seek a medical examination and psychiatric consultation.
- Assure the child through a parental hug or hand-holding.

SIGNS: low self-esteem, a feeling of worthlessness and an abnormal perspective on sexuality

INTERNET SAFETY

Youth and young adults are drawn to social websites to chronicle their lives and interact with friends. To them, these websites are private spaces (private to them because their parents aren't tuning in) in which they can interact the open multimedia style of the online world.

To parents and other adults, these social websites are places where youth and young adults can naively put their own personal safety, reputations, and futures at risk. Many of their words and pictures are reaching beyond the peers for whom they were intended; thus, making themselves vulnerable to predators.

Our young people can teach us about the wonders and capabilities of new technology. As priests, deacons, parents, teachers, and other adults, it is our responsibility to educate them about safety, personal responsibility, technology manners, and life beyond the screen. Some helpful suggestions include:

- Keep computers in the public areas of your home.
- Set limits for your children by monitoring the content of their writing and the time they spend online.
- Have a full discussion with your child about the dangers of posting personal information and photos.
- Emphasize that e-mail is not private—a mean remark can easily be forwarded and cause hurt feelings.
- Limit your children's "IM buddy list" to only people they know and block all other incoming messages.
- Tell your children to never share their password.
- Know the "Terms of Use" agreements for sites that host chat rooms or blogs.
- Have your children be your teacher—get on IM, download MP3 music files, create a MySpace.com account. Learn the lingo and its meaning.
- Teach technology manners—no cell phones at the dinner table, no video games while conversing, etc.
- Make your online behavior and television viewing an example for your children.
- Tell your children to never write anything on the internet that they would not say directly to a person's face.
- Purchase tracking software that can block inappropriate messages and websites, as well as track online activity.
- If your children get threatening or harassing e-mail, forward the harasser's e-mails to the sender's e-mail provider with a request that the cyberbully's account be terminated. Spam filters can also be used to block the receipt of e-mails from "problem" addresses.
- Access these websites to stay informed about safe internet use, to find out more about cyberbullying, and to discover steps to take to protect your children:

- www.WiredSafety.org
- www.Internetsuperheros.org
- www.Stopcyberbullying.org
- www.isafe.org
- www.WiredKids.org
- www.Stoptextbully.org
- www.netsmartz.org