

# Safeguarding the children

*More than 30,000 parishioners have participated in child-abuse prevention training.*

————— *Eleventh in a series* —————

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles is committed to providing a safe environment for children, which includes ongoing education on the prevention of child abuse.

Cardinal Roger Mahony has been in the forefront of ensuring the safety of parishes and parish schools through the establishment of the Office of Safeguard the Children and the adoption of rigorous archdiocesan policies.

Prevention of child sexual abuse is not just a church problem. It is a societal problem, and the need for broad child-abuse prevention measures throughout society is enormous. Sadly, according to national statistics, one in five girls and one in 10 boys are sexually abused prior to the age of 18.

The formation of Safeguard the Children Parish Committees was mandated by Cardinal Mahony in 2002. These parish committees are foundational in ensuring the safe environment of our parishes and schools throughout the Archdiocese. More than 95 percent of the parishes have formed a permanent committee to coordinate initiatives such as education opportunities, site evaluations, and local presentations by speakers including police, nurses and therapists. The committees are also responsible for implementing archdiocesan safe environment policies and procedures.

Beginning in 2003 an emphasis has been put on awareness and training programs implemented by the archdiocesan Office of Safeguard the Children. These trainings are having far reaching effects in maintaining a safe environment at all archdiocesan parishes and schools. “The only way we will make a difference is through education,” says Joan Vienna, director of the Offices of Safeguard the Children and Family Life.

VIRTUS Adult Awareness Sessions include training about warning signs that indicate an adult is engaged in an inappropriate or abusive relationship with a child. All parish and school volunteers, teachers, clergy, religious, staff and paid personnel who work in any capacity with or around children must participate in the VIRTUS program. Since VIRTUS was introduced in the archdiocese in early 2004, more than 30,000 people have participated in the training.

Another focus has been the “Good Touch/Bad Touch” body safety program for children, which was launched in 2005 in Catholic elementary schools and

parish religious education programs for grades K-6. It encourages children to trust their instincts, and to report or assert themselves when they feel unsafe. They learn that abuse is never the child’s fault.

This program was supported by a grant from UniHealth Foundation, a non-profit philanthropic organization whose mission is to support and facilitate activities that significantly improve the health and well being of individuals and communities within its service area.

A new program, Establishing Healthy Boundaries, is geared towards helping teachers and catechists engage 7th, 8th and 9th graders in discussions focusing on sexual abuse, sexual harassment and bullying. Students gain greater confidence in being able to say “No.”

Trained facilitators are ensuring that children, youth and adults are clear about appropriate body safety boundaries. “Through these programs, children are being trained to come forward if they don’t feel safe, and adults are being trained to listen,” says Vienna.

Those working or volunteering with youth are also required to review and sign a code of conduct: Guidelines for Adults Interacting with Minors at Parish and Parish School Events. Another code of conduct has been developed for junior high and high school youth who work or volunteer with children or youth in school or parish settings. These guidelines establish boundaries for adults working with children.

“We can show children we care about them, but still keep appropriate boundaries,” says Vienna.

Safeguard the Children works also works collaboratively with the Offices of Catholic Schools, Religious Education, and Family Life. The archdiocesan Department of Human Resources coordinates the fingerprinting and background checking of those who have regular contact with minors. The commitment of clergy and laity working side-by-side has been “outstanding,” adds Vienna. People want to be part of the solution to the societal problem of child sex abuse. “This has been one tremendous collaboration.”

As parishes and schools gain experience, policies and programs will continue to be developed and revised. Vienna hopes that the impact will extend beyond parish boundaries and increase children’s safety in families and neighborhoods.

“Our dream is to protect all children, because every child deserves to have a safe and happy childhood” says Vienna. “God is calling us to do this.”

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