

Safe Environment Training of Children in the Catholic Church

Safe Environment Work Group Report

April 2007

Report of the Safe Environment Work Group

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SECTION I

Report of the Safe Environment Work Group

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1. Introduction

Compliance audits are mandated by the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* as a measure of accountability for the diocesan bishop/eparch. During the first (2003) and second (2004) rounds of compliance audits, dioceses/eparchies were asked to detail their plans to implement Article 12 that calls for safe environment training and education for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, volunteers and others. In the third cycle of audits (2005), diocese/eparchies were expected to demonstrate that this training was provided to all groups outlined in Article 12 of the *Charter*. As full blown implementation was taking place across the country, the challenges of training children and young people became apparent. Selecting a program that is age/grade appropriate and that reflects "Catholic moral principles", providing a program that teachers and catechists are confident in presenting, establishing a training schedule for the students in parish based religious education programs, and addressing the concerns raised by parents about their role in the education of their children emerged as significant issues related to the implementation of Article 12 at the diocesan/eparchial and parish levels.

The Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People and the National Review Board recognized the need to address the concerns that followed the efforts of dioceses/eparchies to respond to the requirements defined in Article 12 of the *Charter*. Bishop Gregory M. Aymond, chair of the CPCYP and Dr. Patricia O. Ewers, Chair of the NRB, appointed a seven member work group to address these concerns. The work group included two members of the CPCYP: Bishop Stephen Blaire, Bishop of Stockton, and Bishop Richard Malone, Bishop of Portland in Maine; two members of the NRB: Mrs. Jane Chiles of Lexington, KY and Mr. Thomas DeStefano of Trenton, NJ; a representative of the Bishops' Committee on Education: Bishop George Murry, SJ, Bishop of Youngstown, OH; a Superintendent of Catholic Schools, Sr. Mary Leanne Welch of Birmingham, AL and Dr. Gini Shimabukuro of the Institute for Catholic Education Leadership, University of San Francisco. Bishop Stephen Blaire served as chair of the group.

The following task was given to the Safe Environment Work Group:

Goals:

1. Invite input from child psychologists on the appropriateness of providing safety training to young children
2. Describe the scope and sequence of safety training
3. Identify age and grade appropriate concepts for safety training
4. Outline the key elements of Church teaching as it applies to safety training, i.e. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

At the initial meeting, the work group reviewed this task and identified the following issues to cover in its work:

- Criteria for Safe Environment Programs
- Conformity of the content of Safe Environment Programs with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

- Safety Training vs. Sex Education
- Role of the Parents
- Training of Teachers
- Cultural Issues
- Frequency of Training
- Research – Review of Current Literature on the effectiveness of the training
- Quality of the Programs

To complete the task, the work group surveyed the Safe Environment Coordinators of all dioceses/eparchies, described and validated assumptions and criteria for safety training, explained the rationale for safety training, and requested a review of the report of the Catholic Medical Association, *To Protect and To Prevent*, which recommended rescinding safety training for children.

2. Rationale for Diocesan and Parish Sponsored Safe Environment Programs for Children

The bishops of the Catholic Church in the United States have accepted a moral responsibility to create safe environments that protect children and young people from sexual abuse. That responsibility is rooted in the dignity of the human person as proclaimed in the Scriptures and the teachings of the Catholic Church. It is also articulated in the *Charter*. As one means of fulfilling that responsibility, the Bishops have mandated that training and education be provided “about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children and young people.”

The purposes of safe environment programs are threefold. First, safe environment programs teach bishops, priests, deacons, religious men and women, parents, teachers and volunteers the signs that indicate the presence of sexual predators and the signs of abuse. Armed with this knowledge and awareness, Church leaders and parents will be better prepared to prevent abuse.

Second, safe environment programs make children aware, give them the skills and offer them the freedom to come forward when an adult attempts to injure them or they have been, in fact, injured. Abusers can be identified, lessening the opportunity for further abuse to additional children. As a consequence, attempted or actual abuse will not remain a dark secret and healing may begin.

Third, safe environment programs encourage the development of structures of vigilance, mutual accountability and collaboration between children and young people and responsible adults for the purpose of protecting minors from sexual abuse. By mandating safe environment programs in dioceses and eparchies, the bishops have established reasonable means of implementing a resolve to ensure that children and young people are safe whenever they are under the auspices of the Church, to rebuild trust among those who are served, and to provide structures that are capable of sustaining and evaluating our efforts.

Although the primary responsibility for the education of children and young people rests with parents, the responsibility for the safety of children and young people within the sphere of influence of the Church belongs to the entire adult community under the leadership of the bishops. In order to be good shepherds, bishops and eparchs are committed to ongoing education about the problem of sexual abuse

of children and young people, as well as the education of parents, children and all those who work with children and young people. Safe environment programs provide this education. Thus, they are essential.

3. Survey

To better understand the experience dioceses/eparchies have had with the implementation of Article 12, the work group developed and distributed an information survey to all 195 dioceses and eparchies via the bishoponly website and the Safe Environment Coordinators Listserv. Responses were received from ninety-four dioceses and one eparchy, representing an over all response rate of 49%. Most eparchies use programs in place in the Roman diocese where a parish is located.

A summary of the findings follows and is reported in accord with the format of the survey.

Overall findings:

- 67% (66) of the respondents rated their satisfaction with the implementation of safety training programs as high or very high.
- Several respondents called for a nationally approved program.
- Several suggested that the publishers of religious education textbooks be asked to integrate *safety* material into their textbooks.

Program Selection:

- The two most highly rated criteria for selecting a program were these: 1) the materials are age appropriate, and 2) the materials are consistent with Church teaching. Ease of administration, respect for the role of the parents and costs were other frequently mentioned selection criteria.
- 34% (32) of the responding dioceses indicated that they made changes to the programs. These changes included: additions to the program, selection of video/DVD instructional materials, and use of one program for all grades.
- 58% (50) conducted some form of evaluation. These ranged from evaluation by students, by adult participants and by instructors. Those who had not undertaken an evaluation indicated that it was too soon for such a step.
- The following were the most frequently mentioned recommendations about program selection:
 - 1) Develop core requirements for curriculum content
 - 2) Develop a chart that offers a comparison of the most commonly used programs to include grade levels, number of lessons per year, availability of a parents manual, use of DVD's or videos, and costs.

Parental Involvement:

- 86% (84) of the respondents offered parent orientations prior to beginning the programs with children.
- 89% (84) provided an "opt out" option for parents.
- 53% (50) reported that less than 5% of the parents opted out; 7% (7) reported opt out rates of 8% -25%, and 41% (39) did not respond.

- The major obstacle to parent preparation was the low rate of participation in training sessions.

Instructor Preparation:

Teachers in Catholic Schools

- 75% (66) of teachers received special training to present their respective safety training programs. A comfort level of high to very high was reported for 59% (47) of the teachers who were trained.
- If the respondents could re-do implementation of the safety program at the school level, they would attempt to involve parents more, they would train the trainers at the deanery level, and they would train teachers to handle reports of abuse from children.

Catechists

- 70% (64) of catechists received special training to present their respective safety training programs. A comfort level of high to very high was reported for 33% (24) of the catechists who were trained.
- Given the opportunity to re-do implementation, respondents would seek greater support of their programs from pastors.

Training Children in Religious Education Programs

- Instruction time, absentee rates and support of the pastors were named as significant issues in offering safety training to students.
- 33% (32) of the responding dioceses/eparchies indicated that they rely on the safety training instruction provided in public schools to train religious education students.
- 43% (13) of the dioceses who rely on public school training have reviewed the programs.

4. Assumptions and Criteria for Safety Training Programs for Children

The Safe Environment Work Group developed assumptions and criteria to govern safety training programs. These assumptions and criteria are rooted in Article 364 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The assumptions and criteria were forwarded to a “virtual” panel of experts for review and ranking. This validation panel included a theologian, educators, catechetical leaders, child psychologists and practitioners in the field of safety training. The validation panel members were asked to rank their agreement with each of the assumptions and criteria on a scale of 1-10 and were invited to offer comments on their rankings. This feedback assisted the work group in formulating the following assumptions and criteria for use in the selection of safety training programs.

Assumptions for the Implementation of Safety Training Programs for Children

1. Lessons in safety training for children will include annual training with ongoing reinforcement within the program and at home.
2. Age appropriate lessons in safety training will begin no later than kindergarten and

continue through high school.

3. Basic curriculum criteria will be similar at all levels with wording, application and examples being different.

Criteria for the Selection of Safety Training Program for Children

Article 364 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “The human body shares in the dignity of the image of God...” These criteria are presented in the light of this understanding and teaching of the Church.

The work group offers the ten criteria for use in the selection of safety training materials at the diocesan/eparchial level. The appropriate grade levels are indicated for each criteria.

Appropriate for all grade levels:

- Conforms with *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
- Parts of our bodies are considered private and we respect these in self and others.
- I am a person loved by God and deserving of respect
- There is a difference between safe and unsafe touch.
- It is all right to say “no” to violation of personal space.
- It is important to report abuse of self or others until one is believed.
- There are strategies to help protect oneself.

Appropriate for Grade levels 7-12

- A healthy relationship requires individuals to support the life and dignity of one another in all aspects.

Appropriate for Grade Levels 9-12

- All persons have the right to expect personal and vocational lives free of harassment.
- Every person has the obligation to ensure that those whom he or she leads or supervises are free of harassment

5. Providing Safety Training to Children who Participate in Parish Based Programs of Religious Instruction.

Providing safety training to the children who attend Catholic, parish schools has been verified as being accomplished in those dioceses/eparchies that have been audited. Providing this training to children who participate in religious education programs at the parish level has been the most difficult area in implementing Article 12 of the *Charter*. One of the recommendations made to the work group through the survey was the integration of safety training into religious education materials. Religious education instruction time is frequently used for safety training because it is practical in that it is the one opportunity to reach out to the greatest number of children and youth. As previously noted, integrating and/or aligning safety training into religious instruction offers many obstacles. Time is a constraint. On average, religious education programs offer 25 lessons per year. Absenteeism among children in religious education programs is high. Additionally, in large part this training is provided by volunteer catechists, many of whom are not comfortable with safety training materials. Also, many professionally trained catechists question the inclusion of safety training in programs intended to provide instruction in the faith.

At its September 2006 meeting, the Ad Hoc Committee on the Catechism met with the publishers of religion and religious education textbooks. At the request of the Safe Environment Work Group, the Ad Hoc Committee asked the publishers about incorporating safety training into their materials. If so directed by the Bishops, the publishers are willing to consider this inclusion.

One publishing company is already working with a diocese in the Northeast to create a document that aligns the religious education instructional material and safety training.

6. Challenges to Article 12 of the *Charter* Concerning Safety Training to Children

Objections to offering safety training to children have been raised by individual parents and by organizations concerned with the effectiveness and appropriateness of such training.

One group, the Catholic Medical Association publicly challenged the safety training of children required in Article 12 of the *Charter*.

In October 2006, the Catholic Medical Association released its own study, *To Protect and to Prevent*, and called on the bishops to rescind the requirement to provide safety training for children. This recommendation rests on questions concerning effectiveness of this training, the science of child development and the 1992 document, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, issued by the Pontifical Council on the Family.

The Safe Environment Work Group asked Dr. David Finkelhor, Director of the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, to review this study on the first two points –effectiveness of safety training and the science of child development. Dr. John Grabowski, Associate Professor and Director of Moral Theology/Ethics at The Catholic University of America and

Consultant to the Bishop's Committee on Marriage and Family Life, was asked to review the study from the theological perspective.

Dr. Finkelhor indicated that while the evidence of effectiveness is far from conclusive, it does suggest that school based prevention education programs are worth implementing as a component of a more comprehensive strategy to prevent the sexual abuse of children. A study conducted in 1995 by Dr. Finkelhor failed to find that children with prior exposure to prevention programs had fewer subsequent victimizations. However, this study indicated that exposure to prevention education increased the likelihood that children would disclose, resulting in termination or shortened duration of the abuse, mobilization of assistance, reduction in isolation and the children seeing that they had successfully protected themselves. Exposure to prevention training also decreased the likelihood that children would blame themselves.

Dr. Grabowski responded that the paper (*To Protect and To Prevent*) seemed cogent and well-argued, congruent with the main line of the Church's teaching. While *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* invoked the rights of the parents to be the primary educators of their children in matters of faith and morals, a 1986 document of the Pontifical Council for Education *Educational Guidance in Human Love* noted that parents sometimes do not fulfill this responsibility and, therefore, educators in the Church need to assist the family. Dr. Grabowski also pointed out that *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* recognizes that young children need to be provided with enough information to protect themselves from abuse.

The work group acknowledges the emphasis that the Catholic Medical Association paper provides on the role and significance of the family. Based on the information researched, the Work Group concluded that there is evidence safe environment programs for children have a positive effect on children, are consistent with the science of child development and are in accord with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

7. Recommendations

The Safe Environment Work Group recommends that:

1. The members of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops continue and strengthen its efforts to create safe environments for the children and youth entrusted to the care of the Church by providing safety training to these children and young people.
2. Dioceses/eparchies reinforce the role of the parents in the education of their children in matters of faith and morals.
3. Dioceses/eparchies renew their efforts to orient and educate parents in safety education programs.
4. The assumptions and criteria offered in this report guide the selection of training materials to be used with children at the diocesan/eparchial level.

5. Children and young people receive safety training annually at each grade level and that this training is reinforced with regularity within the program and at home.
6. The CPCYP request that the Bishops' Committee on Education and/or the Bishops' Committee of Catechesis approach the publishers of religion and religious education textbooks to integrate and/or align safety training into their materials.
7. The dioceses/eparchies that rely on state/public school mandated safety training review the programs in light of the assumptions and criteria offered in this report.
8. Dioceses/eparchies consider adopting a "train the trainer" model for providing safety training to children. Such an approach will improve consistency of instruction and address the concern about the capacity of volunteers to provide this training.
9. Instructors of safety training programs receive training in handling disclosures of abuse that may emerge during the training.
10. Catholic institutions with schools of education and with research capacity be encouraged to conduct research on the effectiveness of safety training of children and young people.
11. The selection process for materials used with children must consider the visual and oral presentation of the content in addition to the guidance from criteria to insure age and cultural appropriateness.
12. Programs use technology such as CD or DVD to present material to assure consistency of content and approach.

8. Conclusions

Dioceses/eparchies in the United States have made significant progress in selecting, training, and offering safety training to its priests, deacons, educators, employees, parents, volunteers and children. Three and one half years after the adoption of the *Charter*, the compliance audit results indicate that over 5,760,000 million (94.8%) children and young people have received safety training. This is a major accomplishment and one that must continually be maintained and reinforced. Providing safety training to priests, deacons, educators, employees, volunteers, parents and children is an ongoing responsibility of dioceses and eparchies.

The initial implementation phase has been completed. During the ongoing implementation, period dioceses/eparchies will have the opportunity to evaluate their efforts with an eye to improvement.

This report, with its recommendations, is offered as a tool for the ongoing implementation of safety training.

SECTION II

Appendix: Report from Dr. David Finkelhor

The Prevention of Sexual Abuse through Educational Programs
Directed toward Children and Their Families:
A Commentary on the Report from the Catholic Medical Association

David Finkelhor, Ph.D.
Director
Crimes against Children Research Center
Professor of Sociology
University of New Hampshire
Durham, New Hampshire
(603) 862-2761

Summary

The Catholic Medical Association report on the sexual abuse of children and its prevention **does not present an accurate summary** of the research and scholarship on the school based prevention education programs when it concludes that such programs are "ineffective" and "inconsistent with the science." It is true that some scholars have criticized these programs, and one study failed to find evidence that children exposed to such programs had less subsequent victimization.

On the other hand, there is considerable research evidence that suggests that the programs can accomplish many of their goals:

- 1) One study has found less victimization among youth exposed to such programs.
- 2) Several studies have shown that such programs promote the reporting of victimization.
- 3) One study suggests that the programs may reduce self blame among victimized children.
- 4) Many studies have shown that children can learn the concepts offered in the programs.
- 5) Large reductions in sexual abuse and sexual assault against children since 1993 are consistent with suggestions that the widespread dissemination of such programs may have had some general benefit.

Studies have also addressed and found little support in general for the idea that the programs have negative consequences, but not all the negative effects raised by the CMA report have been subjected to comprehensive evaluation

The evidence, while far from conclusive, does suggest that **school based prevention education programs are worth implementing as a component of a more comprehensive strategy to prevent the sexual abuse of children.** Other strategies may also be helpful, but most other strategies, including those proposed in the CMA report, have no or considerably less scientific evidence that they can work to prevent sexual abuse or reduce its impact.

Introduction

A Task Force of the Catholic Medical Association has issued a report on the Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention. This report argues strongly against what it calls “child-empowerment programs” aimed at preventing sexual abuse. It argues that these programs are “ineffective at preventing sexual abuse,” and “inconsistent with the science of emotional, cognitive, neurobiological and moral development of the child.” The report also argues that they are “inconsistent with the Church’s teaching.”

I have been asked to comment on the Report’s conclusions with regard to the first two of these issues.

The programs of concern to the CMA are programs that instruct children about sexual abuse and sexual victimization, and try to impart a variety of messages to children (also their parents) about how to identify abuse, how to react when approached, and what to do in the aftermath. These programs are typically delivered in school settings or other youth service environments. They typically have components directed toward parents, teachers and youth service staff, as well. Well-known examples of such programs are “Talking about Touching” from the Seattle-based Committee For Children and the Child Assault Prevention program used statewide in New Jersey. Although the CMA report refers to these as “empowerment” programs, they have a variety of philosophies. I will refer to them as “school based prevention education programs” or “prevention programs,” for short, since this is how they are referred to in the literature more frequently than as “empowerment” programs.

The CMA report’s conclusion that programs are ineffective are based on two central arguments:

- 1) That the concepts are misguided, cannot be understood and implemented by children, and fundamentally will not work, even if implemented;
- 2) That no empirical evidence has established that they do work.

We will refer to these respectively as the “conceptual critique” and the “empirical critique.”

The conceptual critique focuses on several arguments:

- a) That many of the concepts contained in these programs are complicated and cannot be understood by children at the preschool and elementary school level.
- b) That sexual abuse, as a highly motivated activity of devious and powerful adults, intrinsically cannot be prevented or deterred by the actions of children.
- c) That some of the concepts and their implementation may actually endanger or harm children rather than protect them.

The empirical critique in the CMA report focuses on two findings based on two studies:

A 1995 study by David Finkelhor that did not find reduced incidence of sexual assault or decreased injury among children who had been exposed to prevention programs (Finkelhor, Asdigian, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995).

A 2003 study by Rebecca Bolen reporting that the prevalence of child sexual abuse had not decreased during or after the period when child prevention education programs had been widely implemented (Bolcn, 2003).

Analysis

Complexity of Program Concepts

The CMA report argues that many of the concepts contained in these programs are complicated and cannot be understood by children at the preschool and elementary school level.

Comment

1. Scholarly opinion about the conceptual basis of the programs indeed is not unanimous, and some scholars have been dubious about the concepts (Krivacska, 1990; Melton, 1992). However, the majority of the existing published reports on prevention education have supported it, as do majority of authorities on sexual abuse (Davis & Gidycz, 2000; Finkelhor & Strapko, 1992).
2. The CMA review, unfortunately, only cites the most critical scholars and almost entirely ignores other more favorable scholarly perspectives. It relies heavily on a dated study by Berrick & Gilbert (1991), who reviewed a set of early programs that do not reflect current practices in the field
3. A majority of studies find that children at all ages do acquire the key concepts that are being taught (Berrick & Barth, 1992; Davis & Gidycz, 2000; Finkelhor & Strapko, 1992; Rispens, Alcmán, & Goudcna, 1997). While that does not establish that children can implement them, it is an argument against the broad claim made by critics that the concepts are categorically too complicated to be learned.
4. The critique of the concepts boils down to a claim that some of the concepts are inappropriate for some of the children, for example, younger children. However, this is not the same as an argument that the programs are worthless. Even if the concepts are grasped by only some children, for example, older children, they may be beneficial. And some of the concepts, like emphasis on the importance of telling an adult, are generally seen as non-controversial, easy to understand and may be helpful for most children, even if some of the other concepts are complicated.
5. A variety of other school-based programs with very similar theoretical underpinnings have been proven effective in high quality randomized controlled evaluations (Durlak, 1995). These include school-based programs to prevent bullying, drug use, and to improve interpersonal skills. All of these programs have some components that are cognitively complicated, and involve judgments about the intentions of other people. All of these programs have components that could be described as “child empowerment” in

the sense that they try to train children to resist pressures from other, in many cases, more powerful people. The scientific literature is conclusive that this type of approach works as a general prevention strategy.

In distinction to the CMA conclusion that the concepts are not appropriate or learnable, a fairer assessment of the scientific literature is that, while there has been some scholarly criticism of the concepts, the balance of the literature suggests that many young people can learn and understand many or most of the program concepts.

Impossibility of Children Preventing Assaults

The CMA report argues that sexual abuse cannot be prevented or deterred by the actions of children. "Children are vulnerable to victimization because they are smaller, weaker, and less sophisticated compared with the larger, older, aggressive, and crafty offenders" (p. 14). This argument is based in part on studies of incarcerated offenders who said they were highly motivated to abuse, unlikely to be deterred and used forceful or sophisticated strategies to engage their victims.

Comment

The CMA characterization of abusers and abuse dynamics is a great oversimplification. It fails to accurately represent the wide variety of offenders and offense situations, in many of which prevention strategies may indeed work.

- 1) Up to a third of sex offenses against children occur at the hands of other youth and peers. Some adult offenders abuse children on impulse or in a situation of opportunity without considerable planning. Some sex crimes occur in abduction situations, and most authorities and parents believe it useful to teach children to resist child abductions. Many offenders including adult offenders have some ambivalence or fear about what they are doing, including a fear of getting caught. Even highly motivated offenders also report that they do make discriminations among potential victims based on how amenable they may be to their manipulations. In all these situations, it is possible that some of the resistance skills taught by prevention programs may make a difference between a child being victimized or not.
- 2) Even if they were only successful in a relatively small percentage of situations, given the widespread occurrence of sexual victimization, resistance and other prevention strategies might be of assistance to a considerable number of children.
- 3) The conclusion that offenders are unstoppable is based on conversations with samples of offenders who are not representative of the full spectrum. Incarcerated and even convicted offenders are not representative of all offenders. They are individuals who have committed more serious and more repetitive offenses. Many of the potential offenders who might most be deterred by children's resistance are not incarcerated and may not even have been caught.

The CMA claim that sexual abuse cannot ever be prevented by children is far too categorical. Children may be able to prevent some or much sexual abuse. Even if difficult, children themselves would undoubtedly prefer to have the knowledge and skills to try. We give children skills for other challenging and unequal prevention situations, like stranger abduction. Ultimately, the arguments about how much sexual abuse can be prevented are currently in the realm of speculation. Research is needed to settle the issue, and little of that research has yet been done. But it is certainly premature to abandon the strategy solely on the basis of speculative arguments.

Very importantly, school-based prevention education programs have additional, important objectives beside those of preventing victimization. These include promoting the reporting of victimization, reducing the stigma and self-blame that victimized children feel, and educating parents, teachers and other community members about the problem. There is evidence that they accomplish some of these goals (see below). The programs could be justified solely on the basis of these goals, even if actual prevention was relatively uncommon.

Empirical Findings about Effectiveness

The CMA report argues that no empirical evidence has established that prevention education programs work to reduce the likelihood of sexual abuse. Hence they should be abandoned

Commentary

The 1995 Finkelhor study (Finkelhor et al., 1995), cited in the CMA report, did indeed fail to find that children with prior exposure to prevention programs had fewer subsequent victimizations. But the findings of this study were not definitive, and have a variety of explanations.

1. Most important, it is very hard for any evaluation study of this issue to assess subsequent victimizations accurately. Because programs encourage children to disclose and help them define what abuse is, it may create additional disclosures from children who have been exposed to the programs in contrast to non-exposed children. So exposed children may tell about more, even when they experience less. This can give a misleading impression of no effect or even greater victimization among children exposed to prevention programs.
2. In addition, the Finkelhor study did not have a conclusive way to differentiate which youth had been exposed to programs and which had not. The study had to rely on the youth's recollection. Thus, it was a relatively weak test of programs.
3. There were, nonetheless, positive findings in the 1995 Finkelhor study that were not mentioned in the CMA report. Exposure to prevention education was associated with an increased likelihood that children would disclose victimizations, an increased likelihood that they would see themselves as having successfully protected themselves, and a decreased likelihood that they would blame themselves for the episode. These are not trivial outcomes, since they may determine what impact the abuse has on children.

4. The CMA report incorrectly summarizes the conclusion from the 1995 Finkelhor study (Finkelhor et al., 1995). The CMA report states: "Finkelhor concluded that child-empowerment strategies are not an effective approach to prevent child or adolescent sexual victimization." The actual conclusion of the study was: "If the findings of this study prove to be generalizable, prevention education may be more effective in helping children to disclose and react to the victimization than in avoiding it. Prevention educators need to plan and promote such programs with these realistic goals in mind (p 1689)." This is a conclusion with very different implications from the ones implied in the CMA report.

The CMA report also fails to cite another important study suggesting that exposure to prevention programs **did help to prevent sexual abuse**. Based on a survey of 825 college students, Gibson & Leitenberg (2000) concluded that "adult women who had not participated in a school prevention program during childhood were about twice as likely to have experienced child sexual abuse as those who had participated in a program." This is also a study with a relatively weak design. But it contradicts the assertion that no study has found a suggestion of effectiveness in preventing victimization.

The CMA report also concludes that prevention education is ineffective because sexual abuse rates have not declined subsequent to the implementation of these programs. The report bases its claim about rates on a 2003 study by Bolcn and Scannapieco (1999). However, much better and more recent evidence suggests, contrary to Bolcn and Scannapieco, that there **have been large declines** in sexual abuse.

1. More recent studies with designs better suited to detect trends have found large declines in sexual abuse since 1993. National data on substantiated sexual abuse from state child protective agencies has found a 49% decline in sexual abuse from 1993-2004 (Finkelhor & Jones, in press; Jones, Finkelhor, & Halter, 2006). Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey has found a 67% decline in sexual assaults against youth 12-17 from 1993-2004. Many factors have played a role in these declines. The declines did occur in the period subsequent to the dissemination of prevention education programs, but the declines may or may not have resulted from this dissemination. However, it is wrong to claim categorically, as the CMA report does, that there have been no declines, when some studies show that there have been substantial ones.
2. The study by Bolcn and Scannapieco, cited by the CMA report, was not a study that was well designed to draw conclusions about changes in the rate of abuse since the 1980s when these prevention programs were implemented. The study was a meta-analysis of surveys of adults done with different methodologies at various points in time from 1983-1997, the most recent one being adults of all ages interviewed in 1997. Extremely few of the adult participants in any of those studies were young enough to have been exposed to the prevention education programs that became widespread only in the late 1980s, and certainly not to the more refined programs that are the basis of current practice.

The CMA report bases its critique of prevention education programs on their presumed failure to prevent the occurrence of sexual victimization. However, even if there was no evidence of reduced victimization among children exposed to the programs, the programs have a number of other objectives beside the prevention of sexual abuse. These other objectives include:

- the promotion of disclosure by victims
- the prevention of negative outcomes subsequent to victimization such as guilt feelings, self blame, and shame
- the creation of a more sensitive environment among adults, other children and organizations in general to respond and help child victims.

The literature is virtually unanimous that the programs promote disclosure, and at least one study has found that program exposure reduces self blame (Finkelhor et al., 1995). These are not trivial outcomes. Disclosure may result in much better outcomes for a child because it may terminate and shorten the duration of the abuse, mobilize assistance, and reduce isolation. It may also allow the identification of perpetrators and reduce future offending. Reductions in self blame are believed to be associated with better mental health outcomes (Andrews, 1995).

Possible Negative Effects of Programs

The CMA report suggests that prevention education programs may provoke negative effects. These include undue fear, failure to comply with the reasonable demands of adults, false reports, increased injuries at the hands of abusers and distortions of healthy sexual development.

Commentary

Unfortunately, there has not been comprehensive research conducted on every one of the potential negative side effects that have been articulated. However, research on several of the most frequently mentioned side effects have not supported the concerns.

1. **Anxiety:** Studies have not found increased levels of anxiety among children in the wake of program exposure (Hazzard, Celano, Gould, Lawry, & Webb, 1995; Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Wurtele, Kast, Miller-Perrin, & Kondrick, 1989; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1992). When children do report worry after program exposure, it seems to be a level of concern that is appropriate to an increased vigilance about the problem, and is associated with favorable views of the program (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995).

2. **Failure to comply with authority:** Few parents and teachers report adverse reactions in the wake of program exposure (Binder & McNeil, 1986; Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995; Hazzard, Webb, Kleemeier, Angert, & Pohl, 1991; Nibert, Cooper, & Ford, 1989; Swan, Pruss, & Briggs, 1985; Wurtele, 1990, 1993b; Wurtele, Gillispie, Currier, & Franklin, 1992; Wurtele et al., 1989; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1992). In contrast, studies have found increases in parent-child communication after involvement in prevention education (Binder & McNeil, 1986; Finkelhor et al., 1995; Hazzard et al., 1991; Kolko, Moser, Litz, & Hughes, 1987; Wurtele, 1990; Wurtele et al., 1989; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1992).

3. False reports: Studies have not found that children are more likely to misinterpret appropriate physical contact in the wake of exposures and make false allegations (Blumberg, Chadwick, Fogarty, Speth, & Chadwick, 1991; Wurtele, 1993b).

4. Increased injuries: One study did report somewhat higher levels of injury to program exposed children in the wake of victimizations of all sorts (not just sexual assaults), but the difference was not statistically significant and could have been the result of chance (Finkelhor et al., 1995). Moreover, the program exposed children in the same study simultaneously reported a greater sense of success in their resistance activities, when threatened with victimization, a result that was significant.

5. Sexual development problems: There is no research to address fully the concern about negative sexual development; that participation in these programs will “interfere with their formation in love and chastity” or “interrupt the age of innocence.” However, some research has shown that program exposed children do have more correct terminology for and positive feelings about their genitalia (Wurtele, 1993a; Wurtele, Kast, & Melzer, 1992). Another study did not find any increase in sexual problems among adults exposed to prevention programs during childhood (Gibson & Leitenberg, 2000). However, **prevention education programs are not sexual education programs** and typically have minimal discussions about the sexuality of adults or children. Given the amount of news coverage about sex crimes, it is unlikely that prevention programs represent children's first exposure to the topic, and they are almost certainly not the most frightening exposure to the topic children are likely to have.

Unfair burden on children

The CMA argues that it is not “moral” or fair to use prevention strategies, like prevention education, that raise any expectation that children should be able to thwart sex offenses or that place the burden for doing so in their hands. Instead, the burden of victimization prevention should be exclusively on adults.

Commentary

There is broad agreement that the burden of preventing victimization should not lie exclusively in the hands of children. But if there are potentially effective things that children can do, it would also be morally reprehensible not to equip children with such skills. Comparisons to other prevention challenges illustrate this. It might be said that the responsibility to protect children on bicycles from collisions with automobiles should be in the hands of adult motorists, but few would argue against urging children to always ride with helmets on. It might be said that the responsibility to protect children from kidnappers should be with adults and law enforcement, but few would argue against teaching children not to get into cars with strangers.

The “burden of responsibility” argument means that adults should do everything they can. In fact, most school based prevention education programs do try to mobilize parents and teachers. But it is not an argument against providing children with potentially useful prevention skills.

Alternative Strategies

The CMA report proposes to replace school based prevention education programs with other interventions. Among the proposals:

- Primary intervention for all boys with programs that promote healthy relationship patterns and morally responsible behavior.
- Programs for first-grade boys with the early symptoms of aggression to promote responsibility, civility, honesty, integrity, politeness, kindness, courage and respect for others.
- Social skills and cognitive behavioral self-control techniques for aggressive children.
- Programs that improve parental attitudes, habits and parenting skills.
- Classroom education of children on forgiveness.
- Antiviolence intervention program for elementary school children.
- Leonard Sax's educational program to help children be successful academically and to develop moral character.
- Single-sex education.

Commentary

While these alternative programs may be useful and some have positive evaluation results, none of them has been specifically developed to prevent sexual abuse and its consequences, and none yet have specific theory about why they would accomplish this or evidence that they can in fact do so.

- 1) Many of these programs were designed to prevent aggressive and anti-social behavior among children. While they might help prevent peer sexual abuse, they will not prevent children being victimized by adults, at least in the short run. Nobody knows whether children exposed to these anti-delinquency programs will much later on become adults less likely to sexually abuse.
- 2) Sexually abusive behavior has some specific antecedents that are different from the antecedents of other aggressive, delinquent or criminal behavior that these programs address. These programs were not designed to address those sex abuse specific antecedents.
- 3) There is no evidence for the efficacy of these programs to prevent sexual abuse specifically. It would not be logical to substitute a completely untested strategy for one (sex abuse prevention education) that has some, albeit tentative, positive evidence.
- 4) The CMA report betrays evidence of a double standard, in that some of the approaches that it recommends as alternatives have as little or even less evidence of efficacy than the programs it criticizes.

Nonetheless, it is a good idea to try alternative strategies to help prevent sexual abuse. Such strategies should be tried as a supplement to current prevention education or alone on an experimental basis to test their effectiveness. No current alternative strategy, however, has as much evidence in its behalf specifically to help prevent sexual abuse and its consequences as the

current prevention education approaches. It would be a mistake as a matter of policy to trade a strategy with some positive evidence for other untested strategies.

There is a desperate need for additional research on what works. Research needs to be directed both at current prevention education approaches and alternatives. The kinds of concerns raised in the CMA report should certainly be the focus of additional research. The Catholic Church would be wise to evaluate the programs that it implements, both to ascertain their effectiveness and their acceptability to children and families.

However, sexual abuse prevention education is a reasonable policy choice in the face of the evidence of high levels of sexual abuse and its serious effects on child development. The weakness of evidence in favor of such prevention education might be an argument against its implementation if there were alternative approaches with more or even equivalent evidence. But in the absence of such evidence, the mere plausibility of an alternative strategy is not sufficient to justify it as a substitute for something that has some positive evidence.

Summary Opinion

The opinion of this scholar is that it is worth exposing children to high quality prevention education programs, for the following reasons:

1. Some research suggests that children acquire the concepts
2. Some research suggests the programs promote disclosure
3. One study has found lower rates of victimization for children who were exposed to these programs
4. One study has found that children exposed have less self-blame
5. There have been declines in sexual abuse since 1993 that may possibly be related to the dissemination of prevention education.

It is also true that some studies have not found effects and some scholars have questioned the conceptualization of these programs. No true experimental studies exist. The programs' effectiveness would have to be described as suggestive, and certainly not conclusive.

Other prevention strategies should also be undertaken, such as campaigns to deter and control offending behavior among adults. The weakness of evidence at this point would certainly not justify sole reliance on prevention education by itself.

On the other hand, no alternative prevention strategy has as much positive evidence in its favor as prevention education. It would be a mistake to abandon a strategy that has a tentative but inconclusive evaluation record, including some positive results, for a strategy that has little or no empirical evidence in its favor, however appealing it may sound in theory.

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SECTION II

Appendix: Report from Dr. John Grabowski



THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA
School of Theology and Religious Studies
Office of the Director of Moral Theology/Ethics
Washington, DC 20064
202 319 6509
fax: 202 319 4967

November 14, 2006

Bishop Stephen Blaire
Bishop of Stockton
Chair, Safe Environment Work Group

Your Excellency,

As requested by Sheila Kelly, the Deputy Director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection of the USCCB I have reviewed the CMA document "To Prevent and Protect: A Report of the Catholic Medical Association Task Force on the Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention." I apologize that this review is a bit later than requested but as I mentioned to Sheila, my weekend was chaotic at best with my wife and daughter returning from England and my mother's recent stroke.

In general, the paper seems cogent and well-argued, congruent with the main lines of the Church's teaching. I do not have the expertise to examine all of the clinical data mentioned, but it did seem that the scientific information was adequately documented and from reputable journals. I did have a few more minor concerns with the paper's coherence with the Pontifical Council for the Family's document *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality (TTAMOHS)*. I also think that some of the paper's specific recommendations fall under the heading of prudential judgments—not applications of specific magisterial teaching.

In regard to the first point, there do seem to be some minor areas of tension between the paper and some ideas advanced in the teaching of the Church's magisterium. For example, on page 28 of the paper the text quotes *TTAMOHS* to the effect that:

At this stage of development, children are not fully capable of understanding the value of the affective dimension of sexuality. They cannot understand and control sexual imagery within the proper context of moral principles and cannot integrate premature sexual information with responsibility. Such information tends to shatter the emotional and educational development and to disturb the natural serenity of this period of life.

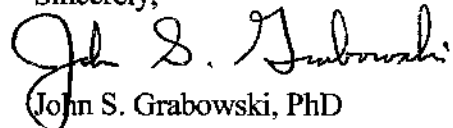
The difficulty is that the paper attributes this statement to the development of pre-adolescent children, *TTAMOHS* is actually addressing the situation of children passing through puberty. While this may not detract from the force of the point, it is not a fully accurate use of the original source. Furthermore, it gives the impression that children at this age should be given no information whatsoever when in fact *TTAMOHS* speaks of laying the foundations for the acquisition of chastity in the context of mutual love, gently discouraging auto-erotic activity, and emphasizing the goodness of the body (no. 68). It would seem that this latter point would involve being taught proper names for the parts of the body and providing children with enough information that they can recognize and report sexual abuse should it occur. The document itself specifically indicates: "Sexual violence with regard to children is not infrequent. Parents must protect their children, first by teaching them a form of modesty and reserve with regard to strangers, as well as giving them suitable sexual information, but without going into details or particulars that might frighten them" (no. 85).

More substantively, the paper consistently invokes the right of parents to be the primary educators of their children in matters of faith and morality (which the Church's catechetical and liturgical tradition fully supports). However, it should be noted that the 1986 document of the Pontifical Council for Education *Educational Guidance in Human Love* correctly notes that parents sometimes do not fulfill this responsibility and therefore educators in the Church need to assist the family (governed by the principle of subsidiarity (see also *TTAMOHS* no. 67). This should be stated more clearly in the paper. Furthermore, the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (no. 97) insists that all Catholics require age appropriate education in an authentic understanding of human sexuality. The document from the Vatican congregation needs to read in the light of this more solemn teaching.

The paper also makes some prudential judgments which are at least disputable. It discourages dating until late adolescence (p. 33). This may be a defensible position, but even the current Code of Canon Law recognizes the authority of individual conferences of bishops to determine suitable ages for marriage, depending on cultural customs and norms (c. 1083). A second example of such a prudential judgment is the critique of coeducational classrooms for adolescents. Although there is both traditional and contemporary evidence for such a critique, this certainly does not enjoy doctrinal weight. More significantly, the paper's criticism of child-empowerment programs is likewise an extrapolation from both Church teaching and scientific study. This does not mean that the judgment is not informed, or that it should not be taken seriously—only that others might read the same developmental data presented here and arrive at other conclusions. The paper does not fully elaborate on all of its objections to child-empowerment programs, but presumably they center around the disturbance of the child's development, the intrusion into the relationship of parents and children, and presenting too much sexual information too early. But as noted above even *TTAMOHS* itself recognizes that young children need to be provided with enough information to protect them from abuse (no. 85). Therefore the harmony of such programs with the teaching of this document would depend upon their specific content and their recognition of the primary rights and responsibilities in this area.

I hope that these observations are helpful. If you have further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John S. Grabowski". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

John S. Grabowski, PhD
Associate Professor and Director of
Moral Theology/Ethics