

Safe Environment Training:

The Effectiveness of the Catholic Church's Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs

Authored by:

Kavita Desai, Esq.
Staff Attorney

Dawn Lew, Esq.
Senior Staff Attorney

CHILDREN AT RISK Institute
2900 Wesleyan, Suite 400
Houston, TX 77027
office: 713.869.7740
fax: 713.869.3409
www.childrenatrisk.org

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I. Introduction

Sexual abuse is a crime that leaves a significant scar in the lives of victims, and the consequences can be especially severe when the victim is a child. Abused children may face serious long-term difficulties with psychological and mental health (Mikton & Butchart, 2009). Victims of sexual abuse are often at a higher risk for depression, anger, substance abuse, sexual difficulties, self-destructive behavior, and sexual revictimization (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). While the exact number of incidents is difficult to measure, it has been well documented that child sexual abuse occurs across a broad spectrum of socioeconomic and ethnic groups (Topping & Barron, 2009). Unfortunately, not even houses of worship are immune from the occurrence of abuse. In 2002, reports on the sexual abuse scandal within the Archdiocese of Boston brought to light a broader crisis facing the Catholic Church in the United States.

In the summer of 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) responded to the sexual abuse problem by issuing the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (the Charter) which has been revised twice since its inception. In addition to implementing other policies and procedures related to child abuse, Article 12 of the Charter requires that all dioceses and eparchies institute “safe environment training and education for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, volunteers and others” (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007, p. 1). These programs seek to prevent child abuse by educating ministers, parents, children, and those who work or volunteer with children. All dioceses and eparchies must implement safe environment programs for both children and adults, but the Charter is silent on the details of the program requirements. Rather, program approval is entrusted to the bishop of the jurisdiction. Consequently, the structure, content, thoroughness, and details of programs in particular dioceses may vary.

The Catholic Church has delineated guidelines to assist dioceses in implementing programming that is consistent with the values and catechism of the Church, is age appropriate, that instructors feel comfortable presenting, and that address potential parental concerns (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). To this end, the Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People and the National Review Board of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops created the Safe Environment Work Group. The Safe Environment Work Group consulted with a panel of theologians, educators, catechetical leaders, child psychologists and safety training practitioners to develop assumptions and criteria for use in the selection of safety training materials (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). The assumptions include that:

- “Lessons in safety training for children will include annual training with ongoing reinforcement at home.
- Age appropriate lessons in safety training will begin no later than kindergarten and continue through high school.
- Basic curriculum criteria will be similar at all levels with wording, application and examples being different.”

(USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007, p. 4).

The criteria for safe environment training are rooted in Article 364 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which states that “the human body shares in the dignity of the image of God” (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007, p. 4). The criteria are divided by age groups, with the following points appropriate for all grade levels:

- “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.”

(USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007, p. 4-5). For grades 7-12, the Safe Environment Work Group adds the teaching that a “healthy relationship requires individuals to support the life and dignity of one another in all aspects” (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007, p. 5). For grades 9-12, they include the concepts that “all persons have the right to expect personal and vocational lives free of harassment,” and that “every person has the obligation to ensure that those whom he or she leads or supervises are free of harassment” (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007, p. 5).

Safe environment programs may be self-generated or obtained from commercial vendors. The VIRTUS programs, which derive their name from the Latin word for valor, moral strength, excellence and worth, are one set of commercial programs commonly used by dioceses, and their format is informative of safe environment programs in general. The adult program, Protecting God’s Children, consists largely of two video presentations involving the testimony of offenders, victims, and experts (Hudson, 2012). A trained facilitator leads participants through written exercises and group discussion. Keeping the Promise Alive was introduced in 2009 as a refresher program for adults who had previously completed Protecting God’s Children, and there is also online training available for continuing education. VIRTUS’ child program is entitled Touching Safety and includes an introductory video, a teaching guide for adults, and lesson plans. The program consists of four age groups each receiving two lessons per year in an attempt to deliver age appropriate lessons.

Recent audits of compliance with the Charter indicate that safe environment programs have been implemented in the vast majority of dioceses and eparchies (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2012). Since its inception in 2002, safe environment training has been provided to over 4.8 million children, who represent 94.3% of all children who must receive training under the Charter. Additionally, training has been received by over 99% of both clergy and educators, as well as 96% of relevant employees and volunteers. While the implementation of safe environment programs is high, the question remains as to whether these programs are effective. This paper seeks to answer that question by reviewing literature on the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs, identifying the core components and best practices associated with successful programs, and comparing the insights of research with the initiatives put into place by the Church. The findings indicate that child sexual abuse prevention programs can be effective in increasing knowledge about sexual abuse, improving self-protective behaviors, and raising disclosure rates, but that the Church's safe environment programs could be improved by universal implementation of the best practices in the field.

II. Methodology

The goal of this paper is to review the current literature available on child sexual abuse prevention programs and to compare the Catholic Church's programs to the best practices in the field as identified by scholars. The first source of information examined in determining the state of safe environment training came from the Catholic Church's internal surveys, documents, and evaluations conducted by the Catholic Church regarding their child sexual abuse prevention programs. Two surveys were conducted at the behest of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops of the child-focused safe environment training programs, one in 2006 and another in 2010. The surveys contain a variety of information about the implementation and

effectiveness of the safe environment training programs offered by the Church. An additional survey of the VIRTUS Protecting God's Children program, which is adult-directed sexual abuse prevention training, was conducted in 2010, and is also included here. Additionally, the report of the USCCB Safe Environment Work Group (2007) offered a comprehensive look at the guidelines the Catholic Church established for the implementation of child abuse prevention programs, and listed recommendations, goals, and the rationale behind the continued mission to provide safe environment training from the Church's perspective.

The National Review Board of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops conducted a request for information from academic scholars and other interested parties on the effectiveness of the Catholic Church's safe environment training. The journal articles provided as part of that request for information are presented here, as well as responses from several professional risk management and child abuse prevention organizations that were willing to provide input as to their best practices for prevention training. This paper also considers an article promulgated by the Catholic Medical Association which is critical of the child sexual abuse prevention programs run by the Catholic Church and which recommends that the focus of prevention shift towards parental education. Finally, two responses to that critique are included in an effort to be inclusive of all the arguments surrounding the Catholic Church's child sexual abuse prevention programs.

The remaining materials considered in this paper are articles from academic journals which discuss the impact, effectiveness, and implementation of child abuse prevention programs. These articles do not directly address the Catholic Church's safe environment training but are relevant to the overall goal of finding the best practices for creating and maintaining effective child abuse prevention programs. The academic databases PubMed, CINAHL, PsycNET,

PsycINFO, OVID, and Scopus were searched using the keywords “child sexual abuse prevention programs” and “child sex abuse prevention.” Articles were further cross-referenced within the databases to locate any additional materials that might have relevant information. These searches produced several articles which are among those examined below.

III. Summary of Materials

A. Surveys from the Church

To assess the effectiveness of the Catholic Church’s safe environment training, three surveys conducted of the Church’s programs were analyzed, as well as scholarly literature on the effectiveness of child-focused, school-based prevention programs generally. The Catholic Church conducted two surveys of its safe environment child sexual abuse prevention programs, one in July, 2006 and another in March, 2010. Each time, surveys were sent to the safe environment coordinators in each of the 195 dioceses and eparchies in the United States.

The Safe Environment Work Group conducted the July, 2006 survey (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). The survey was sent out via the bishops-only website and the safe environment coordinators listserv, and had a response rate of 49% (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Sixty-seven percent of respondents reported that they were highly or very highly satisfied with the implementation of their prevention program (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Thirty-four percent had modified their program curriculum by creating additions to the programs, changing the DVD or video materials used, or using one age-specific curriculum for all grade levels (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Additionally, 33% of respondents indicated that they relied on child sexual abuse prevention training provided by the public schools to educate children, but only 43% of such

dioceses had reviewed the training provided by those schools (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Reflecting concern regarding the variety in program content, several respondents called for the use of a nationally approved program, and several suggested that child sexual abuse prevention materials be integrated into religious education textbooks (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). When choosing a program to implement, respondents were most concerned that the curriculum was age-appropriate and consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Other important criteria were the ease of administration of the program, the cost, and the level of respect for the role of parents demonstrated by the program (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Respondents requested that a core curriculum be developed to assist them in selecting a program, and that a chart be developed comparing programs according to the grade levels covered, the number of lessons per year, the availability of a parent's manual, the use of DVD's and videos, and the cost (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007).

In terms of parental involvement, 86% of respondents offered parental orientations at the outset of the programming, although respondents complained of low participation in these sessions (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). While 89% offered an opt-out option for parents, actual opt-out rates appeared low, with 53% reporting an opt-out rate of less than 5%, and 7% reporting an opt-out rate between 8 and 25% (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). However, 41% of participants in the survey did not provide opt-out statistics, so overall opt-out rates cannot be determined (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Regarding instructor preparation, 75% of teachers received special training, and 59% of those trained reported a high to very high level of comfort with the materials (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Seventy percent of catechists received special training to

present their child sexual abuse prevention programs, but only 33% of catechists trained reported feeling a high to very high level of comfort presenting the materials (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007).

Fifty-eight percent of respondents conducted some sort of an evaluation of their program, whether of students, adult participants, or instructors (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Those who did not perform evaluations stated that it was too soon into implementation for such a step (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). To improve their programs, respondents indicated that they wished to increase parental involvement, implement better training of instructors, better prepare teachers for reports of abuse from children, and seek greater support for the programs from pastors (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007).

A subsequent survey was conducted in March, 2010, by the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Surveys were again sent to the safe environment coordinator in each of the 195 dioceses and eparchies, and earned a response rate of 35%. The survey found that a substantial majority of the prevention programs, 78.8%, were research-based, although almost half, 47%, were modified in some way during implementation (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010). A little more than half, 57.6%, were commercially produced, while the rest were produced by the diocese (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010). The curriculum included high levels of role-playing (65.2%), self-concept building (80.3%), active participation (89.4%), and annual lessons (93.9%) (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010). However, a majority only included one lesson per year, while under 20% included 4 or more lessons per year (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010).

The 2010 survey found that regarding parental participation, 37.9% included homework that asked for parental input, 65.2% had a parent component of some sort, and 89.4% explained the rationale for the program as part of parental training (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010). The survey found positive parental responses, with 66.7% reporting that parents were very receptive to the programming, and another 27.3% reporting that parents were somewhat receptive (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010). Negative responses from parents included fear that the programming would take away their child's innocence, that the program included sexual education, or that the programming content was better left for parents themselves to administer (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010). Although 100% of respondents felt that their child sexual abuse prevention programs were effective in keeping children safe, unfortunately 60.6% of respondents did not have a plan to evaluate their program (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010). Furthermore, even among respondents who did have an evaluation plan, 42.9% had not actually implemented it as a component of the program (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2010).

The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. conducted a survey of the Church's primary adult-centered child sexual abuse prevention program, known as the VIRTUS Protecting God's Children plan (Windham & Hudson, 2010). The VIRTUS Protecting God's Children program was implemented in 2002, and a national survey of its effectiveness was conducted between June and September, 2010 (Windham & Hudson, 2010). Each diocese in the United States was asked for permission to conduct the survey in their diocese, and although some opted out, 34 states and the District of Columbia were included in the survey (Windham & Hudson, 2010). Ten thousand participants were randomly selected from a pool of 1.5 million past participants in the VIRTUS Protecting God's Children program (Windham & Hudson, 2010).

Of these 10,000, emails inviting participation in the survey were sent to the 8,121 with valid email addresses, and 1,177 accepted, yielding a response rate of 14.5% (Windham & Hudson, 2010). Respondents were 73% female, of varied age groups, and two-thirds were from the eastern United States (Windham & Hudson, 2010). The survey collected demographic information, asked respondents the degree to which they agreed with various questions regarding the training's usefulness, and contained a true/false section to test respondents' knowledge retention (Windham & Hudson, 2010).

The survey of the Protecting God's Children participants showed a "relatively high level of retention of key elements of the training," reflected in the 86% average of correct answers on the content portion of the survey (Windham & Hudson, 2010, p. 1). The survey also found no significant drop in retention of knowledge over time, although participants who had taken the online course in addition to the regular program demonstrated significantly higher recall (Windham & Hudson, 2010). Participants overwhelmingly reported that the training had made them more aware of suspicious behavior, with 84% agreeing strongly or somewhat to that statement (Windham & Hudson, 2010). Those respondents were in turn more likely to self-report that their recall of material had not faded and that they had shared the information they learned with friends (Windham & Hudson, 2010). Respondents reported that the most useful aspects of the program were the information on recognizing warning signs of abuse and the instruction on being aware of potential abuse (Windham & Hudson, 2010). A clear majority, 67.6%, thought that children were safer as a result of the program (Windham & Hudson, 2010). Overall, older respondents were more likely to find the program useful than younger respondents (Windham & Hudson, 2010). Finally, a majority of respondents favored a refresher course, with

those who valued the program more highly being more likely to favor a refresher (Windham & Hudson, 2010).

B. Studies of effectiveness of prevention programs

In addition to the surveys of the Church's safe environment training, many scholars have undertaken individual reviews of other school-based child sexual abuse prevention programs, as well as meta-analyses of multiple studies. Without exception, scholars remark on the methodological failings of the studies, which often fail to live up to rigorous scientific standards. For instance, many do not use control groups (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989; Topping & Barron, 2009; Mikton & Butchart, 2009; Madak & Berg, 1992). Many have sampling problems and lack reliable and valid measures, and do not adequately report demographic information (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989; Topping & Barron, 2009). Aggregating the studies to conduct meta-analyses is challenging due to the variation present in the studies. There are a variety of definitions of child sexual abuse, encompassing everything from "unwanted sexual contact," to "contact abuse," "non-contact abuse," "penetrative abuse," and "nonpenetrative abuse" (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010, p. 160). Some studies use criminal definitions of child sexual abuse, while others use child protection or clinical definitions (Topping & Barron, 2009). Studies also use different cut-off ages when measuring abuse, ranging anywhere from 15 to 18 years old (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010).

Researchers also note inherent methodological difficulties involved in attempting to quantify the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs in terms of whether the programs reduce child sexual abuse levels. Prevalence rates are notoriously inaccurate because so many instances of child sexual abuse go unreported (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). Many researchers do not even attempt to assess whether the programs studied reduce the incidence of

child sexual abuse because of the fundamental difficulty of that determination, in part because prevention programs often increase the disclosure rates of abuse (Madak & Berg, 1992; Bolen, 2003; Topping & Barron, 2009; Logan 2010). Furthermore, extrapolating a potential change in children's behavior from their responses to a knowledge test is bound to be imprecise, but there are ethical limitations to testing changes in children's behavior using simulated scenarios (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989; Madak & Berg, 1992; Rispen, Aleman & Goudena, 1997; Bolen, 2003).

Notwithstanding the methodological challenges, scholars have conducted thorough reviews of the research on the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs. More than two decades of research have concluded that child-focused sexual abuse prevention programs increase children's knowledge about sexual abuse, increase reporting of past and current abuse, and teach children self-protection skills (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989; Rispen, Aleman & Goudena, 1997; Plummer, 2001; Bolen, 2003; Finkelhor, 2009; Mikton & Butchart, 2009; Topping & Barron, 2009; Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). As early as 1989, scholars were compiling the available research on child sexual abuse prevention programs to assess the overall effectiveness of such programs. Reppucci and Haugaard (1989) acknowledge that children do gain knowledge as a result of the programs, and that reports show that the programs increase disclosure of abuse. However, they argue that "self-protection against sexual abuse is a very complex process for any child and that few, if any, prevention programs are comprehensive enough to have a meaningful impact on this process" (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989, p. 1266). In order to prevent abuse, children must first understand that they are in an abusive situation, must believe that they can and should do something to stop it, and finally must have and use self-protection skills (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989). These steps involve complex emotional and

cognitive processes, and children will require clear, definitive instructions in order to grasp them (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989). Children benefit from active role-play rather than passive learning during prevention training, and one or two lessons are not sufficient to teach children to repel an abuser or to report abuse (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989). Finally, Reppucci and Haugaard (1989) report that follow-up instruction is essential for knowledge retention, and recommend some form of review work succeeding the initial training to increase retention of the material.

Eight years later, Rispens, Aleman and Goudena (1997) found “no doubt about immediate program effectiveness” in their meta-analysis of school-based sexual abuse prevention programs (p. 981). They conclude that children, even young children, learned the concepts and self-protection skills presented, and that knowledge retention, while it did decrease over time, was satisfactory (Rispens, Aleman & Goudena, 1997). In keeping with the view of Reppucci and Haugaard (1989) regarding clarity of instruction, the authors discern that programs that explicitly taught self-protection skills were more effective than those that merely focused on sexual abuse concepts (Rispens, Aleman & Goudena, 1997). Additionally, like Reppucci and Haugaard (1989), Rispens, Aleman and Goudena (1997) recommend extended instruction time and regular follow-up training. They found that children, especially younger children, tend to forget what they had learned after a period of time, and thus recommended repeating the program at regular intervals (Rispens, Aleman & Goudena, 1997).

In a 2001 study, Plummer found child sexual abuse prevention programs had moved from “Stage One,” where the concern was primarily development and implementation, to “Stage Two,” where programs face the challenges of continuance, ongoing quality control, the incorporation of emerging research, and fine-tuning. Plummer (2001) echoes the findings of

earlier researchers in concluding that children learn basic facts about sexual abuse, and that even young children can learn self-protection skills through prevention programs. She reports that there is widespread parental support for prevention training (Plummer, 2001). However, despite clear evidence that multiple sessions of instruction are necessary for effectiveness, Plummer (2001) reveals that two-thirds of the programs she reviewed offered only one lesson. Over 70% of the programs surveyed expressed concern about resources, which may explain the lack of adequate instruction time (Plummer, 2001). She stresses the need for collaborative community efforts to support prevention programs, and a need, now that many programs have moved from Stage One to Stage Two, for examination and adoption of the best practices in field (Plummer, 2001).

Bolen (2003) reaffirms the previous research in concluding that child sexual abuse prevention training is effective in teaching children sexual abuse concepts and self-protection skills. However, she argues that “even the best prevention programs targeted at school-age children (that is, potential victims) cannot be effective” in preventing the occurrence of sexual abuse, because it is simply not possible to teach children the necessary skills to address all the varied, diverse ways in which they may be approached by abusers (Bolen, 2003, p. 177). As 95% of abusers are male, Bolen (2003) advocates for programs directed at young men and boys that promote healthy relationships and a healthy expression of masculinity that allows men and boys to develop a nonaggressive sexuality. She does not suggest, however, that child-directed prevention efforts be terminated (Bolen, 2003). Rather, recognizing the utility of the programs in teaching children sexual abuse concepts and self-protection skills, as well as increasing disclosure of abuse, she recommends that healthy relationship programs be instituted in addition to child sexual abuse prevention programs (Bolen, 2003).

A comprehensive review of the evidence concerning the effectiveness of school-based sexual abuse prevention training from 1990 forward was conducted by Topping and Barron (2009). They conclude that school-based programs have a positive impact on children's knowledge of sexual abuse and their self-protection skills (Topping & Barron, 2009). However, while nearly all the studies reviewed reported an increase in children's knowledge, often these gains were small, and older children made greater gains than younger children (Topping & Barron, 2009). Self-protection skills are difficult to measure, as few studies utilize direct observation due to ethical restraints (Topping & Barron, 2009). However, self-reporting indicates that children are more likely to use self-protection skills after participating in training, view themselves as more effective in stopping abuse, and are more likely to report abuse (Topping & Barron, 2009). Studies found positive emotional results in that children felt more self-confident and assertive, and less anxious due to increased knowledge of how to deal with unsafe situations (Topping & Barron, 2009). Importantly, prevention programs encouraged dialogue between parents and children, which is crucial because most abuse occurs within the family, and also because parental support plays such a vital role in recovery after abuse (Topping & Barron, 2009). Disclosure of abuse increased following training, and false allegations were found to decrease (Topping & Barron, 2009). However, Topping and Barron (2009) caution that 74% of disclosures by children are accidental, and that many factors beyond prevention training can influence whether a disclosure is made. Finally, Topping and Barron (2009) found that gains in knowledge were maintained in the months following training, but that repeated exposure to the material and follow-up sessions had a significant impact on the level of knowledge retention. Children who participated in multiple training sessions learned and retained significantly more than others, even when the training had been completed years earlier (Topping & Barron, 2009).

Thus, reviewing the data, Topping and Barron conclude that to be adequately effective, prevention programs need to be at least four to five sessions long (Topping & Barron, 2009).

Mikton and Butchart (2009) again reiterate that the “reviews are all but unanimous” that school-based sexual abuse prevention programs are effective at increasing children’s knowledge about sexual abuse and improving their self-protective behaviors (p. 4). They note that unfortunately, the studies are equally in agreement that evidence is lacking as to whether the programs actually reduce sexual abuse (Mikton & Butchart, 2009). Finkelhor (2009) agrees. He stresses that children can and do acquire the concepts taught by sexual abuse prevention programs, and that the programs also promote disclosure and discourage self-blame (Finkelhor, 2009). These are significant effects, as disclosure may cut short the abuse, and discouragement of self-blame may mitigate the negative psychological effects of abuse (Finkelhor, 2009). Furthermore, abused children who had participated in prevention training often express the belief that they stopped the situation from getting worse and protected themselves from injury (Finkelhor, 2009). These positive self-assessments are associated with better mental health outcomes. Finkelhor (2009) also emphasizes that the increase in communication between parents and children following training is meaningful. Finkelhor (2009) argues that prevention programs aimed at children are a critical component of a comprehensive strategy to prevent and address child sexual abuse, which should also include law enforcement initiatives aimed at offenders and therapy of both victims and abusers.

Lalor and McElvaney (2010), like Finkelhor (2009) and Bolen (2003) before them, stress the need for a holistic approach to preventing child sexual abuse, of which school-based prevention programs are an important component. They reaffirm the conclusions of the previous research, finding that prevention programs improve children’s safety skills and their knowledge

about sexual abuse, but that these gains may not lead to the reduction of child sexual abuse (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). To maximize the effectiveness of prevention programs, Lalor and McElvaney (2010) find that teacher's attitudes and centralized responsibility for program coordination are important. They advocate for a global public health response to child sexual abuse, with media campaigns and therapeutic intervention accompanying school-based prevention programs (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010).

IV. Analysis

A. Ideal prevention programs

As detailed above, conclusive evidence now demonstrates that child-focused sexual abuse prevention programs are effective at teaching children about sexual abuse, arming them with self-protection skills, and increasing disclosure rates. However, not all prevention programs are created equal. Clearly, some models are more effective than others, and researchers have been able to identify qualities that mark a successful program. Internally, the Catholic Church has also evaluated its programming, and the USCCB Safe Environment Work Group (2007) offers recommendations to guide dioceses and eparchies in the ongoing implementation of safe environment training. The work group instructs dioceses and eparchies to reinforce the role parents play in the education of their children on the matter of bodily safety and to strive to educate parents on this subject as well (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). It advises that children receive annual training that is bolstered regularly within the program and at home (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). To improve instruction, teacher training is recommended, particularly in the area of responding to disclosures of abuse, as well as the integration of safety materials into religious textbooks and the use of audio or video materials to ensure consistency of content (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007).

Through review of the evidence, scholars and researchers have been able to identify core goals and components of effective child sexual abuse prevention programs that should guide the implementation of programs going forward. First, children must be given a clear understanding of what child sexual abuse is and how to recognize it (Mitkon & Butchart, 2009; Topping & Barron, 2009; Hudson, 2012). Children should also be taught how common abuse is (Kellogg, 2012), the dangers posed by the internet, how to identify potential abusers, and that abusers are often family members or family friends or acquaintances (Hudson, 2012). Second, children need instruction on body ownership; for instance, the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touches (Mitkon & Butchart, 2009; Topping & Barron, 2009). Third, children must be trained in specific self-protection skills, such as how to say no and strategies to avoid abuse (Mitkon & Butchart, 2009; Topping & Barron, 2009). Fourth, it is critical to victim's mental health outcomes that they learn that it is not their fault if they are abused (Mitkon & Butchart, 2009; Topping & Barron, 2009; Hudson, 2012). Finally, an essential component of child-focused prevention programming is detailed training on the importance of reporting past or ongoing abuse (Mitkon & Butchart, 2009; Topping & Barron, 2009; Hudson, 2012; Kellogg, 2012), including recognition of some of the common barriers to disclosure (Kellogg, 2012). Training on the reporting of abuse should not only consist of instruction to victims on telling a trusted adult (Mitkon & Butchart, 2009; Topping & Barron, 2009; Hudson 2012), but should also contain training for friends of victims in disclosure and disclosure promotion (Kellogg, 2012).

The implementation of prevention programs is just as vital to their success as their content. Programs should begin early in a child's life, use developmentally appropriate materials, and use active, systematic and specific skills training (Rizutto, 2011). Successful programs should incorporate the following methods of instruction in order to engage children:

- Modeling (seeing best practices of how to respond in abuse situations)
- Group discussion (talking about the best practices that were modeled)
- Role-playing (rehearsing the skills learned)

(Rizutto, 2011; Topping & Barron, 2009). Prevention programs should be a comprehensive part of a child's education—repeated multiple times a year and repeated for several years (Rizutto, 2011). The evidence suggests that programs need to be at least 4 sessions long to effectively deliver information to children (Topping & Barron, 2009). Additionally, programs should be designed so that they can be taught by a range of presenters (Topping & Barron, 2009). It is crucial that programs involve active parental input (Rizutto, 2011; Topping & Barron, 2009). Finally, programs should contain an evaluation component, so that assessments can be easily conducted (Topping & Barron, 2009).

The Catholic Church's safe environment training also includes programming directed at adults. Praesidium, Inc. (2012), an abuse risk management group that specializes in the creation of safe environments, recommends that adults receive training in the following areas:

- Organizational policies
- Typical perpetrator behavior
- Reporting of policy violations or concerns
- Prevention of false allegations, and
- Recognition of high risk situations.

Further content specifics that adults should receive are an overview of the issue of child sexual abuse, including definitions of abuse and warning signs of abuse or grooming for abuse, how to instruct children on whom they can trust, awareness of personal boundaries, the risks of the

internet, the rules for use of facilities in a safe environment, and the consequences of inappropriate behavior (Hudson, 2012). In terms of the timing of programming, Praesidium, Inc. (2012) advises that adults be trained before exposure to children, annually, and following an incident or close call.

B. Criticisms of programs

Notwithstanding the noble goals of child sexual abuse prevention programs and a shared interest in preventing the sexual abuse of children, opponents and researchers have critiqued child-focused prevention programs for issues ranging from their content, effectiveness, to their theoretical underpinnings. In a report specifically addressing the Catholic Church's safe environment training, the Catholic Medical Association, (CMA), called for the abolition of child-focused prevention programming (Catholic Medical Association, 2007). The CMA claims that prevention programs aimed at children are ineffective at stopping abuse, "potentially damaging to children and families," out of line with the science of child development, and inconsistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church (Catholic Medical Association, 2007, p. 6). The CMA points to statistics showing that child abuse has not decreased within the last 20 years, despite the proliferation of prevention programs, to argue that such programs are incapable of preventing incidents of child sexual abuse (Catholic Medical Association, 2007). The CMA objects to "child empowerment" methods of addressing child sexual abuse, and instead recommends that the Church recognize parents as the primary educators and protectors of their children and redirect its resources towards the education and support of parents (Catholic Medical Association, 2007). It identifies children's insecure attachments to parents, the lack of a loving, authoritative parenting style, and the lack of support for children's self-regulation of emotions and behaviors as risk factors for children to become victims or become abusers themselves

(Catholic Medical Association, 2007). Therefore, it sees the need for a greater emphasis on the character development of children and programming that identifies at-risk children and addresses their needs (Catholic Medical Association, 2007). The CMA argues that the proper role of the Church is to respect and strengthen the family, which in turn will promote the healthy moral and emotional development of children, and to take the lead in teaching the importance of a relationship with God in the development of healthy children, parents and families (Catholic Medical Association, 2007).

In addition to criticism of safe environment training from Catholic professional organizations, the Church is sensitive to the concerns of parents whose children may participate in the training. However, although parental resistance is often a concern to those orchestrating the implementation of child-focused sexual abuse prevention programs, research shows that parents overwhelmingly support such programs (Madak & Berg, 1992). Still, there are instances of parents expressing concern that schools are not the appropriate places for instruction regarding sexual abuse, and that such training should be left to parents (Madak & Berg, 1992; Safe Environment Survey, 2010). Other parents object to the time prevention programs take away from traditional subjects (Madak & Berg, 1992). Child sexual abuse prevention programs, including the overwhelming majority of those offered by the Catholic Church, have dealt with these concerns by allowing parents to opt-out of training on behalf of their children, should they see fit (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007).

Scholarly research has found limited evidence of any negative effects caused by child-focused sexual abuse prevention programming. While some studies found an increase in worry in children following training, this may actually be an appropriate reaction, in that it demonstrates that children are taking the threat of sexual abuse seriously (Reppucci & Haugaard,

1989; Rispen, Aleman & Goudena, 1997). Only a small number of children reported any other negative reaction, such as loss of sleep or appetite, nightmares, bedwetting, or behavioral issues (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989). Most of the negative effects reported by children are small, mild, and brief in duration (Topping & Barron, 2009). However, one study found that teaching children to say no to abusers was effective only if the child was not alone when approached, and that once an abuser was alone with a child, resistance was likely to lead to injury (Bolen, 2003). However, Finkelhor (2007) disputes the relevance of this finding, stating that there is no statistically significant evidence of increased injury caused by resistance. This issue clearly warrants further investigation in order to settle the facts and develop an appropriate response.

C. Responses to criticism

The National Review Board of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops took the criticisms of the CMA seriously. Through the creation of the Safe Environment Work Group, it asked Dr. David Finkelhor, Director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire and a prominent scholar in the field of child sexual abuse prevention, and Dr. John Grabowski, Associate Professor and Director of Moral Theology and Ethics at the Catholic University of America, to review the CMA's report and concerns (USCCB Safe Environment Work Group, 2007). Dr. Grabowski addresses the theological objections the CMA posed to safe environment training, which are generally outside the scope of this paper. In short, he concludes that basic instruction on how to recognize and report sexual abuse is within the bounds of the appropriate role of the Church, and that the Church in fact has an obligation to provide such instruction where the parents do not (Grabowski, 2007).

Dr. Finkelhor objects to the CMA's position that sexual abuse prevention programs directed at children be discontinued and replaced with programs directed at parents and families

(Finkelhor, 2007). Finkelhor (2007) acknowledges that the research is inconclusive as to whether child-focused programming actually prevents abuse, but he points out that such programming has been proven to have a number of positive effects, while the programming advocated by the CMA is almost completely untested. While he strongly opposes terminating the safe environment training, he does support the use of alternative strategies and programs, such as those proposed by the CMA, as supplements to the current programming (Finkelhor, 2007). In Finkelhor's view, the CMA inaccurately summarizes the research on school-based prevention programs, and a fair assessment of the literature does not support the CMA's claim that prevention training has negative effects on children, but rather, demonstrates that children learn and understand the concepts and skills taught (Finkelhor, 2007). Finally, Finkelhor (2007) agrees with the CMA that the burden on preventing child sexual abuse should not be solely on children, but argues that if children can be given tools to help protect themselves, it would be unethical to withhold them.

As detailed above, the literature on child sexual abuse prevention programs establishes that the training is generally effective at teaching children about sexual abuse, equipping them with self-protection skills, and increasing disclosure rates. Notwithstanding criticism from various corners, there appears to be widespread parental support for programs that educate children about sexual abuse (Plummer, 2001), and the programs seem to increase dialogue between parents and children on the subject (Topping & Barron, 2009). Studies have also found positive emotional results to prevention training, including increased confidence (Topping & Barron, 2009), less self-blame, and a belief they protected themselves and stopped the situation from getting worse in the event of abuse (Finkelhor, 2009). Negative side-effects of the training are minor and brief, if any, or disputed, in the case of whether resistance can lead to greater

injury. Overall, then, the balance of the research strongly supports the continuation of child sexual abuse prevention programs.

D. Other prevention models

Sexual abuse prevention programs directed at children clearly have an important role to play as part of a larger strategy to eliminate the sexual abuse of children; however, they are not the only tool that can, or should, be used for this goal. To make a substantial impact in reducing child sexual abuse, a holistic and multi-pronged approach is necessary. Researchers have suggested other prevention programs which are useful to consider. Media campaigns can be effective in increasing awareness of the widespread prevalence of child sexual abuse, encouraging reporting and improving attitudes towards victims, and correcting misconceptions about child sexual abuse (Lalor & McElavney, 2009). Bolen (2003) argues that to have maximum impact at preventing child sexual abuse, the best approach is to attack the offending behavior itself. As most offenders are male, she advocates programming directed at young men and boys that encourages healthy relationships and the development of a healthy, nonaggressive expression of masculinity and sexuality (Bolen, 2003). Law enforcement strategies that increase the likelihood that offenders are arrested and prosecuted will prevent those offenders from victimizing more children, and may also serve as a deterrent for potential abusers (Finkelhor, 2009). Additionally, although not strictly prevention methods, therapy for abusers can prevent recidivism, whereas therapy for victims can lessen the long term negative psychological effects of abuse (Lalor & McElavney, 2009). Finally, it is necessary to understand child sexual abuse as a global public health crisis and incorporate its prevention into broad-based programs aimed at reducing child maltreatment generally (Mikton & Butchart, 2009; Lalor & McElavney, 2009).

E. Limitations of research

As a guide for future research, it may be helpful to discuss the limitations of the current evidence on the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs. Aside from the methodological flaws, many areas of inquiry have been neglected and would benefit from the attention of researchers and scholars. Currently, research investigates the knowledge gain, self-protection skills, emotional impact, risk perception, disclosure rates, maintenance of gains, negative effects, and parental involvement produced by prevention programs (Topping & Barron, 2009). However, further analysis is needed on the effect of gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity on children's gains, the effect of the identity of the presenter, and the differences between programs based on locations in rural, suburban, or urban settings (Topping & Barron, 2009). The varying effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches to teaching also needs to be explored, as does the relative effectiveness of the different core themes programs seek to impart to children (Topping & Barron, 2009). Program fidelity was identified as an area of major concern that warrants further inquiry, as presenters often modify curriculum based on their comfort levels and specific circumstances (Topping & Barron, 2009; Logan, 2012). Although many studies attempted to assess self-protection skills in children, the ability of children to transfer their training to real life is a critical issue and one that needs more study (Rispen, Aleman & Goudena, 1997; Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). Cost-effectiveness is another area ripe for review (Topping & Barron, 2009). Finally, due to the significance of issue of possible negative effects, this area, although it has received some attention, deserves more follow-up (Rispen, Aleman & Goudena, 1997; Topping & Barron, 2009).

The central question surrounding child sexual abuse prevention programs, and the central focus of this paper, is whether such training is effective. However, attempting to evaluate whether prevention programs reduce child sexual abuse may actually be the wrong question to

ask. To date, no study has been able to reliably measure whether prevention programs have an effect on the incidence of abuse, (Topping & Barron 2009), and that fact may be that no study ever could. The majority of child sexual abuse is never reported, thus making it impossible to know the rates of abuse within a targeted population (Logan, 2012). To further complicate the problem, effective prevention programs are likely to increase reports of abuse, which may create the false impression that abuse rates are increasing when they are not (Logan, 2012).

Furthermore, it may take years for the benefits of child sexual abuse prevention training to appear, and research practices are complicated by privacy concerns (Logan, 2012). Therefore, the appropriate measures of effectiveness should be whether the programs increase children's knowledge about sexual abuse, heighten their self-protection skills and behaviors, and improve their attitudes regarding abuse (Logan, 2012; Hudson, 2012).

V. Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence that child sexual abuse prevention programs can be effective in a number of important respects; namely, increasing children's knowledge of sexual abuse, improving their self-protective behaviors, and raising disclosure rates. Although their effectiveness in reducing child sexual abuse is unproven, and is likely to remain so, it would be foolish to discard programs that have such significant and well-proven benefits. However, a great deal of variety exists in the safe environment programming currently instituted by the Catholic Church, and this is a cause for concern. While local control over training may be appropriate, the Church should consider updating its implementation guidelines to include the best practices in the field.

Specifically, the programs used in safe environment training should be evidence-based, should begin early in a child's life and be repeated at least 4 times a year for multiple years. Programs should be designed so that they can be taught by a range of presenters, who should be trained to feel comfortable with the material and particularly in how to respond to disclosures of abuse. Training should include active parental involvement, and should have built-in evaluation components. Curriculum should not exist primarily of audio or video materials, but should engage children with modeling, group discussion, and role-playing. However, standards to ensure program fidelity should be enforced. Clear and specific instruction should be given in skills training and the importance of reporting past, present and future abuse. Finally, dioceses and eparchies that rely on prevention training provided by public schools should have an obligation to ensure that the programming meets the Church's standards. With these guidelines implemented across the board, the Church has the potential to improve the effectiveness of its safe environment training and further its vital goal of protecting children from sexual abuse.

TABLES

Table 1: Best Practices in Implementation

Frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin at a young age • At least 4 sessions a year • Repeated for several years
Pedagogical methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling • Group discussion • Role-playing
Instructors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed to be taught by a range of presenters • Instructor training, with particular attention on how to respond to reports of abuse
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active parental involvement in training
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation built into program

Table 2: Best Practices in Curriculum

Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of child sexual abuse • How to recognize abuse • How common abuse is • Dangers of the internet • How to identify potential abusers • Abusers can be family members, friends or acquaintances
Body ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difference between appropriate and inappropriate touches
Self-protection skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to say no • Strategies to avoid abuse
Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourage self-blame in case of abuse
Disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of reporting past or current abuse • Recognition of common barriers to disclosure • Train victims to tell trusted adult • Train friends of victims to disclose and to promote disclosure

Table 3: Summary of Scholarly Research

Citation	Summary	Comments
Reppucci, N. D., & Haugaard, J. J. (1989). Prevention of child sexual abuse: Myth or reality. <i>American Psychologist</i> , 44(10), 1266-1275.	A review of the content and effects of selected child sexual abuse prevention programs and the underlying assumptions driving the programs.	One of the earliest studies looking at an aggregate of prevention programs.
Madak, P. R. & Berg, D. H. (1992). The prevention of sexual abuse: an evaluation of “talking about touching.” <i>Canadian Journal of Counseling</i> , 26(1), 29-40.	An evaluation of “Talking About Touching” in five elementary schools in Canada.	Detailed evaluation of one specific program; measured student knowledge, surveyed teachers who delivered the program, and surveyed parents.
Rispens, J., Aleman A., & Goudena, P. P. (1997). Prevention of child sexual abuse victimization: A meta-analysis of school programs. <i>Child Abuse & Neglect</i> , 21(10), 975-987.	A meta-analysis used to calculate results of 16 evaluation studies of school-based child sexual abuse prevention programs.	Comprehensive review of the existing studies to date to gain a big-picture overview of the effectiveness of prevention programs.
Plummer, C. A. (2001). Prevention of child sexual abuse: A survey of 87 programs. <i>Violence and Victims</i> , 16(5), 575-588.	A survey of 87 child sexual abuse prevention programs, with an emphasis on how they function in their community contexts.	Broad look at implementation challenges and realities of prevention programs.
Bolen, R. M. (2003). Child sexual abuse: Prevention or promotion? <i>Social Work</i> , 48(2), 174-185.	A review of school-based child sexual abuse prevention programs and a comparison of such programs to a healthy relationship paradigm.	Largely a theoretical discussion of the underlying assumptions, methods, and goals of child-focused versus male-focused prevention programs.
Finkelhor, D. (2009). The prevention of childhood sexual abuse. <i>The Future of Children</i> , 19(2), 169-194.	An examination of initiatives to prevent child sexual abuse, including law enforcement initiatives, school-based educational programs, and counseling programs.	Evidence-based evaluation of most prevalent programs and policies aimed at preventing child sexual abuse by a leading scholar in the field.
Mikton, C. & Butchart, A. (2009). Child maltreatment prevention: a systematic	An examination of 26 reviews of child sexual abuse prevention programs from a	Global public health evaluation of variety of child abuse prevention programs,

review of reviews. <i>Bulletin of the World Health Organization</i> , 87(5), 353-361.	global public health perspective.	including home visits, parent education programs, media campaigns, and child-focused sexual abuse prevention training.
Topping, K. J. & Barron, I. G. (2009). School-based child abuse prevention programs: a review of effectiveness. <i>Review of Educational Research</i> , 79(1), 431-463.	Review of 22 studies of the effectiveness of school-based child sexual abuse prevention programs.	Comprehensive review of the current data on the effectiveness of prevention programs.
Lalor, K. & McElvaney, R. (2010). Child sexual abuse, links to later sexual exploitation/high-risk sexual behavior, and prevention/treatment programs. <i>Trauma, Violence and Abuse</i> , 11(4), 159-177.	Examination of the nature and incidence of child sexual abuse, the long-term effects of such abuse on children, and review of the literature on prevention strategies and effective interventions.	Thorough overview on the nature, incidence and effects of child sexual abuse, as well as various prevention efforts, including media campaigns, school-based programs, therapy of abusers, and therapy of children and their families.

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