

WNR Column - Child Protection Office

Safe with Peers

Safe Environment Training over the past several years has us all on alert for warning signs in adult-child relationships. The beginning of a new school year reminds us that our children and youth spend countless hours in the company of their peers. Just as is the case in adult / child relationships, peer relationships have the potential to be right relationships and also have the potential for abuse.

In preparation for the coming year, our parishes and Catholic Schools are providing continuing education focused on recognizing, preventing, and responding to abuse in peer relationships. These training sessions provide volunteers, staff, parents, and other interested adults with valuable information about bullying, cyberbullying, sexting, sexual harassment, and sexual assault by peers.

Statistics suggest that approximately thirty percent of all children and youth in grades six through ten have been bullied or have bullied other children “sometimes” or more often within a semester. A slightly higher number of U.S. teens (33.4%) report being victims of cyberbullying (an online, amplified version of bullying). Twenty percent of teens and thirty-three percent of young adults say they have electronically sent, or posted online, nude or semi-nude pictures of video of themselves (one aspect of the behavior that has become known as “sexting”). Eighty-five percent of students in a national survey reported that students harass other students at their schools. Insurance statistics indicated a three hundred percent increase in the number of claims filed for sexual assault / abuse by peers.

Warning Signs

Watch for any signs of distress; including change in mood; withdrawal from social situations and previously enjoyed activities; changes in school performance; somatic complaints or concerns; and sleep disturbance. Be particularly tuned in to a child with unexplained cuts, bruises, scratches, or damaged property; who takes a long “illogical” route when walking to or from school; who identifies few if any friendships; or who requests to change schools or “drop out” of religious education, clubs, or other peer activities.

What you can do to prevent abusive peer behaviors

- **Become informed** of the warning signs of abuse in peer relationships.
- **Work collaboratively** with your parish and school to structure safe environments where peer to peer abuse is less likely to occur.
- **Educate your children** about the characteristics of right relationships, signs of risk, and what to do if they find themselves in an abusive peer relationship.
- **Model appropriate behavior.** (For example, don't tell or laugh at jokes that are sexually demeaning. Use language that avoids stereotyping

- individuals by gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or other personal characteristics exhibit dignity, respect, and acceptance for others).
- **Set clear expectations** for your child's behavior toward others and talk about what to do when others are bullying / harassing / abusing or being bullied / harassed / abused.

What to do if your child is being victimized by peers

- **Listen** to what your child or youth tells you with an open mind —Reinforce to them that the abuse is not o.k. and they are not to blame.
- **Don't ignore** abusive behavior. It usually doesn't go away by itself, and may get worse if no action is taken.
- **Report** it to school administration, your parish Safe Environment Coordinator or someone in charge of the child's/youth's activity. Ask that the school/organization keep you informed of the actions taken, as well as future plans, to ensure that the abusive behavior doesn't occur again. If your child has been physically or sexually assaulted or exploited online, make sure that the incident is reported to law enforcement.
- **Keep a written record** of abusive incidents of harassment. This will be important if an investigation becomes necessary. Make notes of any witnesses who might have observed the incident(s).
- **Support your child or youth** while at school, or other activities, by making sure that another adult knows about the abusive behavior such as a teacher, counselor, safe environment coordinator or other staff person.
- **Contact a Diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator** for help finding mental health resources, support, and direction.
- **Search systematically** for talents and positive attributes to be developed in your child. Assist them in addressing any skills deficits or maladaptive behaviors. Teach your child to be assertive. **Do not encourage your child to be aggressive or to strike back.**
- **Encourage your child** to make contact with friendly student(s) in his/her classes. Encourage your child to get to know peers in new situations.

For More Information

Contact your Parish Safe Environment Coordinator to participate in a continuing education session or contact the Diocesan Child Protection Office for more information cpo@qdiocese.org or (308)382-6565.