Introduction

Research shows that about *1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys* in the U.S. will be sexually abused by the time they are 18 years of age. These shocking figures cannot be ignored. In June of 2003, the Diocese of Erie amended its *Policy for the Protection of Children and Youth* and has revised the policy each year to remain current. Some ask, "Are all these clearances and trainings necessary?" The answer is yes! The safety and well-being of our children is important in the mission of the Church. To quote Pope Francis, "The Church loves all her children like a loving mother, but cares for all and protects with a special affection those who are smallest and defenseless."

The Diocese of Erie is dedicated to providing a safe environment for all children and youth. Child abuse is not just a "church" problem. This tragedy is rampant in our society and as people of faith, we must take action to make a difference in the lives of children. This brochure answers some common questions that are asked regarding child abuse, and most specifically, child *sexual* abuse. It is not intended to be all inclusive: please contact your local mental health or social service professionals for additional information. Also, check the diocesan web page at www.eriercd.org for additional resources.

Child Abuse

What constitutes child abuse? Is it only sexual in nature?

Child abuse is defined as intentionally, knowingly or recklessly causing, contributing to or threatening to cause a non-accidental serious physical or mental injury by any act or failure to act. Causing sexual abuse by any act or failure to act. Creating an imminent risk of serious physical injury, sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child through any act or failure to act. Causing the death of a child through any act or failure to act. Neglecting or refusing to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, mental or physical health care or adequate supervision, abandoning the child, or engaging a child in human or sex trafficking. For the complete PA state definition see the diocesan policy.

It is important to remember that not all instances of abuse fit neatly into definitions. It is entirely possible for a child to be abused by another child or by an adult not technically responsible for the child's care. If you become aware of such a situation, you should follow the same reporting process outlined in this pamphlet.

Are most sexual offenses against children committed by strangers?

No. The people most likely to sexually abuse children are their own family members, friends of the family, or an adult known to the child.

Are teenagers more frequently the victims of sexual abuse than younger children?

Children between the ages of twelve to seventeen appear to be at the highest risk for sexual abuse. However, more and more cases of sexual abuse of very young children (under six) have been seen in recent years.

Are girls sexually abused more often than boys?

Yes, statistics indicate that girls are more frequently the victims of sexual abuse, but recognition of the number of boy victims appears to be increasing. Estimates suggest that boys may account for 25 to 35 percent of all sexual abuse victims.

What other factors place a child at risk for sexual abuse?

Research has found that the absence of a parent from the home increases the child's risk. In addition, interviews with offenders suggest that they look for vulnerable children. Such children are young and appear to be isolated, depressed or lonely.

Grooming

I've heard the word "grooming" used in relation to sexual abuse. What does this mean?

Grooming is a deliberate and manipulative process used by individuals to gain a child's trust with the intent of sexually abusing or exploiting them. It often involves building a relationship not only with the child but also with their family or community to reduce suspicion and create access. Grooming can take many forms, including giving gifts or special attention, creating emotional dependency, isolating the child from others, introducing sexual content or behaviors gradually. This process can occur in person or online and it is often subtle, making it difficult to detect. The goal is to desensitize the child to inappropriate behavior and make them less likely to report abuse. Understanding grooming is essential for prevention, early detection and protecting children from harm.

Appropriate Boundaries

Are there guidelines as to what constitutes appropriate touch? Am I never to hug a child? That's not me!

Responsible and appropriate touch is related to warm and healthy relationships between adults and children. A hug, a pat on the shoulder, holding a hand - these may be entirely appropriate expressions of a warm and healthy relationship. Inappropriate touch involves touching or fondling private parts of a child's body by another for the purpose of sexual gratification. It involves sexual stimulation of the child and/or the perpetrator by observing, showing or touching, or being touched in a sexual way. All physical contact with a child should be limited to exchanges which respect the child's privacy, their age and the situation. It is always wise, however, to display demonstrations of feeling in the presence of others and not in isolated situations.

I hear lots of talk these days about boundary issues. What should I know about boundary issues?

A boundary means you know what appropriate behavior is for a child and for an adult. There are clear lines which should not be crossed with children and if you ever have any doubts about certain behaviors, you are probably approaching the boundary. Parents and other adults in whose care children are placed must protect children from inappropriate exposure to sexual matters for which they are not emotionally or biologically ready. Activity which may be normal or condoned for adults is not appropriate for children. Exposure to sexual activity, inappropriate speech, exhibitionism, obscenity or pornography is clearly out of bounds.

Every aspect of your relationship with children should be considered with regard to boundaries. Professionalism dictates how you will use the phone, email, social media and any other forms of communication with children. Always use good judgment about keeping yourself and the children safe.

Children also should be instructed about boundaries and should not violate the boundaries of other children, i.e., bullying, hitting, teasing, etc.

Reporting Child Abuse

Tell me, plain and simple, who is mandated by law to report abuse?
According to PA state law, the mandate to report child abuse is imposed on any individual who has direct contact with children during his or her work or professional practice. Volunteer personnel who perform services for the Church, Catholic school, agency or institution are also considered to be mandated reporters if they have direct contact with children during their volunteer work.

I am not a mandated reporter, what if I only suspect abuse? What should I do? Whom should I contact? I don't want to get anybody in trouble, especially me.
Anyone can and should report child abuse, even suspected abuse. Absolute certainty is not a requirement for reporting, just reasonable suspicion. Whom should you contact? You should contact *ChildLine*, the state agency that handles reports of child abuse. The toll-free number to call is 800-932-0313. You may also file a report of sexual abuse and/or sexual exploitation with local law enforcement officials. Finally, you may call your local county Children and Youth Office.

There is no reason to fear anything. Reporting to county and state agencies and *ChildLine* can be done anonymously. There is immunity from civil and criminal liability given to a person, hospital, institution, school, facility, agency or agency employee or volunteer who, *in good faith*, reports an instance of suspected child abuse. The worst thing to do when you reasonably suspect child abuse is to do nothing at all.

If I report child abuse, will it really be confidential?
When you report abuse to *Childline,* it is not necessary to divulge your name. If you are a mandated reporter, it would be wise to give your name as proof that you did indeed make the call as required by law. The identity of the person making the report is kept confidential except for being released to law enforcement officials or the district attorney's office.

Should I ask a child about what might be happening if I have doubts? Is it my responsibility to determine whether a child/youth is telling the truth?
Children/youth rarely lie about sexual abuse; however, a child should not be asked questions about the situation. In some cases, questioning by a well-meaning adult may adversely affect the outcome of an investigation. If there is enough concern to warrant suspicion, report the situation to *Childline* and let the professionals deal with the child. It is not your responsibility to determine the truth of the disclosure or your reasonable suspicion.

What would happen if I reported someone for an action and the person did not do it?
After investigation, if the person is not guilty of any wrongdoing, the case will be dropped and there will be no consequences.

To whom can I refer a child or minor who has been sexually abused?
For immediate guidance, call *ChildLine* at:
800-932-0313

What about an adult who was abused as a child by a church employee? Who should they call? What help is available?
The diocese encourages anyone who has experienced any abuse or misconduct by a member of the clergy or any employee or volunteer of the church to contact law enforcement. To report abuse to the independent investigators retained by the diocese, email ErieRCD@KLGates.com. In addition, past abuse can be reported directly to the diocese by calling 814-451-1543.

Counseling assistance is available for the survivors and/or their families through the diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator, Dr. Gerard Tobin, who can be reached at 814-451-1521.

You may also contact the Office for the Protection of Children and Youth at 814-824-1195.

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Frequently Asked Questions About Child Abuse



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