

Introduction

Research shows that about *1 of every 4 girls and 1 of every 13 boys* in this country 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 reviewed and 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 regarding the Diocesan Policy for the Protection of Children. It is not intended to be all inclusive: please contact the Diocesan Office for the Protection of Children and Youth (814-824-1195) with further questions and concerns. Also, check the diocesan web page at www.eriercd.org for more information.

General

Is the diocese aware of how challenging it has become to recruit and retain volunteers? With the number of rules and regulations, how can we ensure we don’t discourage the very people we rely on to serve?

The diocese understands that screening volunteers may make a difficult situation ever more complex. It is hoped, however, that potential volunteers will recognize the necessity for careful scrutiny and appreciate the concern for them and for our children which the Church demonstrates with this policy. The time when “just anyone” can volunteer is over.

Where did these regulations come from?

The diocesan Policy for the Protection of Children was written according to the mandates and norms put forth by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in their Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. The policy is also written to comply with the PA Child Protective Services Law and PA Public School Code governing employees and volunteers who work with children/youth.

Clearances, Screening & Training

What clearances are required?

Before working with children: Employees are required to have the FBI Fingerprint Clearance, the PA State Police (PSP) Criminal Record Check, and the PA Dept. of Human Services Child Abuse History Certification. Volunteers are required to have the PSP Criminal Record Check, Child Abuse History Certification and either a signed Disclosure Statement or FBI Fingerprint Clearance.

Who pays for clearances?

Employees are responsible for their own clearances. Employers may opt to pay for employee clearances. The two clearances required of volunteers, the PSP Criminal Record Check and Child Abuse History Certification, are free of charge for volunteers.

If the PSP Criminal Record Check is returned with a “no record” result, could there be a record of child abuse history in the PA Dept. of Human Services records?

Yes. The PSP Criminal Record Check clearance lists only cases in Pennsylvania that are criminally charged or founded cases of child abuse. Indicated cases (discovered through physical evidence, admission, etc.) and not charged criminally will not show up in State Police records but will show up in the Human Services records. PA Child Protective Services law requires both clearances.

If the PSP Criminal Record Check is returned with the result that a person does have a record, does that mean the person cannot work with children?

Not necessarily. A person could have a record for crimes other than child abuse, such as shoplifting, that would not prohibit them from working with children. The Policy for the Protection of Children and Youth lists the offenses that prohibit employment/volunteering. Of course, depending upon the nature of other crimes, pastoral discretion should be exercised in allowing people with criminal records to work with children.

Do my daughter and her friend need these background checks? They’re both 19 years old. They do the Children’s Liturgy of the Word during the Sunday morning liturgy and are only with the children for twenty minutes.

Yes, the two young ladies are adults according to the law and are in contact with children. They will be spending enough time with the children to get to know them and build a relationship with them.

Do adults volunteering for Vacation Bible School programs need to get clearances?

The answer is yes. Whether volunteers are considered regular or occasional, they all need clearances to work with children.

Are new employees and volunteers from other parish/schools/agencies required to apply for new background checks if they’ve already had them done?

New employees and volunteers must provide clearances that are less than five years old. Clearances must be on file before employment or volunteering begins. Employee clearances must state for employment purposes. PSP Criminal Record Check and Child Abuse History Clearance obtained for volunteer purposes can only be used for volunteer service. As of July 1, 2018 new employees and volunteers working with children in the Diocese of Erie are also required to obtain a clearance from the Office for the Protection of Children and Youth before beginning to work with children.

According to diocesan policy, who receives training regarding child abuse and safe environment?

Employees and volunteers who work with children must complete the diocesan safe environment training every five years. Youth in grades K-12 in Catholic schools and parish programs are in-serviced yearly on safe environment topics. Parents/Legal guardians receive information yearly and bulletin announcements are utilized to inform the church community about safe environment practices and how to report suspected abuse.

How long does the parish or Catholic school need to keep child protection records?

Child Protection records must be kept indefinitely in a secure file. Child abuse cases often come to light 20-25 years after the abuse has occurred. Keeping records is good stewardship and provides investigators with information.

When is parent/legal guardian permission required?

When do I need to have the permission of a child’s parent/legal guardian? Do both parents need to give permission? What if the parents are separated?

There are three situations parental/guardian permission is required. The first involves any trip off premises. In these cases, a permission form is required as well as instructions for emergency care.

Permission is required when you enter into regular contact with youth by phone, email or other electronic means. Permission is also required when those who are qualified enter a formal, long-term counseling situation with a child. It is always preferred to obtain the permission of both parents/legal guardians for these situations. This same preference would hold in the case of parental separation.

When is it appropriate for me to meet alone with a child or teenager?

When regularly meeting alone with a child you must have the consent of the parent/guardian(s) and your immediate supervisor. When meeting alone use the *other person nearby* rule. Inform a colleague or another adult that you will be meeting with a child. Ask them to be nearby and leave open the door to the meeting room.

Is it alright to counsel a teenager in my home or in living quarters if the parents say it's okay?

No. Private living quarters are never a suitable place for counseling or spiritual direction. Counseling and spiritual direction of minors requires parental and supervisor consent. Counseling should be held in an appropriate setting and during business hours. Refer to the Policy for the Protection of Children for further information.

Behavior

Does the policy forbid coaches and other adult chaperones from drinking alcohol (with other adults, of course) when away on overnight trips?

Adults are never permitted to use alcohol, tobacco, vape or other illegal drugs while participating in youth activities during the time they are responsible for supervising youth. This includes overnight trips.

What if a child or youth asks me for a ride home? What if the parents forgot to pick up a child and I'm the last one in the building?

The following action is suggested. The adult would attempt to reach the child's parent/guardian. If the parent/guardian cannot be reached, the child should be taken home and not left alone at the building. In this instance, the child's physical protection takes precedence over strict adherence to the policy.

Specifically Catholic Schools

Are high school students who are 18 years old considered adults? Do they need clearances to participate in school activities with their younger peers?

If an 18-year-old student is enrolled in the school and is considered a participant in the school activity and not supervising any younger students, the student does not need clearances.

What about people who do not qualify as school employees but still work with children, such as *Title I* and *Act 89* personnel?

These personnel would have clearances and training through their employer or agency. They do not have to sign diocesan compliance forms or be trained by the diocese.

Victim Assistance

To whom can I refer a child or minor who I suspect or know is a victim of child abuse?

For immediate guidance, call the Pennsylvania State Hotline, **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 of Erie, email ErieRCD@KLGates.com. In addition, victim/survivors or concerned individuals are also welcome to contact the diocese directly to report abuse at 814-451-1543.

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

You may also call the Office for the Protection of Children and Youth at 814-824-1195 or Father Christopher Singer, Director, Office for the Protection of Children and Youth at 814-824-1130.

Frequently Asked Questions

about the

Policy for the Protection of Children



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