

Know the Drill

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month...a time designated to focus our attention on the problem of child abuse and what we can do to prevent abuse and promote the safety of all God's children.

As a society, and as parents, we have clear ideas about how to protect our children from some dangers. We take measures to make our households, schools, and communities physically safe. We know that children learn through repetition and we want our children to be prepared in the face of danger, so we educate our children on things like fire safety. We make a fire escape plan, and we practice fire drills. We make sure our children know how to call for help. We can address the dangers of child abuse in much the same way.

Creating Safe Environments

There are many strategies we employ to make our homes, schools, and communities, fire safe. We inspect for hazardous conditions and equip facilities with smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, sprinklers, and alarms. In our homes, schools, and churches we can make similar efforts to prevent abuse. The vast pool of parents, staff and volunteers within our Diocese who have been trained in safe environment principles serve as our inspectors, detectors, and extinguishers with regard to abuse. As a group, they have participated in a screening process that makes it less likely that potentially abusive adults will view our schools and churches as an easy way to access children. They work together to scrutinize the settings where they serve children to reduce the risk of abuse. They monitor their own interactions with children and the interactions of other adults to detect warning signs, and are trained in how to seek help if a child needs to be rescued. We can do much for abuse prevention efforts and child safety by supporting those individuals in their efforts to create a safe environment for the Catholic children they serve. We can further promote the safety of all God's children by communicating the expectation that all organizations who serve children take similar actions.

Education

Most safety efforts depend on education and awareness. We need to know the signs of danger if we are to have any hope of escaping or avoiding it. We learn early in life "where there is smoke there is fire." Signs of abuse are not always so easy to identify. In our schools and parishes we strive to model right relationships for our children. We educate them about right relationships and help them identify signs that a relationship isn't right. Just as in the case of fire, we don't place the burden of preventing abuse on the shoulders of our children, and we don't expect them to put out the flames, but we do want them to know the warning signs so they know when to call for help. For more information on the qualities of right relationships and warning signs of abuse contact your parish, school or Diocesan Child Protection Office.

Safety Plans

Few of us would hesitate to educate the children in our lives about the danger of fire and how to escape. Child abuse is a more difficult subject to address. Abuse is an interpersonal danger. We wish our children could be shielded from the awareness that

such evil exists. We want our children to love and trust others and we don't want them to be fearful or anxious. But just as with fire, we risk our children being hurt if we don't provide them a plan for safety. Fortunately, identifying a safety plan is one very effective strategy for reducing anxiety. Children take great comfort in knowing that there is a plan and the mere act of formulating a plan increases the likelihood that they will know what to do to be safe in the face of danger.

Take some time to help the children in your life identify a plan for safety in risky situations. Make use of general safety principles like "safety in numbers," "when in doubt, check it out (with parents or a trusted adult)," and "**BOLT** – **B**e aware of danger signs, **O**bject to hurtful actions and inappropriate requests, **L**eave dangerous situations, **T**ell a parent or trusted adult." To get started check out the scenarios in "Do You Know the Drill" available through the Diocesan Child Protection Office and printed in this issue.

Drills

Children learn through repetition and we all know "practice makes perfect." As you enter new situations with a child, rehearse safety plans. Make sure they "know the drill." Whenever possible point out concrete aspects of each safety plan within the environment (for example; "There's a police officer, they'd be a good person to go to for help," "That's a very tall flag pole – that would be a good place for us to meet if we get separated," "That looked like a dangerous situation, let me know if something like that ever happens to you.")

As you continue through the month of April, focusing your thoughts and prayers on the problem of child abuse, consider how you may be part of the solution. Learn more about creating safe environments for children, model right relationships, increase your awareness of warning signs, and formulate a plan for how you would respond if you encountered a child at risk. To promote the safety of all God's children we must all "know the drill."