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Protecting God's Children for Adults

Vol. 22 No. 1

It's All About the Behavior

By **Crispin Ketelhut Montelione**

You may be familiar with this core message of the *Protecting God's Children®* Program: *it's all about the*

behavior. There is a reason this statement is repeated throughout the program—it's an important one, and can take some explaining.

Research tells us abuse occurs in every demographic, which means that anyone could conceivably abuse a child or youth.[1,2] Many times, people have made assumptions on the safety of an individual by fixating on specific elements to determine their "safety meter," such as the person's marital situation, whether or not the person identifies or behaves as heterosexual vs. homosexual, or whether someone might look like a "creepy" person, if they have their own kids, etc. Time and again, safe adults in our VIRTUS sessions assume that if they are regularly checking the online sex offender registry lists and keeping an extra watch on specific houses and telling the youth to avoid others, then the children in their environments are automatically safe.

Though the latter example might provide some level of protection based on known risk, this overarching way of

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It's All About the Behavior

Crispin Ketelhut Montelione

Crispin Ketelhut Montelione is the Associate Director of the VIRTUS® Programs. Before her full-time employment with VIRTUS, she worked as a Program and Training Specialist in the Virginia Diocese of Arlington's Office of Child Protection. Prior to working in the Diocesan Chancery Offices, she was also employed at the Parish level and became familiar with child protection policies from the ground up.

Crispin has presented the Protecting God's Children

thinking could inadvertently increase the risk for abuse to occur because it causes adults to have blinders on when it comes to anyone who doesn't fit into those particular "boxes"—which could result in missing other possible situations of abuse or inappropriate behavior.

In our efforts to protect children and the vulnerable, we must be vigilant to the warning signs of inappropriate behavior and recognize that there isn't any one demographic "failsafe" such as age, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical aspects, cultural background, family status, occupation, income, level of education, etc., that will protect children from being abused. Abusers come from every demographic. Victims and survivors also come from every demographic.[3,4]

As such, we apply the standards of safety to everyone. Even so, sometimes caring adults assume that if people *seem* to be upstanding citizens within a community, and if they *appear* to be trustworthy, then it increases the person's "safety meter." As a result, the caring adult is more lenient when that person exhibits inappropriate behavior, finding excuses, justifying the behavior or rationalizing it away. This is a challenge because we also know that there is such a thing as *community grooming*, where abusers become to the community exactly what is needed, and they help to further positions of authority for themselves so that people will perceive them to be trustworthy. Generally, this results in the community believing that the abuser has special insight toward children, increasing the trust toward the abuser, and decreasing the chance that a child will disclose the abuse and be believed.[5,6]

Unfortunately, this type of "community" grooming happens within families, too, and the cultural membership shared by the family may increase the child's vulnerability to abuse when the needs of the adults, family and community are often placed above the welfare of the individual child.[7] There are many times where people will assume that the significant people in their lives, whether actual biological family members or close friends (or stepparents, or boyfriends/girlfriends, best friends of the family, caretakers, babysitters, teachers, coaches, etc.) could never do something as awful as abuse a child. There can be great denial when it comes to recognizing that family and friends could abuse others, though we know that 30 percent of abuse is done by people who are biologically related to the child victim, and an additional 60 percent of abuse is done by people known to the child victim but not biologically related.[8, 9, 10, 11, 12]

It is challenging to compare these types of statistics with our real-life relationships. In fact, many times in our VIRTUS sessions, people become upset and say that

program to several thousand participants. She has also trained and managed a diocesan team of facilitators through multiple Train the Trainer sessions, and continues to train administrators, trainers and facilitators for the VIRTUS programs nationally and internationally.

they feel that VIRTUS is asking them to be suspicious of their family members and people with whom they have a close relationship. This brings about discomfort, because caring adults feel that they can't both love and trust the important people in their lives while also scrutinizing and calling out possible inappropriate behavior, and ultimately, reporting suspicions of child abuse if the level of concern reaches that height. As a society, we often don't want to assume the worst in others, and have great difficulty with this subject because it calls into question our own judgment with whom we have surrounded ourselves.

Certainly, recognizing that abuse can be done by anyone, and then also having a closer scrutiny upon the behavior of the important people in our lives doesn't always inspire the best of feelings. However, a main goal of the VIRTUS Programs is to increase our awareness and recognition of the signs of inappropriate behavior, and to empower us with courage to speak up about it and do the right action to address it. This is why we say it's all about the behavior—for all the people in our lives. The key meaning of the phrase "it's all about the behavior" boils down to this:

- Regardless of our perceptions on who the person is,
- Regardless of their relationship to us,
- Regardless of their marital situation,
- Regardless of the perception of their trusted role in the community,
- Regardless of what they say their intentions are—*none of this matters*.

What **does** matter is the behavior itself, and whether or not it is appropriate per the values and standards of our environments, or, the organization. This can be broken down into four simple items:

1. The problematic behavior itself
2. What the person's behavior *could mean* (for example, it *could* be grooming, *could* be abusive, *could* be lack of rule following, *could* be lack of knowledge, etc., all of which needs to be addressed since we don't know the person's intentions, and we don't know if the behavior is actually part of a grooming process)
3. How we address it, as safe and caring adults (the way we address it, and to whom, depends on the severity of the situation; we communicate problematic behavior to supervisors in ministerial environments, and have additional steps to take when we suspect abuse in any environment)
4. How the person responds to the correction from others, and specifically from supervisors (safe adults are <u>willing</u> to change their behavior)

As we reflect on all of these elements, we apply a "healthy caution" to the behavior of others, and, even more importantly, we reflect upon our own behavior and whether or not we might be conditioning children to tolerate the inappropriate behavior of someone else. Sometimes safe adults are the ones who need to modify their behavior to ensure that it is above reproach, and that it serves to uphold the boundaries of others.

The truth is, we must have a **healthy caution** toward any adult involved with our youth, regardless of the role that adult may play in the child's life—including family and friends. Having a healthy caution means we still allow others to interact with children—but in a safe and transparent manner. *Having a healthy caution for anyone involved with children is the best, and safest way to err on the side of caution for the welfare of children*. The basis of our actions should be placing the welfare of the most vulnerable in the center of safety equations, rather than our own concerns or fears or worries.

One of the best ways safe adults can be protectors is to maintain vigilance for any adult interacting with children and youth—always being mindful of the behavior, and whether or not it is appropriate. Then, we must be willing to speak up and correct the behavior in our personal settings. And, when in a ministerial setting, to communicate with the supervisor or safe environment office. When our concern rises to an actual suspicion of abuse (which can merely be that the thought of abuse has entered into your mind), then we must communicate these types of concerns directly to the child protective services within our state. You may never know if your courageous action is what ultimately saved that child's life.

Thank you for all that you do as a safe adult and for being willing to review your own behavior and have a healthy caution regarding the behavior that adults exhibit with children, youth and the vulnerable. It takes each of us individually, and, working together collectively, to protect the vulnerable who cannot always protect themselves. Children need you to be their eyes and ears, they need you to speak up for their boundaries, they need you to advocate for their safety when something seems amiss. Children deserve safe and healthy childhoods and are incapable of protecting themselves completely on their own. Will you be a safe haven for them in word and deed, as they navigate their childhood?

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1) True or False: The behavior of an adult (and whether it is appropriate or not), rather than any individual characteristics, is what matters most when it comes to protecting children and youth from abuse.

A) ○ True

B) ○ False

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