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Archdiocese of Los Angeles - Our Lady of the Angels Region

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### Protecting God's Children for Adults



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## What We Culturally Prioritize Can Influence a Child's Vulnerability

By [Crispin Ketelhut Montelione](#)

### Introduction

Every culture has its own unique norms, customs, beliefs,



language and practices that make the environment beautiful and unique. However, at times, cultural norms and what is prioritized within a particular culture or organization can create greater vulnerabilities for children—including child sexual abuse. To foster communities that prioritize healthy relationships and mitigate the risk and aftermath of child sexual abuse, we need to identify the elements that can make children more vulnerable and apply counter-cultural measures to compensate.

### How do "culture" and "safe environments" intersect?

The concept of "culture" is both individual and collective. It relates to your own individual response or nuanced approach to safe environments—which are physical and virtual environments that we create that are safe from abuse.

"Culture" includes membership within your particular family, or ethnic group, and what has been enculturated from your surroundings, your work or volunteer

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### Crispin Ketelhut Montelione

Crispin Ketelhut Montelione is the Associate Director of the VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> 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 program to several

environment, your city, your state, your country, and so on.

### **How do cultural norms impact safe environments?**

Child abuse occurs within every demographic—in every socioeconomic level, within every level of education, across every ethnic and cultural thread, and within every single religion.<sup>1</sup> Even so, there are significant ethnic and cultural differences in abuse prevalence, abuse severity, victim-offender relationships, social reaction to disclosures and post-abuse coping strategies.<sup>2</sup>

Cultural norms will always affect whether child sexual abuse will be recognized, discovered and believed within the community. The culture can influence whether the child will be able to disclose and what actions will be taken upon discovery.

A child's membership within a particular culture (or ethnicity) can decrease their ability and/or opportunities to communicate about child sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> If the child can overcome the reticence to communicate, cultural membership can increase a disclosure delay, and ultimately increases the child's vulnerability at that time and in the future (because when a child is abused even once, it further increases the risk of sexual victimization by someone else in their future).<sup>4</sup> This can occur when different cultural and ethnic aspects place the needs of family and community above the needs or welfare of the individual child, and when we prioritize family survival and fear the loss of privacy, social power, immigration status, financial security, etc.

Different ethnic groups also have differential rates of officially reporting abuse that occurs.

*The decision of whether to report is rarely, if ever, an individual decision; it's made in the context of a group and culture.*<sup>5</sup> Children and adults, each of us, are all influenced by concerns of others' judgments, encouragements, demands and expectations, both within and beyond our culture and social networks.<sup>6</sup>

No matter the justification, refusing to recognize or address abuse increases a child's exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)<sup>7</sup> and increases negative outcomes across the child's entire lifetime. Outcomes of the ACE of child sexual abuse can include increased risk for poorer mental and psychological health, lower educational attainment, decreased cognitive ability, increased risks of engaging in unsafe health behaviors, increased onset of puberty, increased risk of sexual re-victimization, increased risk of cancer and chronic

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.

illnesses and even reduced life expectancy.

### **Potential vulnerabilities and barriers to reporting**

When it comes to children within a culture being at risk of abuse, there is no one value that only holds true to one culture, and different values may be weighted more heavily than others. Every culture may prioritize certain values that can augment vulnerability. There may even be elements that can also foster healthier relationships within a particular culture, such as strong maternal bonds or a focus on healthy relationships within the greater community.

The following are cultural values that are barriers to disclosures from children, barriers to recognition of abuse by adults, and barriers that jeopardize the reporting of abuse. Also included are specific examples of cultural prioritization over child welfare.

### **What is the culture's acceptance and practice of the concept of denial? This could include denial...**

- Of the problem or scope of abuse
- That it could occur "here"
- That a particular person could be an abuser
- That a particular person could have been abused
- That they wouldn't be able to recognize when someone is an abuser; most people believe that they would be able to know, without doubt, if someone is experiencing abuse. This is a false expectation.

**What is the culture's acceptance or rejection of personal responsibility?** (Rejection of personal responsibility increases the bystander effect phenomenon)

**What is the culture's emphasis on protecting something other than the child? For example, do they:**

- Prioritize their own fears or concerns.
- Protect a specific person.
- Protect a nuclear family "cell" or unit.
- Protect the interests of an organization.
- Protect financial support or status, or cashflow.
- Protect concerns about immigration status.

**What is the culture's view of the role or status of a woman, or view of the patriarchy?**

- Are women seen as "less than" within the culture? Cultures may protect the interests of men over women, when women are not seen as equal in dignity, perceived authority, or power to men.

- Do women have equal ownership or legal rights as men in the culture?
- Are women taught to "bear" injustice and abuse as their due as a woman?
- Are men taught they must be tough at all costs?

**What is the culture's concept of honor and respect?  
Is there a:**

- Prioritization of respect for elders?
- Lack of respect for children; i.e., are children to be "seen" and not "heard"?
- What would happen if a child spoke out against an adult?
- Does the overarching culture avoid scandal at all costs?
- Does the individual family culture avoid conflict/scandal at all costs?

**What is the culture's concept of shame?**

- What about modesty?
- What are taboo subjects?

**What is the culture's sexual "scripts"? Are girls and boys taught that:**

- Men can't "control themselves" and so it's the female's "responsibility" to protect their virginity?
- If sexual abuse happens, then they must not have been "pure enough"?

**What emphasis does the culture place on "purity" or virginity?**

- Girls/women may no longer be eligible to marry if no longer virgins, even if it was a result of child sexual abuse.

**What requirements are there for obligatory violence?**

- Mothers might counsel children to keep quiet so as not to trigger concepts of obligatory and potential removal from family.

**What makes it more challenging to recognize abuse?**

- Lack of education.
- Unwillingness to recognize abuse.
- History of abuse makes it harder for observer to recognize.
- Concepts of affection (is it required upon greeting people you don't even know?)

- Concepts of appropriateness of physical touch (is touching people considered rude?).
- Concepts of boundaries (when you or someone else has poor boundaries; when something makes you feel uncomfortable, but you say "oh that's just that person").

Reflecting on each of these may help each of us to recognize whether we are unwittingly contributing to environments where children do not have a voice, and where the people around them do not listen or help. Ultimately, we can create environments where children are no longer silenced, and where there are opportunities for children to speak up and know they will be heard, and will receive help.

### **What Can We Do?**

We each have a cultural motivation of doing everything we can among and within our respective cultures to protect the most vulnerable amongst us. People and cultures are ever-changing, and protecting children is a continual process. Overcoming harmful enculturated norms takes courage, and it will feel uncomfortable and "against the grain" at times. To create these communities that foster healthy relationships with children that have positive overtures, we need to work together. Here are examples of how safe adults can help protect children and youth from harm, within any culture:

- Identify your own enculturated norms that might make children more vulnerable to inappropriate relationships or behaviors.
- Be aware of warning signs of inappropriate behavior in adults, regardless of your relationship with them, and communicate any concerns that arise.
- Pay attention to any behavioral indicators within a child's behavior, that might show a child or youth is experiencing abuse or other harm.
- Always believe children if they disclose abuse to you, and let them know it wasn't their fault. It is extremely rare for children to lie about having been abused.
- Do not attempt to keep knowledge of abuse "within the family" or "within the community." This type of inaction is harmful to the child, because it could allow the abuse to continue, or the child to remain in an unsafe situation. It also sends the message to the child that their welfare is not as important as the abuser's or the community's.
- Always report disclosures or concerns of abuse to the appropriate civil authorities.

You matter! Children need adults who are in "their corner," who will help them when they feel threatened or

unsafe, who are willing to inform themselves about how best to react and respond to unsafe and potentially abusive situations. They need adults who initiate consistent and ongoing conversations about safety, where children have an opportunity to disclose abuse. And, they need us to be willing to speak up and report suspicions of abuse.

Thank you for everything that you're doing to grow, and to strengthen your knowledge and skillset to better be a conduit of hope to the youth in your care.

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- 7 See this site for more information about ACEs:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html>

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#### 1) Which of the following statements are TRUE?

- A)  People and cultures are ever-changing, and protecting children is a continual process.
- B)  Overcoming harmful enculturated norms takes courage, and it will feel uncomfortable and "against the grain" at times.
- C)  To create communities that foster healthy relationships with children that have positive overtures, we need to work together.
- D)  All of the above.
- E)  A and C only.

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