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High Stakes: A Culture of Safety for Every Child

By [The VIRTUS[®] Programs](#)

Introduction

While it can be difficult to determine the full prevalence of child sexual abuse within child serving



organizations, research underscores the importance of policies, training and clear reporting pathways for adults and children/youth. While there are many wonderful and amazing educators, we know through research that educator sexual misconduct is also a serious problem that affects children across public and private schools. To address it effectively, we need to raise awareness, identify our own part in prevention and proper response, and continually promote an effective culture of safety.

What does the research show us?

Within public school settings alone, research indicates that approximately 10% of students experience sexual misconduct or sexual grooming by a K-12 school employee by the time they graduate high school.^{1, 2, 3} Similarly, another study found 10-12% K-12 public and private school children are victims of educator sexual misconduct while in school-specific activities,⁴ suggesting around 5.6 million school-age children will be victims of sexual misconduct by school employees before they graduate high school.⁵ Per this research, in a class of 20 public or private-school

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students, it is possible that at least two of them have already been sexually abused, or likely will be abused before they are 18. Once a child is sexually abused, they are more likely to be abused again by someone else, with greater vulnerability to being a victim of sexual violence even into adulthood.

Furthermore, complaints filed with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) alleging sexual misconduct/violence from educators and coaches against children within K–12 schools more than tripled between 2010 and 2019.⁶ Following the research, homeschooled children who are involved in various communal activities may also be victims of sexual abuse, though to a lesser degree than children enrolled in public and private schools.⁷ While official statistics often underestimate the actual extent of child sexual abuse, studies indicate even lower rates of official reporting of sexual misconduct by students due to fear and stigma, particularly within sports.⁸ Because of this research, the stakes are high to protect children and youth and they highlight the importance of creating cultures of safety.

The good news is that as caring and safe adults—we can help! Educators, coaches, youth ministers, program leaders and any safe adult *can be a part of the solution by creating a culture of safety.* Safe adults can work together to ensure child protection policies, training and behavioral expectations in schools, youth ministry programs, religious education, sports, and anywhere children gather, can shape a culture of safety! The first phase involves identifying whether or not there is a comprehensive policy and ensuring it is appropriate for the environment, then translating that policy into everyday practice that protects children, youth and the vulnerable. Finally, ensuring all adults are engaging in and modeling healthy and appropriate boundaries with one another and with children.

Organizational Culture

An organization's culture can significantly contribute to creating and maintaining healthy and safe environments for everyone!

- Organizational culture goes beyond policies and procedures. It is about how people think and behave in situations outside the scope of policies, as policies can only influence a fraction of risk.
- When you think of the term “culture,” there is likely a plethora of definitions and images that come to mind. The culture within an environment impacts how members of an organization interact with one another and behave in certain situations. It also determines their values and priorities. Cultural association goes beyond policies and procedures—and reveals how people think and behave in situations outside the scope of policies. It is how people behave when no one is watching them—

in which there is a direct correlation to safe environments.

Individual vs. collective culture

When we're talking about an *individual's* cultural identity, the person's personal values, family and ethnic traditions, country of origin, etc., will denote whether a particular behavior is appropriate or not. When considering a *collective* organizational culture, such as within a ministry or program for children, this combines the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of the individuals within that organization.

This combined culture at any organization can either encourage or suppress advocacy toward the wellbeing and safety of children and youth. It can limit or increase the access and opportunity for people to abuse, and it can either decrease or increase the vulnerability of the youth in the care of that organization. In fact, an organization's culture can impact whether sexual abuse, or other harm (such as boundary violations), can occur within a parish, school or other program and how swiftly it is addressed.

Culture of safety

In terms of child and youth protection, you have likely heard the terminology of a "culture of safety." While the definition of exactly what this means can be interpreted differently by organizations, when it comes to child-serving organizations, a "culture of safety" is vital to protect children and youth from sexual misconduct or inappropriate behavior. Does your organization clearly espouse the following checklist of a "culture of safety?"

- The safety of children and the vulnerable are core values—meaning they are more than just priorities (because priorities can change).
- All decisions are centered around safety, putting the child at the center of any decision involving the welfare of children. Resources are allocated to the prevention of child abuse, addressing child abuse, and to the healing of victims-survivors. Access to counseling, accommodations, and ongoing support helps survivors heal and ultimately thrive.
- Beliefs turn into *actual behaviors*—meaning people are behaving in such a way that they are maintaining the safest possible environments for all children, youth and the vulnerable.
- There is compliance and alignment with federal and state laws (such as mandatory reporting requirements) and professional ethics.
- The culture encourages children/youth, families, employees and volunteers to disclose concerns without fear of retaliation, strengthening trust in the organization.

If you can identify one or more of the previous examples as

not occurring in your child-serving organization, it's time to have a conversation with leadership, which might include communicating with people in greater positions of authority.

Conclusion

Knowing that children are vulnerable, we must embrace a culture of safety, which means that we are doing everything in our power to both prevent child sexual abuse, and appropriately *respond* to it when it does happen so that it will discontinue and the survivor can get the help they need.

By prioritizing safeguarding, education about healthy boundaries and access to services for survivors, we create safer learning environments for the children in our care in which we continually share responsibility among program leadership, employees, volunteers, families, and the community. In this way, we are working tangibly to prevent harm, respond effectively to danger and risk, and cultivate a safe environment where every child and youth can thrive.

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1) Which of the following is an example of building a “culture of safety” within a child serving program or ministry?

- A) ☐ Beliefs turn into actual behaviors—meaning people are behaving in such a way that they are maintaining the safest possible environments (as denoted by the policy) for all children, youth and the vulnerable.
- B) ☐ Employees and volunteers do not communicate any concerns unless they have absolute proof there is a problem or issue.
- C) ☐ The leadership of an organization prioritize their objectives and goals first, above the safety of the children and youth.
- D) ☐ All of the above.

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