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Schools, parishes to begin 'safe environment' programs

Curriculum aimed at children teaches about personal safety

By Julie Carroll

The Catholic Spirit

Catholic schools and parish religious education programs throughout the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis will begin teaching children about personal safety and sexual abuse prevention beginning in the 2006-2007 school year.

Four "safe environment" programs for children were approved by Archbishop Harry Flynn to fulfill a mandate set by the U.S. bishops in their "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," issued in June 2002.

The programs are age-appropriate and respect parents' role as their children's primary educators, Archbishop Flynn wrote in a Feb. 9 letter announcing the programs to pastors and parish life administrators.

Parents will have an opportunity to review all program materials before their children receive instruction. The programs involve four 30- to 40-minute lessons a year for Catholic school children and two longer lessons a year for children in parish religious education programs.

School administrators and religious education directors received training in the programs last week. Some Catholic schools and religious education programs will pilot the safety programs this spring.

The children's programs are part of a larger sex-abuse prevention effort requiring the participation of clergy, seminarians, diocesan and parish employees, school and parish religious education staffs, parents and volunteers who work with children. The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis' adult program is "Protecting God's Children," created by Virtus, which is affiliated with The National Catholic Risk Retention Group in Lisle, Ill.

Approximately 11,000 adults, including Archbishop Harry Flynn and Bishop Richard Pates, have gone through the Virtus program since it was instituted in the archdiocese in 2004, according to the archdiocesan Center for Ministry. All parishes will appoint a local coordinator to ensure compliance.

An advisory committee comprised of diocesan officials, principals and educators chose the four children's programs after

reviewing dozens of curricula used in other dioceses. The committee used several criteria to select the programs, according to Sharon Tomlin, archdiocesan director of Facilitation Service and Religious Education Administration. All the programs are:

- Consistent with church documents.
- Congruent with the charter's intent.
- Based on research from other dioceses and the Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
- Developmentally appropriate.
- Easily administered to children.

The programs are not specifically Catholic but can be adapted for a Catholic audience. All lessons have a Spanish component.

Children in preschool through fourth grade will use the Committee for Children's "Talking about Touching" curriculum, also used by the Boston archdiocese. At this age, children will learn that no one has the right to touch or see their private body parts except for the purpose of keeping the child clean and healthy. They also will learn that they have the right to say "no" to unwanted touch and that they can go to a trusted adult if they feel threatened or uncomfortable.

Children in grades five through eight will use KidWISE Institute Inc.'s "Out of Harm's Way: Personal Safety Curriculum," which focuses on Internet safety, bullying prevention and appropriate touch.

Grades nine through 12 will utilize St. Mary's Press' "Creating Safe and Sacred Spaces." Ninth- and 10th-graders will learn to recognize the warning signs of abuse and how to respond to potentially abusive relationships. Eleventh- and 12th-graders will focus on skills for building healthy relationships.

An alternative that parishes and schools may choose is KidWISE Institute's "Family Safety Fair," in which families attend an informational fair together.

Pastors who wish to use other programs that comply with the U.S. bishops' standards may request permission from Archbishop Flynn. Parents also may sign a form to exclude their children from participating in the programs.

The programs are not sex education, as some have claimed, said Charity Sister Fran Donnelly, director of parish life and personnel.

Educators are encouraged to teach children the proper names of body parts, though it is optional. However, lessons do not provide information about sexual activity, she said.

"The more tools we give kids, the better they can protect themselves," Sister Fran said. "If we can protect one child from abuse, it's worth anything."

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