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## Parishes, schools to begin sex abuse prevention, safety programs

**By Julie Carroll**

The Catholic Spirit

This fall, all Catholic schools and parish religious education programs in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis will launch ongoing personal safety and sexual abuse prevention programs for students in preschool through high school.

In February, Archbishop Harry Flynn approved four children's "safe environment" programs for use in the archdiocese to fulfill a mandate set by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in its "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

The charter, issued in June 2002 in response to widespread allegations of child sexual abuse by clergy, requires all U.S. dioceses to implement sexual abuse prevention programs based on specified criteria, but it allows each diocese to select its own programs.

The four programs selected by the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis are designed to teach children and young people about proper and improper touching, healthy relationships, dealing with bullies, gun and fire safety, and other personal safety issues.

An advisory committee comprised of archdiocesan officials, principals and educators chose the programs after reviewing dozens of curricula used in other dioceses. The committee also consulted with professionals in the fields of sexual abuse prevention and education.

The approved programs involve four 30- to 40-minute lessons a year for Catholic school children and two 30- to 40-minute lessons a year for children in parish religious education programs. The lessons are designed to be comprehensive.

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



*Rebecca Dennis-Johnson, a fourth-grade teacher at Holy Spirit School in St. Paul, piloted the "Talking About Touching" program in May. "The kids responded well to the lessons," she said. "It's information that needs to be covered. They need to know."*

Parents will receive information from their child's school or parish and will have the opportunity to review all program materials before their children receive instruction. Parents who do not want their children to participate in the programs may sign a form to opt out; however, they will be asked to teach the material at home, in accord with the bishops' stipulations.

## The approved programs

For children in preschool through fourth grade, the archdiocese has approved "Talking About Touching," a curriculum created by the Seattle-based non-profit organization Committee for Children.

The program stresses that no one has the right to touch or see children's private body parts except to keep them clean and healthy. Furthermore, children 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.

The archdiocese also has approved KidWISE Institute Inc.'s "Family Safety Fair," an informational fair parents and children can attend together, as an alternative program for preschool through fourth grade.

The approved program for students in grades five through eight is KidWISE Institute's "Out of Harm's Way Personal Safety Curriculum." Designed by the Oakland, Calif.-based organization specifically for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the program focuses on Internet safety, bullying prevention and appropriate touch.

For grades nine through 12, the archdiocese has selected Winona-based Saint Mary's Press' "Creating Safe and Sacred Places," developed by Jesuit Father Gerard McGlone, an assistant professor of psychology at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

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.

The archdiocese's criteria for selecting the programs came from The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's "Guidelines for Programs to Reduce Child Victimization: A Resource for Communities When Choosing a Program to Teach Personal Safety to Children," said Sister Fran Donnelly, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is archdiocesan director of Parish Life and Personnel and director of the archdiocesan Protection of Children and Youth Initiative.

The criteria include:

- Developmental appropriateness.
- Instruction based on accepted educational theories.
- The ability to address special-needs children.
- Helping children build self-confidence to better protect themselves in a variety of situations.
- Multiple program components that are repeated over years.
- Use of qualified presenters who use role-playing, behavioral rehearsal, feedback and active participation.

The programs' consistency with Catholic teaching and values was another important consideration, said Sister Fran.

Pastors and school administrators had the option of selecting other programs in compliance with the U.S. bishops' standards, with permission from Archbishop Flynn.

## Focus of controversy

In recent months, some parents and others in the archdiocese have expressed concerns about the age appropriateness of content in the "Talking About Touching" program, which gives educators the option of teaching children the proper names of private body parts. Critics have said the curriculum for children in preschool through fourth grade reveals too much information about sexuality to children at an age when their innocence should be guarded.

Primary Educators League, a group of parents and clergy who object to “Talking About Touching,” says it should be parents, not schools, who teach their children about safety.

“It’s our thinking that the church needs to get back to telling the parents, ‘It’s your right and responsibility to teach your kids this material,’” said John Murphy, one of the founders of Primary Educators League.

“Probably 90 percent of the stuff in ‘Talking About Touching’ is innocuous,” Murphy said. “A lot of it is just common sense safety stuff.”

However, Murphy added, some of the scenarios used to teach children about sexual abuse are “a little too scary, too explicit.” For example, Murphy said, one of the scenarios presents an adult male putting his hand down a child’s pants. “We just don’t think we want that stuff introduced into our Catholic classrooms,” he said.

“We’re not against teaching kids about trying to be safe,” said Murphy, who has six children, ages 2 months to 15 years. “We just think there are better ways to go about it.”

Primary Educators League advocates use of the “Formation in Christian Chastity” program, written by the Diocese of Harrisburg, Pa., and approved by Archbishop Flynn for use in several schools and parishes in the archdiocese.

Others have objected to “Talking About Touching’s” recommendation that children learn the proper names of private body parts.

Sister Fran stressed that the common goal of all the archdiocesan-approved programs is personal safety, not sex education.

She said the reason for teaching children the proper names of private body parts, if educators choose to do so, is to equip them with the tools to communicate clearly if an adult has touched them inappropriately.

Studies have shown “that the more knowledgeable children are [about the anatomical names of body parts] at the appropriate age, the more able they are to tell trusted adults what’s happening to them,” Sister Fran said.

Experts recommended to the archdiocese that children in kindergarten be given this information to keep them safe, she added.

## Preparations begin

The archdiocese is in the process of training educators to present the curricula in schools and parishes this fall. In addition, resource materials with references to Catholic teaching and the “Catechism of the Catholic Church” that instructors can use to supplement the lessons will be distributed to every school and parish.

Last spring, all of the youth programs, with the exception of the “Family Safety Fair,” were piloted in select schools and parishes in the archdiocese. Most of the feedback from educators who participated in the pilot phase was positive, said Katie Gebhard, faith formation program development director for the department of Catholic Education and Formation Ministries.

Rebecca Dennis-Johnson, a fourth-grade teacher at Holy Spirit School in St. Paul who piloted the “Talking About Touching” program, said: “The kids responded well to the lessons. . . . It’s information that needs to be covered. They need to know.”

Dennis-Johnson added that she believes it’s better to be proactive rather than reactive when teaching children about safety.

Chris Lofton, an eighth-grade teacher who piloted “Out of Harm’s Way” at St. Mark’s School in St. Paul, agreed.

“I think the lessons went pretty well,” Lofton said. “I felt [the lessons] were developmentally appropriate, and they were filled with good information in terms of helping kids understand their personal safety rights: the right to know, the right to tell, the right to say no, and the right to decide.”

Lofton said educators have a responsibility to work in partnership with parents to educate their children.

“We want to give [children] good information and we want to empower them to be able to make good decisions down the road,” he said.

Lofton, whose own three children will participate in the archdiocese’s safe environment programs, said last May that as a parent he didn’t have any concerns about the programs, though at the time he had not seen any of the programs in their entirety.

“I do have faith in the archdiocese, and I have faith in the decisions that people are making,” he said.

In response to those who criticize the safe environment programs for being too secular, Lofton said, “The scenarios that are given are realistic situations that could happen in the real world. . . . You can take what one might perceive as a very secular lesson and you can turn it into a lesson that is based in Scripture and based in Gospel values.

“One of the things I tried to talk to the kids about is that we are in communion with one another,” Lofton said. “This isn’t just about protecting yourself; it’s about looking out for the good of all people.”

## Part of a bigger initiative

The youth programs are part of a larger, ongoing sex-abuse prevention initiative requiring the participation of clergy, seminarians, diocesan and parish employees, school and parish religious education staffs, parents and volunteers who work with children.

The “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” requires:

- Background checks for all priests and deacons, as well as diocesan, parish, school and other church employees and volunteers who have ongoing, unsupervised contact with minors.
- Training of parents, ministers, educators, church personnel, volunteers and others regularly involved with minors regarding child abuse issues, including child sexual abuse.
- A written “code of conduct” for all adults who work with youth on a regular basis.

To date, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has conducted criminal background checks for all employees and volunteers, according to Sister Fran Donnelly.

The archdiocese’s adult program is “Protecting God’s Children,” created by Virtus, which is affiliated with The National Catholic Risk Retention Group in Lisle, Ill. Approximately 12,000 adults, including Archbishop Harry Flynn and Bishop Richard Pates, have completed the Virtus program since the archdiocese instituted it in 2004, according to the archdiocesan Center for Ministry.

Archdiocesan officials are in the process of drafting a code of conduct for personnel.

## A national leader

Since the 1980s, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has been a leader in sexual abuse prevention. In 1987, the archdiocese began conducting workshops on ministry related sexual misconduct and boundaries for priests and church personnel. In 1988, the archdiocese released the nation’s first written policy on clergy sexual abuse of children.

Since 1992, all clergy and many lay professionals have received training concerning sexual misconduct and boundary issues. The archdiocese also created a full-time victims advocate position in 1992.

Since 1993, the archdiocese has conducted criminal background checks for all church and school employees.

In 1998, Archbishop Flynn updated, revised and strengthened the policies outlined in Archbishop John Roach’s 1992 document

“Understanding Sexual Issues in Ministry” under the title “A Time to Heal.”

Last spring, an audit of all U.S. dioceses conducted by the U.S. bishops’ Office of Child and Youth Protection found the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis noncompliant because it had not met the charter’s deadline for implementing children’s safe environment programming in all Catholic schools and parishes.

However, Father Kevin McDonough, vicar general, told The Catholic Spirit that the archdiocese made a conscious decision to delay implementing children’s programs so the archdiocese would have ample time to thoroughly review all available programs and provide training for parents.

The U.S. bishops’ Office of Child and Youth Protection will conduct ongoing biannual audits to ensure all dioceses remain in compliance with the charter. Officials of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis expect the archdiocese will be in full compliance for the next audit in November.

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