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CREATING SAFE AND SACRED PLACES FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS



Sexual Abuse Educational Sessions
for 5th to 8th Graders

Laurie Delgatto

Foreword by Jo Hittner, PhD

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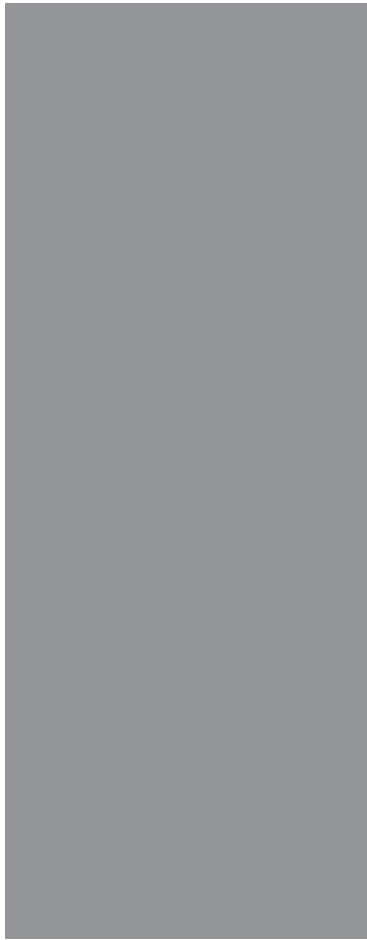
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DEDICATION

There have always been wonderful teachers along the way that have helped me through some of life's most difficult moments. But no one has taught me more about myself and how to live without fear than Jerry McGlone. For that reason I dedicate this book to him.

For his kindness, for his humility, for his never giving up on me, even when I wanted to give up on myself, and especially for his teaching me what it means to feel safe again, I am grateful. I am so grateful.



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My deepest prayer is that someday all children will be safe from the sin and horror of sexual abuse. I invite you to join me in praying that prayer.



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FOREWORD

Child sexual abuse is not a comfortable subject matter, nor is it a topic that most of us care to include in our regular conversations. Even the thought of child sexual abuse is something most people prefer to put out of their minds. Many of us would like to believe that sexual abuse happens only to other people in other places or in other times. Discussing child sexual abuse, in fact, remains taboo even in this era of openness about personal and family difficulties. Sexual abuse includes topics that people are uncomfortable with: sexuality, power, gender, violence, and the exploitation of innocent children. Sexual abuse not only wounds its victims but also cuts through families and communities and destroys trust.

During early adolescence, youth are growing and changing in a range of ways that are deeply affected if they suffer sexual abuse:

- **Physiological change.** Young people compare themselves with their peers in terms of looks or talents. That comparison may produce feelings of anxiety or contribute to dampening their self-esteem. Youth who have experienced abuse compare themselves to their peers but think they are different even if they look or act comparably. Because of the abuse, they often feel they are somehow noticeably different, even if they cannot tell what that difference is.
- **Emotional development.** Young people in abusive situations must redirect their energy from emotional development to survival. When

they are forced to focus on avoiding the violent or sexual advances of an adult, especially an adult caretaker, they cannot make the same developmental progress as young people who receive unconditional love, support, and guidance. These delays in emotional development become more evident as their peers advance and they do not.

- **Cognitive change.** Young people develop more abstract thinking and better problem-solving skills as they mature. For abused youth, this means they will reexperience and reframe the abuse they experienced earlier. They will begin to put new thinking on old experiences and judge themselves harshly for not having acted differently.
- **Moral and spiritual development.** During early adolescence young people begin to question the meaning of life and begin to think about the larger world, the role they play in it, and the options and opportunities available to them. Youth who have been sexually abused question why it would happen to them or what they could or should have done differently. If they have not been able to talk about the abuse or have felt blamed or not believed, they begin to question their value as worthwhile people.
- **Sexual development.** For some young people, the real consequences of being sexually abused occur during early adolescence. When a child of three or four years of age is sexually abused, it is not a sexual event in the way adults may think. It is physically hurtful, confusing, and alarming, but children that young do not have a context for defining the abuse. When those children become young adolescents, they cognitively reassess the abuse as they begin to learn about or experience sexual feelings. They have difficulty knowing what healthy sexual behavior is and often confuse sex and love. Though all young peoples' development is affected by both internal and external factors, each youth experiences growing up differently. For youth who are abused, that process is negatively affected. For positive identity formation to occur in any human being, some basic things have to be attained, including the following:
 - *Expressions of love.* Young people need to feel that somebody cares about them unconditionally.
 - *Feelings of significance.* Young people need to feel that they are significant or important to someone for no other reason than just being who they are.
 - *A sense of virtue.* Young people need to have a belief in their innate goodness.
 - *A sense of belonging.* Young people need to feel connected to someone who provides them with a sense of stable belonging.
 - *Mastery and control.* Young people need to experience feelings of mastery, personal power, and control.

These variables are all significantly compromised by sexual abuse.

According to the most recent report of data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, approximately 872,000 children were found to be victims of child abuse or neglect in 2004. Of this number, 9.7 percent were sexually abused.

Despite these statistics, many of us still live in a state of denial. The results of this country's refusal to confront the sexual abuse of children are staggering. These include gaps in services to survivors, little research into the effects of sexual abuse, and inadequate assistance on effective approaches to supporting youth who have been sexually abused. The limited intervention and support typically given to youth survivors is compounded by the fact that they must deal with their trauma in a society that is reluctant to acknowledge that child sexual abuse even occurs.

This is why *Creating Safe and Sacred Places for Young Adolescents* is such a valuable tool in the efforts to educate and prevent child sexual abuse. The writing of this manual reveals the ongoing commitment that Saint Mary's Press has to helping address the long-standing problems of child sexual abuse, particularly abuse in the Church. The key to prevention is education.

This manual provides solid educational material for teaching early adolescents what sexual abuse is and how they can take an active role in preventing it. In today's environment, this resource is essential for teaching young people how to keep themselves out of harm's way and gives them permission to be assertive in situations that demand such a response.

The Catholic Church owes today's young adolescents this type of education and prevention. To ignore or not help to prevent the sexual abuse of young people is simply unacceptable.

Jo Hittner, PhD



INTRODUCTION

In 2002 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” in response to the horrifying headlines and reports about Church leaders who had sexually abused young people. Simply put, the charter required every diocese, parish, and Catholic school in the United States to create and maintain safe environment programs for and with young people.

In 2003 Saint Mary’s Press published *Creating Safe and Sacred Places: Identifying, Preventing, and Healing Sexual Abuse* to provide dioceses, schools, and parishes with the necessary pastoral resources to help train and educate parents, ministry volunteers, Church leaders, and teens in the areas of awareness and prevention of sexual abuse.

Since 2003 *Creating Safe and Sacred Places* has been adopted and utilized in dozens of dioceses and hundreds of parishes across the country. *Creating Safe and Sacred Places* provides an in-depth discussion of sexual abuse, sexual offenders, and signs of abuse, as well as a candid chapter regarding sexual abuse and the Church. It also includes a compelling reflection written by a sexual abuse survivor. Additionally, that manual provides numerous resources for addressing the issue of sexual abuse, including a sample code of conduct, a sample parish statement for those working with youth, questions and commentary for screening volunteers, and a prayer service of reconciliation and

rededication. Finally, the manual includes training and education sessions for ministry leaders, parents, and older adolescents.

As dioceses and parishes around the country continue to work diligently to implement training and education programs relating to prevention of, identification of, response to, and reporting of sexual abuse, many ministry leaders and safe environment coordinators have shared their concerns regarding the lack of resources for educating young people in grades 5 through 8. *Creating Safe and Sacred Places for Young Adolescents: Sexual Abuse Educational Sessions for 5th to 8th Graders* is Saint Mary's Press's response to that concern.

Creating Safe and Sacred Places for Young Adolescents does not duplicate the content found in the 2003 publication; rather, it builds on that content by providing hands-on educational sessions geared toward 5th and 6th graders and 7th and 8th graders. The sessions in this manual are meant to provide information and help young adolescents develop skills for recognizing child sexual abuse and for avoiding or averting abusive situations.

The manual includes three 60-minute educational sessions for 5th and 6th graders and three 60-minute sessions for 7th and 8th graders. During these sessions the participants will

- develop the skills to recognize, trust, and follow their instincts about people and situations
- be introduced to types of touch (5th and 6th graders only)
- identify personal boundaries that no one, not even a relative, should ever cross (7th and 8th graders only)
- identify the risk factors associated with sexual abuse
- obtain information and tools, including the use of assertiveness skills, necessary for responding to threatening and abusive situations
- understand the importance of telling a responsible adult if someone inappropriately touches or harms them
- be aware of the tools, resources, and guidance that are available to them to help create a safe home, school, and community environment
- learn how to respond when a friend has been abused (5th and 6th graders only)
- understand their key role in raising awareness and support in the prevention of child sexual abuse

Two prime components critical to the successful prevention of sexual abuse are information and skill. In these sessions information is transmitted in a variety of ways, and skills are learned primarily through safe practice. The use of role-play is essential to these educational sessions. The objective of role-playing is not to coach the young people into polished performances, but simply to give them opportunities to experiment and practice.

Preparing for *Creating Safe and Sacred Places for Young Adolescents*

Any initiation of a discussion about child sexual abuse will lead to many questions and concerns a pastoral minister, teacher, or administrator must be prepared to address both individually and communally. This resource presents you with an important but clear responsibility to respond to such questions and issues ethically, directly, and sensitively.

Spend time reflecting on the thoughts and feelings evoked within you when you hear about sexual abuse. Although self-reflection is encouraged and necessary, you need not and *should not* attempt to address this issue on your own. Remember that a communal problem requires a communal response. The best preventive and educational programs are collaborative in their conception and in their implementation.

Only experienced, skilled, nonjudgmental leaders who can deal responsibly and in a pastorally sensitive manner should lead and conduct the sessions in this manual. It is not recommended that these sessions be conducted by volunteers or catechists who have not been appropriately trained in the area of child sexual abuse education and prevention. A parish staff member working side by side with a professional counselor or social worker from the community is optimal. Working in pairs as facilitators (cofacilitation) is highly recommended.

If you do not already own a copy of *Creating Safe and Sacred Places: Identifying, Preventing, and Healing Sexual Abuse* (the 2003 publication), it is highly recommended that you purchase one. In it you will find helpful foundational material regarding sexual abuse, including sexual abuse in the Church. Remember that the more you know about the issue, the better prepared you will be to discuss and present it to the young adolescents you will be working with.

Preparing Yourself

Honesty

It is your responsibility to be candid and honest from the onset. The young people participating in any of the sessions in this program must be told from the start that you have a legal and ethical responsibility to report any alleged abuse, whether it is sexual or physical.

Access to Professional Assistance

An issue such as sexual abuse or domestic violence requires a trained and competent psychological and pastoral counselor. The importance of having a trained professional therapist on hand or readily accessible as you are implementing the programming in this manual

cannot be stressed enough. You are not expected to be an expert on these issues. It is important to know your own limitations and those of the staff or program team members. Most states and cities have child protection services or agencies with a toll-free telephone number, as well as an emergency number, to call if abuse of any sort is suspected. It is important to know the names and telephone numbers of such agencies and to have the information readily available for all the participants.

Knowledge of the Law

Know and abide by the state and county laws as well as your diocesan policy regarding the reporting of alleged abuse. Many states now require anyone who works with young people to report alleged abuse; some require reporting in a timely fashion. Know how soon you are required to report as well as what the content of that report must be.

Consider working with local police and county agencies as you begin to implement the programming in this manual. Initiate conversations and discuss ways those agencies can be involved in the education of your community. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has made it clear that all Roman Catholic Church and school communities must obey local and county laws regarding sexual abuse.

Preparing the Participants' Parents

Generally speaking, the more parents know about these sessions, the more supportive they are likely to be. Naturally, parents will need assurance that their children are being taught about a sensitive subject matter in a carefully planned and pastoral manner. Though parents do want to have their children aware and safe, they don't want them to be unduly harmed or afraid.

Parents often want and need information about child abuse. You might want to schedule a special meeting so parents can hear about the session content, preview materials, or participate in a sample session. You might also consider inviting parents to attend the actual sessions. Always encourage them to be in touch if they have any questions or concerns.

Preparing the Participants

There is great potential for authentic and honest sharing for all session participants. From the onset you will need to acknowledge that some of the information you will be providing may make some participants uncomfortable. It is essential that the participants know they should speak only when they are comfortable doing so.

The seriousness of the topic will have to be addressed immediately. Young adolescents are not used to adults' saying anything regarding sex to them. There may be initial nervousness or embarrassment. When the sessions begin, consider inviting the participants to discuss and agree upon guidelines for participation and sharing. Engage the participants in discussing the positive effects of respect and confidentiality and the destructive effects of sarcasm, judgment calls, and put-downs. You will want to remind the participants of these guidelines each time you gather.

What If a Young Person Discloses Abuse to You?

If a young person makes any comment about the possibility of sexual (or emotional or physical) abuse, it is critical that you believe him or her and take the matter seriously. *It is rare for a child to lie about abuse.* Refrain from making any judgmental comments, and allow the young person to talk freely. Assure the young person that he or she did the right thing by telling you. Let the child know he or she is not responsible for the abuse and not to blame for it. Tell him or her you will take appropriate steps to do what you can to have the abuse stop. It is important to tell the young person that you cannot keep his or her secret and that you must report the abuse. *Never* promise a young person you will not tell his or her secret. Each state identifies mandatory reporters (groups of people who are required to report suspicions of child abuse). However, any concerned person can and should report suspected child abuse. A report is not an accusation; it is an expression of concern and a request for an investigation or evaluation of the child's situation.

Any suspicion of sexual abuse *must* be reported. This includes suspicion of cyber sexual abuse as well. You do not have to verify the abuse; you only need to report it. People who report suspected abuse in good faith cannot be prosecuted. To report suspicion of abuse, contact your local child protection agency. If you are a parish volunteer or staff person, you will want to notify your pastor as well. School staff should notify the school principal.

Once a report is made, the receiving agency will determine the extent of the abuse or whether abuse did in fact occur. The alleged abuser will be contacted, and more important, the child will be given safety. Whether the abuse is substantiated or unsubstantiated, services are available to the family to help them through the crisis of a report having been made. These services could include in-home family therapy, a

safety plan for the family, individual therapy for the child, and further investigation of the circumstances surrounding the report.

(This information is adapted from Jo Hittner, *Helping Kids in Crisis*, pp. 46–47.)

Strategies for Implementation

Consider the following ideas for implementing and integrating the sessions found in this manual within the overall young adolescent ministerial programming your parish or school offers:

- as a series of sessions addressing family, child, or community safety
- as regular yearly sessions in the religious education curriculum
- in preparation for a school or parish outing or event in which young people will participate
- as a portion of training for young adolescent peer leaders
- as a component of a summer weeklong program for young adolescents
- as part of a parish intergenerational program

Ongoing Prevention and Education

Your community can do several things to inform, prevent, and respond to sexual abuse. The following are essential strategies you will want to incorporate into parish or schoolwide ministries:

- All young people need to know that their bodies are sacred. Talk openly about safe touch versus unsafe touch.
- Remember that most offenders are known by their victims.
- All young people need to develop good, solid relationships with peers, parents, and significant adults they can trust.
- Background checks and supervision are simply unavoidable for any adult volunteer or paid employee. Be clear about the procedures and processes required by your diocese.
- Proper boundaries need to be talked about and respected within staffs and within congregations.
- Nothing is more sacred than communication, and nothing is more preventive! Research points to communication as key to prevention. Good and nonjudgmental communication assumes mutual respect, regardless of any information a young person may share.
- Open discussion about sexual matters, though it may be uncomfortable, must be pursued and encouraged, especially within families.
- Do not assume anything about anyone.