



## Safe Environment Programs Promote Awareness, Prevention

By Terry McGuire

Every so often Joan Vienna will hear someone bemoan the fact that children today have to be warned about child abuse.

“And my point back to them,” says the coordinator of the Safeguard the Children program for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, “is always, ‘No. Isn’t it too bad we haven’t done this years ago!’” For as she notes, the more people are educated about the topic, the more they talk about it, the more they look for it, the more they spread awareness to the wider community, and the greater the chances are that perpetrators will be stopped before the damage is done.

Recently, for example, parents trained in the Safeguard the Children program alerted their pastor about a school dad seen regularly taking photos of children on the school grounds. The picture taking was stopped. And six months later, the man was in federal prison after being caught operating a child pornography Web site, Vienna says.

Vienna and her counterparts in dioceses around the nation are carrying out the U.S. Catholic bishops’ mandate to protect children from sexual abuse and other abuse through training programs for adults and children that teach the warning signs of abuse and how to respond. Children are taught to trust their instincts and to report the matter to adults if someone is making them feel uncomfortable. They learn that “no one has the



**Joan Vienna**, coordinator of the Safeguard the Children program for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles



**Beth Heidt-Kozisek**, director of the Child Protection Office for the Diocese of Grand Island, Neb



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right to touch you,” Vienna says, and that “it’s not your fault” if an adult acts inappropriately.

Adults are trained to look for warning signs of inappropriate behavior, or relationships that don’t seem right, says Beth Heidt-Kozisek, director of the Child Protection Office for the Diocese of Grand Island, Neb. and a licensed child psychologist. Among the red flags are adults who: isolate the child from others; encourage the child to be secretive; and withhold attention or affection unless the child engages in what the perpetrator wants. “It’s important for adults to respond by monitoring the situation,” Heidt-Kozisek says. “If there is clearly abuse going on, it’s important to report it to authorities.”

Education “is first and foremost” in safe environment efforts, Vienna said. In addition, policies and procedures, including codes of conduct, must be established, and special resources such as brochures and other informational materials need to be developed.

“I’ve had the honor these past five years of seeing the fruits of the labor, where things are reported to us before something happens to a child or a young person,” Vienna said. “That’s how I can tell it’s working.”

Advocates find that some adults still harbor misconceptions about programs designed to protect children from abuse. “There’s a tendency for people to equate safe environment training with sex education or teaching in human sexuality, and it’s really not,” Heidt-Kozisek says. Instead, it’s about rules and what children should do when they feel pressured to break them. Safe environment training empowers children to know that there are things they can do when dangers invade their environment. And by repeating the rules each year, it becomes rote in the child’s mind, she says. “What we try to teach children is that they are God’s creation and they’re worthy of dignity and respect.”

Some people regard child abuse as a “church problem,” Vienna says, “and that if it weren’t for the clergy abuse crisis it wouldn’t be such an issue today. “They don’t understand this is a worldwide problem (that) has been with us since the beginning of



time,” she says, “and that no other organization has stood up and bravely faced it on a large scale” like the Catholic Church has.



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