

SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE CHURCH: HOW PARENTS AND TEACHERS CAN HELP

The Catholic Church is in the midst of a national tragedy and crisis regarding allegations of sexual misconduct by the clergy. Children and adolescents are exposed to talk and news coverage about this and they have their own reactions as well as reactions to the feelings of adults around them.

When they hear that some priests have sexually abused children, they may feel shocked and confused. Depending on their age and circumstances, they may focus on one or another aspect of the allegations. Here are a few of the things children may ask and talk about: *How someone who is holy could do something so wrong, sexual abuse of children, sexual behavior with people of one sex or the other, why adults break laws, what authorities should do when people do wrong things, why celibacy rules exist, why priests might commit sins and what happens when they do.* For adolescents, there is a clear risk of cynicism and loss of confidence in adults they look up to, such as teachers, priests, counselors, coaches and youth ministers.

Individual children and adolescents will respond in particular ways, shaped by their developmental stage, their parents' reactions and the comments of their peers. The following guidelines may help you help children with their reactions to this crisis.

WHAT HELPS NOW?

BRING IT UP FIRST:

Adults make it easier for children to talk about upsetting events if they bring up the topic first. This shows the children that adults can face what has happened and they can handle their upset feelings. It is a good idea to talk about this in a place and at a time when the child is likely to feel secure and comfortable – a familiar place without interruptions. If your child shows little interest in talking about this, don't push the issue. They may bring it up when and if they want to talk about it.

NORMALIZE THE FEELINGS:

Children typically feel bewildered by the ideas and feelings that arise at a time like this. A statement from adults that their reactions make sense can help them understand and accept their thoughts and feelings – something like: “This is the kind of thing that upsets and shocks everyone and it usually helps to talk about it.”

LISTEN WITH ACCEPTANCE:

Their feelings may be quite different from yours or similar. Listening is a way of letting children know that their feelings, whatever they are, deserve attention, respect and understanding. Encouraging expression of feelings reduces tension and leads to acceptance of what has happened.

ANSWER HONESTLY THE QUESTIONS THEY ASK:

Honesty from adults helps repair the crack in the children's trust in the world. So it is important for us not to lie or evade real questions children are asking. Answering their questions in a clear and matter of fact manner calms them. Usually, adults do not know the answers to some of the questions children ask. At these times, it is better to say so directly, rather than guess or avoid the question. A comment like: “I don't know—I wish I understood all this better myself “can help them feel more comfortable with the confusion they feel.

ACCEPT EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR:

Depending on the child's age and situation, they sometimes act angry, anxious and upset or engage in sexually-toned teasing. Sometimes they do not realize why they are more troubled and/or troublesome. Parents' and teachers' calmness and understanding of these feelings will help them cope with what is troubling them.

AVOID ABSOLUTE REASSURANCES:

No one can guarantee that “nothing like this will ever happen here.” Even though we wish we could prevent incidents like those described in the press and on television from happening, we cannot guarantee it. In our wish to reassure children we should avoid

promising things we cannot control. In the long run, global promises of safety can lead children to distrust adults.

PAY ATTENTION TO HOW TALKING ABOUT THIS AND THE MEDIA COVERAGE AFFECTS THEM.

Once you have made it clear you are open to talking about their questions and feelings, monitor and limit excessive coverage of this topic, especially for younger children.

There is no reason to believe repeated TV coverage of this issue is helpful to children and it may harm them.

KEEP OTHER THINGS STEADY:

Keeping family and school routines as consistent as possible provides a sense of security and order at a time when children don't know what to expect.

PUT THIS IN A CONTEXT:

Children need to be reminded that most adults they count on and most Church leaders live good and holy lives and they can be trusted.

REVIEW RULES OF PRIVACY AND BODILY INTEGRITY WITH CHILDREN.

Remind them that no one has a right to touch them in ways that feel wrong and uncomfortable and what to do if someone tries to do so.