

## Catechesis for Family Life And Abuse Prevention

In developing an effective approach for abuse prevention, the Archdiocese of Baltimore stresses a holistic and positive Catechesis in Family Life. In this program, required in all parish and schools, grades Kindergarten through 12, young people learn about personal safety in the context of lessons on appropriate behavior, moral living, and healthy relationships that supplement their basic faith formation programs.

Study of current research and guidelines in child protection has raised awareness of a number of limitations and concerns with some of the popular approaches of the past decade. The currently available textbook resources address abuse prevention, but more parental resources are needed.

As they use the approved textbook series for Catechesis for Family Life, parents and catechists should also keep in mind:

- Children have difficulties in saying ‘no’ to those in authority or with more power. Victims of abuse may feel guilty because they could not or have not said “no”, told, or made the offender stop. Prevention programs should not put the onus on children to be solely responsible for their own safety.
- “Good touch” vs. “bad touch” cannot be the extent of our instruction to children about appropriateness or boundaries. The definition of sexual abuse as bad touch may give children the misguided notion that all sexuality is “bad” (even consensual sexual activity between adults). As well, children whose abuse has included pleasurable body feelings may not be able to conceptualize their sexual abuse as “bad” touch (without viewing themselves as bad).
- Therefore, prevention programs should incorporate teaching about legitimate touch e.g. for washing or wiping, medical attention, or ensuring safety) while also recognizing that trusted adults (e.g. family members) may engage in sexually abusive touch. Oversimplified “touching rules” may lead to overgeneralization by children (e.g. “Nobody should touch my private parts.”) or the inappropriate provision of exceptions by parents (e.g. “Don’t let anyone touch your private parts except Mommy, Daddy or a doctor.”)
- “Stranger danger” is not adequate instruction, either, since the majority of abusers are not strangers to the child. The abuser is much more likely to be a member of the child’s family or other close acquaintance.

