



Parent and Youth Education Program

The Diocese of Kalamazoo continues to update and refine the Maria Goretti Project. The goal of the Maria Goretti Project is to establish open communication between parishes, schools, parents, and youth of the diocese to create a safer environment to know, love, and serve God. For the 2023-2024 school year parishes and parents of parish religious education and youth ministry programs will enter the next phase of the project. Parishes will provide some time for parents to hear and discuss why they are being asked to be involved in safe environment education, and to learn some valuable information that can assist in keeping their children safe. Each parent will then be provided with a paper handout for their children's specific grade levels. This sheet will address four topics: Communication, Body Awareness, Technology, and Healthy Boundaries. Over the next year more material will be added to the diocesan Protect website (protect.diokzoo.org/gorettiproject) to provide further discussion points and information to parents who want to have deeper conversations. There will be two specific questions for each section to start conversations between parents and their children. We hope that parents will see the value of this program, but they can always contact the diocese for any additional questions or concerns. After receiving the information parents will have the opportunity to opt out of educating their children using these discussion guides. These forms will then be kept at the parish grounds and reported on the Annual Audit.

FAQ

Why are we asking parents to be involved?

Some of the prime factors in both preventing child sexual assault and mitigating the effects are:

- Feeling comfortable discussing emotions and feelings with family
- Having supportive family through difficult times
- Having a safe adult who has a genuine interest in them
- Feeling safe and protected by an adult in their home¹

Also, most abuse cases are not reported. Most children do not report their abuse due to, fear of not being believed, guilt, self-blame, or fear of family disruption.² "A secure parent-child relationship and safe environment are likely important in regard to disclosure",³ "caregiver belief is an important aspect of the disclosure process and promoting youth protection"⁴. Of those that disclose their abuse "40% tell a close friend, rather than an adult or authority."⁵ It

¹ https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Statistics_Risk-Factors.pdf

² https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Statistics_Reporting.pdf

³ <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2005&context=psychfacpub>

⁴ <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2005&context=psychfacpub>

⁵ https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/all_statistics_20150619.pdf

has been found that the sooner a youth discloses the less psychological effects of the abuse such as post-traumatic stress disorder or substance abuse.⁶

In order to assist with both the prevention of child sexual abuse, and to assist in creating an environment for youth reporting instances of sexual abuse, or unsafe situations, the Diocese of Kalamazoo is focusing on educating parents and assisting parents in having necessary conversations with their children. This also fulfills the USCCB Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, article 12 that indicates cooperation with parents and education of minors, parents, ministers, employees and volunteers.⁷ The Diocese of Kalamazoo is committed to creating a safe environment in our parishes, our programs, and assisting families in creating a safe environment at home, while promoting parents as the primary (meaning first and most consistent) educators.⁸

Will this make it more difficult for the parish to detect abuse?

All employees and volunteers are still going to attend the Safe Environment trainings provided by the Diocese of Kalamazoo for adults working with children. This training includes ways of detecting potential abuse and providing a safer environment. When abuse is reported to an adult it is primarily because of the trust level between the adult and the child. Disclosure is made typically to peers, then parents or trusted adults.⁹ For parish personnel to be effective in detecting abuse they must build virtuous and safe trust with youth they interact with and be observant of the signs of abuse. If the whole of Catholic teaching is promoted, youth will feel comfortable disclosing information.

Why are we not using the VIRTUS lessons?

While the lessons provided by VIRTUS are extensive and there is a version that is developed for use with parents, feedback has shown that many parents are overwhelmed by the content and structure of the lessons. Our primary goal is to establish a means for parents to feel comfortable communicating with their children on these topics. The more natural and conversational these discussions are, the more effective they will be. We have established our own content using experts and resources to condense the material for ease of use, and to develop questions that are natural for parents to communicate.

What are the expected benefits of this project?

The expected benefit of the Goretti Project Parent and Youth Education Program is to have educated parents who are in constant and consistent communication with their children. Our hope is this will lead to less children being abused, earlier detection of abuse, and quicker assistance for those who are abused. This should lead to a greater understanding of all

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15374410701279701>

⁷ <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Charter-for-the-Protection-of-Children-and-Young-People-2018-final%281%29.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/para/2223.htm#:~:text=Catechism%20of%20the%20Catholic%20Church,disinterested%20service%20are%20the%20rule.>

⁹ https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Statistics_The-Issue.pdf

diocesan policies on safe environment and a collectively safer environment of parishes and homes.

While 30% of abused children are abused by immediate or extended family, not all of these are adults and most are not parents¹⁰. Additionally 40% of children are abused by older or more powerful children.¹¹ While these young offenders are not as likely to become adult offenders¹² they need psychological assistance. Open conversations with children in families can both assist with preventing youth offenders, and getting youth offenders help when needed to prevent future offending.

Creating an open relationship and partnership with parents, the parish, parish personnel, and youth can lead to a safer environment with less opportunity for abuse to take place and a quicker response to situations of abuse. This will lead to healthier relationships. This creates a space where all can come to Jesus through the Church in a safe and wholesome environment.

What if parents opt-out?

This shift in education programs is really a shift in culture and will take time to implement. Parents have always had the opportunity to opt out of the children's education programs and will still have that opportunity. Every parent should be given the materials and the opportunity to educate their own children. We believe that over the years as we shift the culture more and more parents will desire to be a part of this culture and discussion.

How will I get my parish's parents to come to a meeting?

Explaining the importance of this meeting, making the meeting worthwhile and choosing a convenient time are all aspects of creating a welcoming environment for parents to attend a meeting. It is important to have discussions with a group of parents to determine the timing of the meeting, and what elements will assist parents in attending.

How do I address parents that do not come to a meeting?

A follow-up phone or email communication with parents who do not attend the meetings are important. Every parent must be given the materials and determine if they want to opt out of the conversations with their children. If you are unable to get a response from the parents, they will be considered untrained on the yearly audit.

How do I know if my parents have provided the information to the children?

The diocese requests a trusting and open relationship between parents and the parish. If the parents have not opted out of the program, they will be designated as educating their children on the yearly audit. This program assists parents in conversations with their children and we do not need to put artificial deadlines or meeting times on these conversations.

¹⁰ https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Statistics_The-Issue.pdf

¹¹ https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/all_statistics_20150619.pdf

¹² https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/all_statistics_20150619.pdf