

Reporting Suspicions of Abuse

We all feel quite strongly about the harm that befalls some children. Media accounts of abused and neglected children anger us. We don't understand how these things could happen.

And then it happens. We suspect that a child in our classroom or youth event is being abused. The suspected predator is not a stranger to the child – and in fact, is someone we have met or know. We know that we need to report this to the authorities, yet we stall.

The hesitation we may experience is caused by many factors. Because we are well aware of the devastating impact any allegation of abuse has on the victim and the accused, we want to be absolutely certain of the situation. We may start questioning what we have observed or been told and how we have interpreted the situation. We want to take care of the child but we are afraid to make the report because we don't want to cause further harm. What do we do? How do we calm our concerns?

The first thing to do is to remember that your report to authorities is not only helping the child but helping the child's family and community. Reports of abuse in a family setting can help connect the family with counseling and other services which may help prevent future abuse. The trauma experienced by the child may be lessened leading that child to a healthier, more productive future.

Mandated Reporters and Mandated-to-Report Individuals

There are some individuals who are *mandated by state law* to report suspicions of abuse or neglect by virtue of their employment. Those who are **mandated reporters** include: clergy (priests and deacons), members of religious orders or congregations, all school employees, medical and health care workers, child care workers, and more. The full list can be found in Wisconsin State Law S48.981.

Other individuals who are not specifically identified by the Wisconsin statute are considered **mandated-to-report** by the Diocese of Superior because of their ministry with minors. This includes directors and coordinators of religious education programs, youth ministers, catechists, school or religious education program volunteers – anyone who works with or in proximity to minors as part of a parish or diocesan program.

Diocesan guidelines state:

Mandated reporters and those mandated-to-report by the Diocese of Superior who have reasonable cause (that set of facts which would cause a reasonable prudent person to conclude that abuse will occur or has occurred) to suspect child abuse or who have reason to believe that a child has been threatened with abuse and that the abuse will occur, are obligated to report the case as soon as possible but within 24 hours, by telephone or personal visit to the local county child welfare agency, the office of the county sheriff or the city police department.

Diocesan Charter Safe Environment Binder, Tab 1

Therefore, whether you are identified by state law or diocesan guidelines, you are required to report suspicions of, observations of, and disclosures of abuse to the appropriate authorities within 24 hours.

If the child is in imminent danger, call 911 immediately.

When and Where to Report

When a child has disclosed abuse to you or you have observed abuse, suspect that it has happened, or believe it will happen, it is important to make your report to authorities as quickly as possible but within 24 hours. You may make your report in person or via phone. Making a phone call is most common.

Wisconsin does not have a centralized “hotline” number for reporting abuse. You will need to call your local county Human Services agency or Sheriff’s department.

Making the Report

It is important to stay calm when reporting an abusive situation to authorities. Organize your thoughts and observations to help you share this information. Gather basic information ahead of time such as the child’s address, parents’ names and contact information.

The law enforcement or protective services worker may ask some questions that you can’t answer. Don’t panic. Give them the facts as you know them. **Be descriptive.** Don’t make assumptions or conclusions about anything.

Be aware that you may have evidence that the child is in imminent danger. If so, law enforcement needs to be contacted immediately. Try to do so in a manner that will not draw an inordinate amount of attention to the situation. Stay calm. Do whatever you can to make things appear normal.

Who is the Investigator?

The Diocese of Superior firmly believes that investigation of suspected abuse is the responsibility of law enforcement and county child protection workers. These people have been trained in forensic interviewing and understand the process of collecting evidence. Parish employees and volunteers should not attempt to interview the child about the situation at hand. Past experience has shown that the child experiences more trauma if forced to repeat his/her story too many times. Some children even recant their story and then nothing can be done to protect the child into the future.

It may be necessary in some situations to ask a clarifying question or two. These questions must be worded very carefully to not lead the child’s answers. They must also be expressed in a manner that does not further alarm or frighten the child.

Confidentiality

It is of the utmost importance that your suspicions of abuse be held in confidence. If you are uncertain about what you have observed and feel that you need to consult with someone, go to your catechetical leader or pastor. They will help you and are willing to be with you when you make your report.

Your own anxiety caused by this situation may lead you to want to process your feelings with another individual not involved in the situation. Keeping this to yourself is difficult, but this information should not be shared with anyone else – not your spouse, not your best friend, not a fellow catechist. A breach of confidentiality can complicate the investigation by the authorities, tip off the abuser, and actually impose further abuse on the child.

The best thing to do with this information is to bring it to God. You have just acted on his behalf. He will now take care of you.