

**Should I ask a child about what might be happening if I have doubts? Is it my responsibility to determine whether a child/youth is telling the truth?**

Children/youth rarely lie about sexual abuse; however, a child should **not** be asked questions about the situation. In some cases, questioning by a well-meaning adult may actually adversely affect the outcome of an investigation. If there is enough concern to warrant suspicion, report the situation to *Childline* and let the professionals deal with the child. It is not your responsibility to determine the truth of the disclosure or your reasonable suspicion.

**If I report child abuse, will it really be confidential?**

When you report abuse to *Childline*, it is not necessary to divulge your name. If you are a mandated reporter and acting in that capacity however, it would be wise to give your name as proof that you did indeed make the call as required by law.

**What would happen if I reported someone for an action and the person did not do it?**

After investigation, if the person is not guilty of any wrongdoing, the case will be dropped and there will be no consequences.

**Are there guidelines as to what constitutes appropriate touch? Am I never - ever - to hug a child? That's not me!**

Responsible and appropriate touch is related to warm and healthy relationships between adults and children. With this in mind, a hug, a pat on the shoulder, holding a hand - these may be entirely appropriate expressions of a warm and healthy relationship. Inappropriate touch involves touching or fondling private parts of a child's body by another for the purpose of sexual gratification. It involves sexual stimulation of the child and/or the perpetrator by observing, showing or touching, or being touched in a sexual way. All physical contact with a child should be limited to exchanges which respect the child's privacy, their age and the situation. It is always wise, however, to display demonstrations of feeling in the presence of others and not in isolated situations.

**I hear lots of talk these days about boundary issues. What should I know about boundary issues?**

A boundary means you know what appropriate behavior is for a child and for an adult. There are

clear lines which should not be crossed with children and if you ever have any doubts about certain behaviors, you are probably approaching the boundary. Parents and other adults in whose care children are placed must protect children from inappropriate exposure to sexual matters for which they are not emotionally or biologically ready. Activity which may be normal or condoned for adults is not appropriate for children. Exposure to sexual activity, inappropriate speech, exhibitionism, obscenity or pornography is clearly out of bounds.

Every aspect of your relationship with children should be considered with regard to boundaries. Professionalism dictates how you will use the phone, e-mail and all forms of communication with children. Always use good judgment about keeping yourself and the children safe.

Children also should be instructed about boundaries and should not violate the boundaries of other children i.e., bullying, hitting, teasing, etc.

**To whom can I refer a child or minor who has been sexually abused?**

For immediate guidance, call *ChildLine*

**1-800-932-0313**

**What about an adult who was abused as a child by a church employee? Who should they call? What help is available?**

Dr. Robert Nelsen is the Victim Assistance Coordinator for the Diocese of Erie. Dr. Nelsen, who is a Licensed Psychologist, works comprehensively and confidentially to assist victims in obtaining outpatient counseling, facilitate spiritual and mental health support services and maintain contact in order to insure that the counseling provided is helpful. He is also available to provide victims with valuable information and resources for promoting healing, stability and security. Dr. Nelsen's phone number is (814) 451-1521 and his e-mail address is [nelsen001@gannon.edu](mailto:nelsen001@gannon.edu)

You may also call Msgr. Robert Smith, 814-824-1130 or Mrs. Karen Streett, 814-824-1195.

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\*\*used with permission from the pamphlet *Basic Facts About Child Sexual Abuse (Fourth Edition)*, 1996. Prevent Child Abuse America  
<http://www.preventchildabuse.org>

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# Frequently Asked Questions

about

# Child Abuse



**Roman Catholic  
Diocese of Erie**

## Introduction

Consider this: *1 of every 4 girls and 1 of every 6 boys* in this country have been abused by the time they are 18 years of age. These shocking figures cannot be ignored! In June of 2003, the Diocese of Erie amended its *Policy for the Protection of Children and Youth* and has revised the policy each year to remain current. Since the promulgation of the policy, one of the most frequently asked questions is: "These rules and regulations make no sense to me, a lot of needless work. What's the big deal?" The big deal is the safety and well-being of our children!

The Diocese of Erie is dedicated to providing a safe environment for all children and youth. Child abuse is not just a "church" problem. This tragedy is rampant in our society and as people of faith, we must take action to make a difference in the lives of children. This brochure answers some common questions that are asked regarding child abuse, and most specifically, child *sexual* abuse. It is not intended to be all inclusive; please contact your local mental health or social service professionals for additional information. Also, check the diocesan web page at [www.eriercd.org](http://www.eriercd.org) for additional resources.

## Child Abuse

### **What constitutes child abuse? Is it only sexual in nature?**

An abused or neglected child is any child/youth less than eighteen years of age whose parents or other person responsible for his/her care: cause or threaten to cause a non-accidental or mental injury; neglect or refuse to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, emotional nurturing or health care; abandon the child; neglect or refuse to provide adequate supervision in relation to a child's age and level of development; or commit or allow to be committed any sexual act upon a child, including fondling a child's genitals, incest, rape, indecent exposure and prostitution, or allow a child to be used in any sexually explicit visual materi-

It is important to remember that not all instances of abuse fit neatly into definitions. It is entirely possible for a child to be abused by another child or by an adult not technically responsible for the child's care. If you become aware of such a situation, you should follow the same reporting process outlined here.

### **\*\*Are most sexual offenses against children committed by strangers?**

No. The people most likely to sexually abuse children are their own family members, friends of the family, or an adult known to the child.

### **\*\*Are teenagers more frequently the victims of sexual abuse than younger children?**

Children between the ages of seven and thirteen appear to be at the highest risk for sexual abuse. However, more and more cases of sexual abuse of very young children (under six) have been seen in recent years.

### **\*\*Are girls sexually abused more often than boys?**

Yes, statistics indicate that girls are more frequently the victims of sexual abuse, but recognition of the number of boy victims appears to be increasing. Estimates suggest that boys may account for 25 to 35 percent of all sexual abuse victims.

### **\*\*What other factors place a child at risk for sexual abuse?**

Research has found that the absence of a parent from the home increases the child's risk. In addition, interviews with offenders suggest that they look for vulnerable children. Such children are young and appear to be isolated, depressed or lonely.

### **I've heard the word "grooming" used in relation to sexual abuse. What does this mean?**

Grooming is the technique used by pedophiles to influence their child/youth victims. Pedophiles are very manipulative and patient. They first nurture a friendship with the child and at times, even the child's family, giving them gifts, taking them on special outings and showing them much attention. Once the child trusts the adult, the adult can influence the child's

attitude toward sexual behavior and what the child thinks is acceptable. They then will tell the child how much they love them and want to have a long term, loving relationship with them. Once the child has opened up to the perpetrator, they will begin to instill fear in the child, sometimes even threatening the safety of their families and friends. Ultimately, the pedophile uses force to sexually exploit the child. The grooming process is intentionally planned and executed by the pedophile to gain access to the child.

## Reporting Child Abuse

### **Tell me, plain and simple, who is mandated by law to report abuse?**

According to state law, the mandate to report child abuse is imposed on any individual who comes into contact with children in the course of his or her work or professional practice. Voluntary personnel who perform services for the Church/school should also consider themselves to be mandated reporters if they come into contact with children during the course of their volunteer Church/school work.

### **What if I only suspect abuse? What should I do? Whom should I contact? I don't want to get anybody in trouble, especially me.**

Anyone can report child abuse, even suspected abuse. Absolute certainty is not a requirement for reporting, just reasonable suspicion. Whom should you contact? You should contact *ChildLine*, the state agency that handles reports of child abuse. *ChildLine* can be accessed 24 hours a day. The toll free number to call is 1-800-932-0313. You may also file a report of sexual abuse and/or sexual exploitation with local law enforcement officials. Finally you may call your local county Children and Youth Services usually listed in the phone book under the name of the county.

There is no reason to fear reporting. Reporting to county and state agencies and *ChildLine* can be done anonymously. There is immunity from civil and criminal liability given to a person, hospital, institution, school, facility, agency or agency employee who, *in good faith*, reports an instance of suspected child abuse. The worst thing to do when you reasonably suspect child abuse is to do nothing at all.