

## “What Can I Do To Prevent Child Abuse?”

By Elizabeth Fagan - Holy Family Safeguard the Children Committee Chair

Why did the sexual molestation of those young boys at Penn State continue even though many people knew about it? How could it go on for so long? It's not hard to understand, really. People are busy and hesitate to act; it is easier to look away than to face something and deal with it and all the possible ramifications – particularly when a powerful person is the abuser. We tend to resist reaching unpleasant conclusions and prefer, instead, to look for more benign explanations. Also, there is the “Genovese” effect, in which individuals are less likely to report their concerns where other people are also in a position to witness and report. (I'm sure that if something bad were *really* going on other people would have mentioned it by now, right?)

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing,” wrote Edmund Burke. That venerable quote can be applied to many situations, but it is particularly apt when applied to child abuse because children have a diminished capacity to defend themselves from evil, and we have a tendency to resist the conclusion that something as awful as child abuse is taking place. Others, usually many others, must act to prevent it.

Because I once represented abused and neglected children, about once a year I will randomly get a call from a friend asking whether they should report suspected child abuse. The last one was from a friend who lives in an upscale beach community. She said that a mother on her son's T-Ball team had driven to team practice drunk to the point of incoherence. The parents had banded together and refused to let the intoxicated mother drive home – one took her keys and drove the car while another drove the mother and her son home. But now, my friend wondered if she should report it. Apparently, the father, who traveled out of town frequently, had hired nannies to be with the mother around the clock when he was gone to protect his son from the mother's substance abuse. But this time, and at other times, the mother had just taken her son and left the nanny behind. What could the nanny do – the mother was her employer too.

I told my friend what she already knew. Yes, the father was trying to protect the child. Yes, our child welfare system is imperfect. Yes, other people might have reported the problem. Yes, even though reports are anonymous, the mother may figure out that you reported it. Yes, just because you report it the problem might not get solved, and yes, there are all sorts of rationalizations for not reporting and looking the other way or minimizing what you know or suspect to be true. But that child could die. That report could be the one that saves that child's life. The father could not be persuaded to set up an effective protection plan on his own immediately, so this needed to be reported. If it were your child or nephew or grandchild, wouldn't you want someone in the community to report it?

The truth is that our first inclination is to not get involved, but if you fail to act, that is all it takes for abuse or neglect to continue. If you ever come across suspected abuse, I urge you to call the Child Protection Hotline at (800) 540-4000. The hotline is operated twenty-four hours, around the clock, seven days a week. You don't need to *know* that child abuse or neglect is taking place, you are welcome to report your suspicions and consult with a social worker if you are not clear whether what you are

witnessing or have learned of is abuse. Depending on your profession, you might even be legally obligated to report suspected child abuse and neglect, a so-called “mandated reporter.” But if you are not a mandated reporter, you can even make your report anonymously.

The Holy Family Safeguard the Children Committee is part of a comprehensive program designed to promote a safe environment for children, youth and vulnerable adults and prevent child sexual abuse. The program was initiated in all dioceses in the United States at the direction of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). There is a Safeguard the Children (STC) Committee in each parish which helps to implement the objectives of the USCCB “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People”. This is the Tenth Anniversary of that Charter. You can read more about our mission at <http://www.holyfamily.org/2012/01/safeguard-the-children/>.

As a parishioner with children in this community, I want to take the time to thank you for your participation in this program. You may have been only vaguely aware of our committee, but most of you have been electronically fingerprinted as part of our parish’s child protection program. Thank you.

Most of you have now attended the Virtus “Protecting God’s Children” program which trains parishioners to spot the sometimes subtle signs of abuse and report suspected abuse so that you can be the eyes and ears for our children. Thank you.

You have allowed your children to attend the **“Teaching Touching Safety”** program that Mrs. Strong teaches so that students are better able to recognize abuse and protect themselves. Thank you.

You have signed countless forms acknowledging the [“Guidelines for Adults Interacting with Minors at Parish or Parish School Activities or Events.”](#) Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do.

All of these actions take time out of your already busy lives, but they help inoculate our community against abuse. They are worth the time, and without your willingness to do these things we would not have the robust child protection program which adds additional protection to all of our children.

Finally, on a happier note, we ask that you take this month to reflect on your relationship with your child and other children in your parish, home or school community. This is a time to embrace your relationship with your child and to consider how your actions, big and small, make a lasting impression and impact on your child’s development. Please consider trying some of the activities listed on the Child Abuse Prevention Month Calendar of Activities that will be sent home in the Family Envelope (along with the “Keep Children Safe” stickers and the brochure: “Working Together to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse.”) Or you can create your own activity with a child in your life. Listen to your child. As you know, even the smallest actions make a big difference in a child’s life.