



Safe Environment

Diocese of Wheeling - Charleston

Fall 2023

Safe Environment Compliance Deadline for All Parishes and Schools is January 5, 2024



The deadline for parishes and schools to have all employees and volunteers compliant with the diocese's Safe Environment protocol is January 5, 2024.

On site audits by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' contracted agency, Stonebridge Business Partners, occur on a yearly basis and may take place anytime between February and November for 2024. More information will be forthcoming on the exact dates.

Completion of the Safe Environment protocol is a condition of employment in the diocese. In addition, all volunteers who work directly or indirectly, with or around, or have access to children must be compliant with Safe Environment. Safe Environment compliance entails completion of sex abuse awareness training (online or in person), completion of a background check, and acknowledgement of policy, code of conduct, and reporting requirements.

In July of 2022, the diocese transitioned to the VIRTUS platform for tracking and documenting Safe Environment compliance, making the entire process electronic for employees, volunteers, and local level Safe Environment coordinators. This transition has markedly increased Safe Environment compliance and documentation throughout the diocese. Live training sessions and completion of paper forms remains an available option for volunteers and employees without computers or internet.

Over the past year, the Office of Safe Environment has continued to work with parishes, schools, and diocesan-related entities on how to use the VIRTUS platform to achieve compliance and how to generate and analyze compliance reports. Now the time has come to ensure that all parishes and schools have their employees and volunteers Safe Environment compliant and properly documented in the system. VIRTUS has been the diocese's awareness training provider for two decades. Being able to utilize the VIRTUS platform for training as well as tracking and documenting has been an efficient and effective means of increasing Safe Environment compliance.

The diocese undergoes data collection and on-site audits on a yearly basis to ensure compliance with policies and to help promote a culture of safety and increased awareness in West Virginia.

Recognizing Child Abuse and Maltreatment

By The VIRTUS® Programs

Every child deserves to grow up in a safe environment, free from abuse or other harm. As safe adults, it is up to us to help create the safest environment possible for children and youth. One way we can achieve this is to be mindful of the various types of child abuse and maltreatment, and what we can do if we become aware a child is experiencing (or has experienced) this.

Child maltreatment is the term used to refer to all types of abuse and neglect of anyone under the age of 18 by a parent, caregiver, or other person with the responsibility for safeguarding the child. The four most common forms of child maltreatment include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.¹ It's also possible that your specific state may identify more types of child abuse than the four typical types that are mentioned here.



Physical abuse

Physical abuse is "the use of intentional, physical force that can result in physical injury. Examples include hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, or other shows of force against a child."² The physical abuse of children can result in permanent physical harm and even death. Signs of physical abuse include unusual or frequent bruising, burns, cuts, muscle sprains, unexplained broken bones or other physical marks.³

Indicators of physical abuse can include when children:

- have frequent bruising, cuts, welts or other marks,
- are constantly absent from activities,
- shy away from physical contact,
- act distrustful toward others,
- are fearful of going home,
- frequently have unexplained injuries, and
- wear inappropriate clothing for the weather, such as long pants or long-sleeved shirts in warmer temperatures.

Sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse can include both physical and non-physical actions. Touching a child anywhere on their body in a sexual manner or forcing a child to touch the private parts of an adult, is child sexual abuse. Non-touching behaviors include voyeurism—such as trying to look at a youth's naked body or exhibitionism—meaning exposing one's genitalia to children or, showing pornographic images to children.⁴

A child may be experiencing sexual abuse or exploitation by an adult or another child if:

- there is a sudden change in behavior relating to likes or dislikes, health problems or eating habits,
- they appear increasingly moody or aggressive, withdrawn or depressed,
- they lose interest in school or there is a sudden shift in grades or school activities,
- they become secretive or defensive, including with technology or online activities,
- they become fearful, anxious or uncomfortable around certain people,
- they bathe excessively, or stop taking care of personal hygiene, or
- they have regressive behavior such as bed-wetting, or thumb sucking.

Although these behavioral red flags don't necessarily mean that a child is being, or has been abused, they are indicators that something may be a problem and they shouldn't be ignored.

Emotional abuse

Also referred to as verbal or psychological abuse, emotional abuse is any pattern of behavior that harms a child's self-worth or emotional well-being.⁵ It includes name calling, shaming, rejection, threats, withholding love, isolation, humiliation and belittling a child. Emotional abuse is often hidden from view where there may not actually be physical signs, but there are other indicators of possible emotional abuse.

Indicators of emotional abuse can include when children:

- exhibit fear, intense dislike or detachment toward someone in their lives,
- suffer from sleep or eating disorders,
- exhibit learning disabilities, speech impediments or developmental delays,⁶
- demonstrate destructive or anti-social behavior,
- have low self-esteem,
- experience anxiety,
- are defensive or show age-inappropriate behavior, and
- are extremely withdrawn or anxious about making a mistake and doing something wrong.

Neglect

Neglect is the type of abuse that occurs most frequently among children, with up to one in seven children experiencing neglect.⁷ Neglect is the failure to meet a child's basic needs, including housing, food, clothing, education and access to health care. Signs of neglect in infants and younger children include when they fail to develop and grow appropriately or appear malnourished. In older children, other signs of neglect may include:

- improper clothing for the weather or ill-fitting clothing,
- a lack of cleanliness or increased body odor,
- being consistently unsupervised,
- inadequate medical or dental care, and
- coming to school or activities hungry, without food or money to purchase food.

Older children may have poor eating habits due to unhealthy caloric intake and/or little supervision and may appear to be underweight or even overweight. Coping with stress at a young age may result in anorexia, bulimia or obesity. Children experiencing neglect may also attempt to steal food, or money to buy food, and may attempt to hoard food.

Communicating concerns



If you have a suspicion of any type of child abuse or maltreatment, contact the appropriate civil authorities, or a child protection hotline. For reporting information by state, please visit the VIRTUS website: https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse_Reporting.cfm.⁸ Even if you are not sure abuse is happening or has happened, but you have a suspicion or concern (meaning the thought has entered your mind that abuse could be occurring), it is always better to act on the side of protecting the child and communicate your concerns.

References

- 1 Child Welfare Information Gateway. Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect. Accessible online at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/define.pdf>
- 2 Fast Facts: Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessible online at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html#:~:text=Physical%20abuse%20is%20the%20intentional,to%20engage%20in%20sexual%20acts>.
- 3 The National Traumatic Stress Network. Accessible online at <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/physical-abuse>
- 4 The VIRTUS Programs. Protecting God's Children. Version 4.0 (2021).
- 5 Child Welfare Information Gateway. Accessible online at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/identifying/emotional-abuse/>

6 ChildHelp. Accessible online at <https://www.childhelp.org/what-is-child-abuse/emotional-abuse/>

7 Fast Facts: Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessible online at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html#:~:text=Physical%20abuse%20is%20the%20intentional,to%20engage%20in%20sexual%20acts.>

8 https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse_Reporting.cfm .

This article is the copyrighted property of National Catholic Services, LLC. All rights reserved.

Reporting in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston

The Diocese encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed. There are several mechanisms for reporting.

To Report to Civil Authorities:

Contact your local law enforcement; numbers will vary based on your location. If you believe someone is in immediate danger, call 911. To confidentially report any incidence of suspected child abuse or neglect, including sexual abuse, contact the West Virginia Bureau for Children and Families' Child Protective Services by calling the Child Abuse Hotline at 800-352-6513.

To Report Abuse by a Bishop of the Catholic Church:

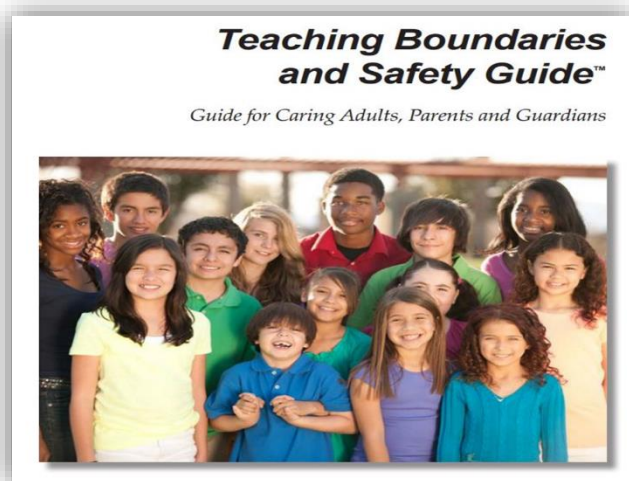
The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed. We also encourage utilizing www.reportbishopabuse.org to report. If you have reason to believe that a bishop has engaged in sexual misconduct or has interfered with an investigation into sexual misconduct, please contact civil authorities in the applicable jurisdiction and visit www.reportbishopabuse.org.

To the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston:

The Diocese encourages reporting to the appropriate civil authorities first and foremost as well as to the appropriate church authorities. To report suspected cases of sexual abuse of children by clergy, religious or lay personnel of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to the Diocese, please contact one of the Bishop's designees at 1-888-434-6237: Bryan Minor, ext. 263; Tim Bishop, ext. 353; Very Rev. Dennis R. Schuelkens Jr., V.E., ext. 270; Sr. Martha Gomez, ext. 264; or please call the Office of Safe Environment at 304.230.1504. You may also visit www.dwc.org, under "Accountability," and utilize any of the mechanisms listed for reporting, including EthicsPoint, a third-party reporting system that accepts reports via internet or phone. You may report anonymously to EthicsPoint if you prefer.

VIRTUS Teaching Safety for Children Program for 2023-24

A Student Awareness Program has been implemented since the fall of 2005 to give children information (appropriate for their age levels) and skills to help recognize acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and how to effectively deal with those behaviors. This is a VIRTUS program called "**Teaching Safety**." The program is taught in Catholic schools and as part of Parish Schools of Religion. This program offers lesson plans for children in grades Kindergarten through 12.



The "Teaching Safety" lesson cycle for this year is:
School Year **2023-24** ... **Lesson ONE** and **Lesson TWO** ... Lesson One should be taught by the end of October 2023. Lesson Two should be taught by the end of the school year. Or both lessons may be taught together by the end of October 2023. All parents/guardians who opt out of the lessons for their children are welcome to take copies of the lessons and teach them at home. If you are a parent or guardian, please contact your parish or school if you would like to see the lessons in advance of being taught or if you would like to teach the lessons to your child yourself.