



Safe Environment

Diocese of Wheeling - Charleston

Fall 2024

Three Months Remain for Employees and Volunteers to Complete VIRTUS 4.0 Module



Employees and volunteers in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston who are working to complete the most recent version of VIRTUS awareness training have about three months to finish and ensure continued compliance with the Safe Environment protocol.

In May, Bishop Mark Brennan announced a yearly continuing Safe Environment education requirement for all employees and volunteers in the Diocese. Since then, the Office of Safe Environment at the Chancery has been working with parishes, schools, and Diocesan entities to help ensure that all employees and volunteers complete Version 4.0 of the VIRTUS *Protecting God's Children* module for adults.

Version 4.0 is the most current

version of the training. The deadline for employees and volunteers to complete Version 4.0 is no later than January 6, 2025. Once all employees and volunteers have completed Version 4.0 and starting in 2025 and going forward, a yearly refresher module will be required to maintain Safe Environment compliance.

Since 2002, the Safe Environment protocol for dioceses in the United States has been mandated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in an effort to keep children and vulnerable adults safe. Employees and volunteers in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston are required to complete awareness training, complete regular background checks, and acknowledge policy-related documents.

Requiring awareness training on a regular basis as part of its Safe Environment program will bring the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in line with best practice for reducing risk in the Catholic Church nationwide. The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston is one of only a few dioceses remaining that

did not require continuing education on a regular basis as part of its Safe Environment program. VIRTUS has been the diocese's awareness training provider since the Diocese's Safe Environment program's inception.

The quickest and easiest way for employees and volunteers to complete training is online through their VIRTUS accounts. However, other options for completing training include in-person sessions at parishes and schools and by receiving and reading a written transcript of the training module. Employees or volunteers who still need to complete Version 4.0 should contact their parish, school, or Diocesan entity/program to determine how best to proceed. Employees and volunteers may also contact the Office of Safe Environment at the Chancery at 304.230.1504 or 304.230.1531.

2024-25 Children's Program: VIRTUS Teaching Safety

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston provides awareness training for adults as well as children in grades Kindergarten through 12. Two lessons are taught every year for all students enrolled in Catholic schools and in parish schools of religion throughout the Diocese. **For the 2024-25 school year, Lessons 3 and 4 will be taught for all grade levels.** Parents and guardians are always welcome to view the lessons in advance. Parents and guardians also may opt out of the lessons for their children. Your parish or school will provide further information regarding the VIRTUS Teaching Safety lessons for children for this school year.



Talking about Sexting with Children and Young People

By Robert Hugh Farley, M.S., Vol. 18 No. 7

If one searches the word "sexting" in Google, one instantly finds over 30,000,000 results ranging from guides such as: How to Sext—The Ultimate Sexting Guide to Emoji Sexting Tricks. Although the word sexting seems to have been around for quite a while, it was only in 2012 that sexting was first defined by Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as the sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cellphone.

In their NetSmartz online safety program, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children organization defines sexting as the sharing and receiving of sexually explicit messages, and nude or partially nude images or video via a cellphone. The sexts can be sent as regular text messages or through a variety of online apps.

Unfortunately, sexting images or videos with a smartphone or tablet is a very dangerous technology-facilitated activity for children, teens and even some adults.

Background

In the past, online child molesters would typically ask a potential victim for innocuous photos such as those from home or taken at a school event. For example, as the grooming process continued, the molester would send sexually explicit photos of himself or would expose himself to the victim using a webcam. At this point, the molester would tell the victim that he loved her and would suggest that as an expression of her love, she should return sexually explicit photos of herself; or, if she truly loved him she should expose herself to him in real time using a webcam.



Today, children and teens taking selfies with a smartphone and utilizing the numerous social media apps such as Snapchat, Kik or WhatsApp have made this type of risky activity much easier. Unfortunately, young people do not comprehend that once a digital image has made its way onto the Internet, it is often floating around there forever.

Reasons Teens Sext

Teens engage in sexting images for different reasons. Girls often feel pressure from friends to sext and are more likely to do so than boys. Some girls are trying to impress a boyfriend, show off or just be funny. Other girls have been manipulated by an offender into sending multiple nude images of themselves, which is referred to as the online blackmail crime of sextortion.

Boys feel more peer pressure to collect the sext images and are more likely to receive sexts than girls. Oftentimes boys will then share the sext images with their friends or even post them online.

According to the FBI, the perpetrators of sextortion employ gaming platforms, social media, and dating and video chat applications to reach their young victims. They use any number of ploys-from pretending to be a romantic interest, giving flattery and attention, offers of money or other items of value, or threats to coerce the child to produce an explicit image. Once the youth has produced or sent a single image or video, the perpetrator will use threats of exposure or other means of coercion to make the child produce more and more images, and even more explicit material.

A Discussion about Sexting

A caring adult today must be proactive. For example, a parent cannot wait for a sexting incident to happen to their child or a child's friend before having an open discussion regarding the dangers of sexting images or distributing them.

Some of the indicators that a young person may be sexting images with a cellphone can include:

- Being secretive, overprotective or anxious about the cellphone or images within it

- Overreacting when a parent or a caring adult picks up the cellphone
- Deleting histories on the cellphone
- Observing that whenever a young person receives a text or is sending a text, the young person will turn their back or will leave the room so they can text in private

Children and teens are understandably reluctant and often embarrassed to disclose any information to their parents regarding sex. Additionally, many young people believe that anything they want to do with their cellphones is strictly their own personal business. That being the case, a discussion about sexting should first begin with a parent clarifying the family rules, expectations and consequences regarding all cellphone usage.

Following that conversation, the parent should initiate a two-way discussion regarding the dangers of sexting images. Start by asking a question such as:

- Has anyone ever sent you a nude photo of a young person? (Follow-up question: What did you do or what would you do?)
- Do you think it's ever ok to forward a nude or sexy image of a young person? (Follow-up question: Why?)
- Has anyone ever asked you or dared you to send them nude pictures of yourself? (Follow-up question: What would you do or what did you do?)
- What do you think are the consequences of someone taking, sending or forwarding a nude picture of a young person?

Unfortunately, most young people do not seem to understand, nor are they even aware of the fact that producing or distributing nude images of a minor (a person under eighteen years of age), may constitute the serious state or federal crime of child pornography.

A parent should conclude the discussion about sexting images by explaining what the basic conditions of consent, respect and trust are in a healthy and safe relationship.

Reports regarding sexting images can always be made to a local police department. Additionally, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children takes reports on online sexual exploitation 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at www.cybertipline.org.

Conclusion

A parent should not expect the discussion about sexting images to last very long. During the discussion, the parent must always try to remain calm and supportive. Lastly, a parent must try to be respectful of how a child or teen responds during this challenging



conversation. It should not only be communicated once, as these types of conversations are best revisited over time.

Technology continues to rapidly change. Parents and all of us who are charged with protecting children must continue our efforts to stay abreast of the many new devices, software programs and the latest apps that may be used by young people and child molesters seeking to manipulate and sexually abuse children.

References:

1. Dangerous Connections, Youth Faces a Risk of Sextortion Online, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, 5/30/19

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Instructions for Reporting Safe Environment Concerns



The Diocese encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed or is suspected. 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; Sr. Martha Gomez, ext. 264; Fr. Don Higgs, (304) 685-2367, 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.