



Safe Environment

Diocese of Wheeling - Charleston

Spring 2025

April Is Child Abuse Prevention Month



Every child
deserves
a **safe**
environment.

National Child Abuse Prevention Month recognizes the importance of families and communities working together to prevent child abuse and neglect. Prevention services and supports developed by this collaboration can help parents, other caregivers, and communities protect children and strengthen families.

www.childwelfare.gov/preventionmonth

What is a "Healthy Caution" Toward Adults?

By The VIRTUS® Programs

There can be uncertainty about how to approach the creation of safe environments for children, youth and vulnerable adults, particularly regarding the mindset we should adopt when assessing our commitment to safety. VIRTUS facilitators are asked to use the language of "Healthy Caution" when describing our level of concern with entrusting children into the care of adults.

Multiple times throughout the Protecting God's Children® (PGC) videos, the term "healthy caution" is used. Here are some examples of the term being used throughout the video:

- Any adult interacting with children should be scrutinized with the same type of healthy caution.
- The reality is that all of us should have a healthy caution for anyone interacting with children.
- Every adult must also maintain a healthy caution about any environment in which they entrust children—including activities and internet interactions.
- What exactly do we mean when we say it's important to have a "healthy caution" toward adults who could have contact with children and youth?

Let's review.

WHAT HAVING A HEALTHY CAUTION DOES NOT MEAN:



Having a healthy caution toward adults does not mean we are to assume that every adult is a potential abuser, lurking around every corner and ready to abuse children. In fact, we do want to increase awareness, but we do not want adults to feel paranoid or powerless about abuse. Paranoia causes unneeded anxiety that can actually interrupt our efforts at creating healthy and safe environments.

Having a healthy caution does not mean we expect parents to be involved in every single interaction or activity in which their children are participating. We acknowledge that adults cannot be physically present in every event of a child's life, and we acknowledge that the older children become, the more autonomous they should be. But, this means that we have to equip these children to be able to come to us when they are struggling in more autonomous situations.

Having a healthy caution does not mean that you personally must keep a "closer eye" on certain people, or that you should be a vigilante protector. These examples are one side of an extreme. Instead, we are asking everyone to have the perspective of caution that is situated more in the "middle ground."

We recognize that we all have a collective responsibility to ensure that any ministerial environment and all of the people within it are as safe as possible, given our knowledge, known risk, access to technology and experience. When we know more, we have a greater responsibility for caution regarding their protection. Our overarching mindset should be to have the knowledge that children are vulnerable, and since we know this, there are greater responsibilities surrounding their care.

HERE IS WHAT HAVING A HEALTHY CAUTION TOWARD ADULTS DOES MEAN:

- Requiring all adults to follow the rules outlined in the Policy or Code of Conduct, regardless of their role or position.

- Being willing to take a look at our own personal behavior and boundaries, to better align them to appropriate best behavioral practices, so as not to condition vulnerable children to more likely be violated or abused by someone else.
- In ministerial environments, monitoring the behavior of all adults when interacting with children and youth—no one receives special accommodations to violate the rules, and we are all held to a baseline standard.
- In our personal lives, being willing to be more aware of the behavior of the adults around us, and speaking up when something is amiss (not to accuse them, but to bring attention to something problematic).
- Communicating any concerns regarding inappropriate behavior within ministerial environments or relationships to a supervisor or safe environment office, and suspicions or disclosures of abuse to the appropriate child protection agency or local law enforcement.
- Leadership taking swift action on any concerns that are communicated regarding the behavior of any adult.
- Safe adults maintain transparency for both in-person interactions between adults and children, as well as interactions involving technology.



Maintaining a healthy caution toward adults is being welcoming, but also mindful, when it comes to adults interacting with children. On one end of the spectrum, if we have zero caution, that means we are open and fully trusting of anyone who comes in and interacts with children, without any oversight or monitoring (if we think of this as a pendulum, it would be completely to one side). On the other hand, having extreme caution could lead to paranoia to the extent that no one would be able to interact with children and youth, perhaps even assuming they are all out "to get" children (this involves the pendulum swinging all the way to the other side).

Conversely, having a healthy caution is the middle ground (where the pendulum is situated evenly in the middle). We all have different experiences, subjective levels of boundaries and understandings of what that equilibrium position should be, which is why we can rely on the organization's policies and code(s) of conduct to help us find that appropriate middle ground and keep the pendulum in the middle where it belongs.

Our collective experience and research have shown us that children are vulnerable and need protection. We also know there are adults in the world who manipulate and abuse children for their

own gain, but that there are plenty of safe adults who are willing to help when properly educated. The larger our cohort of safe adults who are reacting to this public health issue of child abuse—based on the facts and known solutions, rather than fears—the more likely environments involving children will have adults who are mindful of their own behavior and carefully monitoring the behavior of others. When someone behaves inappropriately, it "sticks out," and we're more able to address the issue when we're looking at the same standards and expectations of appropriate behaviors as outlined in the policy or code of conduct. Having a healthy caution and implementing appropriate behavior gives us the opportunity to interrupt boundary-violating or grooming behaviors, prevent abuse before it can even happen, and put a stop to it abuse when it does occur.

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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.

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.

Prayer to St. Nicholas

*God Our
Father, we
pray, That
through the
intercession of
St. Nicholas,
You will
protect our
children. Keep
them safe from
harm, And
help them
grow, And*



*become worthy of Your sight. Give them strength, To
keep their Faith in You, And to keep alive their joy,
In Your creation. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord.
Amen.*