

May 3, 2007-Catholic Church anti-sex-abuse ed programs a success, U.S. bishops' report says
By Jerry Filteau, Catholic News Service, Washington, DC

WASHINGTON (CNS) - A report sent to the U.S. bishops by their National Review Board and Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People said the safe environment education programs for children in dioceses across the nation are "a major accomplishment and one that must continually be maintained and reinforced."

It proposed criteria for evaluating and improving those programs, which are intended to prevent the sexual abuse of children and young people and to help them recognize it if it occurs and report it to adults.

The report recommended strengthening the training of teachers and catechists who are called on to teach children in age-appropriate ways what they need to know to help them to avoid inappropriate touching or behavior and to report it when it occurs.

It assessed objections to such programs in some quarters, particularly a 55-page criticism, "To Protect and to Prevent," issued last fall by a task force of the Catholic Medical Association, which called for the abolition of such programs.

But the report concluded that "there is evidence safe environment programs for children have a positive effect on children, are consistent with the science of child development and are in accord with the teachings of the Catholic Church."

It recommended that "children and young people receive safety training annually at each grade level and that this training is reinforced with regularity within the program and at home."

It also recommended the use of "technology such as CD or DVD to present material, to assure consistency of content and approach."

It suggested approaching publishers of religious education and catechetical texts "to integrate and/or align safety training into their materials." It noted that one of the biggest challenges in safety training for children is incorporating such training into parish catechetical programs for those children who are not in Catholic schools.

Article 12 of the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" adopted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2001 requires all dioceses to establish ongoing safe environment education programs, including age-appropriate education of children, as part of the church's effort to prevent sexual abuse of minors.

The new report to the bishops, "Safe Environment Training of Children in the Catholic Church," was written by the Safe Environment Work Group, headed by Bishop Stephen E. Blaize of Stockton, Calif., a member of the USCCB Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People.

The work group consisted of him and six other members selected by Bishop Gregory M. Aymond of Austin, Texas, head of the committee, and Patricia O. Ewers, chairwoman of the National Review Board. Three of the members were bishops, two were from the review board and two were lay experts in education.

The work group said all safety training programs run by the church must conform to the teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church that "the human body shares in the dignity of the image of God."

It said other criteria of content appropriate for safety training at all grade levels are:

- "Parts of our bodies are considered private and we respect these in self and others.
- "I am a person loved by God and deserving of respect.
- "There is a difference between safe and unsafe touch.
- "It is all right to say 'no' to violation of personal space.

- "It is important to report abuse of self or others until one is believed.

- "There are strategies to help protect oneself."

Materials for grades 7-12 should also include training that "a healthy relationship requires individuals to support the life and dignity of one another in all respects," it said.

For content for grades 9-12 it added two more criteria:

- "All persons have the right to expect personal and vocational lives free from harassment.

- "Every person has the obligation to ensure that those whom he or she leads or supervises are free of harassment."

Part of the work group's report was a response to objections against such programs, especially those raised by the task force of the Catholic Medical Association.

The task force had argued that such programs for children were ineffective, potentially damaging to children and families, and "inconsistent with the church's teaching on the education of children in matters pertaining to formation in sexual morality."

Accompanying the work group's report were two assessments of the task force's critique: one by moral theologian John S. Grabowski of The Catholic University of America in Washington, the other by sociologist David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

"Dr. Finkelhor indicated that while the evidence of effectiveness (of such safety training) is far from conclusive it does suggest that school-based prevention education programs are worth implementing as a component of a more comprehensive strategy to prevent the sexual abuse of children," the report said.

"A study conducted in 1995 by Dr. Finkelhor failed to find that children with prior exposure to prevention programs had fewer subsequent victimizations," it added. "However, the study indicated that exposure to prevention education increased the likelihood that children would disclose, resulting in termination or shorter duration of the abuse, mobilization of assistance, reduction in isolation and the children seeing that they had successfully protected themselves. Exposure to prevention training also decreased the likelihood that children would blame themselves."

Grabowski pointed out that the task force paper was selective in its treatment of church teaching on parental rights in education and not clear enough about the role the church attributes to educators in assisting parents in that task.

The work group's report was approved by the National Review Board at a meeting in February and by Bishop Aymond's committee at its meeting in March. It was sent out to the bishops at the end of April.
