

Overview and Founding Principles of the Touching Safety Program

"The Church has always affirmed that parents have the duty and the right to be the first and the principal educators of their children." This statement from *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*¹ is the core principle upon which *Touching Safety—Instructions for Educators, Catechists, Youth Ministers, and Other Caring Adults (Touching Safety)*, is founded and designed.

Parents are the primary educators of their children.² This right of parents to educate their children, particularly in the area of morals, values, and human sexuality, is also recognized by the Church as "an educational duty."³ The Church knows that, "In many cases parents have given up their duty in this field or agreed to delegate it to others, because of the difficulty and their own lack of preparation."⁴

Other parents have made a decision to take their children out of public school sex education programs. While the Church affirms the parents' right to approve any education program dealing with this subject matter, it reminds those parents who remove their children from sex education outside the home that they "have *the duty* to give [children] an adequate formation, appropriate to each child or young person's state of development"⁵ (emphasis added).

The *Touching Safety* program establishes guidelines and principles to assist parents in this important task. The program was developed to help educators, catechists, youth ministers, and other caring adults support parents as they provide their children with education in this critical area of human development. And, it responds to parents' concerns about their own ability to accomplish the task.⁶

The job of ensuring children's safety is a monumental undertaking. In this effort, the Church provides for collaboration between parents and competent educators.⁷ The role of teachers is to assist and complete the work of the parents.⁸ The *Touching Safety* program and its sister program, the *Protecting God's Children* program for parents, were developed consistent with these guidelines established by the Church. These programs assume that the primary education of children is in the hands of the parents and that responsible, thoughtful, classroom instruction that enters into "the same spirit that animates the parents"⁹ can enhance and reinforce the parents' teaching and increase the child's ability to resist the overtures of potential child molesters.

The *Touching Safety* program is not sex education and is not intended to be a substitute for the responsibility of parents in educating their children in the area of human sexuality and love. Rather, through this school and/or religious education-based curriculum, teachers, catechists, and youth ministers become partners with parents in assuring that all of God's children have the tools they need to protect themselves and to resist the overtures of persons in the community who want to prey on them.

Teaching children to protect themselves is part of the mandate of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in June 2002. Article 12 of the *Charter* states:

Dioceses/eparchies will establish "safe environment" programs. They will cooperate with parents, civil authorities, educators, and community organizations to provide education and training for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, and others about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children.

¹ *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, Pontifical Council for the Family, Guidelines for Education Within the Family, November 21, 1995.

² *Declaration on Christian Education, Gravissimum educationis*, Proclaimed by Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965. Article 3.

³ *Ibid.* at 44.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 1.

⁵ *Ibid.* at 117.

⁶ "It is not easy for parents to take on this educational commitment because today it appears to be rather complex, and greater than what the family could offer, also because, in most cases, it is not possible to refer to what one's own parents did in this regard." *Ibid.* at 47.

⁷ *Ibid.* at 64.

⁸ "The primary role of parents to educate their children must be upheld in all forms of collaboration between parents, teachers and school authorities..." *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, Article 5e.

⁹ *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* at 43; APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO* OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE EPISCOPATE TO THE CLERGY AND TO THE FAITHFUL OF THE WHOLE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY IN THE MODERN WORLD. November 22, 1981.

The *Protecting God's Children* program for parents and *Touching Safety* are vehicles available to parents and the Church to assist in accomplishing this important mission.

The Curriculum

For the purpose of creating an age-appropriate learning environment, the lessons have been created for four (4) specific age groups:

- Kindergarten through 2nd Grade
- 3rd through 5th Grade
- 6th through 8th Grade
- 9th and 10th grade

For each of the four age groups this program provides two lessons for educators to deliver to children:

Lesson 1 — The Touching Safety Rules

Lesson 2 — Understanding Safe Friends, Safe Adults, and Safe Touches

Any program sponsored by the Church that educates children on issues related to human sexuality also should include appropriate “**opt-in**” and “**opt-out**” provisions for parents. So, consistent with Church teachings, the first two lessons for each age group are “opt-out” lessons. Hence, schools and religious education programs will provide these lessons to all participating children, as determined by the diocese, unless parents specifically request, in advance, in writing, that their children be opted out of the lessons.

An optional lesson is available for the youngest age group only (Kindergarten through 2nd grade). This is an optional “opt-in” lesson, which requires advance parental authorization in writing for a child to participate. The optional lesson involves teaching about private body parts. Again, this lesson is available to only the youngest age group. In accordance with Church teachings, it is recommended that the decision to allow children to participate in the third lesson be left in the hands of parents—and that it require an affirmative “opt-in” action to participate rather than an opt-out decision that removes children from programs. Hence, the only children who will receive school or religious education-based instruction on the third lesson are those children whose parents have specifically requested, in advance, in writing, that the school or religious education program provide this instruction about private body parts to their children.

Lesson 3 — Private Body Parts (*optional* “opt-in” lesson for Kindergarten through 2nd grade only)

Structure of the Lesson Plans

As previously stated, this program and each included lesson are founded on the principles of appropriate relationship boundaries within the context of Church teachings. All lessons are age-appropriate, and help children develop the vocabulary and boundary distinctions necessary to empower them to begin to recognize inappropriate behavior by others, while practicing appropriate relationship boundaries in their own lives. Each lesson will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour to complete.

Each lesson for each age group includes the following:

- An appropriate passage of Scripture
- An appropriate teaching regarding a Saint
- An appropriate reflection from Catechism
- A goal, including expected learning outcomes

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- An overview for creating a successful learning experience for the specific age group
 - Key vocabulary words that apply to the lesson
 - Suggested activities, with instructions
 - A closing group prayer that reflects the key message of the lesson

The lessons focus on an age-appropriate discussion of touching safety, relative to the specific roles that different people play in a child's life. All of the lessons stress the importance of keeping private body parts "private."

Specific topics and learning activities will be changed annually to prevent children from experiencing the same exact material two years in a row.

Other Resources

As a resource, educators, catechists, youth ministers, and other caring adults will have access to download and print *Teaching Touching Safety: A Guide for Parents, Guardians, and Other Caring Adults*.

Teaching Touching Safety is a booklet that empowers parents to teach their children about keeping private body parts *private*. It also helps parents understand and identify the "safe friends," "safe adults," "unsafe adults," and "special safe adults" in the life of each child. Plus, it provides guidance for how to teach children about appropriate boundaries in relationships.

Because Church teachings call upon educators, catechists, youth ministers, and other caring adults to support parents in their role as the primary educators of their own children, *Teaching Touching Safety* provides educators with the core information parents should discuss with their children. Educators are then empowered to clearly distinguish which information is appropriate for parents to discuss, versus information appropriate for educators to discuss with children. Notably, with the exception of the *Optional Lesson 3* for the youngest age group, educators who present the *Touching Safety* program will never be in a position to discuss the names of private body parts or specifics about private body parts with their students. Rather, *Teaching Touching Safety* provides educators with the appropriate framework to support parents by presenting and reinforcing information about *safe touches*, *unsafe touches*, and establishing appropriate boundaries in relationships.