



Protecting God's Children for Adults

How to Familiarize Yourself with Policies and Procedures on Reporting Abuse

You know that being familiar with policies and procedures on reporting sexual abuse is an important aspect of preventing abuse of all kinds. So, where do you start? How do you turn this responsibility into practical, workable procedures that make a difference?

At first it seems confusing and somewhat overwhelming. There are state laws that mandate reporting of abuse. There are the diocese's new reporting policies and procedures. There are the guidelines established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. And, for the most part, all of these sources read like lawyers wrote them.

So, where should you start and what can you do?

The first and easiest place to start is at www.virtus.org. Through the Virtus Online™ system, you can access the reporting laws for all 50 states, as well as the website of each state's child protection services agency.

Information on state reporting laws and procedures:

Knowing your state law is crucial. Although some states mandate all adults to report suspected child abuse, many others specify categories of individuals who regularly interact with children as the ones who are required to report when *they suspect abuse* or when *a child discloses abuse to them*. State laws define who is required to report, how the report is made, and what information is needed at the time of the report.

Even if your state designates specific categories as mandated reporters—and if you don't appear to be on that list—states allow any adult to report voluntarily. In fact, all adults are encouraged by state child protection agencies to report suspected abuse, and the Church recommends it. Anyone who reports in good faith is protected from prosecution for making a false claim—and the law provides punishment for mandated reporters who fail to report.

First, find out whether you are mandated by law to report suspected abuse. If you are specifically identified as a mandated reporter and are unclear about the reporting process, contact the administration of your facility or organization and ask for specific instructions.

If you are uncertain about your responsibility as a reporter, call the child abuse hotline in your state or your local child protection services office and ask for information on mandated reporting. Most states have brochures and other resources for mandated reporters. In most states, you can also get information on how to report from the website of your state's child protection services. The site will tell you the number to call for reporting and the kind of information you can provide to best assist in the investigation.

Once you understand your legal responsibility for reporting, move on to the next step.

Information on Diocesan reporting procedures:

All dioceses also have policies and procedures for reporting allegations of abuse by clergy and other Church personnel. It is important for clergy, staff, and volunteers to know where to find the dioceses' procedure for reporting allegations of abuse and neglect and to understand the procedures.

Many dioceses include the current response policies on their website. If the policies and procedures are not available on the website, call the Chancellor, Vicar General, or Victim Assistance Coordinator to find out where to obtain a copy of the most current policies and procedures for responding to allegations of abuse and neglect.

Once you have obtained your diocese's policies, read them carefully and contact the Church administration if there is

anything unclear about your responsibilities for reporting allegations of abuse by clergy or other Church personnel. By understanding the Church's commitment to dealing with these allegations in a fair, just, and prompt manner you will be reassured that you are viewed as an important part of the solution to this problem within our faith communities.

Each diocese in the United States is making these policies and procedures a part of their commitment to safe environments. They want you to know what to do, who to call, and how to let the diocese know about allegations of abuse. By familiarizing yourself with both the local policies and procedures and your state's laws on reporting, you are in a much better position to be an active part of this effort and to help protect children in your community.

Bottom Line:

Even though most states require you to report suspicions of abuse, and even though all dioceses are committed to responding to abuse, there's a much more important reason to participate in this community effort—the safety and well-being of children. Don't be the one who says to the parent of a victimized child that you “did not know what to do or how to report” your suspicions.

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