

VULNERABLE ADULTS – SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

The title, “Protecting God’s Children,” was chosen as a most appropriate name for a program whose goal is to create safe environments for all those who work and minister in Church settings. The question that is often raised when the title is introduced is “Who are God’s Children?” The answer is simply “everyone.”

Although the Protecting God’s Children® program is primarily designed to address the issues of creating safe environments for children and young people, much of what it promotes is applicable to the vulnerable adult population as well. *Vulnerable adults* can apply to people with a physical, mental, or emotional condition or an illness that renders them unable to defend themselves, protect themselves, or get help for themselves when injured or emotionally abused. The term can also apply to the elderly population.¹ It is important to remember, however, that at times we can *all* be considered vulnerable and it is thereby important to treat *all* individuals with respect and dignity.

Among vulnerable adults, the abusers’ patterns are similar to the behavioral patterns of those that abuse children. In particular, there are those who seek out and “groom” vulnerable adults and those who take advantage of particular situations and give into the pressures of those events by abusing others. These abusers are primarily found among the family members, caregivers, and others who are known and trusted by the adults.

Some of the principles addressed in the Protecting God’s Children program apply to the vulnerable adult population. Specific differences in how each step may be applied to this population are provided in this supplemental material.

One key difference is that we know that child sexual abuse is about sexual attraction as well as power and control. Child predators think that they love the children and are sexually, socially, and romantically attracted to the children they abuse. Abuse of vulnerable adults is the same type of violence that is committed during any adult-on-adult sexual assault. Sex is merely the tool used to exert power and control in the situation.²

The following information is provided to accommodate the needs of those who attend the awareness sessions and who work with the vulnerable adult population. From time to time, it will be necessary for facilitators to provide additional information regarding how to apply the steps to working and volunteering with vulnerable adults. This information may be used in one of two circumstances:

¹http://www.webmd.com/hw/health_guide_atoz/stv5470.asp

² Abramson, W., Cameron, L.A., Mastroleo, C., *Sexual Violence and Persons with Disabilities*, <http://www.advocatweb.org/hope/default.asp>.

1. During Protecting God's Children for Adults sessions on child sexual abuse when some of those in attendance have additional questions regarding the application of the information to the vulnerable adult population.
2. In cases when the particular group attending a session consists of staff and volunteers who work with vulnerable adults.

The adjustments are being provided as additions to the Protecting God's Children Awareness Manual. Therefore, the additional information is formatted to be integrated into the Manual. The supplemental material is available for presentation to those in attendance who are exclusively staff and volunteers working with vulnerable adults or when the session participants include those providing services to this special population.

Introduction

- Although the videos and the basic information apply specifically to child sexual abuse, much of the material will also be useful to those of you who are working with vulnerable adults. Vulnerable adults do suffer from sexual abuse, but they also suffer from physical abuse just as children do. In fact, only an estimated one percent of abuse of the elderly is sexual.³ However, financial exploitation is a major form of abuse within this group. During our discussions, we will provide you with additional relevant information about the nature and scope of the broader problem of the abuse of vulnerable adults.

Why do vulnerable adults refrain from telling anyone about the abuse?

1. The fear of retribution. The people who commit these acts are relatives, business professionals and institutions, con artists, and caregivers. Vulnerable adults who fall victim to one of these people are often afraid.
2. They are ashamed.
3. They may have some debilitating physical and/or psychological impediment that prevents them from coming forward.
4. They may not remember what happened or become confused about events that occur.
5. They may not know that they have been victimized and therefore they cannot tell anyone.
6. They are adults—regardless of their vulnerability—and they have the right to decide whether abuse is reported, investigated, or prosecuted.⁴

How common is abuse of vulnerable adults?

³ Teaster, P.B., *A Response to the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults, the 2000 Survey of State Adult Protective Services*. p.21 The National Center on Elder Abuse.

⁴ *Supra*, note 2.

Each year approximately 500,000 allegations of abuse of vulnerable adults are reported to Adult Protection Services. Some experts, however, estimate that a very small percentage of cases are ever reported.⁵ Studies indicate that as many as 10 percent of the vulnerable adult population is subject to abuse and that only one in six will be reported.⁶

Additional relevant information

The bias against vulnerable adults, including older Americans, is a major contributing factor to the low reporting and prosecution rate. The same factors that have an impact on the prosecution of child sexual abuse also play a part in the decisions to prosecute when the victim is a vulnerable adult. However, it is also important to remember that these are adults and they have the right to consent or to refuse to participate in the report, investigation, and prosecution of the matter.⁷

When the victim is an adult with developmental disabilities, the offender is often a caregiver. However, when the victim is an elderly person, the most likely perpetrator is a family member. Forensic evidence is hard to find and it is a major challenge for prosecutors to find a way to convince a jury that an adult child would deliberately harm a parent.

Step One—Know the Warning Signs

Some of the warning signs of an inappropriate relationship with a vulnerable adult are the same as those that indicate someone is a potential risk of harm to a child. Warning signs that apply to both populations are:

1. Always wants to be alone with the person.
2. Discourages others from being around and arranges to be with the target person in areas where they cannot be monitored.
3. Thinks the rules do not apply to them.
4. Uses bad language or tells dirty jokes around the person.

Some additional signs that indicate a caregiver is a risk of harm to a vulnerable adult are:

1. The person acts with indifference toward the vulnerable adult in his or her care.

⁵ Bensen, W.F., *Comments of the National Adult Protective Services Association for The White House Conference on Ageing "Listening Session,"* Washington, D.C., September 2004. ; *National Elder Abuse Incident Report*, 1996.

⁶ *About Elder Abuse*, Utah Adult Protective Services; Hodge, P. D., *Elder Abuse: A National Scandal*, Unites State's Senate Hearings of the Subcommittee on Aging.

⁷ *Supra*, note 2.

2. The caregiver or family member prevents the adult from speaking to visitors.

Serial offenders who victimize vulnerable adults also groom the victim and the victim's family.

Step Two—Control Access

The elements in this step are the same for children and vulnerable adults.

Step Three—Monitor All Programs

The monitoring techniques listed apply equally to facilities and organizations that provide services to vulnerable adults. Substituting the word “vulnerable adults” for “children” provides some indications of how this Step applies to that population. In addition, part of the vulnerable adult population is elderly parents and family members. Therefore, monitoring programs should include allowing family members to have access to the programs as well as to the person involved and to encourage family involvement and participation in activities.

Step Four—Be Aware

It is important to talk to, listen to and observe the vulnerable adults in our environments. However, not in the same way as we talk to, listen to, and observe children. Being aware of what is happening with vulnerable adults who are being neglected or physically or sexually abused includes noticing:

- Injuries such as cuts, bruises, and other wounds that appear to be uncared for or never seem to heal.
- Poor skin color, sunken eyes, dehydration or apparent malnutrition.
- Frequent trips to the hospital.
- Soiled clothing, apparent pain from touching.
- Lack of social contact.
- Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, and confusion.
- Apparent disorientation or confusion and far-fetched stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances.⁸

It is also important to remember that one of the key warning signs that a caregiver or family member is abusing a vulnerable adult is that the caregiver or family member isolates the victim from other people. They refuse to allow visitors and keep the vulnerable adult away from anyone who might observe the signs of abuse.

⁸ Adult Protective Services—Information about Adults Protective Services, *available at* <http://www.okdhs.org/APS/printer.html>

In addition, there are environmental signs that a vulnerable adult is being abused. Living conditions that are inadequate or consistently unclean is cause for concern. Other environmental causes include room temperatures that are too extreme in both winter and summer and foul odors in the house.

Financial abuse is cause for concern when the vulnerable adult suddenly changes his or her will in favor of a caregiver or family member that is keeping the person isolated. Other warning signs of financial abuse are the purchase of expensive gifts for the caregiver, the disappearance of personal items from the home and financial issues such as credit card problems, missing bank account funds, and/or bounced checks.

Step 5—Communicate Your Concerns

The federal government started funding state adult protective services through Social Security in 1975.⁹ Adult Protective Services are now part of almost every state's programs for protecting vulnerable adults and elders from abuse, exploitation, and/or neglect.¹⁰

In many states the law mandates that anyone who suspects that a vulnerable adult is being or has been abused report those suspicions to Adult Protective Services.¹¹ Just as with reports of suspected child abuse, the law protects those who make reports in good faith from civil liability and allows for anonymity in reporting.¹²

Regardless of the legal mandates, everyone has a moral responsibility to report suspected abuse of vulnerable adults to the authorities. The only exception to this moral responsibility is abuse that is disclosed to a priest under the seal of the confessional.

In addition to reporting suspected abuse of vulnerable adults, we must also communicate concerns that arise about the behavior of their caregivers. If we notice that a caregiver or family member is behaving in a way that indicates that they are a risk to the vulnerable adult, communicate your concern to the person or to someone who can make a difference with the person.

⁹ 42 U.S.C.S. § 1397a (2003)

¹⁰ Benson, Comments of the National Adult Protective Services Association, *supra* note 3.

¹¹ U.C.A. § 76-5-111; Okla. Stat. Tit. 43A § 10-104 (1991).

¹² U.C.A. § 62A-3-311; Okla. Stat. Tit. 43A § 10-104 (E) (1991).

Resources for further assistance:

- 1) **The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD)**
The NCPD serves as the voice for over 14 million U.S. Catholics who live with physical, cognitive, sensory, or emotional disabilities. Since 1982, NCPD has implemented the call for greater access and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the life of the Catholic Church and in society. NCPD supports a network of diocesan directors of disability ministry and other ministry partners through training, resources and consultation. They continue to promote the culture of life in the way that VIRTUS and Protecting God's Children does—by defending the dignity of every human person.

- 2) **VIRTUS *Online***[™]
VIRTUS *Online* articles can provide additional information to assist those working with vulnerable adults in recognizing the behaviors that indicate an adult is at risk or that a caretaker is a risk to the person they are caring for. Although most will not bear directly on the issues relevant to this population, facilitators should recommend that everyone read the articles as part of our responsibility to create safe environments for all God's children.