

CIRCLE OF GRACE: Safe Environment Program

Dear Parent,

Out of concern for all God's people and in response to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, we have a program for the safe environment education of children and young people supported and mandated by Bishop Christopher Coyne. This program is called **Circle of Grace**. It is meant to supplement and be integrated into the excellent programs and curricula for the formation of children and young people in our schools and religious education programs. **Circle of Grace** aims to equip our children and young people by arming them with essential knowledge and skills grounded in the richness of our faith. This program helps children and young people to understand their own (and other's) dignity in mind, body, and spirit.

What is a Circle of Grace?

The Catholic Church teaches that God has created each of us as unique and special. Genesis 1:27 tells us that we are created "male and female in God's image" and that God saw this as "very good." In that goodness, we are meant to respect ourselves and everyone else as persons created and loved by God.

Adults assist children and young people to recognize God's love by helping them to understand that each of us lives and moves in a *Circle of Grace*. You can imagine your own *Circle of Grace* by putting your arms above your head then circle down in front of your body including side to side. This circle, front to back, holds who you are in your body and through your senses. It holds your very essence in mind, heart, soul, and sexuality.

Why is it important to help our children understand the Circle of Grace?

God intends our relationships in life to be experiences of divine love. Respectful, nurturing, loving relationships increase our understanding of our own value and help us to love others. It is never too early to help children and young people understand how very special they are and how relationships in life are called to be sacred. Understanding this can help them to protect the special person they are and to be respectful of others.

Adults, especially parents, as they strive to provide a safe and protective environment, hold the responsibility to help children and young people understand and respect their own dignity and that of others. A truly safe and protective environment is one where children and young people recognize when they are safe or unsafe and know how to bring their concerns, fears, and uncertainties to the trusted adults in their lives.

How is the Circle of Grace Program different from other protection programs?

According to research, one in four girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused by age eighteen.² Many protection programs focus on "stranger danger"; however, up to ninety percent (90%) of the time the perpetrator of abuse is known to the child or young person such as a relative or family friend. **Circle of Grace** goes beyond just protection by helping children and young people understand the sacredness of who they are and how to seek help through their relationships with trusted adults.

Please feel free to contact John McMahon (878-5331, ext. 202) if you have questions or want more information.

Common Questions of Parents

1) How is this connected to the “Safe Environment” program?

Circle of Grace is the safe environment program for children/youth. The goal is to help children/youth understand the sacredness of who they are and how to seek help when needed through their relationships with trusted adults.

2) What information can this program give my child that they are not getting already?

The *Circle of Grace* Program reinforces in a peer setting that their faith community cares about their safety and wants them to understand how to seek help if they feel unsafe for any reason. It will help them identify potentially unsafe situations and know how to handle them by seeking help from trusted adults.

3) You indicate that this program will provide them with “life skills”, what do you mean by this?

It reinforces that they are valued by God and others. It gives them information on boundaries and practical directives of what to do if someone makes them feel uncomfortable when in their *Circle of Grace*. It is a good foundation for healthy relationships that will help them throughout their lives.

4) Will this program be age appropriate?

Yes! The lessons were written with great attention to the stages of child development.

5) How can parents support what is being taught in the program?

Some grade level classes will receive take home activities for parents to complete with their children. Talking with your children about the *Circle of Grace* at home will help your children to understand the importance of the lessons and that the lessons apply everywhere, not just at school. Additionally, you are your child's most important teacher in the area of relationships. Much of what your child will learn and later imitate about relationships comes from what they learn by your example. Creating an atmosphere where they know that they can talk to you about anything provides a valuable safety net for your child because they know they have you to turn to whenever they have a concern.

6) Is there accountability attached to this program implementation?

Yes! There will be an ongoing evaluation of the program to ensure its effectiveness and to incorporate any suggestions that would improve the quality of the program.

7) Will there be resources (people and material) available if I have questions?

Yes! John McMahon will be on hand to provide further explanation of the program at the Parent Orientation Meeting for the Elementary R.E. Program on Sunday Morning, Sept. 28 (9:45AM @ HFSL Parish Center) & for the Middle & High School Program at the first session of classes.

8) Shouldn't parents be the ones teaching their children about sexuality?

Absolutely! This is NOT a sex education program. *Circle of Grace* will provide children with a sound understanding of their own value and of God's care and presence in their lives. It will also help them notice the signals that tell them when they do not feel safe and how to talk to a trusted adult. All of this will be a good foundation for healthy relationships. However, this is not a sexuality education program. Many parents will appreciate that this program will provide a spiritual framework that will allow parent-child communication about the value of all that they are, including their sexuality. Those conversations are most effective between parent and child.

9) Is this a mandatory program for my child?

If you have questions or concerns about your child participating in the *Circle of Grace* Program, please contact John McMahon at 878-5331, ext. 202 or at john.mcmahon@essexatholic.org.

Summary of the Key Concepts of “Circle of Grace”

God gives each of us a *Circle of Grace* where He is always "Present"

*Raise your hands above your head,
then bring your outstretched arms slowly down.
Extend your arms in front of you and then behind you
embrace all of the space around you
slowly reach down to your feet.
Knowing that **God** is in this space with you
This is your **Circle of Grace**; you are in it.*

God is "Present" because He desires a relationship with us

- God is with us when we are happy and sad. God does not cause bad things to happen to us. He loves us very much.
- God desires to help us when we are hurt, scared or confused (unsafe).
- Having faith may not take away all of life's struggles. It is because of these struggles, God promised to always “be present”; providing guidance and comfort in our time of need.

God helps us know what belongs in our *Circle of Grace*

- Our feelings help us know about ourselves and the world around us.
- God helps us know what belongs in our *Circle of Grace* by allowing us to experience peace, love or contentment when something or someone good comes into our *Circle of Grace*.

God helps us know what does not belong in our *Circle of Grace*

- God desires to help us when we are hurt, scared or confused (unsafe).
- The Holy Spirit prompts (alerts) us that something does not belong in our *Circle of Grace* by giving us “a funny or uncomfortable feeling” that something is not safe. This feeling is there because God wants us to be safe.

God helps us know when to ask for help from someone we trust

- God gives us people in our lives to help us when we are troubled or struggling with a concern.
- God wants us to talk to trusted grownups about our worries, concerns or “funny/ uncomfortable feelings” so they can help us be safe and take the right action.

Tips for Parents

Even “Nice” People Sometimes Do Mean Things.

Abusers are experts at looking friendly, nice, safe, kind, generous, and loving. A child is vulnerable when the other person has more: age (older), size (bigger), knowledge, resources, status, and/or power. REMEMBER: Up to 30% of abusers/offenders are under the age of 18. Abusers use manipulative behaviors to gain control: flattery, bribery, jealousy, intimidation, and anger. Abusers manipulate parents along with children.

Pay Close Attention To Who Is Around Your Children.

Parents should know where their children are and who they are with. Children should know how to contact their parents. Use the buddy system: Take a buddy or don't go. Refuse to leave your children with someone you don't trust. No job or event is worth your child's safety.

Listen To What Your Children Say.

Encourage communication by taking seriously what your children say. Increase your child's vocabulary by helping them name feelings. Back up your child's right to say “NO.” Role Play: A child who never says “no” to a parent will never say “no” to another adult. Give children permission to yell for help.

Take A Second Look At Potential Danger.

Be cautious on the Internet, experts recommend computer use be monitored regularly. Be selective when sharing personal information: including last name, telephone numbers, contact information, schools, activity schedules and occasions when someone is home alone. Talk about worse case scenarios and possible solutions to uncomfortable situations. Don't follow anyone who takes your bicycle, book bag or purse – report theft instead. Watch out for children who are alone often.

Trust Your Instincts.

Listen to your gut feelings, if you have doubts listen to them. Your body sometimes knows what your head hasn't yet figured out.

Recognize Change In Your Child's Behavior.

Change in behavior is a signal of change in your child's life. Tell your children: “I will always love you.”

Model Healthy Boundaries and Limit-Setting Behavior.

Be a good example.

Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect: Signs and Symptoms

The first step in helping abused or neglected children is learning to recognize the signs of child abuse and neglect. The presence of a single sign does not prove child abuse is occurring in a family; however, when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination you should take a closer look at the situation and consider the possibility of child abuse. If you do suspect a child is being harmed, reporting your suspicions may protect the child and get help for the family. Contact your local child protective services agency or police department. **For more information about where and how to file a report, call the Child Help USA® National Child Abuse Hotline (1.800.4.A.CHILD).**

Recognizing Child Abuse

The following signs may signal the presence of child abuse or neglect.

The Child:

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance.
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention.
- Has learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes.
- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen.
- Lacks adult supervision.
- Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn.
- Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home.

The Parent:

- Shows little concern for the child.
- Denies the existence of — or blames the child for — the child's problems in school or at home.
- Asks teachers or other caretakers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves.
- Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome.
- Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve.
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs.

The Parent and Child:

- Rarely touch or look at each other.
- Consider their relationship entirely negative.
- State that they do not like each other.

Types of Abuse

The following are some signs often associated with particular types of child abuse and neglect: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. It is important to note, however, these types of abuse are more typically found in combination than alone. A physically abused child, for example, is often emotionally abused as well, and a sexually abused child also may be neglected.

Signs of Physical Abuse

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the child:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes.
- Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school.
- Seems frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home.
- Shrinks at the approach of adults.
- Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver.

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury.
- Describes the child as "evil," or in some other very negative way.
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child.
- Has a history of abuse as a child.

Signs of Neglect

Consider the possibility of neglect when the child:

- Is frequently absent from school.
- Begs or steals food or money.
- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses.
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor.
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather.
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs.
- States that there is no one at home to provide care.

Consider the possibility of neglect when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Appears to be indifferent to the child.
- Seems apathetic or depressed.
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner.
- Is abusing alcohol or other drugs.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the child:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting.
- Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities.
- Reports nightmares or bed wetting.
- Experiences a sudden change in appetite.
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior.
- Becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age 14.
- Runs away.
- Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver.

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child's contact with other children, especially of the opposite sex.
- Is secretive and isolated.
- Is jealous or controlling with family members.

Signs of Emotional Maltreatment

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the child:

- Shows extremes in behavior such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression.
- Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example).
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development.
- Has attempted suicide.
- Reports a lack of attachment to the parent.

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child.
- Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child's problems.
- Overtly rejects the child.