

Welcome to this Protecting God's Children® awareness session:

This handout is designed to answer many of your questions up-front, to help create a context for this session, and to give you the information you'll need to maximize the value of today's experience.

Why am I here?

You are here because you are a part of the solution to the problem of child sexual abuse in our homes, parishes, and communities. You did not cause this problem. But, when caring adults have a "healthy suspicion" about something in their surroundings, they *can* identify the risks to children early enough to prevent child sexual abuse from occurring.

What are the VIRTUS® programs?

VIRTUS is the brand name that identifies best practices programs designed to help prevent wrongdoing and promote "rightdoing" within religious organizations. The VIRTUS programs empower organizations and people to better control risk and improve the lives of all those who interact with the Church.

Who created the VIRTUS programs?

The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. (National Catholic) created the programs. Monsignor Kevin McCoy, past board chairman of National Catholic, asked whether child sexual abuse could be prevented and, if so, how? In March of 1998, National Catholic invited prominent national experts—experts in many disciplines—to discuss these questions at a forum in Washington, D.C. From those discussions, the initiative for the VIRTUS programs was created. The National Catholic Board of Directors selected an Ad Hoc Committee to oversee development of the programs. The Ad Hoc Committee was assisted by a steering committee of nationally known experts and program and service providers.

Why did National Catholic select VIRTUS as the brand name for the programs?

The word *virtus* derives from Latin, and means valor, moral strength, excellence, and worth. In ancient times, *virtus* denoted a way of life and manner of behavior that always aspired to the highest, most positive attributes of people and aspects of human interaction.

What is the Protecting God's Children® program?

The Protecting God's Children program is the VIRTUS program for protecting children from child sexual abuse. The seminar you are currently attending is the Protecting God's Children awareness session—the initial program component for adults in the faith community. Those in the faith community who interact with minors will have access to additional training and risk prevention tools.

How does the Protecting God's Children program prevent child sexual abuse?

The Protecting God's Children program consists of many components. The education component helps prevent child sexual abuse by first making every adult employee and volunteer aware of the issues surrounding child sexual abuse. This includes awareness of the many ways that sexual abuse harms its victims, their families, the parish, and the community. The awareness session also helps adults learn to recognize the warning signs of abuse, and shows them the appropriate way to respond to suspicious behavior. Finally, the awareness session empowers each person with five steps to help prevent child sexual abuse. A trained facilitator leads these awareness sessions. **You are currently participating in this interactive awareness session, which is part one of our education component.**

But, community awareness—by itself—is not enough to prevent child sexual abuse. A parish or community needs a core group of trained specialists—people within the parish and schools—who have additional knowledge and training on how to prevent harm to children.

Those who interact most with children become the core of the prevention effort within each parish. They receive an added benefit by completing a certification course on the prevention of child sexual abuse. The certification course takes approximately three to six hours a year to complete, and the entire certification process takes place on the Internet—via the VIRTUS *Online*[™] system. For more information on VIRTUS *Online* and our continuing education programs, refer to the attached VIRTUS *Online* information sheet.

Finally, some local individuals will be selected to lead the awareness session—we call these people “facilitators.” In addition to being certified to prevent child sexual abuse, the facilitators receive additional training on how to lead an effective session.

What is my role in the Protecting God's Children program?

All adults are protectors of children. That's why you are a part of this awareness session. As an adult, it is your role in the faith community, to keep your eyes and ears open, and to report any suspicious activity to appropriate authorities and church officials.

We provide a wealth of information to assist you in this quest. Visit our website, www.virtus.org, for new information each week designed to help educate adults about a wide range of risks to children—from child sexual abuse, to camp safety, to school violence. If you are fortunate to be selected to complete one of our certification courses via VIRTUS *Online* (each diocese has a different strategy regarding the selection of trainees) then you will become a knowledge center for protecting children within your parish or school. If you'd like to complete the certification course, or you wish to complete the certification and become a trained facilitator, you should contact the VIRTUS Coordinator in your diocese. The facilitator for today's session can give you the name and contact information for your VIRTUS Coordinator.

What can I do to help?

First—make sure that you have registered to use the VIRTUS *Online* system. If you haven't already visited the website to complete your registration, you should do so as soon as possible. For those who have not registered, please refer to the attached VIRTUS *Online* registration instructions. Please keep in mind the importance of registering through the online system. If you have not registered, we have no way to certify your attendance at today's session. Signing the sign-in sheet is not adequate. If you need help registering online, you should contact your diocese's VIRTUS Coordinator or your local VIRTUS Coordinator. Again, today's facilitator can give you those names and contact information.

Second—behave consistent with what you learn in today's session. Learn more about child sexual abuse by visiting our website each week (www.virtus.org). Make a conscious effort each day to protect children.

Third—if you are selected to complete one of our continuing education courses, use this benefit to your advantage and help your parish become a safe haven for children.

Finally—if you want to volunteer as a facilitator, contact your diocese's VIRTUS Coordinator and begin the process.