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Not all parishes are 'Talking About Touching'

One in five shuns program aimed at preventing abuse

By Michael Paulson
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RANDOLPH - The third graders sit squirming in their seats, a crucifix on the wall and a bag of Doritos on each desk, as Rose Eames holds up a big picture of two girls and starts to tell a potentially unsettling story.

The girls are at a movie, she says, and when their chaperone, an older sister, goes to get popcorn, a man in the row behind them strokes the hair of one of the girls. What should they do?

While the question seems straightforward, the very discussion in a weekly religious education class of inappropriate behaviors is causing major headaches for Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Boston, who has made resolving the abuse crisis a hallmark of his tenure. O'Malley, like almost every Catholic bishop in the United States, has promised to teach children in educational programs about "safe environments," but the program he has chosen for pupils in kindergarten through third grade, "Talking About Touching," has proved more divisive than expected.

Most local parishes, like St. Mary's in Randolph, have employed the program, which has been in use in secular and church settings around the country for 27 years and has been used to educate more than a million children nationwide, including pupils in eight other Catholic dioceses.

But one in five parishes in the archdiocese has either refused to implement the program or has seen it fall apart, and O'Malley is struggling to get everyone to commit to a curriculum that some argue is too explicit and others contend is just impractical. By the archdiocese's own count, 64 of 295 parishes are not using "Talking About Touching." The archdiocese says it is not punishing the noncompliant parishes, but is trying to persuade them to adopt the program and is offering alternatives to the most unhappy congregations.

Supporters, including much of the academic world that has looked at "Talking about Touching," say the program is effective, appropriate, and necessary, and contend that in the Archdiocese of Boston, its implementation has led 400 minors to come forward to report they had been abused. Those reports, most of which involved relatives and none of which involved clergy, have been forwarded to the state Department of Social Services.

"I would say that 95 percent of the people who work in child maltreatment and child protection support this kind of prevention education," said David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. "It's not controversial among people who are doing child protection work."

But, six years after the abuse crisis rocked the Catholic Church in Boston and around the nation, the program remains controversial. Last month the Archdiocese of Boston was one of 10 dioceses declared out of compliance with the child protection measures agreed upon by the nation's bishops because of a failure to fully implement a "safe environment program."

"This whole idea of empowering kids is an illusion - a 6-year-old kid cannot protect himself against some behemoth who is fouled up inside - and kids will be protected when adults have their wits about them and realize their children should not be put in the hands of anybody who they do not completely trust," said the Rev. David J. Mullen, pastor of St. Brendan Church in Bellingham. Mullen argues that the archdiocese should be training parents and that parents should then be instructing their children.

"I am against doing things that ignore parental rights and might be suggestive to children or upsetting to children," Mullen said.

The Archdiocese of Boston is almost certainly being held to a higher standard than other dioceses around the country: It is attempting to implement a more complex and time-consuming program than many dioceses, and it has voluntarily agreed to detailed parish audits, a level of scrutiny that is higher than that other dioceses are facing, because of the impact of the scandal here.

Most of the criticism suggests either that the program, by referring to the possibility of inappropriate touching of genital areas, is too explicit or scary for young children or that the subject of abuse prevention should be discussed at home, and not in parish religious education programs. Some critics have called the program sex education, although it includes no discussion of sexuality or procreation. An organization called the Catholic Medical Association has criticized the program, and a bishop in Oregon has also come out against it.

The leadership of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, the primary organization advocating for abuse victims in the United States, has slammed O'Malley because the archdiocese has not achieved full compliance.

"This is allegedly a binding national policy, and has been for five years, and it's disingenuous blame-shifting for O'Malley to claim that it's not his fault that the programs are not being

offered," said David Clohessy, national director of SNAP. "The spirit of the bishops' reforms is that every Catholic kid will be trained."

But another victims' advocate, Anne Barrett Doyle of bishop-accountability.org, said the situation appears to be more complicated. Doyle's own parish, St. Agnes in Reading, is among those that have declined to use the program.

"This parish was out in front in solidarity with survivors in 2002, and they started a Voice of the Faithful affiliate early on," Doyle said. "They're passionate about protecting kids, and this reaction is consistent with that."

At the Reading parish, parents have come to the conclusion that they don't like the program.

"People thought that some of the language used and some of the direct conversation used was not age appropriate, and we felt it would be unfair for CCD teachers to be responsible to teach this when the CCD teachers are primarily volunteer parents," said Kate Kaminer, who said she has been a member of the religious education board at St. Agnes for five years. "Personally, I think it should be done at home."

Every parent is offered the chance to exclude their children from the program - about 1 percent of parents in parishes that use the program have opted out - and parents are then offered the instructional materials in case they want to teach the program at home.

"Talking About Touching" is one of three programs run by the archdiocese in an effort to prevent abuse. Programs for older children and for adults have proved noncontroversial. Last year, the archdiocese trained nearly 160,000 children and 51,000 adults in abuse prevention.

The "Talking About Touching" program is offered in kindergarten through third grade in Catholic schools and in weekly religious education programs at parishes; it introduces the subject of abuse as part of a series of lessons about safety - bicycle, gun, and then personal. Children are taught that no one should inappropriately touch their private parts. Instructors are given the option of using the words "penis" and "vagina," or describing them as areas covered by a bathing suit, and most parishes choose the bathing suit description.

And children are told that if someone does attempt to touch their private parts, they should shout, 'No!' and then tell a trusted adult what happened.

After the recent class at St. Mary's, several parents who came to pick up their children said they were pleased with the program.

"It's an excellent idea and very necessary in the world we live in. It's what they need to know, unfortunately," said Deidre Yerly. "And it helps us bring up the subjects. It makes them easier to discuss."

Kathy Johnston, a mother of three who teaches religious education in Randolph, said that at first she was hesitant to teach the curriculum, but that she concluded that "God wants us to keep kids safe." She said her own three children went through the program without incident.

And another religious education teacher, Julie Pantazelos, said she has become so supportive of the program that she is teaching it to her grandchildren, who, she said with unhappiness, are in a parish that is not implementing it.

"At the end of the session last year, a young boy came up to me and said, 'Mrs. P, thank you for telling me I can say no to a grown-up,' " Pantazelos recalled. "That made it all worthwhile, and it might save a child from a lot of pain."