

VIRTUS—Protecting God's Children®

Overview of the Empowering God's Children Safety Program®

Ensuring children's safety is a challenging undertaking. The prevention of child sexual abuse requires more than adult awareness, education, and training about the nature and scope of the problem. The **VIRTUS Empowering God's Children Safety** program and the "**Creating and Maintaining Healthy Relationships**" program from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles are vehicles through which parents, teachers, catechists, and youth ministers give children and young people they need to protect themselves from those who might harm them. The programs are not sex education. It is responsible, thoughtful classroom instruction that assists in enhancing and reinforcing the parents' teaching and increase the child/youth's ability to resist the overtures of potential child molesters who prey on our children/youth in our neighborhoods, parks, youth camps, churches of all faiths, schools and over the internet. A recent study conducted by leading expert Dr. Finkelhor indicated that self protection programs do appear to empower children/teens to be more assertive, speak up and disclose abuse or suspected abuse. It also assisted in opening up a dialog for drug use, bullying & suicide prevention. Visit <http://calcasa.org> for more information.

The **Empowering God's Children Safety** Program and the "**Creating and Maintaining Healthy Relationships**" program lessons for children & youth were created for four specific age groups starting with grades K through 12th grade. Each year, the program will provide a theme that introduces and builds on the basic concepts of the **Empowering God's Children Safety Guide** and the **Archdiocese of Los Angeles Self-Protection Program**. The material will be developmentally appropriate for each age group and will include content and activities that reinforce the message.

The lessons are organized in cycles so each child experiences a totally different lesson plan each time the materials are presented. Each child receives the full range of information from the **Empowering God's Children Safety Guide** in small; "digestible" bites, over a three-year period. Then, as a child advances to the next age group, there are a whole new set of age appropriate lessons that explore the major topics in increasingly greater detail.

This program and each included lessons are founded on the principles of appropriate relationship boundaries in the broader context of Christian values. All lessons are age-appropriate, and help children and young people develop the vocabulary and boundary distinctions necessary to empower them to begin to recognize inappropriate behaviors by others, while practicing appropriate relationship boundaries in their own lives. Each lesson takes approximately 45 minutes to an hour to complete.

The lessons focus on an age-appropriate discussion of touching safety, relative to the specific roles that different people play in a child/youth's life. All of the lessons stress the importance of keeping private body parts "private," of recognizing the warning signs of a predator, of distancing themselves from a predator and of telling a trusted adult the behaviors that caused them to feel uncomfortable or threatened. Additionally, a set of introductory videos are used as an icebreaker to make it easier and more comfortable for the certified instructors to present the lessons to students. For the teens, lessons will include enforcing personal boundaries, recognizing risky adult behavior and grooming behaviors of potential abusers. Common scenarios are often discussed with all age groups so that the child/teen can learn how to apply what is discussed into real life situations they may encounter.

Empowering Children *Safety* requires parents and other caring adults to help children learn appropriate relationship boundaries and how to protect themselves from predators. By teaching **Empowering God's Children Safety**, we can raise the awareness of our youth to help them avoid situations where they can be victimized and empower them to respond in the best possible ways when those boundaries are violated. If you have any questions about the program please contact Sister Rosalie at 969-4868. You can also find information about the program by visiting www.virtus.org. There is a preview and an introduction to the **Empowering God's Children** program as well as a parent handbook, child safety articles written by experts and other resources that will help keep our youth safe.