

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month

April 23 is Blue Ribbon Sabbath

THE ROLES OF COMMUNITIES OF FAITH IN KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE

DUE CARE IN PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

As a result of the many highly publicized cases of sexual abuse of children within religious organizations and programs that they administer, many staff and parishioners of churches, synagogues, and other congregations may believe that their role in child protection may primarily be one of risk management. There can be no question that places of worship and religious education should be safe sanctuaries for children and youth:

No matter where a child is harmed or by whom, as people of faith we grieve for the inestimable injury done and for the losses experienced by the child and the child's family. We are called to move beyond grieving to active efforts to eliminate the possibility of child abuse everywhere, and most especially in our places of worship. Our religious community must adopt a child abuse prevention strategy because:

1. It is a community of faith that can offer a safe haven and sanctuary where children and youth can seek advice, help, and nurture.
2. It is a place where more than just facts about child abuse can be taught. We can also teach and proclaim our religious values: compassion, justice, repentance, and grace.
3. It is the place where children can come and learn and develop the inner strength and spiritual resources they will need to feel truly connected to God and to face suffering and evil.
4. It can be the place where children and adults are able to learn to respond to painful and confusing events using the wisdom of our religious tradition.¹

¹Adapted from JOY THORNBURG MELTON, *SAFE SANCTUARIES: REDUCING THE RISK OF CHILD ABUSE IN THE CHURCH* 12 & 52 (1998).

HELPING TO BUILD STRONG COMMUNITIES

There is much more, however, that religious organizations can do to ensure that children are safe in the community as a whole. Religious organizations not only should be sure that no harm is done to children attending their own programs, but churches, synagogues,

and other congregations also should recognize their critical role in making child protection a part of everyday life throughout the community.

In that regard, it is important to remember both that neglect is by far the most common form of child maltreatment and that it is rarely willful. Both neglect and physical abuse typically occur when parents feel overwhelmed by the multitude of economic, social, and personal challenges before them, especially when they are facing those problems alone. In cases of neglect, parents may lack both the energy and the means to deal with such formidable problems. Lapses in their supervision of their children may occur. These lapses are more serious in situations—for example, dangerous neighborhoods or substandard housing—in which it is difficult to keep children safe.

Conversely, as the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect noted, "In neighborhoods in which children are protected, there is friendship among neighbors, watchfulness for each other's families, physical safety of the environment, common knowledge of community resources, visible leadership, and perhaps most critically, a sense of 'belonging,' ownership, and collective responsibility."² Religious organizations can be critical in building such norms of neighborliness—communities in which the Golden Rule guides how people treat each other (in particular, how they treat the children among them).

The U.S. Advisory Board identified three ways that religious organizations can contribute to a comprehensive community effort to preserve children's security, both subjectively and objectively.³ First, as *societies for service* that are present in almost every neighborhood, religious organizations can provide resources to families that make their care for children easier. Refugee resettlement programs provide a model for comprehensive services—economic, educational, vocational, and social—that religious organizations can provide to families that enable them to cope with formidable challenges and to feel that they have neighbors watching out for them. Religious organizations can also form partnerships with schools in which members lead activities to create networks of friendship among pupils' parents, to facilitate the pupils' families' engagement in community life, and provide material resources (clothing, financial counseling, etc.) for families of limited economic means.

Second, religious organizations can be *places of acceptance* for families who may be on the margins of the community. By offering healing and reconciliation, communities of faith may

2 U.S. ADVISORY BOARD ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT, NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS: A NEW NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN 8-9 (1993).

3 Id, at 77-78.

reassure parents about their ability to make a difference in the lives of their own family and indeed in the community as a whole. By modeling a belief in the worth of every parent and child, religious organizations can promote an ethic of neighbors' respect and support for one another.

Third, and perhaps most obviously, religious organizations can provide *moral leadership*. Congregations can join in affirming children's dignity and worth and proclaiming the importance of protecting their personal security. This message can be proclaimed from the pulpit and in Sunday School classes and men's and women's organizations. It can be modeled through "welcome baby" and "parents' night out" programs that directly support family life. It can be spread throughout the community through ecumenical and interfaith services, neighborhood chats, and family social events.