How to recognize child abuse

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan declared April to be National Child Abuse Prevention Month. Since then, government and social service professionals have worked tirelessly to raise awareness of child abuse and what people can do to prevent it.

Children who are being abused often have difficulty asking for help. They may not want to get their abuser in trouble, especially if the abuser is a parent or relative. The child may fear that the abuser will hurt him/her or a family member if the child reports the abuse. Very young children and children with disabilities may have difficulty communicating their abuse to others.

Because it can be so difficult for children to disclose abuse, adults must be vigilant about identifying signs of abuse and neglect, which may include:

✦ Sudden changes in personality or behavior, such as becoming withdrawn or moody.
✦ Frequent injuries.
✦ Attempts to cover up injuries by wearing weather-inappropriate clothing, such as a long-sleeved shirt on a hot day.
✦ Fear of going home.
✦ Untreated illnesses or injuries.
✦ Age-inappropriate behavior. For example, an older sibling in an abusive or neglectful home may “parent” his or her younger siblings.
✦ Poor grooming and personal hygiene.

If you believe that a child might be the victim of abuse or neglect, it’s important to speak up for that child. In Illinois, you can contact the Department of Children and Family Services child abuse hotline 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 800-25-ABUSE. If you believe that a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

Prayer: Dear God, all children belong to you. Help us to keep your little ones safe by paying attention, asking questions, and speaking out. Amen.


How faith communities can prevent child abuse

Child abuse happens in all kinds of families. In addition, non-family members also commit abuse. Faith communities play an important role in preventing, identifying and reporting child abuse.

Here are some ways that congregations can protect children:

Developing educational programs

Faith communities can work with child advocates to educate their congregations about neglect and abuse. Education can take the form of in-person programs offered at the church as well as training for clergy and religious educators.

Identifying and reporting child abuse

While Illinois clergy are legally required to report suspected child abuse, all congregants, particularly those who work with children, should be trained to identify and report abuse.

Developing safe congregation policies

Congregations can help prevent abuse by creating policies that protect children. These policies may include:

✓ Requiring regular background checks for clergy, educators and staff members.
✓ Establishing guidelines for adult staff or volunteer members who work with children or youth, such as requiring the presence of at least two unrelated adult supervisors at youth or children’s activities.
✓ Requiring staff and volunteers to undergo regular training on safe congregation issues and policies.

Providing support to families

In some cases, abuse and neglect can be prevented by providing adequate support to families under stress. Ways of providing support to families include:

✓ Connecting families with social service and mental health resources.
✓ Providing practical support by helping with transportation, child care, utility bills and other basic needs.
✓ Taking time to listen to parents who are struggling.