

Parish youth contacts received education in child sexual abuse

As part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's ongoing efforts to promote a safe environment for children, the Office of Child and Youth Protection met with parish youth contacts June 6 at Church of the Resurrection, Ellicott City, to discuss youth protection policies.

Some 30 people gathered in the parish center as Allison West, the Child Safe program manager for Catholic Charities, spoke about child sexual abuse prevention. According to Ms. West, one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused by their 18th birthday. She also said 40 percent of sexual offenders are age 18 and under, 95 percent of offenders are people whom the child trusts and loves, one in seven children who are abused are under the age of 6 and one in 10 children who are sexually abused don't tell anyone.

"Many children don't tell anyone because they're afraid it's their fault, they don't want to get the person in trouble and many don't completely understand what is happening," said Ms. West.

The effects of abuse on a child vary, but some children become depressed, anxious, have low self-esteem, have suicidal behavior, symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and in many cases their spirituality is affected. Many children have a distorted image of God following abuse. They see a God who is indifferent, inconsistent, absent or powerless, said Ms. West.

When it comes to preventing child sexual abuse, Ms. West recommends the public health approach. The primary prevention goal is to end the sexual abuse of children.

“We must raise children that don’t become sexual offenders,” she said. “We need to raise children that don’t want to hurt others and who have adequate coping skills.”

Children who have had traumatic experiences, lack empathy, have been exposed to domestic violence and have experienced maltreatment and/or neglect are at higher risk of becoming abused. Juvenile offenders normally have poor social skills, learning disabilities, depression, poor impulse control, impaired family function and behavior problems, said Ms. West.

Ms. West encouraged the group to help reduce the risk by educating adults and children on abuse and what to look for if they suspect someone is being abused or may be a sexual offender. Offenders tend to target children who are isolates, “loners,” come from single family homes, have problems communicating or haven’t been given information on sexual boundaries, said Ms. West.

“For children and teens, healthy sexuality is nurtured when we meet the emotional needs with empathy, acceptance and respect,” said Ms. West, who hopes parents and educators will help children foster a positive approach towards the body and promote a positive self-image and respect for others.