

Parents can help prevent sexual abuse
By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

Sexual abuse is not an easy topic to talk about in any culture. It is almost taboo for many Hispanics families. However, talking is necessary if we want to help prevent it.

As parents with young children, my husband and I are scared by statistics that say that one in every five girls and one in six boys are sexually abused by age 18.

We both had the luck of growing up in a safe environment where there were certain "sacred" norms in our relationships with adults. However, during my years in pastoral ministry I've heard in confidence from many young people and adults who were sexually abused as minors.

Today, I think of the pre-adolescent boy abused by an uncle in Mexico, the hurt, the years of psychological treatment and the anxiety this horrible crime against his dignity have caused him; of the young Latina in California enthused by the idea that a young man "with good intentions" was courting her, but scared to allow the relationship to go forward due to the aftermath of rape as a child; and, of the young immigrant woman who during a moment of intimacy and prayer at a retreat confided that she had been repeatedly abused by her own father.

My heart still cries out loud for them, but I know we are not impotent. As parents and pastoral ministers, we can and should do something to prevent cases such as these. The tools exist today and, more than ever, are within our reach.

The first step is to become informed. I thank the Church for the tremendous effort to train parents, Church workers and volunteers on how to recognize possible indicators of abuse, inappropriate relationships and how to react to a suspected case of abuse. I took safe environment training a few years back in Denver. Virtually every diocese in the United States has similar programs thanks to the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (<http://www.usccb.org/ocyp/charter.pdf>) established in 2002.

There is no reason to do nothing. Not even a language barrier is a excuse. Parents who do not speak English must demand that this information be provided to them in their native language. Even as materials and presentations become available in Spanish or other languages, the communities can organize to find creative solutions to pass the information around and encourage others to become informed as well. Nothing must stop parents in the war against child abusers.

And ladies, if your husbands are the kind that simply won't talk about this issue, find ways to drag them to the trainings; read the information to them at home; make their ears hurt with your insistence. Our children deserve it.

In many dioceses, children are also learning, at their level, things such as no one has the right to touch them, how to defend themselves from an adult who makes them feel uncomfortable, to find someone to talk to, that talking is good and that is not their fault if an adult behaves inappropriately. This is important since guilt and withdrawal of attention or affection are mechanisms often used by child molesters.

The clergy sexual abuse scandal, and the defective manner in which this problem was dealt with in the past, is a terrible disgrace that has hurt not only victims but also the Church in general. However, it is also true that no other institution in this country, public or private, has made the prevention effort the Church has made recently.

As parents, however, we worry that the sexual abuse of children is not a problem just in the Church. Research shows that this is a social problem that occurs in many other environments (daycare, public schools, clinics, hospitals, summer camps, the family) as well, often with higher incidence than in the Church but with much less publicity.

Most of us have our children in public schools. They should be held to the same standards demanded from churches and private schools. We must demand from our legislators laws that punish equally people who commit these horrible crimes regardless of where they happened. Is a child molester less guilty for abusing a child using a position of trust at a public institution? Is the hurt they cause more bearable? Are those who knowingly cover it up or look the other way less accountable? There should be no double standards when it comes to the wellbeing of our children.

For our part, my husband and I are not ready to allow that any of our children become a part of this terrible statistic. Not if we can help it with information, dialogue and much, much prayer.

Mar Muñoz-Visoso is assistant director of Media Relations for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops