

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document presents the research of the Catholic Medical Association Task Force on the Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention on how best to respond to the crisis of sexual abuse in society and in the Church. The report does four things:

- The report shows how inconsistent awareness of and reactions to the sexual abuse of children in the 20th century have intensified the challenge of preventing child abuse.
- The report examines the appropriateness of “child-empowerment” programs—the most widely used methodology to prevent the sexual abuse of children—by reviewing studies of their effectiveness, as well as by analyzing their adequacy in light of the science of child development and in light of the Church’s teaching on sexual morality.
- The report provides a summary of the latest scientific findings on child development, with particular focus on the neurobiological, emotional, cognitive and interpersonal dimensions of normal, healthy child development.
- The report draws on the science of child development and the teachings of the Church to recommend strategies that can better prevent sexual abuse.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The problem is the sexual abuse of children and how to effectively prevent it. The history of the 20th century shows cyclic swings both in society’s awareness of the sexual abuse of children and in institutional measures to prevent it. Recent studies show the prevalence of sexual abuse of children has not decreased over the last 20 years despite heightened concerns and prevention efforts. This history demonstrates the need for ongoing review and reform of sexual abuse prevention programs.

WHY SHOULD CURRENT INTERVENTIONS BE REVIEWED AND REFORMED?

Over the past three decades, prevention efforts have relied on a methodology of *empowering* the potential child victim to stop or prevent the abuse. Analysis of these “child-empowerment” programs shows them to be *ineffective at preventing* the sexual abuse of children, and *inconsistent with the science* of the emotional, cognitive, neurobiological and moral development of the child. These programs also are *inconsistent with the Church’s teaching* on the education of children in matters pertaining to formation in sexual morality.

WHAT ARE THE FOUNDATIONS OF EFFECTIVE, LONG-TERM STRATEGIES TO PREVENT SEXUAL ABUSE?

In order to be effective, strategies to prevent sexual abuse must be consistent with the science of healthy child development and must address the current crisis of culture which is fostering the sexual abuse of children. Key elements of child development reviewed include: attachment relationships; emotional development; authoritative parenting; latency; cognitive and moral development; and adolescent development (with particular focus on gender differences).

The science of child development demonstrates that the optimal health and well-being of the child depends upon secure attachment with parents, an authoritative parenting style that guides a child’s

emotional development toward self-mastery and self-giving, and support for growth in morality and faith. On the other hand, insecure attachments, a deficit of loving, authoritative parenting, and lack of support for self-regulation of emotions and behaviors not only prevent optimal character development, but can constitute risk factors for children to become victims of sexual abuse or to become sexual abusers.

According to Pope John Paul II, “The abuse of the young is a grave symptom of a crisis affecting not only the Church but society as a whole. It is a deep-seated crisis of sexual morality, even of human relationships, and its prime victims are the family and the young. In addressing the problem of abuse with clarity and determination, the Church will help society to understand and deal with the crisis in its midst.” The relativism, individualism, and hedonism that have reached crisis proportions in Western culture contributed to the developing crisis of sexual abuse in society and the Church in the late 20th century and continue to impact efforts to halt and prevent the sexual abuse of children. The moral teaching of the Church and, in particular, the doctrine contained in the Pontifical Council for the Family’s document, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, is indispensable for addressing the current crisis.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

While great progress has been made over the past several years in addressing the crisis of sexual abuse in society and the Church, it is possible and necessary to improve our ability to effectively prevent the sexual abuse of children. To this end, we recommend that:

- Current “child-empowerment” prevention programs be rescinded because they are ineffective and potentially damaging to children and families;
- Parents be recognized as the primary educators and protectors of their children and, further, that current resources be re-directed to programs that educate and support parents on how better to fulfill this vocation;
- Greater emphasis be placed on character education of children through formation in the virtues;
- Educational interventions shown to mitigate developmental deficits be implemented as soon as possible;
- Prevention programs be developed to identify children at risk for sexual abuse and to help families and children find therapeutic ways to overcome deficits;
- Church and social institutions help to promote the healthy moral and emotional development of children by respecting and strengthening the family; and
- The Church, in particular through the leadership of bishops and priests, take the lead in teaching the importance of a relationship with God, and the spiritual treasures of the sacraments, in the development of healthy children, parents and families.

We pray that this report will be helpful to the bishops, both corporately and individually, to the Office of Child and Youth Protection, to the National Review Board and to parents, all of whom have the best interests of children at heart.