

ST. BERNARD CHURCH

**275 Tower Hill Rd.
North Kingstown, RI 02852**

Sexual Misconduct Statement and Policy

Leaders in Youth Ministry and Religious Education at St. Bernard Parish are responsible for providing a safe and healthy environment for young people who participate in our Religious Education and Social programs. This environment includes the physical setting, the adults involved in ministry activities, and the interaction of young people. We follow the guidelines set down by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in their document, “*Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*”. (June 2002)

Abuse occurs when someone does not respect another’s boundaries; uses power, tricks, threats, or violence to cross or change another’s boundaries; or inflicts hurtful or unwanted behavior (physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual) on another person. We see abuse defined as any of the following:

- **Emotional abuse:** putting down the persons, making the person feel bad about him/herself, excessive criticism.
- **Coercion and threats:** making or carrying out threats to do something physically hurtful, threatening to expose embarrassing secrets.
- **Sexual abuse:** coercing a person to engage in sexual acts against her or his will, physically attacking the sexual parts of one’s body, treating a person like a sexual object.
- **Economic abuse:** destroying one’s property, using money or gifts as leverage in return for sexual favors.
- **Isolation:** maintaining surveillance, controlling what a person does or who a person sees or talks to.
- **Blaming, Denying:** refusing to accept responsibility for abusive behavior, blaming the victim for causing the abuse.
- **Intimidation:** acts designed to frighten a person such as frightening gestures, displaying weapons, smashing objects, driving a car crazily.

As representatives of the church, parish coordinators of youth ministry, clergy, and all adults ministering as teachers have a distinct responsibility to be advocates for our young people in the church. As advocates we should:

- Ensure that the diocesan policies on abuse strongly advocate for the needs of the young, including counseling for those who are survivors and their families.
- Ensure that our parishes, schools and organizations follow all of the diocesan policies in regards to sexual and physical abuse.
- Coordinate the screening of all volunteers and employees, doing reference checks and arranging for police background checks for employees and volunteers as required by diocesan policy.
- Ensure that all parish, school, and community organizations employees and volunteers have training on the sexual abuse policy of the State of Rhode Island and the Diocese of Providence.

How can we help our children understand this difficult issue?

When speaking to your children about the issue of sexual abuse, be honest. You might consider speaking to the following issues:

- ✓ The priesthood and all church ministry is composed of human beings. We see both good and bad behaviors in clergy and ministers, as we do everywhere else. Sexual abuse of children and young people is found in the general population, and will be found in the church ministers as well. The rate of occurrence of sexual abuse in church ministry is similar to the general population, as well as in other church denominations, athletics, Scouting, and other youth-serving organizations. The Catholic Church certainly seems to receive greater publicity.
- ✓ Let young people know that those who are victims of abuse are victims of violence and that one victim is one too many. When abuse by a member of the clergy or church personnel occurs, victims often lose trust in authority and the church. The church seeks to restore any broken relationship, though this is sometimes very difficult.
- ✓ Make sure the conversation does not lead to “blaming the victim”. It is wrong to say, “he’s old enough to have known better”, or “she was asking for it anyway”. The adult is always in the position of power and that should be made clear.
- ✓ While one case of clergy abuse is too much, help young people understand that the number of priests who have committed these crimes is a very small percentage of all priests. It is good to acknowledge how hard it is for the vast majority of priests who are good men and who find themselves under suspicion because of nothing they have done. When we blame all priests or fear all priests, we are hurting many good people in the process.

In the Diocese of Providence the five basic principals in dealing with accusations of sexual abuse are:

1. Respond promptly to all allegations of abuse where there is reasonable belief that abuse has occurred.
2. If such an allegation is supported by sufficient evidence, relieve the alleged offender promptly of his or her ministerial duties and refer the person for appropriate medical evaluation and intervention.
3. Comply with the obligations of civil law as regards reporting of the incident and cooperating with the investigation.
4. Reach out to the victims and their families and communicate sincere commitment to their spiritual and emotional well-being.
5. Within the confines of respect for privacy of the individuals involved, deal as openly as possible with the members of the community.