

How to talk to children about the Church sex abuse scandal

When speaking to their children about sexual abuse scandals in the Church, parents should listen to their children's concerns and be careful to not to make assumptions, experts told CNA.

When discussing the issue of abuse, "the first step is to be sensitive [to] the age and stage the child's in," Dr. Gregory Popcak, founder and executive director of the Pastoral Solutions Institute, told CNA.

"Certainly, a kindergarten age child would not need to know as much as an adolescent would, or even a middle schooler."

When broaching the issue, Popcak said that parents should ask their children about what they understood about what they had heard, or what they think had happened.

Parents should determine what their children actually know before they ask them what they think about the situation, explained Popcak. He suggested parents ask questions to help frame the discussion, giving examples like "When you heard that, what does that mean to you?" and "What did you make of that?" to try to discern where to begin discussing sexual abuse.

Younger children especially may not know how to put their feelings into words. Popcak suggested that parents should provide multiple choices of answers, such as "scared," "sad," or "confused." It is paramount in this type of conversation to identify a child's knowledge, understanding, and reaction to a situation, he said, so a parent can address the child's main concern.

Parents, he explained, tend to "get really anxious and sometimes try to over-solve for the child," and that this is why it is important to determine what exactly a child needs from his or her parents.

Instead of attempting to over-explain or resolve a problem, Popcak said the most important thing a parent could do is to reassure their child that while they may be afraid or confused, their parents will be there to look out for them and to protect them. Small children should also be reminded that they can and should go to their parents to talk about things that upset them or make them uncomfortable.

Roy Petitfils, a licensed professional counselor who has worked with teenagers for the past 25 years, agreed with many of Popcak's points. He told CNA that he would advise parents to carefully consider their children's age before beginning to discuss the abuse crisis, saying that younger children simply don't need or want to know more than is necessary, or they may be oblivious to everything.

"Not everything that can be said should be said. Just because it's happened or is happening doesn't mean they need to know all about it," Petitfils said to CNA.

"As parents our role is to allow our kids access to age-appropriate information."

Petitfils also said that parents should not attend therapy sessions with their children, as adults handle feelings and emotions differently than children. Adults "should not process [their]

feelings with young people, because it will only add to their anxiety and confusion,” he explained.

Parents should instead strive to validate the thoughts and feelings of their children, Petitfils said. They could say things like, “It makes perfect sense to me that you’re angry, scared and confused about all of this,” and explain that these feelings are normal.

Coming to terms with the trauma of sexual abuse in the Church affects Catholics of all ages. But while parents may themselves be upset by reading graphic accounts of some cases, it is very important that they keep their emotions in check when talking about it with their children, Petitfils said. Otherwise, this may make the situation worse.

“Telling your child you’re angry in a calm, but serious tone is helpful. Screaming, stomping and slamming things while you’re angry will only frighten and confuse your child even more.”