

Establishing Healthy Boundaries: A Personal Body Safety Program

Establishing Healthy Boundaries: A Personal Body Safety Program is part of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles' commitment to protecting children and youth — in this case, young teens in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

It was created by Pam Church, author of the *Good Touch/Bad Touch*® program currently used in Kindergarten through fifth grade classrooms. Church says taking the program to the junior high-level was in response to numerous requests she received from educators across the country.

“Junior high teachers expressed their need for a program that would give young teens a safe environment in which to discuss the changes taking place in their lives,” Church explains. “Teachers wanted a program for these young people who are dealing with so many issues such as changing peer relationships, dating, sexual harassment, bullying and understanding appropriate boundaries. *Establishing Healthy Boundaries* is my response to these requests.”

Church identifies the major strengths of *Establishing Healthy Boundaries* as giving young teens the vocabulary, the strategies and the skills to:

- discuss violence as it relates to teen relationships.
- evaluate whether something is or is not abusive.
- deal with angry feelings without harming others or themselves.
- discuss the concept of respect, power and boundaries.
- identify common behaviors of sexual offenders.
- identify bystander strategies for helping.
- know personal *Body Safety Rules* to use in their own lives.

Young people, says Church, need the opportunity to talk about these issues. “With the research we have on violence prevention and sexual abuse, it is imperative that this information be shared with our youth,” she says.

Loretta Haemker, school nurse at Our Lady of Grace School in Encino, sees *Establishing Healthy Boundaries* as essential training for today's teens. As a mother of two teenage sons, a nurse for 27 years and a trained *Establishing Healthy Boundaries* facilitator, Haemker knows that as children get older the problems of sexual abuse become more complicated.

She also observes how young people today feel heavily pressured by media images and messages that show teens having relationships but never point out the consequences.

Establishing Healthy Boundaries, says Haemker,

Fortieth in a series.

teaches students appropriate boundaries for themselves and others. “We cannot assume because these young people are in junior high they are now safe from predators,” she says. “Training in boundaries and respect can alert them to potential problems.

Sexual abuse does not discriminate, continues Haemker. “Very young children or youth, male or female, rich or poor — all children and youth are at risk. As parents, we cannot know every person our child is going to encounter. Students in their beginning teen years are not always clear about what is OK and what is not OK in relationships.

“*Establishing Healthy Boundaries* provides students with the opportunity to explore real life situations. It opens the door to discussion. It is no longer acceptable to keep our youth silent and ashamed.”

Friends and parents sometimes question her, Haemker says, as to why schools are teaching *Establishing Healthy Boundaries*. Her response is clear and to the point: “If it wasn't a societal problem, schools would not have to be involved! I am so grateful to be a part of this program. It will make all the difference in the lives of young people.”

Joan Vienna, Coordinator of the Archdiocesan Office of Safeguard the Children, reiterates the importance of boundary training for our youth. “We owe our young people information and life skills to deal with sexual abuse and boundary violations,” she explains. “Junior high students are dealing with potential abusive behaviors, not just from individuals, but from the media, cell phones and computers. We must openly talk about these issues with them.”

Pam Church — who created the *Good Touch/Bad Touch*® program in 1983 when she learned she had children who had suffered sexual abuse — believes that her program “gives young teens the tools to recognize inappropriate advances and the skills and strategies to deal with these situations.

“*Establishing Healthy Boundaries* is about reinforcing that God has made each one of us special and that each person has the right to be recognized and treated as special.”

For information on Good Touch/Bad Touch, visit www.goodtouchbadtouch.com.

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