Boundaries Beyond the Bathing Suit: Utilizing Intimacy Choreography Practices to Support VIRTUS Training

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In 2002, the *Boston Globe* exposed the Catholic Church's mishandling of child sexual abuse cases. Two years later, *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002* by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice confirmed that Catholic dioceses lost immense amounts of money and public trust as a result.

In March of 1998, however, National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc.–an insurance company for the Catholic Church–had conducted a forum to discuss how child sexual abuse could be prevented (National Catholic Retention Group, Inc. n.d.); from these discussions and consultations came the creation of the VIRTUS programs, established "to safeguard ministries and people," prevent child sexual abuse, and provide reactive strategies to allegations of abuse within Catholic settings and diocesan schools (Virtus Online). In June of 2002, then, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*; Article 12 of this document formally mandates safety training. While VIRTUS training itself is not mandated by the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, VIRTUS is a viable option available to dioceses–districts of parishes unified under the budgetary and pastoral leadership of a Bishop–to meet the obligations of Article 12.

The frequent encouragement of my Catholic junior high teachers to remember and rely on VIRTUS training echoed in my mind when, as a teenager, I helped the school's theatre directors decide whether to block a stage kiss. I had received the same VIRTUS training twice, and my directors had viewed the same training I received; the video taught that "bathing suit areas" or "private parts" should not be touched by anyone other than a doctor or my parents. Lips didn't count as bathing suit areas or private parts according to the training, so my directors may have been left with the impression that lip contact is okay, although they may have felt uncomfortable with telling minors to kiss–and afraid of parental reactions. Given that, I could see where the uncertainty in my directors was coming from.

In my experience as a Catholic school student, VIRTUS was the main formal learning source about personal boundaries. Learning about establishing boundaries in such a narrow context gave the impression that boundaries were solely analogous to protective walls or fences, rather than doors or fences with gates, which could be individualized to let certain things in and keep certain things out. I later learned this nuanced way of viewing boundaries from my study of intimacy choreography, and this view provided me with a greater sense of agency and a holistic understanding of consent. VIRTUS was all I had to go off of as a student, yet I felt that there was

something off or missing from the VIRTUS programs. I have searched for scholarly critiques about the programs, and the only critique I could find stated that it was impossible to critique the program because the training materials are difficult to access (Desai, Esq. and Lew, Esq. 2012).

I had been pondering whether there was some connection between intimacy choreography and VIRTUS. Then, during one of Kim Shively's "Working with Minors" intimacy choreography training workshops held by Theatrical Intimacy Education, which I attended online in June 2023, Shively shared that a colleague recommended VIRTUS as a supplemental material to learn more best practices for working with minors. It seemed there was a way to fit the two together after all.

In the Summer of 2023, I conducted two surveys

[1]–one for graduates of Catholic diocesan schools and another for current or former adults who work in diocesan settings with minors–to evaluate how VIRTUS training impacted Catholic theatre educators' approaches to scripted intimacy. Two opposing perspectives emerged as themes: first, that intimacy ought to be avoided (not staged) to remain within VIRTUS guidelines, and second, that teachers ought to go against the VIRTUS guidelines for the sake of artistic integrity. Some adults in the community found intimacy choreography and VIRTUS training to be at odds with one another, while some responders stated that VIRTUS itself needed an addendum or an update to remain relevant.

It was in reviewing the VIRTUS literature and receiving intimacy choreography training that I came to believe that incorporating intimacy choreography practices in Catholic youth spaces is not only compatible with VIRTUS teaching, but the implementation of intimacy choreography practices in Catholic spaces (even when there is no physical intimacy in the script) is necessary to fill gaps between VIRTUS's theory and practice by expanding on Social Emotional Learning. This paper analyzes teachings and practices from intimacy choreography and VIRTUS to assess how the two can complement one another.

The stated mission of VIRTUS is to provide best practice programs to "prevent 'wrongdoing' and promote 'rightdoing' within religious organizations" (National Catholic Retention Group, Inc. n.d.). VIRTUS training provides plenty of applicable tools to achieve its first goal to prevent the specific wrongdoing of child sexual abuse, yet the training itself offers few applicable tools for its second goal of promoting rightdoing, which includes "refocus[ing] the faithful on developing and nurturing appropriate human relationships" (National Catholic Retention Group, Inc. n.d.), which is in line with Social Emotional Learning. For this reason, I will

analyze how the tools of intimacy choreography presented in a Catholic youth space specifically support the teaching and best practices contained within the most commonly implemented VIRTUS trainings: Protecting God's Children for Adults, and Teaching Safety - Empowering God's Children, but first, I will consider the two subjects' similar histories.

In *The Evolution of Consent-Based Performance: A Literature Review,* author Amanda Rose Villarreal, PhD, traces the history of intimacy choreography which follows a similar trajectory to VIRTUS, with the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements echoing the outcry that followed the Boston Globe exposé, and organizations forming and creating trainings in an attempt to cease patterns of harm. Intimacy choreography is the art of staging content of an intimate nature for a live or recorded performance, and demand for the field grew in response to growing awareness and movements that followed to address the exploitation of performers by those in power within the entertainment industry. Many different intimacy choreography companies were created to train people to become intimacy choreographers who mitigate the risks of performing intimacy. Similarly, while VIRTUS was created before the 2002 *Boston Globe* exposé, the demand for programs such as VIRTUS grew in response to the growing awareness of child sexual abuse in the Church to train children as well as adults on how to prevent and respond to abuse. However, while VIRTUS provides tools to children and adults regarding child abuse prevention and response, VIRTUS's creators had the end goal of protecting their shareholders ("About Us"), the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, the intimacy choreography education company Theatrical Intimacy Education aims to serve the most vulnerable people in the room (Rikard 2020), and that singular focus on the vulnerable is what the Catholic community needs. For this reason, I will analyze how the tools taught by Theatrical Intimacy Education, if used in theatrical processes, support the teaching and best practices contained within the most commonly implemented VIRTUS trainings: *Protecting God's Children for Adults,* and *Teaching Safety - Empowering God's Children.*

The tools of VIRTUS and intimacy choreography both aim to facilitate boundary communication, boundary crossing prevention, boundary crossing response, and risk management. However, VIRTUS and intimacy choreography do so in different capacities in part due to whom they aim to ultimately protect. Informed by Laura Rikard's teaching at the California State University Summer Arts course *Creating with Consent: Onstage Intimacies,* during which she mentioned how the tools of intimacy choreography and the responsibilities of an intimacy choreographer do not fall within the scope of situations where something illegal has occurred;

Nicolas Shannon Savard's (2023) utilization of risk assessment practice in helping students mitigate the pressure to take the biggest risks and to aid in identifying personal boundaries; as well as Laura Rikard and Amanda Rose Villarreal's discussion regarding how intimacy choreography aims to create "spaces of acceptable risk" rather than "safe spaces" (2023), I made the following observations.

VIRTUS provides excellent tools for preventing and responding to potentially illegal scenarios or situations, such as being pursued by a predator or child sexual abuse. However, VIRTUS's tools aren't as applicable in legal, but potentially boundary-crossing, situations. Such legally acceptable risks can range from waiting for consent before hugging someone, to peers communicating their boundaries, to taking the social and emotional risk of performing onstage. The most severe risks that need to be attended to in legally acceptable scenarios are those of an ethically questionable nature, rather than a legally questionable nature.

For example, both VIRTUS and Theatrical Intimacy Education acknowledge that boundaries provide us the framework in which to interact with one another, thrive, explore, and even play ("Teaching Boundaries" 2023*;* Shively 2022). However, due to the history related to VIRTUS' creation ("About Us", n.d.), VIRTUS focuses on safety and boundaries primarily in relationship to sexual abuse, despite mentioning other forms of boundaries. Intimacy choreography practices–Theatrical Intimacy Education's (TIE) practices in particular–expand upon this in ways that are holistic, concrete, and rooted in supporting vulnerable individuals rather than rooted in teaching guardians and minors to be suspicious, wary, and unintentionally, to be fearful. According to Theatrical Intimacy Education, there are different types of boundaries—such as physical, emotional, cultural, sexual, professional, and energetic boundaries—and one's boundaries can change over time (Villarreal, et al. 2023), which aligns with VIRTUS's acknowledgment that there are other types of boundaries beyond the physical and sexual boundaries of one's body parts covered by a bathing suit ("Teaching Boundaries" 2015; "Teaching Touching Safety" 2005; "Protecting God's Children" 2004), and that boundaries vary depending on the relationship one has with others ("Teaching Touching Safety" 2005). Where Theatrical Intimacy Education's intimacy choreography practices expand on the holistic nature of boundaries is in introducing tools and practicable approaches to establish and uphold these other boundaries, whereas VIRTUS tools leave these other boundaries vague and theoretical.

VIRTUS training asks adults to support students in identifying and enforcing their own boundaries ("Teaching Boundaries" 2015). Two tools VIRTUS provides for outlining physical boundaries are the use of the definition of "private body parts"–which are demarcated by the areas covered by a bathing suit–and the identification of "safe touches" ("Teaching Boundaries" 2015, "Teaching Touching Safety" 2005, "Protecting God's Children" 2004). While the private body parts boundary tool provides a starting point for physical boundaries, it does not acknowledge other boundaries a person may have on their body, such as the arms, legs, and face–nor does it acknowledge emotional, cultural, or energetic boundaries. While VIRTUS has recently shifted its theory from bathing suit areas to Total Body Safety to advocate that the entire body is private (National Catholic Services, LLC, et al., 2023), no tool is given to assist teachers or students in putting this new theory into practice.

VIRTUS defines "safe touches" as touches that have "a good purpose and aren't intended to hurt" and provides examples: a hug from a teacher in class, receiving a kiss from Mom, getting a shot from the doctor, cleaning a cut with antiseptic, and holding hands with a good friend ("Teaching Boundaries" 2015; "Teaching Touching Safety" 2005; "Protecting God's Children" 2004). While these examples provide a start, the definition of safe touches doesn't consider the fluid nature of boundaries, and that in different contexts even with the same people, a well-intended touch may not be welcomed by a minor for whatever reason.

If safe touches are those that are defined as those that are not "intended to hurt", then the toucher and their intention are what gets to define whether the touch was safe or not, rather than the touched person and how the touch impacted them. This definition of safe touches creates a loophole for the intention of "I didn't mean anything by it" as a reason why a child's concerns are made invalid. A touch's intention does not equate to its impact.

Therefore, the bathing suit private parts boundary tool and safe touches identification tool do not quite achieve their objectives of helping students identify and enforce their own boundaries, because they both impose and limit the definition of what boundaries are allowed to be, and what safe touches must include, which does not support students' identifying their own boundaries.

However, tools and approaches taught by TIE do provide tools to help students identify and enforce their own boundaries. Boundary practice (Pace and Rikard 2020), adapted for minors of different age groups by Kim Shively (Shively 2023), is one of these. Deloaded, desexualized language for clarifying boundaries (Pace and Rikard 2020. pp. 17 and 22-3; Rikard 2022;

Villarreal, et al. 2023) has also been adapted by Shively (Shively 2023), and this use of language aligns with VIRTUS's Overview and Founding Principles of the *Touching Safety Program* document. Furthermore, VIRTUS acknowledges the human need for touch and encourages appropriate touch ("Teaching Boundaries"; "Teaching Touching Safety"; "Protecting God's Children"), but does not provide a tool for communicating such. The boundary practice is a comprehensive, concrete tool to support VIRTUS's intention to balance its messages regarding touch in a supportive way rather than a fearful, extralegal way.

A protective tool VIRTUS teaches is saying or shouting the word 'No' when one's boundary has been crossed ("Teaching Boundaries" 2015; "Teaching Touching Safety" 2005; "Protecting God's Children" 2004). While saying or shouting 'No' may be an effective strategy for frightening off offenders and alerting others to one's plight, the tool of 'No' is not always accessible, as is explored in Theatrical Intimacy Education Workshops such Best Practices (Rikard 2022), Working with Minors (Shively 2023), and Creating With Consent: Onstage Intimacies (Villarreal, et al 2023) and texts such as *Staging Sex* (Pace and Rikard 2020). However, teachers in Catholic settings can use the intimacy choreography tool of the self-care cue offered by TIE, which is often called Button (Rikard 2022; Pace and Rikard 2020).

When someone calls Button, all in the room take a collective deep breath, boundaries are acknowledged, agency is given to the one needing care, and it eases the pressure to justify one's needs by validating those needs upfront. Those willing to provide support consent to offering it, rather than forcing themselves to. Furthermore, the Button conversation as taught by Theatrical Intimacy Education (Pace and Rikard 2020) eases the fear around asking questions–which can come off as questioning authority, or being someone who is 'hard to work with' or 'disruptive'. While saying 'No' tends to come off as pressing a jarring "STOP" button, the self-care cue acts as a neutral "Pause" button (Pace and Rikard 2020. pp. 17-20).

Button is not limited to physical boundaries; this tool can provide practice in advocating for one's needs and encourages listening to one's feelings and body for information about boundaries–all concepts that VIRTUS teaches adults to encourage in minors ("Teaching Boundaries"). Because the activities that TIE uses to teach Button clarify a structure for communication and provide opportunities to practice asserting one's agency in identifying and enforcing boundaries, Button is a perfect tool to support the theoretically discussed goals of VIRTUS, providing a concrete approach that aligns with VIRTUS's theory.

Another tool VIRTUS offers to children when boundaries are crossed is to run away from the perpetrator and to tell a trusted or 'safe' adult about what happened until they are believed ("Teaching Boundaries" 2015; "Protecting God's Children" 2004). Fortunately, VIRTUS instructs adults to believe what children say and to calmly contact legal authorities if needed ("Protecting God's Children for Adults" 2021). These practices are adequate when extreme or illegal harms have occurred, but they may not be enough for all situations. Alongside these teachings, trusted adults can teach Theatrical Intimacy Education's Apology System, introduced to be used in times when harms accidentally occur (Rikard 2022; Villarreal, et al 2023), as a social and emotional learning tool. Having a system for apologizing helps students and adults learn from their mistakes and come back into community with each other (Villarreal, et al 2023) while still encouraging the normalization of respecting boundaries, as is encouraged by VIRTUS ("Teaching Boundaries" 2015; "Teaching Touching Safety" 2005; "Protecting God's Children" 2004).

While an adaptation of intimacy choreography tools for Catholic non-performance spaces is something I would like to explore in the future, for this paper, I advocate for the use of these tools in an arts space specifically, because utilizing arts is optimal for developing Social Emotional Learning (Eddy et al. 2021), and VIRTUS notes that safety training requires practice to reinforce the use of tools and knowledge ("Teaching Boundaries" 2015). In fact, an exercise included in one VIRTUS lesson plan includes a roleplay exercise ("Protecting God's Children" 2004). Abundant with roleplaying activities, the acting classroom and the theatre rehearsal room are the perfect places to practice the tools students can use to assert their boundaries, practice agency, and practice waiting for consent, even if no physical intimacy is present.

Kim Shively emphasizes the importance of adapting theatrical intimacy tools to the needs of minors (Shively 2022), and the Catholic space is no exception. To test how well the practices of intimacy choreography fill gaps in VIRTUS training, I am taking the directing opportunity with the TK to Grade 8 cast and crew of the Catholic diocesan school I attended to implement intimacy choreography tools for the sake of Social Emotional Learning. At a parent meeting, I presented my Catholic community with my plan to implement tools from the intimacy choreography field. At the advice of my producer who is a teacher at the school, I explained to the parents that I am not implementing the tools with plans to have minors perform physical intimacy in mind, but because these are the tools I wish I had as a student to navigate my boundaries. I am in the process

of learning what adaptations to tools are needed for this community, and I look forward to sharing them soon.

[1] This research was supervised by Amanda Rose Villarreal, PhD as an element of the author's Honors Thesis at California State University Fullerton.

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