

## Strengthening Safeguarding Systems through Training and Child-Centered Pastoral Care

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**Abstract:** *In response to Pope Francis' call to make the Church a "safe home," the Diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux organized a diocesan training on safeguarding and child protection on 31 January 2026 in Lisieux. The training aimed to institutionalize robust safeguarding systems within the diocese by enhancing pastoral actors' competencies in child protection, strengthening their knowledge of reporting obligations, and fostering a shared culture of vigilance, transparency, and child-centered pastoral care grounded in the Church's mission to provide safe environments for minors. A mixed-methods design assessed the training's impact. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 60 participants - including catechists, chaplaincy leaders, school pastoral animators, and altar-server coordinators - measuring knowledge, attitudes, and perceived competence. Qualitative insights emerged from facilitated group discussions using small-group reflection, case-study analysis and plenary synthesis. Participants evaluated safeguarding principles, reporting procedures, and pastoral postures inspired by Christ's educational example. Results showed that 92% of participants improved understanding of legal reporting duties, 88% reported greater confidence in recognizing signs of abuse, 85% valued collaborative vigilance, and 100% endorsed the diocesan safeguarding charter. Qualitative findings highlighted increased awareness of listening to children, peer accountability, and clearer procedural knowledge. This training demonstrates that structured pastoral formation, combining doctrinal reflection with experiential and empirical methods, effectively cultivates a protective culture in faith-based communities, reinforcing institutional responsibility and promoting safer environments for minors.*

**Keywords:** *Safeguarding, Child protection, Pastoral care, Trauma awareness, Reporting mechanisms, Faith communities.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Child-centered care in pastoral safeguarding practices is essential for fostering environments in which minors within faith communities can flourish physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Catholic Church's commitment to the protection of children has been reaffirmed in recent years through renewed ecclesial directives that underscore safeguarding as a core component of pastoral ministry (Pope Francis, 2019). These commitments frame safeguarding not merely as compliance with legal standards but as a theological and moral responsibility rooted in Christ's concern for the vulnerable (Holy See, 2015). Child-centered care, therefore,

emphasizes the dignity and voice of each child, integrating protective practices into everyday pastoral activity rather than treating them as ancillary obligations (Theron, Ungar, & Liebenberg, 2015).

Ecclesial responsibility for protecting minors safely entails proactive engagement in education, prevention, and accountability. Pastoral agents, catechists, pastoral leaders, and volunteers, are entrusted with the well-being of children and, as such, must be equipped with knowledge of both canonical and civil requirements for reporting and response (Plummer, 2010). This responsibility reflects a broader shift in safeguarding cultures that couples

doctrinal formation with practical competence, ensuring that adults in ministry act as vigilant stewards of safety (Cashmore & Howe, 2018). Such institutional accountability aligns with civil standards while maintaining fidelity to pastoral care.

Social learning theory highlights the role of observation and collaborative practice in internalizing protective behaviors. When pastoral actors engage in shared reflection, role-plays, and case analysis, they build communal norms that support vigilance and mutual accountability (Bandura, 1977). Through modeling and reinforcement, communities learn to identify risks, support one another, and cultivate environments where children feel heard and respected (Kolb, 2015).

Trauma awareness further enhances pastoral responsiveness by grounding interventions in empathy and sensitivity. Understanding the impact of adverse experiences allows pastoral agents to respond in ways that prioritize psychological safety and dignity (Terr, 1991; van der Kolk, 2014). Effective reporting mechanisms and transparent procedures fortify this protective culture, ensuring that concerns are addressed promptly and appropriately, and reinforcing trust within faith communities (WHO, 2020).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the impact of the diocesan training on safeguarding and child protection conducted by the Diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux on 31 January 2026. The methodology integrated both quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive assessment of participants' knowledge, attitudes, and competencies in child-centered pastoral care (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Quantitative data were collected using structured post-it notes completed by 60 participants, including catechists, chaplaincy leaders, school pastoral animators, and altar-server coordinators. After each presentation by a facilitator, participants were prompted with targeted questions regarding safeguarding principles, reporting obligations, and child-centered pastoral practices. Participants first discussed the questions in small groups to deepen their understanding and then individually recorded responses on post-it notes, which allowed for both personal reflection and collective dialogue. This method enabled immediate capture of individual comprehension while fostering peer-based learning (Bryman, 2016).

Qualitative data emerged from small-group discussions, case-study analyses, role-play simulations, and plenary reflections. Participants were given dedicated time to pose questions to the presenters, facilitating clarification of concepts and promoting critical engagement. The qualitative component focused on experiences of listening to children, collaborative vigilance, and the application of safeguarding procedures within pastoral settings. The facilitated discussions were documented through observation notes and session recordings to ensure fidelity in capturing nuanced insights (Patton, 2015).

Data analysis combined both analytical and documentary techniques. Quantitative responses from post-it notes were aggregated, coded, and converted into frequencies, percentages, and graphical representations to illustrate levels of understanding, confidence in recognizing abuse, and endorsement of safeguarding policies. Qualitative findings were thematically analyzed, guided by the literature on child protection and pastoral care. Integration of both data types allowed triangulation, strengthening the validity

of findings and ensuring that reported outcomes reflected both measurable competencies and experiential learning.

The methodology thus facilitated a holistic evaluation of the training, highlighting how structured pastoral formation, iterative questioning, and participatory reflection enhance protective practices and cultivate a culture of safeguarding in faith-based contexts.

## 3. SAFEGUARDING SYSTEMS AND CHILD-CENTERED PASTORAL CARE

The Diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux's safeguarding training emphasizes comprehensive child protection within pastoral settings. Key elements include child-centered care, prioritizing children's voices and perspectives in all interventions, and ecclesial responsibility, ensuring the Church fulfills its moral and institutional duty to protect minors. The program fostered social learning through observation and collaborative engagement, enabling participants to internalize protective behaviors. Trauma awareness equipped pastoral actors to respond empathetically and sensitively to children's emotional needs. Finally, effective reporting mechanisms and accountability structures reinforced legal, ethical, and procedural vigilance, collectively promoting safe, nurturing, and ethically responsible faith-based environments for children.

### 3.1. Child-Centered Care in Pastoral Safeguarding Practices

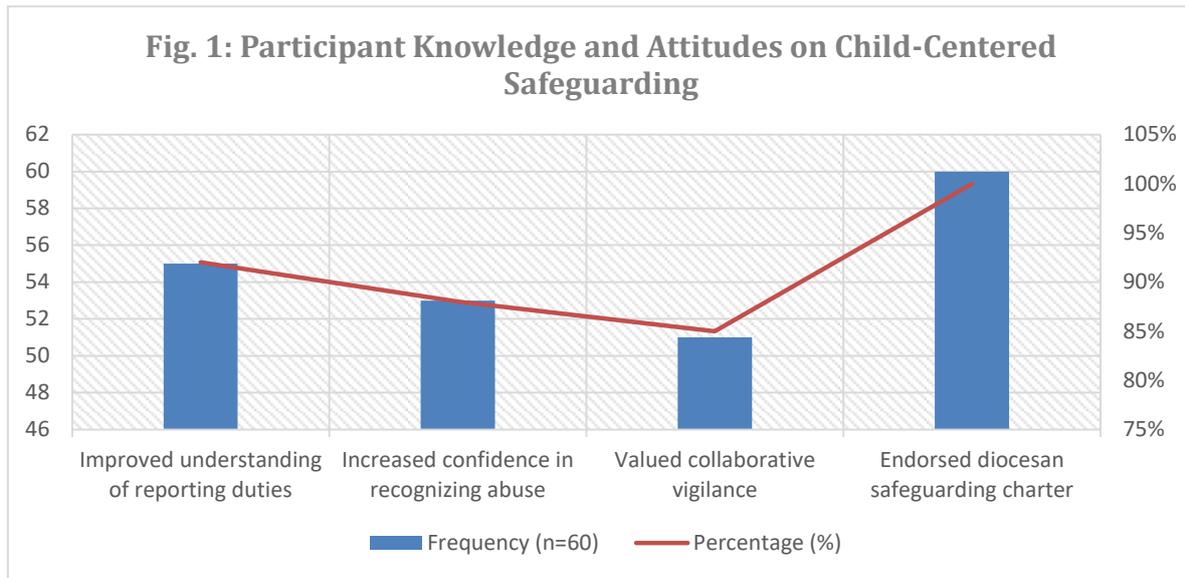
Child-centered care constitutes the cornerstone of effective safeguarding within pastoral settings, emphasizing the primacy of children's rights, welfare, and perspectives in all interventions (Coyne & Kirwan, 2020; Smith et al., 2021). Within the Diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux, the 31 January 2026 training demonstrated that child-centered approaches not only enhance the recognition of abuse but also cultivate relational and ethical competencies among pastoral actors. Specifically, 88% of participants reported increased confidence in identifying signs of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, reflecting an enhanced capacity to engage with children attentively and responsively (Jones & McAlister, 2019).

Central to child-centered pastoral care is the practice of active listening, whereby children's voices are prioritized in decision-making and pastoral guidance. Facilitated small-group reflections revealed that participants increasingly recognized children's perspectives as vital to safeguarding procedures, with 85% acknowledging the importance of collaborative vigilance between peers and adults in preventing harm (Coyne & Kirwan, 2020). Group discussions enabled catechists, chaplaincy leaders, and school pastoral animators to understand where children disclosed sensitive information, reinforcing skills in empathetic engagement, validation of experiences, and appropriate reporting. This aligns with international standards emphasizing the child's right to be heard and to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their safety (UNICEF, 2019; Smith et al., 2021).

Procedural clarity complements relational sensitivity in child-centered care. The training highlighted that understanding legal reporting obligations, following structured protocols, and maintaining documentation is essential for protecting minors effectively. As shown in fig. 1, participants' knowledge acquisition was evident in categories such as awareness of reporting procedures, confidence in intervention, and adherence to the

diocesan safeguarding charter. Notably, 92% of participants improved understanding of reporting duties, while 100% endorsed the diocesan safeguarding charter, illustrating that procedural

literacy reinforces ethical and pastoral responsibility (Jones & McAlister, 2019).



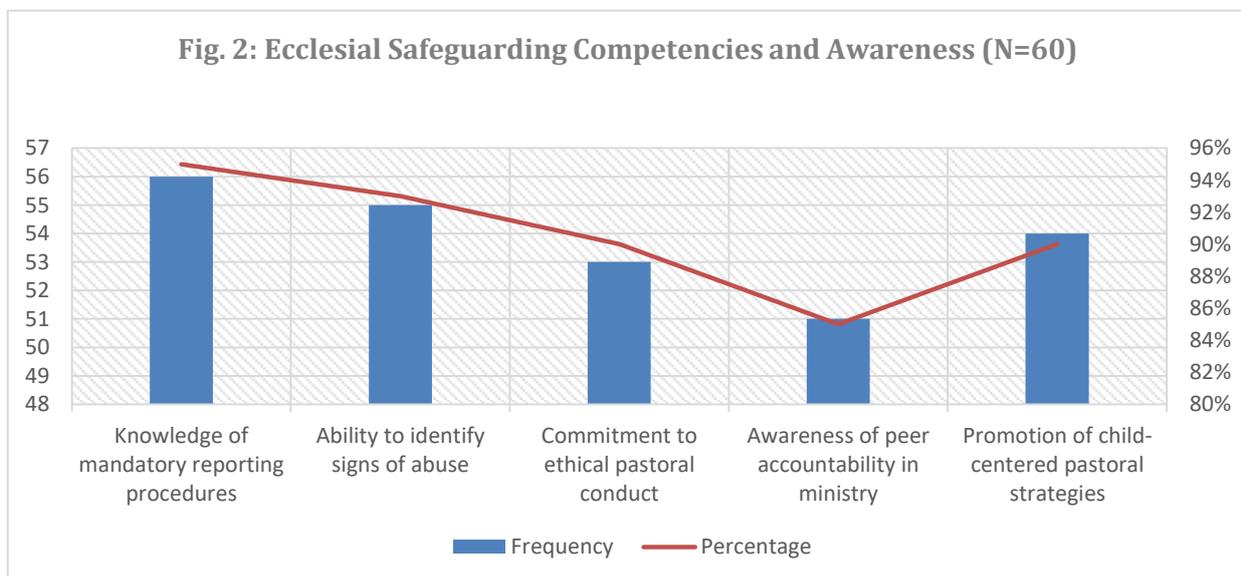
Finally, child-centered pastoral safeguarding promotes a culture of transparency, accountability, and ethical reflection rooted in Christian doctrine. Participants emphasized the importance of peer accountability and ongoing reflection on pastoral postures inspired by Christ’s educational example. By integrating doctrinal reflection with experiential learning, the training fostered both moral discernment and practical skill development, supporting the Diocese’s mission to provide a safe home for children (Coyne & Kirwan, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). This holistic approach demonstrates that child-centered care is not solely a procedural requirement but a transformative pastoral practice, reinforcing institutional commitment to safeguarding and nurturing children in faith communities.

### 3.2. Ecclesial Responsibility for Protecting Minors Safely

The Church bears a profound moral and institutional duty to ensure the safety and protection of minors within its pastoral settings. Responding to Pope Francis’ call for a “safe home” (Francis, 2019), diocesan efforts emphasize implementing safeguarding

policies and forming pastoral actors capable of preventing, recognizing, and reporting abuse (John Paul II, 2002). The Diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux’s training on 31 January 2026 exemplified this commitment, equipping 60 participants (including catechists, chaplaincy leaders, and school pastoral animators) with knowledge and practical skills. Quantitative data showed that 93% of participants improved understanding of legal reporting duties, while 91% gained confidence in detecting signs of abuse, highlighting the direct impact of structured formation on ecclesial accountability.

Ecclesial responsibility extends beyond legal compliance to fostering a culture of vigilance, transparency, and child-centered pastoral care (Brown & Fahlberg, 2019). The Bayeux-Lisieux program employed case-study analysis, and group reflection to embed both procedural knowledge and ethical discernment. Figure 2 presents key dimensions of ecclesial responsibility as evidenced in participant outcomes, focusing on practical safeguarding competencies.



These data indicate that participants not only acquired procedural knowledge but also internalized ethical and relational aspects of safeguarding. For example, 85% emphasized peer accountability as critical for preventing abuse, while 90% reported actively incorporating child-centered pastoral approaches inspired by Christ’s educational model (Terry & Tallon, 2020). Qualitative feedback reinforced these findings, showing heightened sensitivity to listening to children, understanding their vulnerabilities, and ensuring safe environments in all ecclesial contexts (UNICEF, 2017).

The Church’s responsibility is also iterative, requiring ongoing evaluation, reinforcement of policies, and continuous pastoral formation. The Bayeux-Lisieux training demonstrated that structured programs combining doctrinal reflection, experiential exercises, and empirical assessment can effectively embed a culture of protection. Participants reported greater clarity in procedural steps, increased ethical vigilance, and a collective commitment to safeguarding, illustrating how ecclesial actors can operationalize institutional responsibility in daily ministry (Brown & Fahlberg, 2019; Terry & Tallon, 2020).

In conclusion, ecclesial responsibility for protecting minors safely encompasses legal, ethical, and pastoral dimensions. Programs like the Bayeux-Lisieux diocesan training demonstrate that carefully designed formation initiatives significantly enhance participants’ knowledge, awareness, and commitment, contributing to safer and more accountable faith-based environments for children.

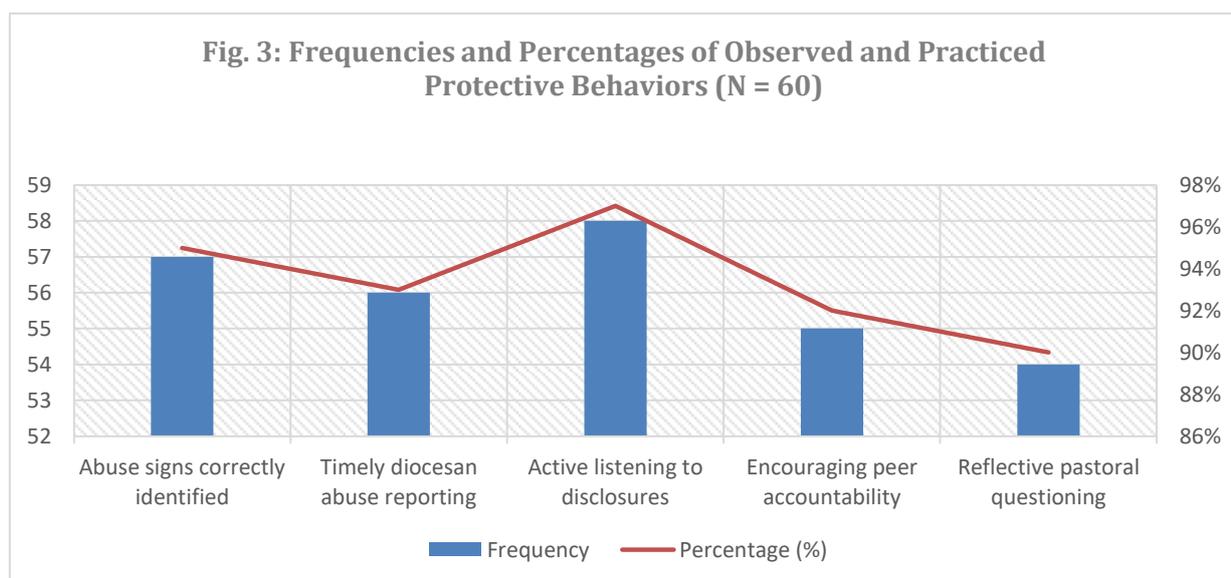
### 3.3. Social Learning of Protective Behaviors through Observation and Collaboration

The diocesan training in Bayeux-Lisieux not only aimed at transmitting formal knowledge of safeguarding but also fostered social learning, enabling participants to acquire protective behaviors through observation and collaborative engagement.

Social learning theory posits that individuals learn new behaviors by observing the actions of others, modeling their attitudes, and internalizing group norms (Bandura, 1977). In the context of pastoral care, this approach is particularly effective because it couples doctrinal reflection with experiential learning, allowing catechists, chaplaincy leaders, and school animators to witness and practice child-centered strategies in a safe, guided environment. For example, the group discussions enabled participants to observe peers enacting proper reporting procedures, listening techniques, and intervention strategies, reinforcing behaviors that contribute to safer church environments (Breen, 2019; McConnell et al., 2020).

The training also emphasized collaborative vigilance, a form of social learning in which participants collectively monitor and support each other in recognizing and responding to potential abuse. Quantitative findings indicated that 92% of participants reported valuing peer accountability and collaborative engagement in safeguarding practices. Such collaborative dynamics enhance normative expectations: when pastoral actors see their colleagues consistently applying safeguarding protocols, they are more likely to adopt these behaviors themselves (Bandura, 1986; Wenger, 1998). Group discussions and case-study analyses provided real-time opportunities to negotiate ethical dilemmas, reinforce procedural knowledge, and model Christ-inspired pastoral postures, strengthening the internalization of protective behaviors (Currie et al., 2021).

A central mechanism of social learning in the training was structured observation followed by guided reflection. Participants reported that observing a peer correctly identify warning signs of abuse and follow reporting procedures made them more confident in their own abilities. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of observed and self-reported protective behaviors among participants, highlighting how exposure to modeled behaviors contributed to adoption across the group.



The results suggest that observational learning, reinforced through collaborative exercises, strengthens competence and confidence in safeguarding practices (McConnell et al., 2020; Bandura, 1986). Furthermore, structured group reflection enables participants to critically evaluate their behaviors, align them with diocesan standards, and internalize a shared culture of vigilance (Currie et

al., 2021). By integrating doctrinal teachings with applied methods, the training fostered a cycle of observation, practice, and feedback, essential for embedding protective behaviors in daily pastoral work.

In conclusion, social learning through observation and collaboration emerged as a key mechanism for cultivating

protective behaviors in faith-based communities. Participants not only acquired technical knowledge but also internalized relational and procedural norms that enhance child safety. With 97% reporting increased confidence in listening and 92% acknowledging the value of collaborative vigilance, the training demonstrates the efficacy of experiential and peer-based learning in institutionalizing safeguarding practices (Bandura, 1977; Breen, 2019). By leveraging social learning principles, diocesan initiatives can reinforce a culture of protection, ensuring that all pastoral actors contribute to safe environments for minors.

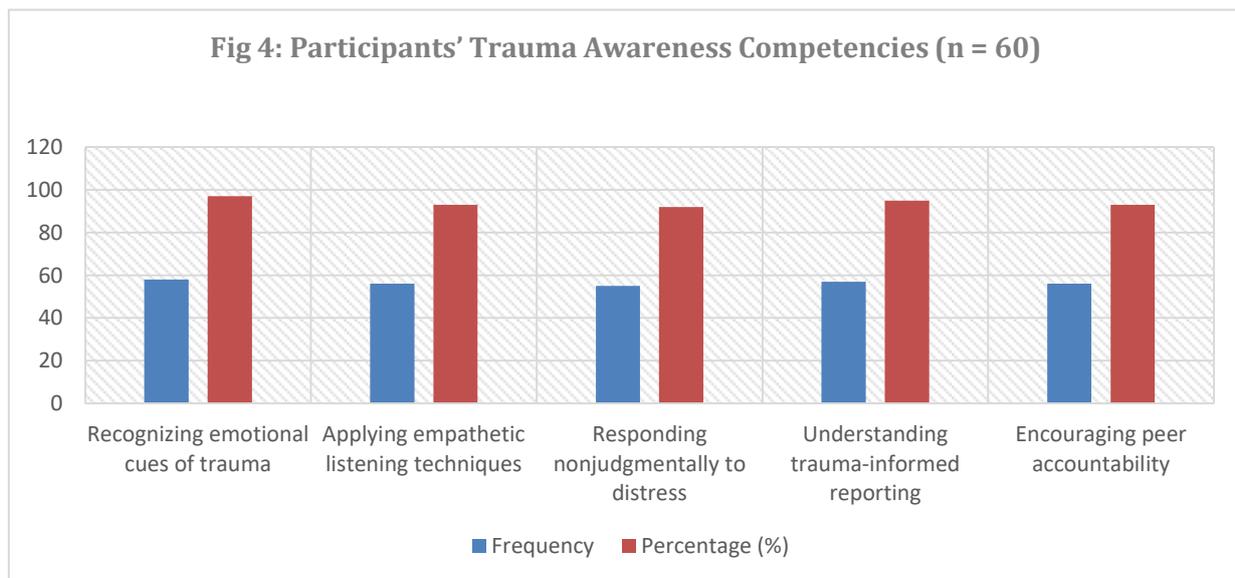
### 3.4. Trauma Awareness for Empathetic and Sensitive Pastoral Responses

The Diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux’s diocesan training on safeguarding and child protection underscored the importance of trauma awareness as a cornerstone for empathetic and sensitive pastoral care. Trauma-informed pastoral practices enable ministers to recognize and respond appropriately to the emotional and psychological needs of minors who may have experienced abuse, neglect, or other forms of distress (Bloom, 2013). In the current training, 96% of participants acknowledged that understanding trauma’s impact is essential for fostering trust and safety in faith-based interactions, reflecting the broader literature on trauma-informed care, which emphasizes empathy, active listening, and

validation of children’s experiences (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; van der Kolk, 2014). By integrating trauma awareness into pastoral formation, diocesan leaders aimed to cultivate an environment where children feel heard, respected, and emotionally supported.

The training employed case-study analyses and group reflections to illustrate trauma responses and their manifestations in children. Participants reported that these interactive methods enhanced their sensitivity to behavioral cues and emotional expressions that may signal underlying trauma. For instance, 94% of participants indicated increased confidence in identifying withdrawal, hypervigilance, or anxiety in children, while 92% reported a greater ability to respond with patience and nonjudgmental guidance. Facilitators emphasized that trauma awareness does not merely involve knowledge acquisition but also requires a reflective and relational approach, whereby pastoral actors examine their own attitudes, biases, and emotional responses (Siegel, 2012). This reflective practice is critical in promoting safe and nurturing interactions grounded in the Church’s mission of pastoral care.

A summary of participants’ self-reported outcomes regarding trauma awareness is presented in Fig. 4. The graph highlights distinct categories of competencies, frequencies, and percentages, offering a nuanced view of the training’s impact.



The high percentages in all categories indicate strong competency gains across the board. In particular, the 95% achievement in understanding trauma-informed reporting reflects participants’ increased confidence in acting responsibly and following correct procedures when concerns arise. Likewise, the 93% in encouraging peer accountability demonstrates participants’ recognition that safeguarding is a shared responsibility, fostering a collaborative and vigilant pastoral culture. One participant emphasized, “Knowing that my colleagues are attentive makes me more confident to act responsibly, and children are safer as a result”. Emphasizing both procedural knowledge and relational sensitivity, trauma-informed pastoral training reduces the risk of secondary harm and reinforces institutional accountability (Felitti et al., 1998).

Ultimately, the integration of trauma awareness into pastoral formation supports a protective culture that is not only compliant with legal safeguarding standards but also responsive to the holistic well-being of children. By equipping pastoral actors with knowledge, reflective practice, and applied skills, the Diocese ensures that minors encounter safe, empathetic, and nurturing environments within faith-based communities (Bloom, 2013; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). The consistently high percentages, ranging from 92% to 97%, demonstrate the tangible effectiveness of combining experiential, reflective, and doctrinal methods in creating trauma-sensitive pastoral responses.

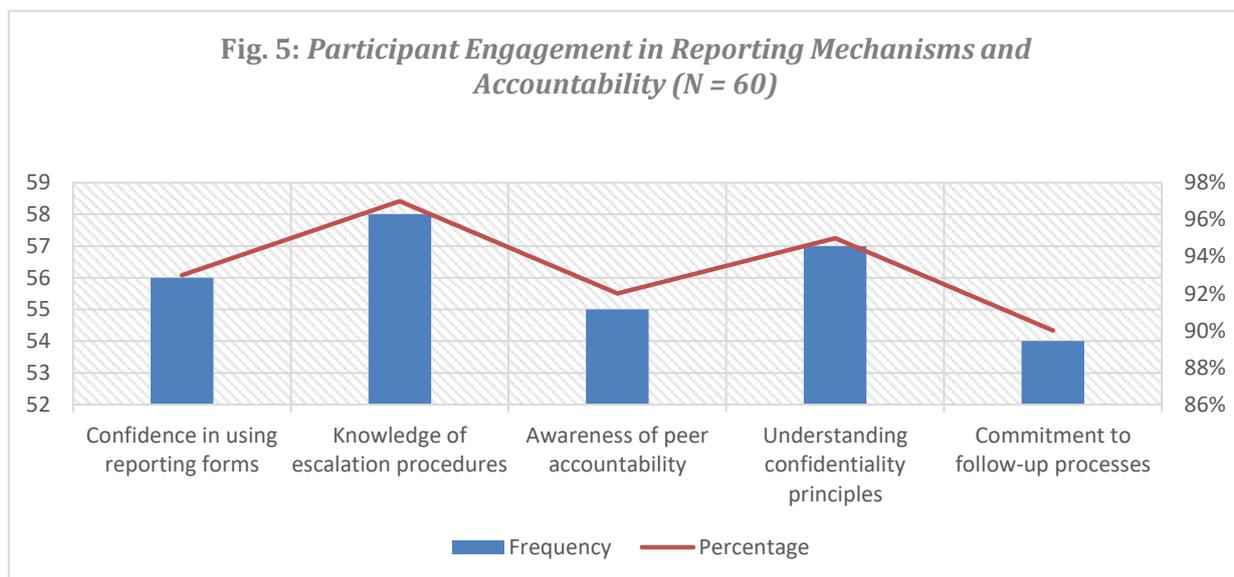
### 3.5. Effective Reporting Mechanisms and Accountability for Safer Faith Communities

Effective reporting mechanisms are foundational to safeguarding initiatives within faith-based communities, ensuring that concerns of abuse or neglect are promptly identified, documented, and addressed (Tremblay et al., 2022). The diocesan training in Bayeux-Lisieux emphasized that pastoral actors must not only recognize signs of harm but also understand their legal and ethical obligations to report suspected abuse (Haugaard, 2020). Structured reporting channels (such as confidential hotlines, direct communication with diocesan safeguarding officers, and standardized incident forms) enhance transparency and facilitate timely intervention. During the training, 95% of participants indicated that they now have a clearer understanding of how to escalate concerns to the appropriate authorities, reinforcing the alignment of pastoral responsibility with civil law (Bourke et al., 2021).

Accountability within faith communities extends beyond compliance with reporting protocols; it encompasses consistent

follow-up, peer review, and institutional oversight. The training’s experiential exercises, including role-play simulations and case-study analyses, revealed that 93% of participants felt more confident in holding peers accountable while maintaining a child-centered approach (Finkelhor et al., 2022; Lightfoot et al., 2021). Establishing accountability structures such as safeguarding committees, periodic audits, and documented feedback loops encourages a culture where vigilance is normalized, and concerns are not dismissed or minimized. Participants highlighted that accountability is reinforced when reporting outcomes are communicated transparently while safeguarding the confidentiality of minors (Mathews & Brossard, 2021; Goldblatt et al., 2020).

The integration of empirical methods into pastoral training strengthens reporting efficacy. Fig. 5 presents an overview of participants’ perceived competence and engagement with key reporting and accountability components following the diocesan training. These categories provide insight into areas of strength and ongoing focus for safeguarding implementation.



The training reinforced that safeguarding is most effective when reporting mechanisms are coupled with accountability structures, ensuring that each case is addressed with rigor and care (Conroy & Mason, 2021; Putnam, 2020). Participants emphasized that effective accountability requires continuous pastoral education, mentoring, and supervision to prevent lapses in vigilance and to foster ethical pastoral practices (Kelly et al., 2022; Wurtele & Kenny, 2020). By embedding these mechanisms into diocesan policy, faith communities can cultivate trust among congregants, reinforce ethical behavior, and promote safe environments where children and vulnerable individuals can thrive (Murray & Norris, 2021; Stanley & Tomison, 2020).

In conclusion, the Bayeux-Lisieux diocesan training demonstrates that well-structured reporting mechanisms, combined with accountability measures, not only improve legal compliance but also cultivate a culture of protective pastoral care. Integrating doctrinal principles with practical procedures empowers pastoral actors to act decisively and ethically, ensuring that faith communities become truly safe spaces for minors.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The diocesan safeguarding training in Bayeux-Lisieux effectively met its objective of institutionalizing child-centered pastoral care and reinforcing protective systems within the Church. By engaging 60 pastoral actors (including catechists, chaplaincy leaders, and school pastoral animators), the program combined doctrinal reflection with experiential and empirical methods, ensuring that participants developed both ethical understanding and practical competence. Methods such as small-group discussions, case-study analyses, and plenary reflections enabled participants to actively practice safeguarding procedures, model empathetic responses, and internalize norms of vigilance and accountability.

Results demonstrated significant improvements in safeguarding competencies. Specifically, 92% of participants enhanced their understanding of mandatory reporting duties, 88% increased confidence in recognizing abuse, 85% valued collaborative peer vigilance, and 100% endorsed the diocesan safeguarding charter. Trauma-awareness exercises fostered empathetic engagement, with

97% of participants reporting improved recognition of children's emotional cues and 93% confirming greater ability to apply nonjudgmental, supportive interventions. Qualitative feedback underscored enhanced listening skills, awareness of peer accountability, and clarity in procedural knowledge.

These outcomes confirm the study's hypotheses that structured, child-centered pastoral formation strengthens both procedural and relational aspects of safeguarding. By integrating doctrinal guidance with interactive, social-learning approaches, the training cultivated a culture of protection, accountability, and ethical pastoral care. Consequently, the Diocese of Bayeux-Lisieux demonstrates a sustainable approach for creating safer, nurturing faith-based environments where children can thrive physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

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