

Protecting God's Children for Adults

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Boundaries Part 2: How Safe Adults Can Maintain Healthy Boundaries

By [The VIRTUS® Programs](#)

Introduction

As safe adults, it is always our responsibility to create and uphold appropriate and healthy boundaries in our interactions with children and the vulnerable. However, there may be times when we might be unconsciously violating a boundary or creating a situation where a person is more likely to be susceptible to having their own boundaries be violated by someone else. Even if we have the best of intentions-our intentions are insufficient, and it's our behavior and the possible impact of our behavior that matters. As a result, one key aspect of protecting children is to teach children and the vulnerable what type of behavior they should expect from safe adults-through our own actions with them and our advocacy efforts with them.



Society in general does not always create opportunities for people to set and maintain healthy boundaries. Yet, the good news is, as safe adults, we can be a part of the solution to help. Here are some ways in which you can maintain appropriate and healthy boundaries as part of your ministry when interacting with children, youth and the vulnerable.

Give alternatives

Rather than refusing any type of physical affirmation or interactions, as the adult, you can help guide those interactions to more appropriate displays of affection for the ministerial environment. For example, if a child or youth tries to give you a big, and long full-frontal hug, turn to the side and give a quick "side hug" instead. You can also verbally communicate that instead of a hug, you appreciate "high fives" or "fist bumps."

Another example is if a child or youth wants to connect with you through your personal social media or email account. Instead, offer to connect with them using the ministry's or program's general social media account rather than your own personal account. Or, if a child or youth wants to discuss something with you privately, let them know you can talk in the parish hall, outside in an open area of the school, in the classroom with the door open and the invitation for another adult to come in at any time, or another location that still allows you to be within the sight and hearing of others. Avoid private chatting online, or any area that would be isolated. Let someone else know where you are, and inform the child that you may need to inform someone else to help keep them safe.

Respect the child or youth's boundaries

Children and youth have the right to determine their own boundaries and what they are comfortable with, even though some might have less firm boundaries than others. Even so, the ministerial environment requires that we uphold specific boundaries, regardless of whether or not the child wishes to uphold them. We do honor the boundaries of the child over our own personal boundaries. For example, if we want to give each of the children in our ministry program a "high five" or a "pat on the head" and a child doesn't want to-that's okay! Honoring a child's verbal or nonverbal "no" helps to empower the child to know that they can choose their own boundaries. The flip side of this is if we do not respect a child's boundaries when they say "no," we could be inadvertently conditioning them to accept unwanted behavior-no matter how inconsequential it may seem.

Keep interactions professional per the ministerial environment

When it comes to minors, adults should be friendly, but are not called to be a "peer" type of friend. Your influence over the child stems from your professional position as a volunteer or employee, which means that you are a leader, and not a "peer." An emotional distance is necessary with those entrusted to your ministerial care. Rather than behave as a peer, embrace a Christian attitude to act with kindness and professionalism as a leader to everyone in the group.

You may need to clarify your role directly to youth. If prompted, acknowledge kindly, but firmly, that you are there to be a leader and mentor, not as a "peer" friend. That, you're there to help them within your designated ministry and to help them become the best version of themselves. Focus on creating an environment that reflects the goals of your organization, rather than your own individual relationship with each student. All minors should feel welcome in the ministerial or educational environment and know that they are valued.

Communicating a concern

It is important to communicate concerns when something is amiss, such as observing a boundary violation, or being aware that someone else's behavior is against the policy/rules. Remember, remaining quiet about someone else's boundary misconduct or violation gives the perception of condoning the behavior, and contributes to an unsafe or problematic environment. However, communicating your concerns helps to fulfill your ethical (and possibly legal) responsibility, and helps to ensure a safe environment for all. Communicating concerns also assists with the welfare of the person who was violated-which is particularly important with minors and the vulnerable, along with providing an opportunity for the person exhibiting the concerning behavior to get help.

Your organization may have multiple avenues by which to communicate your concerns about boundary violations. If you are unsure of how to communicate your concerns for your specific state or within your organization, contact your supervisor or the leadership within your organization.

Conclusion

It is up to us, as safe adults, to maintain appropriate boundaries with others in ministry, especially with vulnerable adults and minors. It is also equally important for us to help the vulnerable and minors understand healthy and appropriate boundaries-whether in person or via technology.

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