

Protecting God's Children for Adults

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Boundaries Part 1: Barriers to implementing Stronger Boundaries

By [The VIRTUS® Programs](#)

Introduction

In the world of safe environments, we increasingly recognize the need to set and maintain proper boundaries in our relationships with others in our ministries—and especially our interactions with children. Unfortunately, there are often challenges that make it more difficult for us to recognize when safe environment boundaries within ministry have been crossed. They also make it more difficult to communicate about the issues to someone in authority who can do something about it.



Background: The need for boundaries

Relationships matter. They're foundational to ministry, and both relationships and ministry must be built upon proper boundaries. Proper boundaries can serve to protect us, the people around us, and the people in our care from problematic situations. We take particular care when addressing environments and interactions involving minors because of their inherent vulnerability as children.

While behavior within ministerial environments *is* typically appropriate, there are some actions or behaviors that are inappropriate. This can culminate in boundary violations, and possibly abuse. Boundary violations can range in severity. They are actions that disregard another's boundaries or that violate the professional or ethical rules, or policy, of an organization. Abuse, including the sexual abuse of children, can occur after a series of boundary violations.

Many people struggle to set healthy boundaries with one another. They may not understand what a reasonable limit should be, or they may struggle with communication or low self-esteem. We might recognize there's a boundary issue in our interpersonal relationships if we feel a lot of pressure from another person, if we feel resentful, overtaxed, etc.

However, there are also boundary issues that we might observe in our various ministries. When we exist within an organization, that organization has an expectation of appropriate behavior that occurs as part of relationships and interactions. Discovering, setting and upholding healthy boundaries in settings where we work or volunteer also upholds personal and professional integrity, and protects the goals of our ministry.

We may also need to communicate our concerns when we observe behavior that does not uphold integrity, or that is against the policy, professional standards of behavior, or code of conduct. It can be extremely challenging, even for the most seasoned professional, to communicate concerns about boundary issues or violations. This is especially true when fearful of consequences, concerned about confrontation, feeling ill-equipped, etc.¹

Here are common challenges adults face when concerned about implementing stronger boundaries or communicating concerns:

If I am firm with boundaries, doesn't that make me seem standoffish or rude? People might not like me as much.

Establishing and enforcing boundaries is a good, positive matter. It is not "snobby," "mean," "rude," or "wrong" to set boundaries or enforce them—and they can be firm while also explained in a kind manner (although, explanation can be helpful, it isn't necessary). It is normal to want to be liked, or respected. However, other people's approval

shouldn't influence your own self-worth or self-esteem, and those who don't honor your boundaries aren't respecting you. If someone attempts to make you feel bad or guilty about setting a limit or saying "no," the problem usually lies with that person.

How can I create a safe environment of trust with youth if I don't share about how messy life is, starting with myself? Isn't this the best way to create trust with another? Am I being inauthentic if I don't share enough?

Being authentic does not mean that you need to share everything about yourself.² Being authentic means being self-aware, defined by yourself rather than someone else's expectations of you, and, presenting your behavior in line with your boundaries. In fact, in one study, students defined authenticity in educators as those who were approachable, passionate, attentive, capable and knowledgeable, while inauthentic educators were identified as unapproachable, lacking passion, inattentive, incapable and disrespectful.³ There is a line of what we adults should and should not share in professional, work or volunteer environments, especially when children are involved. Sharing too much information about ourselves regarding personal experiences, trauma or wounds is not appropriate in a ministerial or teaching relationship. This kind of oversharing can lead to inappropriate behavior and boundary violations.

If I don't "go along with it," or if I set a boundary, people will be angry with me.

When people are accustomed to violating boundaries or manipulating, they will often show anger or hurt when another person attempts to set a healthy boundary. But, you don't need anyone's approval to set a boundary.

While you aren't responsible for others' feelings, you are responsible for the way that you treat others. It is your responsibility to communicate in a respectful and kind manner, but each person's feelings are their own responsibility. Another person's feelings cannot dictate your ethical responsibility to set a boundary or communicate about a boundary violation.

Needing to set a boundary is selfish; I should be more "loving" and kind.

Being selfish is defined as being "concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself: seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others."⁴ This description is actually more appropriate for a boundary violator.

Conversely, there is nothing that is selfish about setting personal limits. Setting boundaries is actually respecting yourself, and respecting others. A helpful analogy is this: when we ride on airplanes, in the event of an emergency, we are asked to put our own oxygen mask on before we help anyone else—including any children or vulnerable in our care. In this way, and similar to safe environment boundaries, we are better protectors of others when we can first insulate our own selves by setting limits.

Setting boundaries doesn't seem to be working. It's easier to just let the person do what they're going to do, avoid the conflict and just deal with it.

While it might be more convenient to avoid conflict, it's not a good determination for doing the right thing, nor does it help with boundaries. There are people who will repeatedly ignore your boundaries. Sometimes, this could be a sign that you need to discern whether the boundary is appropriate, or have a firmer resolution to follow-through. Keep in mind, it is always an appropriate boundary in ministry settings when it is laid out in the code of conduct or policy, or if there has been a verbal or written communication about the appropriateness of the behavior with a supervisor. There may also be times where you need to detach yourself, ignore the person, or bring it to the attention of a supervisor.

Conclusion

Many of these barriers highlight the necessity of shifting our perspective to reduce the elements that inhibit us from consistently setting appropriate boundaries. As we navigate through our ministries, we must be mindful of healthy boundaries for ourselves, of how we impact others' boundaries, of what boundary violations look like on behalf of others, and how to communicate our concerns or any concerns brought to our attention when there is a possible problem. Identifying these issues and your own feelings sets a strong foundation to both advocate for yourself and challenge deeply-held societal and personal myths that impede our healthy relationships.

1 Selva, J. (2021). How to Set Healthy Boundaries: 10 Examples + PDF Worksheets. PositivePsychology.Com.

<https://positivepsychology.com/great-self-care-setting-healthy-boundaries/>

2 Westfield, N. (2018). TMI: Over-sharing is NOT Caring. Blog Series: Notes From The Field. The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion.

3 Johnson, Z. & LaBelle, S. (2017). An examination of teacher authenticity in the college classroom. Communication Education, 1.

4 Merriam Webster Dictionary entry for "selfish." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/selfish#:~:text=Definition%20of%20selfish,of%20others%20a%20selfish%20act>

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