

Guidelines on Interactions with Children, Young People, and the Vulnerable

Effective July 1, 2016

The public and private conduct of clergy, staff, and volunteers can inspire and motivate people, and can draw them to the Church, but it can also scandalize and undermine the people's faith. Clergy, staff, and volunteers must at all times be aware of the responsibilities that accompany their work. They must also know that God's goodness and grace supports them in their ministry.

Working with children and young people is a special joy, but also carries special responsibilities. No one should ever compromise a child's innocence or tarnish his or her openness to good relationships. Jesus preached:

*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.
But if a man is a cause of stumbling to one of these little ones who have faith in me,
it would be better for him to have a millstone hung round his neck
and be drowned in the depths of the sea. Mt. 18:5-6.*

While adult interactions with children and young people must be tailored for the particular context and child, some guidelines and consideration can inform good ministry practices.

1. Children and young people look to adults for examples of appropriate behavior. *Actions speak louder than words. Adults should model the virtues of humility, chastity, and meekness. They should treat others with respect and courtesy; practice compassion; employ appropriate language; and avoid sexualized humor, language, or conversation. They should, in every regard, model honorable behavior, modesty, and relationships.*
 - a) Those working with young people should generally not discuss their own sexual activities or desires, nor should they solicit such information from a young person.
 - b) Humor regarding sexual issues usually models a lack of respect for men or women, or for sexual activity itself, and is never appropriate.
 - c) Those working with young people should never express sexual desires for an individual who is not their spouse, or a desire to commit immoral acts with others (e.g. use illegal drugs, view sexual materials, drink alcohol with a minor, etc.), regardless of their marital status.
 - d) Although there may be exceptions, generally, alcohol should not be present at youth ministry events when young people under the age of 21 are present.

2. Some children have had unhealthy experiences with relationships in the past. *Children interpret actions through the lens of prior experiences and immature understanding. The laying on of hands and the embrace of fellowship are sacramental signs of Christ's love and healing. Thus, the human touch is part of the life of the Church and part of ministry. Yet, human touch can play other roles, some of which are disordered or sinful. Most understand the difference between appropriate and gracious touching that signifies fellowship, forgiveness, compassion, or the love of Christ, and touching that is sexual or capable of being perceived as sexual. Everyone in children and youth ministry should carefully consider the character of their physical contact with the young people they serve.*
 - a. Hugs or handshakes should generally be brief. However, if an adult is providing counseling or other deeply emotional support, longer contact might be appropriate. Adults should remember that if a young person is pulling away before the adult, then the adult has "hung on" too long, and should immediately take the cue that

4. Children and young people can have difficulty articulating their discomfort. Adults must be alert to a young person's physical and verbal cues because children are often unskilled in identifying and protecting their own boundaries.
 - a. Give young people a safe way to "opt out" of working with a staff member they seem hesitant about. In some cases, there might not be any particular problem with the staff member him- or herself, but they might remind the young person of a difficult or scary experience in their past. Allowing young people a choice gives them the opportunity to get to know the staff member at a more gradual pace and on their own terms.
 - b. Indirect cues should trigger further inquiry. In most cases, if a young person indicates a desire to avoid a particular staff person, other staff should follow up to find out if there has been any inappropriate behavior on the part of the staff person.

5. Children can either exaggerate or trivialize incidents. While adults must take every complaint seriously, they must also verify facts before reaching conclusions.
 - a. Clergy, staff, and volunteers who receive a complaint of sexual misconduct must immediately consult the Diocesan Sexual Misconduct Policy and report the complaint consistent with that policy.
 - b. In order to protect the privacy concerns of the alleged victim, individuals who report complaints must never share details of the complaint with others without the expressed permission of the Diocesan Moderator of the Curia or Diocesan Director for Human Resources.
 - c. In order to protect the reputation of alleged offenders who might later be found not to be at fault, individuals who report complaints must never share information outside the reporting requirements.

6. Children and young people deserve personal privacy. Although most Church and Diocesan activities are in group settings, there are times when a child needs individual attention. Such times may involve counseling a child, or giving a child physical care or assistance. In these situations, adults should provide such care with the needs of the child remaining paramount and with due consideration to the appearances of propriety.
 - a. While there are few exceptions, children and young people should be given total privacy when performing activities that involve disrobing, such as showering, changing clothes, and bathroom activities.
 - b. If assistance with any form of bodily issue is absolutely required, this assistance should be given by an adult of the same gender as the young person, and more than one adult should be present in the immediate vicinity.

Diocesan clergy, staff, and volunteers should also refer to the Sexual Misconduct and Abuse Policy for more information regarding these issues.

Protection of the Vulnerable

Protection of the vulnerable is also included with these Guidelines, since many of our ministries involve interactions with those who are elderly or ill, or **experience deterioration of the ability to think and make decisions.** While most of the Guidelines for the *Interactions with Children and Young People* also apply to the vulnerable, if you suspect abuse of any type, including physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological neglect or abandonment, inform your parish priest. It is your responsibility to report suspected abuse to them **AND** to notify the Department of Family Services.

EMPLOYEE'S / VOLUNTEER'S AFFIRMATION

Our children are the most important gifts God has entrusted to us. As an employee / volunteer, I promise to strictly follow the Sexual Misconduct Policy and give careful consideration to the Guidelines on Interactions with Children and Young People as a condition of my providing services to the children and youth of our Diocese.

As an employee / volunteer, I will:

- Treat everyone with respect, loyalty, patience, integrity, courtesy, dignity, and consideration.
- Use positive reinforcement rather than criticism, competition, or comparison when working with children or youth.
- Refuse to accept expensive gifts from children or youth or their parents without prior written approval from the pastor or administrator.
- Refrain from giving expensive gifts to children or youth without prior written approval from the parents or guardian and the pastor or administrator.
- Report suspected abuse consistent with the Diocesan Sexual Misconduct Policy.
- Cooperate fully in any investigation of abuse of children or youth.

As an employee / volunteer I will not:

- Smoke or use tobacco products in the presence of children or youth.
- Use, possess, or be under the influence of alcohol at any time while volunteering.
- Use, possess, or be under the influence of illegal drugs (including medical marijuana) at any time.
- Pose any health risk to children or youth (i.e., no fevers or other contagious conditions).
- Strike, spank, shake or slap children or youth.
- Humiliate, ridicule, threaten, or degrade children or youth.
- Touch a child or youth in a sexual or other inappropriate manner.
- Use any discipline that frightens or humiliates children or youth.
- Use profanity or other inappropriate speech in the presence of children or youth.
- Engage in frequent one-to-one personal or electronic communications with a young person without the oversight of a member of Diocesan or Church staff.

I understand that as an employee / volunteer working with children or youth, I am subject to a background check including criminal history. I understand that any action inconsistent with this Code of Conduct or failure to take action mandated by this Code of Conduct may result in my removal as an employee / volunteer with children or youth.

Employee's / Volunteer's Printed Name

Employee's / Volunteer's Signature

Date: _____

