

Conversations with Youth about Boundaries and Safety: First Steps

By [The VIRTUS® Programs](#)

Editor's note: *The information learned in this article will assist caring adults and parents with establishing and maintaining safety guidelines and principles to ensure all children are protected, and that youth have the tools necessary to protect themselves. This first article addresses how to begin the conversations along with elements to consider; other articles will address safe adults, handling disclosures, secrets vs. surprises, technology, when the child is under the someone else's care and reporting/communicating concerns. Information for all ages is included.*



Effective safety programs begin with education and understanding. This is true whether we're learning about bicycle safety, car safety, fire safety or safe environments—the key to creating and maintaining personal safety is understanding what can happen and knowing how things really work.

We begin with boundaries. While it's never too late to reset boundaries, learning about them and safety rules in relationships begins with young children and continues throughout life. The more we know about boundaries, the more we can protect

ourselves and others—and particularly the youth in our lives. One conversation about boundaries with people we know isn't enough—as the content will need to be addressed multiple times.

What are boundaries?

Boundaries can be viewed as imaginary lines that separate one person from another. They promote our sense of "self" and help us preserve personal integrity while creating a framework for our relationships. Boundaries can be physical, emotional, behavioral, verbal and spiritual. They're formed during our early years as we model the behavior we witness from influential adults in our lives. Boundaries differ depending on the relationship; boundaries between married couples are different from those between friends, and boundaries between children and parents are different from those between students, and teachers or coaches.

Reflect on these questions to see the impact adults in your childhood had on your personal boundaries. Notice how what you heard or observed now impacts your relationships even now:

- Growing up, what values, opinions and points of view were you expected to embrace as your own?
- Do your views as an adult reflect the expectations that were there in your childhood?
- Were you forced to accept uncomfortable behaviors by influential adults? (For example, hugging people you didn't want to hug because you were expected to do so)

Tools for Success:

The primary role of protecting children is the mission of adults; it's our responsibility to create safe environments for them. Since we can't be everywhere all the time, there are also items that we teach youth to be able to better protect themselves. Apply these "Tools for Success" when

teaching the children in your care about appropriate boundaries in relationships.

- Consistently set boundaries with rules, regulations and limits to facilitate the life-long physical and emotional safety of children
- Affirm children to enable them to accept themselves and to love and support others
- Praise children's behavior when they maintain a boundary, and correct them when boundaries are violated or broken

Time and place:

When communicating with children on this subject, select a time and location without distractions, keep the rules simple and give clear examples. It's important to keep the conversation going over time—even if the youth becomes bored with the discussion or seems to dismiss the subject when you bring it up.

Information to know:

The conversations should include reminders to respect their own bodies and to expect respect from others. These children are empowered to better protect themselves when possible, and may be more likely to speak up if there's a boundary violation.

Children must understand they have the right to speak up if something doesn't seem right to them—even if it concerns an adult. At the same time, it's important for children to learn the difference between maintaining a healthy caution of the actions of others versus being afraid of everyone.

During this discussion, take time to listen to the child as they tell you about the people they trust.

Tell them the word "NO" is a very powerful word and an effective way to set a boundary.

Remember, you're equipping the child for the future and for the many different situations and people they'll encounter.

One of the things that youth will need to know is the difference between "safe" and "unsafe" touches, which also means they need to know about their private body parts and the connections between them and staying safe. This is information that should be broached first by parents, and is something that may be fortified via safe environment training geared toward children (which is required in every diocesan Catholic school and diocesan parish ministry involving children). When you talk openly with them about their private body parts, they learn that it's okay to ask questions about their bodies, and are more likely to challenge an inappropriate touch or speak up when someone leaves them feeling uncomfortable. Empowering children with tools to address the advances of boundary violators or potential predators is a key part of the plan to keep children safe from sexual abuse.

Although the discussions will change as children age, the anatomically correct names for body parts do not alter. Children begin learning about body parts when they're a few months old. Adding this vocabulary to the conversation should begin early, and particularly when children begin to speak. When children know these names [names](#), they're less vulnerable to a predator or person with bad intentions. Laura Palumbo, a sexual abuse prevention specialist with the [National Sexual Violence Research Center](#), echoes the importance of teaching children the anatomically correct terms for private body parts in an age-appropriate manner. She says that "We need all adults to be partners in teaching healthy childhood sexual development, and square one is body parts. Educators and parents should communicate accurately, without stigma or shame."

Some adults think of this discussion about private body parts as "taboo," but nothing could be further from the truth. A child who's not allowed to discuss his or her private body parts is more likely to remain silent about abuse or even a serious health condition. Open, frank discussions with parents and other responsible adults teach youth they can talk to trusted adults about anything—

including something as horrific as sexual abuse.