

## Protecting God's Children for Adults



### Raising the Bar

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At a recent event, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with people involved in youth ministry at local Catholic parishes. They were familiar with the child sexual abuse prevention efforts of the Church, but many were unfamiliar with the *Protecting God's Children*® (PGC) program, and were surprised by my suggestions of behavioral best practices for safety.



Many of them said that individuals involved with ministering to youth really have the best interests of children at heart and would not really harm anyone. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. They also felt that it was important to form more intimate personal relationships with the young people in order to accomplish their youth ministry goals. No amount of explanation or encouragement really changed their mind, until I said:

*"When you do the things you are talking about, you become part of the problem. Those actions that you are justifying condition young people to accept more intimate touch from adults. You may not have bad intentions, but the next person*

*who interacts with the young person may have a different purpose, and now that person will have an easier time of it. You just helped that predator break down the barriers that keep children safe. In addition, your actions condition the community to accept these behaviors as part of ministry and that also opens the door to predators."*

We must continue to raise the bar. We can do that easily by looking at two specific things.

#### **Social Media and Electronic Communication**

There can be no compromise regarding the use of social media and contact through Internet and other electronic means. Recent news stories have included too many stories of adult youth ministers from many different denominations who used social media and electronic communication to seduce young people, share pornography and initiate contact that led to alcohol and drug use, and sexual assault.

If your parish does not have a policy about social media and electronic communication, establish one. If you have a policy in place, check to see that it includes the following points:

- No private contact with any young people involved in youth ministry (other

than the volunteer/employee's own children and family). Private means completely outside of the sight and hearing of others, without any oversight.

- No "friending" of any parish young people other than through group/organization sponsored web-pages that keep everyone informed. This means that it isn't appropriate to "friend" a child using your own personal account for any social media platform.
- Be extremely careful of how and when you text young people using your own personal phone. All communication with young people should have oversight from a supervisor.
- Do not exchange pictures/videos with young people.
- Parents should always be aware of communication with youth.

If young people initiate electronic one-on-one contact with you, inform them that you'd be happy to communicate during your normal working hours (if applicable), in a place that is conducive to your ministry. Invite them to come visit you in a location where others can see and hear you. And, in the meantime, notify a supervisor regarding when and where the meeting will occur.

Keep in mind that your policy may contain provisions to regularly update the policy on electronic communications as technology improves and new methods of communication become part of the electronic landscape. When policy updates happen, there may be a new requirement to read and accept updated versions.

### **Review and Monitor all Behavior**

In addition to raising the bar on electronic communications, it is important to review all activities and interactions with the "no conditioning" standard in mind. Make sure that none of your actions or those of other adults in ministry can be characterized as behavior that conditions children to lower their barriers to inappropriate contact.

There are some behaviors that sometimes creep back into the picture because they are justified or rationalized as "just how she (or he) is." The problem is predators are counting on us to water down our vigilance and open the gate to give them more access. These include full-on hugs or excessive examples of physical touch, a single person violating policy requirements by giving a child a ride home and meeting a young person outside of the office to "talk" about something that is bothering them. Children should know that they can consider you to be a trusted adult and that they can talk to you about their concerns. However, these types of interactions must be held during times and places that have oversight for both your protection and theirs.

Volunteers and employees who minister to youth must regularly review the policies and examine their own behavior to see if there is anything that has appeared, or reappeared in the interactions with youth that creates a risky environment. They must also review the policies with other ministers and volunteers and reinforce the message that there is a no tolerance policy for those who work in youth ministry. Monitor each other and communicate when you see something risky.

Follow the policies, practice the safe environment standards and make sure your interactions are consistent with the established guidelines for protecting all God's

children. Parents and others who see the rigorous standards slipping must step in and demand that child protection and prevention of child sexual abuse be a priority. Raise the bar on youth protection! It's everyone's responsibility.