

Applying the PAN Standard – Public, Appropriate, and Non-sexual

Are You a ‘Model’ of Appropriate Behavior

The dictionary defines “model,” when used in this context, as: “One serving as an example to be imitated or compared. Applying that definition, how will you model appropriate behavior in ministerial relationships? How will you model appropriate interactions between children and adults who don’t know each other very well? How will you know when others perceive your interactions with children and young people as being appropriate or inappropriate to the circumstances and the relationship?

Some people are concerned that the current emphasis on the risk of harm to children by adults who they know and trust will result in an environment that prohibits any kind of physical contact between children or young people and the adults in their life. Unfortunately, in response to this crisis, in some schools and Religious Education programs the new rule is: “Do not touch children.” However, children need nurturing, caring appropriate physical contact with people who care about them. We should not forget that people who care about children and are affectionate with them does not mean that a person is a child molester.

Well-intentioned adults who work with children must learn where to draw the line in their physical contact with children and young people. They need to avoid certain types of contact with children such as wrestling, tickling, and full frontal body hugs. Appropriate touching serves as an example of safe, wholesome, proper contact with children and young people.

Modeling appropriate physical interactions with children and young people accomplishes several things.

- It demonstrates a commitment to safe environments for everyone concerned.
- By creating a safe environment, those whose behavior is inconsistent with that environment become noticeable. They no longer blend in with the other adults working in ministry with children.
- It models appropriate behavior for the children and young people participating in the ministry. These children learn about healthy ecclesiastical boundaries and can begin to establish and maintain them in other situations.
- It reminds the community of the acceptable limits of physical contact between adults in ministry and the children who they serve.
- The standard recommended by VIRTUS® for assessing the appropriateness of behavior is **PAN**. Touch that is **Public**, **Appropriate**, and **Non-sexual** is proper and welcomed and it nurtures healthy relationships between adults and the children and young people with whom they work.

Some may wonder how you know that physical contact with a child or young person meets the PAN standard. One way is to carefully consider each element of the PAN standard.

Public contact is easy to identify. Make sure that contact between children, young people, and the adults who minister to them is open and above board. This means that adults must make sure that any contact is able to be seen by others in the vicinity. Do not hug children in your office with the door closed, wait until you are at the front door and their parent or others in the office can see your interaction. Do not go into the locker room when a child is in there

alone. Be aware of your surroundings and nurture an atmosphere of openness and encourage others to pay attention to the behavior of those who have contact with children.

Appropriate is a little more difficult to define. However, there are certain characteristics that can help determine whether the interaction meets this standard. One aspect to pay attention to is *who* initiated the contact. Contact that is initiated by the child or young person usually starts out on the right track. It is the responsibility of the adult to see that it does not get derailed. For example, a priest who is surrounded by a group of children coming out of the church after Mass who want his attention could talk with them, give them side-hugs, shake their hands, or perhaps pat them on the head or shoulder. These are examples of appropriate physical interactions with children and young people.

Another characteristic to consider is the type of contact. Appropriate contact means that it is appropriate to the relationship. Adults must maintain boundaries that define the relationship. For example, it is not appropriate for Youth Ministers to participate in activities that involve having young people sit in his or her lap. That is not an appropriate boundary between a Youth Minister and a young person.

Non-sexual touch can be anything from a handshake to a side or shoulder hug (a hug in which body contact is limited to the shoulders or side). Adults must be responsible for making sure that any contact between them and young people is free of any sexual connotations or qualities. In addition to being aware of and avoiding any contact that is overtly sexual, adults must also be cognizant of contact that could be sexual even though that is not the intention of the interaction. An example of this type of contact is wrestling and tickling. These activities are not “sexual” in nature but they do allow an individual to potentially have their hands on another in what could be intimate contact—and the contact could be or could appear to be entirely innocent.

Some additional examples of physical interactions that meet the PAN standard are:

- Pats on the shoulder or back.
- Handshakes.
- “High-fives” and hand slapping.
- Touching hands, faces, shoulders and arms of minors.
- Arms around shoulders.
- Holding hands while walking with small children.
- Sitting beside small children.
- Kneeling or bending down for hugs with small children.
- Holding hands during prayer.
- Pats on the head when culturally appropriate.

Applying the PAN standard to our physical contact with children other than our own will set a good example. It will model appropriate behavior for the children and young people in our lives and for the other adults who interact with them. Taking this issue seriously will allow us to be an example of appropriate behavior between adults and the children and young people in their ministries—an example to be emulated.

Brought to you through the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. and its VIRTUS® programs with the goal to help prevent, address, and mitigate wrongdoing in the community of faith and to help adults become protectors of children and to help communities become safe havens for children.