

Applying the Principles of the Program

A primary focus of the *Protecting God's Children*[®] program is to raise awareness about the behaviors that indicate an adult who may threaten the safety of children and young people. The program is designed to do something that has not been done before: show adults how to *prevent* child sexual abuse.

However, some adults may be left with concerns and even worry that the behaviors identified in Step One are similar to activities that are part of their regular interactions with the children and young people they serve in ministry. They may be afraid that others may see them working with children or young people and decide there is something wrong with them and the way they behave. Sometimes, the tendency is to overreact and become hesitant to participate in activities that include children and youth. As a result, skilled, gifted, and caring ministers pull away from the children they care so much about.

Hopefully, we can alleviate these concerns by looking at the warning signs of child molesters and considering how behavioral signs apply to their actions. Thinking this through can provide support and encouragement to conscientious individuals with concerns about these issues.

Let's take a few moments to consider some scenarios that might arise in ministry situations and how behaviors and actions could be modified or adjusted to create a risk free environment. Thinking through ways to respond relying on the principles that are the foundation of Steps One, Two, and Three of the *Plan to Protect God's Children*[™] can help us see how to safely continue participating in the ministry we love and are committed to continue.

Consider the following scenarios:

1. *You are the Youth Minister and one of the young people in your group asks to meet with you alone to discuss a problem.*

Concerns:

- Warning signs remind us that "people who always want to be alone with children" are behaving in a risky way. You don't want to seem to be isolating a child.
- It is your responsibility to provide ministry care and support to young people, and that includes counseling them when they come to you for help.
- It is not easy to provide an open atmosphere when the Youth Office is in an area that is separate from everything else.

Applying principles of the Protecting God's Children program: A warning sign of risky behavior is "someone who always wants to be alone with children." As it is your job to meet with children to deal with problem issues, find ways to make it open and safe. For example, only set private meeting times on dates and during hours that there are others in the building. Meet one-on-one in a more public area such as a classroom or the Church library. Make sure the door is open or has a window and you are seated in such a way that you are visible to someone walking by and let the Pastor, Business Administrator, and/or Religious Education Director know when you are meeting alone with a young person for any reason. Creating an atmosphere of openness and transparency goes a long way toward alleviating the concerns of others.

2. *You are the last one leaving Church at night and there is a young person from another activity waiting alone for a ride home. Everyone else is gone and the Church is locked up.*

Concerns:

- You are left alone at Church with a young person.
- You cannot leave a child alone at Church in the dark waiting for a ride.

Applying principles of the Protecting God’s Children program: First, be prepared! Have phone numbers of Church leadership and/or staff with you so that you have resources to use in emergency situations. Call someone and let them know that you are there alone with the child and will wait for the parents to come. Or, call someone to wait with you so you are not alone with the child. Stay in an open area that is visible to anyone who comes to the Church and, if possible, sit or stand in a light. Keep your eye on the child, make sure he or she is comfortable and not afraid. This can help resolve almost any difficulty regarding the situation.

3. *A Youth Minister sees that some of the usual activities might raise concerns but does not know what to do about it. You know that some activities make kids uncomfortable but some challenges are good. Where do you draw the line?*

Concern:

- After attending the session, the Youth Minister is concerned that some of the tried and true activities for building team and cohesiveness will be seen as risky—and might appear to be a threat to the safety of the young people.
- The goals of the games are worthy and need to be fulfilled.

Applying principles of the Protecting God’s Children program: Sit down with a team of staff and volunteers and examine every activity that is used in Youth Ministry. Look at the games and interactions from several viewpoints beginning with the goal of the activity. For example, review the activity to determine whether it forces young people to accept touch that they might not want to accept and find another way to achieve the goal without uncomfortable touch. Also, determine whether the activity creates a situation where the young people are isolated, are without supervision, or are in a vulnerable situation. Redesign the activity and the structure with more supervision in mind so no youth are completely alone or in vulnerable situations for more than a few minutes. Creative, caring people can find ways to accomplish ministry goals without compromising either the children or the ministers. Children can be challenged to stretch themselves beyond their comfort zone without humiliation or embarrassment to them.

4. *A young person reaches out to take your hand as you walk through the Religious Education building or you are in a public place and a child that is in one of your classes or programs comes up to give you a hug or reaches for your hand.*

Concerns:

- The warning sign states “goes overboard touching children” and there is no “need” for the touch at that point.
- Children need to be nurtured by those that care about them and they need wholesome touch.

Applying principles of the Protecting God's Children program: Remember the tenets of PAN: touch that is **p**ublic, **a**ppropriate, and **n**on-sexual is acceptable. These situations are a perfect example of how to apply this standard. The child is approaching you—not the other way around—in a public situation. Holding a child's hand or comforting a crying child is entirely appropriate as if pulling the child out of the way of oncoming traffic or grabbing a child out of the lake or pool that is too deep to stand in. This kind of situation applies perfectly to the PAN standard.

As you increasingly become aware of safe environments concerns, you will be able to better model effective practice and application of the principles and standards of the Protecting God's Children program to these and other situations. Together, we can resolve any fears about how to make the program work for everyone to achieve the ultimate goal of protecting children and young people.

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.