

PROTECTING GOD'S CHILDREN
Vol. 23 No. 10 (October 2024)
When Boundaries Abound, Our Lives Can Flourish
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Introduction

Imagine a world without boundaries. The survival of all depends on healthy boundaries with land, water, animals, and one another. Without boundaries established clearly and firmly among humanity, everyone is left vulnerable, especially our children, with an "anything goes" type of thinking that is common in our society today.

Children, increasingly, are not aware of appropriate or healthy boundaries. We can empower children and youth in boundaries by first clearly defining and strengthening our own boundaries. Children watch our every move while absorbing some of our habits (the healthy and the unhealthy) like a sponge. Appropriate boundaries set the foundation for happier lives, which is why it is so important to be mindful of modeling healthy boundaries for the children and youth in our care.

Boundaries 101

As the VIRTUS® "Protecting God's Children" Program states, boundaries are limits, or lines that separate our personal space, emotions, and behaviors from others. When we have a "let it begin with me" approach, intentional reflection upon our boundaries with ourselves (self-control) and others (human agency) can have a positive influence. Building a foundation for your boundaries begins with clarity around who you are amidst what God is calling you to do.



Teach the adults and children around you that "No." is a complete sentence, and perfectly acceptable as part of setting a boundary. This natural process of individuality provides a pathway for becoming our authentic selves. It is completely acceptable for children and adults to say "No" when something makes them feel uncomfortable, scared, or unsafe.

We don't just teach others that they are allowed to say, "No," we also accept their responses when it comes to their boundaries. Learning to accept others' "No" can create mutual respect for healthy interactions at all ages. For children, we may say things like "listen to her words," or "respect his no," while they are playing together. Providing several age-appropriate choices within a situation can provide opportunities for them to practice saying "No" to one thing and "Yes" to another. Encouraging personal autonomy can safely happen by providing choices that fit within their developmental stage which can include saying "No" to unsafe touches, like hitting, or even safe touches, like hugs.

Providing clear and explicit direction regarding boundaries for children and youth may include guidance regarding behavior that could be dangerous, disrespectful, or dishonest. Even when using directives to create a safe environment for children, this approach also builds in choice by defining "out of bounds" behaviors to avoid confusion and frustration for all.

Safe Environment Tips

Clarifying expectations within an organization is key. Ensuring everyone is aware of the organization's Code of Conduct, or expected behavior, can empower children, youth, parents, caregivers, employees, and volunteers to know what to expect. This may include these behaviors:

- Remain in public sight while avoiding any isolated one-on-one conversations and situations.
- Ensure there are always at least two adults supervising children.
- Appropriate physical interactions may include side hugs, handshakes, and high-fives.
- Interact with children through ministry or program emails or group social media accounts (that are monitored), and not via private email or personal social media accounts.
- Ensure the safety procedures for drop off and pick up are followed.

- Be the type of bystander who follows the rules, and also communicates any concerns to leadership.
- Encourage random status checks by others, when you are ministering to youth.

It is also helpful to conduct walk-throughs of the ministry or program location while identifying isolated or vulnerable physical spaces that may cause risk for children and youth. Designing a physically safe space by roping off certain areas, such as a bathroom located too far away from the group, can lower the risk of a questionable encounter for everyone.

As leaders, taking a supportive approach while modeling healthy interactions can instill a safe foundation for all to adhere to. We all have various backgrounds, cultures, and family upbringings—what is "normal" among families can vary greatly. When everyone is working toward maintaining a clearly defined safe environment, team morale, teachable moments, and opportunities to thrive can abound!

What You Can Do

As the author of the Say "NO!" and TELL! books teaching body boundaries and safety for children, I advocate beginning prevention education early and often to help prevent child sexual abuse. Take the lead and set the stage for discussing, implementing, and modeling general day-to-day boundaries with the children and youth in your life, which includes body safety. Notice, highlight, and role-play real-life boundary scenarios throughout a young person's life to sew a beautiful tapestry of healthy interaction within your family, organization, and community.

Here are a few tips to help model and implement appropriate boundaries:

- Build a bridge for positive communication with warmth by talking about healthy boundaries and behaviors with children and youth. Give clear examples of healthy and appropriate boundaries, such as giving their teacher a high five instead of a hug.
- Use teachable moments! For example, if a child or youth asks to follow you on social media, let them know you cannot share your personal information or interact with them directly on social media, but that you can refer them to the school or parish social media accounts.
- Explain the difference between safe vs. unsafe behaviors such as secrets vs surprises, and safe vs. unsafe games.
- Use age-appropriate body safety language pre-approved by your organization with a focus on security and self-protection by using positive statements rather than fear-based ones (positive statements include: "private parts stay private and have special rules," "notice the uh-oh feeling," "telling is not tattling," etc.)
- Teach the difference between safe (respects boundaries) and unsafe (crosses or violates boundaries) behavior and people. Let children and youth know that if anyone—whether an adult or another child—has ever made them feel uncomfortable, or unsafe, or has violated their boundaries, they should immediately tell a safe adult. And keep telling, even to someone else, until it stops!

Conclusion

As you put on these new boundary glasses, what do you see through this new lens? Taking a fresh view of yourself and your role as an employee, volunteer, leader, and caregiver can help fortify strong boundaries and healthy relationships in your own life, which can overflow into your professional and spiritual relationships with others. Empowering yourself can set the stage for empowering everyone—it is never too late to begin today. With your overflow can spring forth health, healing, and hope while positively impacting a world full of trauma, addictions, and codependency with your inspiration and wholeness. Thank you for all you do to help model and implement appropriate boundaries.