

# **SAFE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM DIOCESE OF FORT WAYNE-SOUTH BEND**

## **Preparing to Teach/Minister to Young People**

When thinking of how to best build good relationships with the youth in your classroom or group, think of Jesus, our Master Teacher. Jesus knew he had only a short time to teach his twelve disciples all they needed to know. But he didn't just set up a classroom, order books, and prepare outlines.

Jesus invited those twelve, and many others, to live, work, and walk with him. He invited them into relationship with him. And it was in the midst of living and relating that the disciples learned the most.

We most want for students to learn how to have genuine, positive, affirming relationships – with peers and with adults. One of our tasks then is to model and build good relationships.

Here are some things you can do to model and build good relationships:

- Really listen to the youth – individually and as a group.
- Show genuine interest in their lives and stories.
- Be encouraging and supportive.
- Pay attention to discover their gifts and talents.
- Invite them to use their gifts and talents in ministry – in the congregation and in the community.
- Look for something they do well and affirm it.
- Give sincere compliments.
- Say “thanks” for their time, their help, their ideas, their enthusiasm, and so forth.
- Use your sense of humor – but never be sarcastic.
- Do not speak ill of someone; those who hear will wonder what you will say about them.
- Practice and enforce the Golden Rule.
- Talk a little about your own life and spiritual journey (as appropriate).
- Stay in touch in between meetings by attending sporting events or writing a note of thanks or praise.
- Make sure to tell their parents how well their children are doing.

Many of these relationship building blocks are ones your youth can use well. Model the behaviors, teach skills, encourage their use, and affirm youth as they practice building good relationships.

Following the Jesus way, you and your youth will create a safe and welcoming atmosphere where both relationships and learning will flourish.

Another very important component of creating and maintaining good relationship is setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries for the youth in your class. Setting and maintaining boundaries helps create a positive and safe learning environment. Such an environment helps foster spiritual growth in youth.

### **What Is a Boundary?**

- A boundary is a limit for behaviors.
- A boundary is a rule or guideline.
- A boundary is a standard; a specific description of what is expected and what is appropriate.

Some examples of boundaries are:

“One person speaks at a time.”

“Keep your hands to yourself.”

“Be on time.”

“Use appropriate language. No cussing or swear words.”

“Show respect for others by not putting them down.”

### **Why Do Youth Need Boundaries?**

We all need to know the limits: what is acceptable behavior, what to do and not to do. Established and enforced boundaries help youth recognize the limits and enable them to take more personal responsibility for their actions.

Boundaries keep us safe, emotionally and physically. They help us learn how to show respect for others, and in the process, help us feel better about ourselves. Establishing and reinforcing boundaries help to create an environment where youth can feel comfortable enough to share faith and safe enough to open themselves more to God’s love and grace.

Without boundaries, there are no clear limits for behaviors. When what is expected and appropriate is left unsaid or is unclear, we set you up to fail. Youth are much more likely to rise to the challenge and engage in respectful behaviors if boundaries are clearly stated and reinforced up front.

### **Types of Boundaries**

**Physical Boundaries** – enable us to protect and honor our bodies as the “Temple of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 8).

We are not only responsible for the spiritual well-being of the youth we work with, but also for their physical well-being. It is always important to give kids clear and specific instructions and rules. Whether in a classroom, on a youth group trip, at a community service project, or on a retreat, adults need to create and maintain a safe environment for youth.

**Emotional and Spiritual Boundaries** – enable us to protect personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

We undertake the awesome task of helping youth grow spirituality. One way to help foster spiritual growth is to create and maintain a welcoming atmosphere. Sprucing up your actual meeting place can help, but it’s even more effective to set and maintain specific expectations and rules for how to treat one another. Spiritual growth involves building good relationships with God and others, sharing one’s faith, self-disclosing, asking questions, and praying. Each of these activities involves risking and trusting. Our task is to create and maintain an environment with clear boundaries so that youth can be assured that they will be respected, listened to, and cared for, no matter what.

### **When to Set Boundaries**

The most effective time to set boundaries is at the beginning of the year, or at the first session of your planned meetings. Once established, list and post these boundaries so they can be referred to often. It can be helpful to remind youth of these boundaries:

- After holiday or vacation time
- Before an upcoming event – to proactively teach specific boundaries
- After a problem has occurred – in order to correct inappropriate behavior and remind the youth of boundaries and why we follow them.

### **Who Establishes the Boundaries?**

The principal, pastor, religious education director, and teachers, along with parents and adults from your community, should give specific input as to what behaviors are expected and appropriate for youth. Along with clarifying what is expected from youth, these adults should also establish guidelines for what to do when boundaries are broken. It may be helpful to include selected youth leaders from your congregation or school to be a part of this initial conversation. These youth may be able to provide insights and situational examples that can help determine more clear, fair, and necessary recommendations.

After you have clear ideas and direction from adults and parents, the next step is to meet with the youth themselves. Try the following activity to help youth name, clarify, and take ownership of specific boundaries they will need to follow to create and maintain a caring Christian environment.

Step One: Ask the youth to brainstorm and list their responses to these two topics:

- What damages or destroys relationships?
- What builds or nourishes relationships?

Encourage youth to name specific actions and attitudes that fit into each list (Damages – rumors, cheating, two-faced behavior, talking behind one’s back; Nourishes – respect, spending time with, listening, etc.). Allow students plenty of time to add to the list. Make sure adults wait to add to either list until youth have finished.

Step Two: After completing this list, ask: “What do you notice about these lists?”

Again, allow plenty of time for their responses. Hopefully, they will notice that the contents of these lists are how we want to be treated or don’t want to be treated by others – the Golden Rule.

Step Three: Next, explain to the students: “The purpose of this activity was to help us begin to think about specific boundaries we need to keep in order to create an environment where relationships are nourished, not damaged. You have just listed how you want and don’t want to be treated by others. Let’s condense these two lists into one list of the Ten Most Important Boundaries / Rules for Behavior.” Before naming boundaries, offer youth these helpful suggestions:

1. Keep it simple. State the boundary clearly and concisely.

“One person speaks at a time.”

“Disagree appropriately.”

2. State it positively. Tell them what they should do and how to do it.

“Thou SHALL...” instead of “Thou shall NOT...”

“Be in the classroom, at your desk, before the bell rings.”

3. Stick to the “Golden Rule.” Always keep in mind how you want / deserve to be treated as a child of God.

When the students are finished listing their ideas, add any other boundaries you deem necessary.

Step Four: Create and post your new list of boundaries. Send copies home to parents to read and discuss. Refer to the list often!

Step Five: MAKE SURE to let kids know that these boundaries are expectations. If they break a boundary, let them know that there will be consistent consequences and what those consequences will be. Be sure to consult with your principal, director of religious education, or pastor for exact procedures regarding consequences. It is most important that the youth know that:

1. There are specific boundaries for behaviors that EVERYONE is expected to follow.
2. Maintaining these boundaries will help make this a Christian environment where all are safe and welcomed.
3. There are pre-established and appropriate consequences for breaking boundaries (more on how to set and enforce consequences later).
4. The teacher or another designated adult will address any broken boundaries in a fair and dignified way (more on this in the next section).

Be sure to explain why it is important for all of us to maintain appropriate and healthy boundaries.

- “They help us know how to treat one another and how we can expect to be treated.”
- “Following these rules will help us all learn to show respect to others.”
- “Maintaining boundaries helps us create good Christian relationships.”

### **Methods for Maintaining Boundaries**

Along with naming boundaries, you also need to know ways to maintain and reinforce boundaries with youth. Here are three tried and true methods from the Youth Care Specialists at Boys Town:

### **Proactive Teaching**

Set youth up for success by specifically naming and briefly explaining the boundaries / expected behaviors before each event / activity. A little preventive teaching goes a long way in stopping behaviors before they get started. The steps to proactive teaching are:

1. **Describe the behaviors** that are appropriate and / or expected for this event / activity.
2. **Give a reason.**
3. **Practice** (optional).

**Example** – In a Girls Support Group, gossiping and complaining can quickly ruin a good discussion. Use Proactive Teaching to remind the girls:

- a. “When describing a problem or situation, please do not use any names. Stick to talking only about yourself and your feelings. No blaming or complaining.”
- b. “It’s important to do this for many reasons: Because no one want to be talked about behind their backs; it is not fair to discuss someone who is not present; we are about solving problems, not laying blame and complaining.”

It’s amazing how these simple boundaries can prevent potentially serious problems and enable the girls to speak more freely, trust one another more, and resolve conflicts in a more responsible fashion!

### **Effective Praise**

One of the best ways to help youth do the right this is to “catch them doing the right thing.” We all need reassurance that we’re doing what we are suppose to do. We all like to receive praise and compliments. A great way to ensure that a positive behavior is repeated is to recognize it with praise. Tell youth what they’re doing right, when they’re doing a good job, and be sure to name exactly what it is that they are doing so well. They they’ll know exactly what to do right the next time!

The Steps to Effective Praise are:

1. **Show your approval.** Smile, speak a word of praise or thanks, or give a thumbs up.
2. **Describe the positive.** Name it specifically: “Alan, thanks for waiting for Juana to finish speaking before stating your point.” or “Allison, I really appreciated your note to let me know that you’d be late for the planning meeting!”
3. **Give a reason.** Tell them why what they did was good, important, or helpful. To Alan: “Waiting for someone to finish speaking before you speak is a great way to show respect and to show that you were really listening!” To Allison: “Your note helped me use that extra time wisely instead of worrying and waiting.”

### Corrective Teaching

Boundary breaking is “bound” to happen. We all cross a boundary now and then, sometimes by accident and sometimes on purpose. Our task as adults is to provide consistent management of boundaries, whether kept or broken. It is important to know, in advance, what to do when boundaries / rules are broken. **Corrective Teaching**, another tried and true method from the Youth Care Specialists at Boys Town, coupled with appropriate consequences, is a most effective method for transforming a broken boundary into a teachable moment.

The steps to Corrective Teaching are:

1. **Stop the problem behavior.** As soon as you notice a broken boundary, address it. Sometimes just moving closer to the problem behavior – moving to sit next to the two whispering teens, or catching the eye of those involved – can stop the problem. Other times a prompt, spoken in a calm and descriptive manner, can help kids get back on track: “Remember, no talking during the Prayer Service.”
2. **Give a consequence.** Sometimes it is enough of a consequence to have an adult leader sit next to you or to be gently prompted in front of the whole group. Other times, a more substantial consequence is needed.

Following are some guidelines for consequences:

- Consequences should be established by adults and communicated to youth and parents in advance! Don’t wait for a situation to arise before deciding what the consequence will be. It is best to have predetermined consequences that are well communicated to all before any boundaries are broken. Consequences decided on the spur of the moment can too easily become punishing, vengeful, or too drastic.

- Consequences should never be degrading or humiliating. They should be opportunities for learning responsibility.
  - Consequences should be given fairly and consistently. All youth should be held accountable for maintaining these boundaries. Don't play favorites or let youth talk their way out of owning up to their behavior.
  - Corrective teaching and consequences should be done one-to-one whenever possible, even if it means taking a youth aside for a moment. It is rarely effective to correct a youth in front of a group. Usually this causes anger and embarrassment and you run the risk of escalating the problem rather than correcting it.
  - Ask for help from parents and other adults. Sometimes the presence of other parents / adults helps youth stay on track. These "extra" adults could be used as "time-out" folks – someone to send a youth to be with if his or her behavior causes the youth to be removed from the large group activity. The "time-out" folks are not meant to be disciplinarians, but rather an option for a youth who may need some extra one-on-one time.
3. **Describe the positive behavior the youth should do.** Now that the youth knows what not to do, let him or her know what to do: "Instead of whispering to Shannon, please give your quiet attention to our guest speaker."
  4. **Give youth a chance to engage in positive behavior.** Now is your change to back away and allow the youth to turn his or her behavior around. Watch for any steps in the right direction and give praise for it. Again, most of this can be done in low voice tones, one-on-one, without disturbing or calling attention from the rest of the group, although there may be times when you have to stop the group activity and address a major boundary breaking.

Addressing and correcting any problems promptly and without much disruption sends a powerful message to the whole group. It lets them know that you are watching out for them, that you care about how they treat one another, and that you keep your word. They need to see that you will be firm, yet gentle, in safeguarding their boundaries. Your actions speak much louder than words in these instances.

**ALWAYS REMEMBER THE GOLDEN RULE WHEN CORRECTING BEHAVIORS.** Treat the youth as you would want to be treated. Put yourself in that teen's place. Show genuine empathy and understanding rather than anger and dominance. When dealing with difficult situations, remember these two adages:

“A gentle response turns away wrath.”  
“Love the sinner, hate the sin!”

### Top Ten Boundaries for Youth Group Activities

Here are some time-tested, success-inspiring, “catch ‘em being good” boundaries that address areas of behavior that are common to most religion education settings.

1. **One person speaks at a time.** Whether in small or large group discussions, this is an ever-present opportunity to show respect and to really listen to what everyone has to say.
2. **Disagree appropriately.** This is a very important skill to teach, model, role-play and use. Disagreeing appropriately allows opinions to be voiced without aggression or disrespect. It teaches us how to accept and allow others to be different. It can defuse tense situations.
3. **No put downs.** Show respect to others by refraining from making value judgments about them: “You may not use words like ‘stupid,’ ‘dumb,’ ‘ugly,’ ‘gross,’ or other judgmental, negative words to describe people or their thoughts. Say ‘please be quiet’ instead of ‘shut up.’ No teasing, even if only in fun.”
4. **Say whatever you want as long as it is appropriate** – as long as what is said is on topic and does not contain any obscene or offensive language.
5. **What is said here, stays here** – except for when an adult needs to seek help for a teen in danger. When anyone makes any reference to doing something harmful or illegal to himself or someone else, we need to speak up and seek help. Do not keep this information to yourself. This boundary helps create trust, safety, and a sense of community.
6. **Self-disclose appropriately.** Personal dumping, public confessions, blaming or complaining are never allowed. If it does happen, the teacher should politely interrupt and steer the conversation back on track.
7. **Practice good listening skills.** Looking at the person who is speaking, concentrating on what is being said, etc., all show respect and value of others.
8. **Observe school / church rules about public displays of affection (PDA).** YES, it is important to state this clearly. PDA can cause serious problems among youth groups. Some recommended PDA rules: “Refrain from hand holding, kissing, cuddling, or any other form of exclusive affection at school / church activities; ask permission before giving a hug – especially to newcomers.”

9. **Ask for help** – from adults or youth leaders whenever you need it.

10. **Participant.** “You get out of class what you put into class. So get into it!”

### **Boundaries for One-to-One with Teens**

When a teen asks to talk to you privately, there are some important boundaries to make known:

1. Some things cannot be kept secret. Let teens know that if they share thoughts of hurting themselves or someone else, or reveal involvement in illegal, sexual, or abusive activity, that you have a moral obligation to tell someone else who can help them. In these serious circumstances, a teen’s physical and / or motional life is at stake. We must let kids know that we value their life above all else, even about their possible anger at “telling” on them.
2. Meet in an open space where you can be seen, but not overheard, by others. If meeting in an office, keep the door open, or use only an office with uncovered windows. This can prevent any allegations of misconduct and provide you both with the security of knowing others are around.
3. Remind kids that you are not a trained counselor, but that you can point them in the right direction. Have referral sources available with names and phone numbers of professionals who can help.

### **Skills That Build Boundaries and Help Prevent Conflict**

The best way to resolve a conflict is to prevent it! We can help prevent some conflict by teaching, practicing, and modeling good social skills. What is a skill? It is a step-by-step approach, a “how to” method of learning proper social behaviors.

Many conflicts arise because of inappropriate or misunderstood verbal or non-verbal communications. Learning more about and practicing social skills can help youth learn how to relate to one another and to adults in a more appropriate and Christian fashion. Here are some examples:

- How to disagree appropriately
- How to accept criticism
- How to give / receive compliments
- How to ask for help
- How to self-disclose
- How to express empathy and understanding to others

Preparing to Teach/Minister to Young People  
Safe Environment Program

- How to follow rules
- How to apologize / accept apologies