

GUIDELINES FOR THOSE WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE DIOCESE OF COLORADO SPRINGS

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Because we treasure our children and young people as special gifts from God, we who minister in the Diocese of Colorado Springs want to take reasonable steps to provide a protected and safe environment for them in all church activities and to ensure their safety in every situation.

This is a statement of guidelines for all those who have regular contact with minors to carefully consider how they conduct themselves. They are intended to reflect the seriousness with which our Diocese takes this teaching of Jesus:

“Anyone who welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith in me would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone around his neck.” Mt. 18:5-6

Nothing should be done to obstruct a young person’s view of the beauty and holiness of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Because every child is an individual, the interaction with each child will be unique and based upon an evaluation of the child’s needs with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, some overall guidelines may be helpful in remembering the challenges that children face and the appropriate ways for adults to respond to them.

1. *Minors look to adults for examples of appropriate behavior.* The Christian task is to help children to grow in faith. Adults should model prayerfulness, spiritual growth, commitment to their vocation, and charitable concern for others. They should exemplify behaviors appropriate to their journey toward holiness, including in their personal appearance and dress. Adults should always treat others with respect and courtesy, using appropriate language, and modeling honorable behavior. Sexualized language or jokes are especially inappropriate in the presence of young people.

2. *Some children have had unhealthy experiences with relationships in the past. Minors will interpret the actions of adults through a “lens” clouded by previous experiences or an incomplete understanding of events.* The laying on of hands and the embrace of fellowship are sacramentals and signs of Christ’s love and healing. Thus, the human touch is part of the life of the Church and part of ministry itself. Yet the human touch plays other roles as well. Most understand the distinction between appropriate and grace-filled touching that signifies Christian fellowship, forgiveness, compassion, or the love of Christ, and a touching which is sexual or capable of being perceived as sexual. Everyone involved in ministry with minors should consider carefully the character of their physical contact with those whom they serve. Please refer to the Interactions and Behaviors Summary, which describes in more detail the differences between appropriate and inappropriate conduct.

3. *One-to-one ministry can be misinterpreted in many ways.* Effective ministry is about relationships. While Church relationships often occur in groups, they sometimes occur in one-to-one encounters as well. Careful consideration and caution should be given before getting involved in any one-to-one encounters with children or young people:

- Might a one-to-one encounter be confusing to the minor?
- Where is the least confusing place for such an encounter?
- Is an office with the door open a better place than another location?
- Does the one-to-one encounter have any appearances of impropriety?
- Does a one-to-one meeting put the minister at risk of being falsely accused?

Adults should ensure that all interactions with young people are appropriate and appear appropriate. Spending significant time alone with one child or providing significant gifts to one child could be perceived as favoritism by others and is not advisable.

4. *Minors need and deserve personal privacy.* Although most Church activities will be in groups, there will be times when a minor does need individual attention. Such times may involve counseling, or they might involve times when he/she needs physical care or assistance. In these situations, adults should provide such care with the needs of the child remaining paramount and with due consideration to the appearances of propriety.

5. *Minors find it difficult to state discomfort or objections.* Since the safety of minors is primarily the responsibility of adults, those working with them must bring added sensitivity to physical and verbal cues that they may provide that reflect their discomfort or objection to any behavior or situation.

6. *Confidentiality of personal information should be honored.* Those involved in ministry to minors often become aware of family and personal information that is not generally known. This information might relate to a young person's physical or emotional condition, family problems, health issues, learning disabilities, seizures, difficulties in school, inappropriate classroom or parish behavior, and the like. Serious consideration is to be given to maintaining appropriate safeguards to preserve an individual's privacy and personal information. Generally, information should be shared only on a need-to-know basis or for reasons that enhance one's ministry of service.

7. *Minors sometimes either exaggerate or trivialize incidents.* Adults must take every complaint seriously, but also carefully verify facts before jumping to an unsupported conclusion. The Diocesan Sexual Misconduct Policy is clear in its instruction: "The Diocese will report every allegation of sexual abuse of a person who is a minor to law enforcement." (Section 6) An adult who receives or becomes aware of such an allegation should breach any confidentiality understanding (with the exception of the seal of sacramental Confession) and report it immediately.

While not an exhaustive guide for all behaviors, these guidelines provide a direction for conduct supported by our primary call to individual and communal holiness. Remembering that those who work with minors are serving as stewards of God's precious gifts of young life should reinforce the need always to respect boundaries and provide a holy example of life.