



# ***Teaching Boundaries and Safety Guide™***

*Guide for Caring Adults, Parents and Guardians*



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## Preface

*Virtus* is Latin for excellence, valor, moral strength and courage—the same characteristics needed for caring adults who interact with children and protect them from abuse (defined as any physical, sexual or emotional maltreatment or neglect of a child). As the primary educators of their children, parents have a duty to provide adequate formation that is appropriate to each child or young person's state of development. This is the core principle upon which all of our resources and programs involving the instruction of children are founded and designed.

In an effort to assist in this monumental mission of protecting youth, all of our programs, including our school-based curriculum and this booklet guide, provide for collaboration between parents and lesson leaders in establishing safety guidelines and principles. Through these programs, caring adults become partners with parents to ensure that all children are protected and that youth also have the tools they need to protect themselves.

Thank you for all that you do to protect youth.

***(Note: The following symbol ►► indicates that there are specific examples supporting the text located within an adjacent text box.)***

## Introduction: Boundaries

All effective safety programs begin with education and understanding. For example, bicycle safety starts with knowing how a bicycle works and understanding the safety risks involved with bicycling. Learning about personal boundaries is the first step to personal safety. Good boundaries yield a lifetime of healthy relationships. The more we know about boundaries and safety issues, the more we can protect ourselves and others.

### Boundary Definition

Unless someone “crosses the line,” most people don’t give a great deal of thought to personal boundaries. For example, when someone gets too close to us, we simply step away or leave to end any discomfort and learn to deflect probing questions by changing the subject or pretending we didn’t hear. We hesitate when a retail clerk asks for our information. These are all examples of boundary infringement.

#### Boundaries:

- Are the limits defining one person as separate from others, giving a clear sense of “self”
- Empower us to promote and preserve personal integrity
- Provide a framework to function in relation to others and thrive

Boundaries may be physical, emotional, mental, behavioral and spiritual. They can also involve language.

We determine appropriate relationship boundaries by evaluating peoples’ roles and relationships within the context of our personal beliefs and values. For example, appropriate boundaries between



#### We can see the impact of boundaries in our own lives through reflection:

- Growing up, what values, opinions and points of view were you expected to embrace as your own?
- Do your views as an adult reflect the expectations imposed in your childhood?
- Were you forced to accept uncomfortable boundaries by influential adults?

#### Boundaries in action: how are they formed?

Personal boundaries are established during our early years, although it is never too late to assess one’s boundaries and “reset” them. A minor example of not respecting a boundary is when a parent demands that a child kiss a loved one goodbye—even when the child doesn’t want to or feels uncomfortable. This often teaches a child to suppress his/her own wants in favor of the wants of another, more

influential person. Both the parent, and the receiver of the action should recognize and honor the child’s boundary.

There are times where we may need to help others step outside of their comfort zones, but always with respect for boundaries. However, some boundaries need to be “non-negotiables” for children—such as touching/physical boundaries.

husband and wife aren't the same as appropriate boundaries between friends or acquaintances. Similarly, appropriate boundaries between a parent and child aren't the same as appropriate boundaries between the child and a caring adult, such as a teacher, coach or counselor.



## Teaching Boundary Safety: What am I instructing?

Children learn boundaries from the adults in their lives and model that behavior. Teaching boundary safety requires parents and caring adults to teach children appropriate relationship boundaries, how to avoid problematic situations and how to protect themselves from violators when possible.

## Preparing Yourself to Teach Boundary Safety

Young children are generally comfortable learning about boundary safety. It's adults who typically exhibit discomfort. Keep in mind that one conversation won't be enough, and that you're paving the way to speak about this subject more in the future. Review these points prior to your discussion with children:

### Tools for success:

- Consistently setting boundaries with rules, regulations and boundaries facilitates the life-long physical and emotional safety of children
- Affirming children with support and love enables them to accept themselves and to love and support others
- Praising children's behavior when they maintain a boundary is crucial, as are putting in corrections when boundaries are violated or broken

- **Identify those you approve as the child's special safe adults.** During your discussion, also listen to the child's input on who they feel is a trusted adult.
- **Provide a time and setting where the child's attention is focused only on you.** Minimize distractions so you can answer questions—completely and without interruption.
- **Keep the rules simple.** Review the safety guide tips prior to communicating them to youth.
- **Give specific examples,** such safe and unsafe behavior descriptions.
- **Teach self-respect.** Children who respect their own bodies and expect respect from others are empowered to understand their personal rights regarding their own bodies and others', and may be more likely to speak up if there's a boundary violation than peers who lack this understanding.
- **Avoid training children to fear others.** Everyone must know the difference between having a healthy suspicion and being afraid of everyone.



## Where to Begin: Physical/Touching Boundaries

Much of this guide will focus on physical boundaries, “safe” touching rules and private body parts because of the connection between these items and child sexual abuse.

“No” is an extremely powerful word in every language. It’s also an effective way to establish a boundary. Noticing your own and others’ reactions to “no” can help you see where physical and non-physical boundaries are unclear or infringed upon.

## Teaching About Private Body Parts

When you talk openly with children about their private body parts, they learn that it’s okay to ask questions about their bodies. Children who know that they can ask are more likely to speak up if someone exhibits inappropriate behavior toward them, and are less attractive and vulnerable to potential predators.

Sometimes children don’t know the correct vocabulary for their private parts and aren’t aware they’re allowed to say “no” to an adult. Their age, or even lack of vocabulary, may make it difficult to articulate abuse. An important reason to teach the proper names of body parts is to help them accurately communicate about their bodies if harmed.

Abuse can happen at any age. It’s never too soon or late to teach the proper names of body parts. Discussions will change as children mature. Some simple age-appropriate items to discuss are:

- **1 and a half years (18 months):** Anatomically correct names of their private body parts, including the penis, scrotum, buttocks and anus (for boys) and vulva, vagina, buttocks, anus and breasts (for girls). Young children begin learning about



### Principles to teach younger children:

- Use names a doctor would use to describe private body parts
- Private body parts are “private” for a reason
- Private body parts are “off limits” to almost everyone
- Nobody has the right to touch or see a child’s private body parts except for the purpose of helping keep clean and healthy—and under certain circumstances
- No one has the right to ask the child to touch their own private parts, either

### Private body parts are not a “taboo” subject— why knowing and discussing body parts matter

A child who’s not allowed to discuss his/her body may think that any talk about private body parts is “taboo.” Such a child is more likely to remain silent about abuse or even serious health concerns, than a peer who has open and frank communication with his/her parents. Beware that some predators use nicknames for private body parts as a grooming tool to desensitize and blur proper boundary lines—

which could seem like a game to young children. Even youth who already know and use slang terms or nicknames to describe private body parts should learn the appropriate words. For older youth, someone with poor boundaries could try to influence them by speaking about sex, which might appear to be “cool” or exciting because of its seemingly “taboo” nature.



their arms, ears, eyes, etc., when they're just a few months old. Teaching children about all of their body parts is important to the developmental process.

- **3 to 5 years:** How to say “No!” to someone who wants to see or touch their private body parts, or makes requests that cause the child to feel uncomfortable.
- **5 to 8 years:** Safety away from home, scary experiences and the difference between safe/unsafe touches.
- **8 to 12 years:** Personal safety issues, including bullying, self-defense, pornography and other topics about sex.
- **13 to 18 years:** Safety issues such as sex, rape, date rape, assault, dating relationships, abusive relationships, drugs/alcohol, HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancy.

►► **Children should know examples of specific “safe” physical behavior:**

- “Cheek” kisses from Mommy before bedtime
- Hugs from Dad after work
- ‘High fives’ with friends during a game
- Shaking hands with someone new
- A loose hug from a teacher in class
- A pat on the back/shoulder from a coach
- Having Grandma/Grandpa bounce you on the knee
- A pat on the head by an uncle
- Sitting on Dad’s shoulders
- Linking arms or holding hands with a good friend

## Safe vs. Unsafe Physical Behavior

### ◀◀ Safe Touches

Studies show that children thrive with appropriate physical contact and affection. They need the reassurance of appropriate, caring and safe touches from the nuclear family, relatives, teachers and friends. Teach children which touches are safe and give them specific examples, emphasizing a child’s own experiences often.

Explain why these touches are safe—they have a good purpose and aren’t intended to hurt. Safe touches are safe, even if they don’t know the person well, as long as those touches are appropriate for the particular relationship.

Touches such as those from a doctor, nurse, dentist or “Dr. Mom” need special explanation because they’re safe and necessary—and sometimes they can hurt. Even so, they hurt for a “good” reason because they’re meant to keep children healthy.

### Avoid saying “touches that feel good” are safe

Avoid saying that safe touches “feel good,” are “loving” or “show someone loves you.” Touching of genitalia can feel good and can be characterized to a child as loving. Children might then assume that touches that feel good are safe and painful ones are unsafe. A safe touch isn’t intended to confuse, scare or deliberately harm the child. Also keep in mind a touch, or

hug that makes you feel “good” does not automatically mean that the person giving the hug is a safe adult—especially if that person does something that makes you feel uncomfortable. Remember, child molesters will often tell a child that inappropriate touches are a way of showing love. Children need your help to know the difference.

Also describe how accidental touches don't make the person unsafe, such as:

- Bumping against someone at the mall
- Accidentally falling on someone at a playground

## Unsafe Touches

An unsafe touch is one that is inappropriate, could be meant to hurt or scare someone, or violates the safety rules, such as hitting, punching, tripping, kicking, spitting and molestation. In addition to these examples, explain that touching private body parts can be an unsafe touch—and is only safe in specific, limited situations.

### Children need to know:

- We treat our private body parts special by keeping them covered.
- Only a few *special* safe adults may see or touch a child's private body parts—and only to help keep clean and healthy (See "Teaching to Identify Their Special Safe Adults?").
- Children can always ask about a touch that is uncomfortable or confusing. Reassure them that a parent or guardian will let them know whether a particular touch is safe or unsafe (See "Teaching What to Do if Boundaries are Violated").

### Children should know examples of safe touches that might be unpleasant or painful, such as when:

- The doctor gave you stitches after you fell off your bike
- The nurse gave you an immunization shot for health
- The dentist cleaned your teeth to keep cavities away
- Mom applied stinging ointment to a cut to fight infection
- Dad put drops in your eyes to flush out grains of sand
- Your brother pulled your arm to keep you from going into the busy street

## Avoiding "stranger danger"

The risks to children are greater from someone they know. Even though only 10% of abuse is perpetrated by strangers, children need to be cautious of strangers—on the street and Internet. But, saying to a child, "Don't talk to strangers or take candy from a stranger," often creates unnecessary apprehension in a child; and, it implies incorrectly that if someone isn't a stranger he/she's safe. Take note: when asked to describe a "stranger," most children say it's an "ugly or mean" person. This highlights an important fact: children don't often perceive friendly, attractive or charismatic people as strangers. Nor do they consider someone to be a stranger if the person talks to them once, or is around them more than once.

We shouldn't say "never speak to a stranger" because it's unrealistic and we, as role-models, frequently

speak to strangers. We also don't want to eliminate a key source of help—particularly for a lost child. Children should know that most strangers, regardless of their appearance are safe; but we don't know for sure. Teach a child to stay put if lost unless it's dangerous, and to make a lot of noise to attract attention. In this specific circumstance, it's OK to talk with strangers for help.

Abductions are more likely when a perpetrator asks a child for help. Define strangers, and quiz the child regarding their reactions if someone they don't know well asks for help finding a lost kitten/puppy or to get into a car. The child should answer that he/she must ask you first before doing anything or going anywhere. If a person makes the child uncomfortable or tries to detain him/her, the child should try to get away immediately, making as much noise as possible.



### ►► To increase their safety, children should know:

- Most people are safe, regardless of their “looks”
- To know if an adult is safe, pay attention to whether they uphold your boundaries
- Be wary of adults or children who violate your boundaries
- Get away as soon as possible if someone is trying to hurt you, or is following you
- It’s OK to say “NO” to an adult if they try to hurt or touch you in an unsafe way—or even if you feel uncomfortable
- Check with a parent/safe adult before going anywhere, accepting anything or helping anyone
- Scream, kick and yell if anyone tries to grab you
- Sometimes it’s hard to say “NO” or get away from the situation, and that’s OK—but still tell a safe adult right away

## Who are Safe Friends and Safe Adults?

For the purposes of teaching personal boundary safety, safe friends and adults are people who:

- Won’t hurt the child without a good reason (i.e., medical exams, vaccinations, throat swabs, removing splinters, stopping a child from running into the road, etc.) and won’t intentionally confuse or scare the child.
- Consistently respect the child’s and the parent/caretakers’ personal safety wishes and concerns. If someone behaves safely once, it doesn’t confirm that he/she’s safe.
- Exhibit behavior that’s transparent and utilizes the **PAN** acronym, meaning **P**ublic, **A**ppropriate and **N**on-sexual in nature.

## ◀◀ How Do You Know Who’s Safe?

Most child molesters are known and trusted by the victim and the victim’s parents—and may be related. One way to tell if someone is safe is by observing the person’s interaction with others. Note that caring adults are responsible for protecting children. However, children can learn important safety measures to better protect themselves.

Consider role-playing with them so they have an arsenal of phrases and reactions to use—sometimes they know something is “off” but don’t know what to do or how to respond. Practice “what-if” scenarios with them, evaluate their answers and create agreed-upon protocols and responses.

### Be clear and consistent with appropriate behavior

Even small boundary violations by well-intentioned adults could condition a child to tolerate inappropriate grooming behaviors from others and desensitize youth to behavior they’d normally resist. Caring adults must strictly enforce proper boundaries with children. Any attempt to isolate a child should be

viewed with healthy suspicion. On the contrary, a responsible adult informs others when meeting alone with children, invites random status checks and meets in areas where others could walk by unimpeded—or where interactions are transparent and visible to others.



## Teaching Children to Identify Their *Special* Safe Adults

A child's life may include many safe friends and adults. Once children understand safe friends and adults, along with safe and unsafe touches, you must explain the specific meaning of ***special*** safe adults.

- *Special* safe adults may see or touch a child's private body parts, but only for the purpose of helping keep the child clean and healthy.
- They have permission to help with bathing, restrooms, and putting on clothes or when the child is sick. Not every caring adult has this approval and not every *special* safe adult has unrestricted authorization, as some are *special* safe adults for specific occasions or reasons.
- For example, a doctor's permission to touch the child's private body parts is limited to specific examinations for a specific purpose and only when a parent or nurse is also present.

### Children should know their **special safe adults, and the behavioral boundaries:**

- Grandma: for help in the bathroom, or putting on clothes
- Dad: for help to get clean or with using the bathroom
- Your teacher: for help in the restroom at daycare or school
- Mom: for help getting out of the bathtub
- Doctor: for an injection in the buttocks



### Whom should you select as a “*special*” safe adult?

Choosing a *special* safe adult is a big decision. Remember, parents are primarily responsible for identifying safe adults, and children need to know who they are—and eventually identify them on their own. Consider your experiences with the same adults. If your father was safe with you and your siblings, then, unless circumstances have shown otherwise, it's likely that he's a good candidate as a special safe adult if there's a reason to help your child with the toilet, bath or other activity involving

your child's private body parts. *Please remember that your love for a person should never compromise your protector role.* Stepfathers, uncles, boyfriends, family and other loved ones, male or female—are responsible for a high percentage of child sexual abuse. So, until you're certain, it's better to play it “safe,” limiting special access to your child only to those with a flawless record of safety. Provide unlimited clearance only to those you know are safe and trustworthy.



## Teaching What to Do if Boundaries are Violated

While prevention is the goal, sometimes child molesters gain access. We must teach children simple rules for when their boundaries are violated or unclear—or when they feel unsafe.

A child needs to know that any time someone tries to touch his or her private body parts or tries to get the child to touch the private body parts of the other person, the child should:

- Say words that mean “No!,” or “Stop!”
- Try to remove themselves from the situation, then
- Tell a parent or another safe adult as soon as possible
- Know that you’ll believe them, and that they will not be in trouble for saying “No!” and getting away from the person

◀◀ It’s helpful to “role play,” helping youth know and practice an array of scripted responses so they don’t have as much difficulty when “on the spot.”

### ►► Potential scripted responses to give youth an “out” or “exit strategy” when uncomfortable:

- “I need to use the restroom”
- “I’m thirsty and need something to drink”
- “I’m not feeling well, I’m going to throw up”
- “Stop touching me that way—I don’t like it”
- “Stop it” or “No!”
- “I don’t let anyone touch my private parts”
- “I want to check on my puppy/turtle/cat at home”

### Sometimes children feel paralyzed during or after abuse

Even when we teach children strategies to better protect themselves, in the moment of trauma, sometimes children may feel paralyzed and unable to communicate. To the child, sometimes it’s so scary, embarrassing or shameful to discuss abuse that it may seem easier to endure it. That’s why it’s critical for caring adults to remind children how important it is to tell a safe adult when someone behaves in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable—even if the child isn’t sure what happened. Children need to know that it isn’t safe or right to keep secrets about

unsafe touches—even if the person apologized or said it was an accident. By telling what occurred, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the incident, the child is empowered to give caring adults an opportunity to take the actions necessary to protect.

Parents and caring adults should be careful not to communicate to children that they would hurt violators if a child is abused or hurt. A child may be fearful that their parent would get into trouble, and might decide to keep quiet about abuse or boundary violations.



### Conversation starters about secrets:

- What's the difference between secrets and surprises?
- Has anyone told you to keep a secret from Mommy?
- Once I had a secret and was afraid Daddy would be mad if I told. Then I told him and felt better. Do you have a secret from Daddy?

## Teaching “No Secrets”

### Secrets vs. Surprises

Let children know there aren't secrets when it comes to personal and physical safety. That, it's wrong for an adult or another child to ask to keep a secret about safety—especially unsafe touches—because that's a way for people to get hurt. If an individual tries to make a child keep a secret or frightens them, children must know the right thing to do is immediately talk to a safe adult or parent. Reassure the child that he/she will be protected regardless of any threats or seeming consequences of “telling.” When a child knows the difference between secrets and surprises and that keeping a secret isn't OK, he/she's more likely to reveal boundary violations.

### Conversation starters about boundaries:

- Have you ever thought about your personal boundaries?
- Do you know what your boundaries are?
- What are they?
- Did you know it's OK to say “no”?
- Do you know you have a right to be safe?

### Establish this important point

*“When it comes to your safety, you can tell me anything—even if someone threatened you or told you to keep it a secret, and I'll believe you and you won't get into trouble.”*

Assure the child that you'll listen to him/her and won't get angry, and that the child's safety is your top priority. Make sure that your reactions consistently reflect this. If a child knows you typically react to small issues in a big way, this could prevent communication about bigger issues.

## ►► What's the difference between secrets and surprises?

### Secrets

- Hidden
- Never told
- Exclude others
- Potential to harm
- May cause feelings of fear, sadness

### Surprises

- Temporary
- Will be revealed and shared
- Inclusive
- Usually fun (birthday surprise, special treat, etc.)
- Often causes feelings of happiness, excitement



◄◄ Children must know that we don't keep secrets, but we can keep surprises. The idea of keeping one's "confidence" may be adjusted in later years for older youth, but secrets should never be communicated to children or asked of them by caring adults—even as a game.

### Conversation starters:

- Is anyone scaring you?
- Has something happened that you're afraid to tell me?
- Has anyone touched you in a way you don't like?
- Has anyone touched, or tried to touch your private parts?
- What's the best part about being (with a person, at a place)? The worst?
- Has anyone violated, or crossed your boundaries and upset you?

## Continuing the Conversation for Older Youth

As youth transition to teenagers, there will naturally be less supervision and more responsibility given to them to evaluate safe situations and persons. Many boundary and safety rules for younger children also apply to older youth, though it may be communicated differently. Caring adults must still provide teens and "tweens" expectations and boundaries. Remind them they can say "no" and are allowed to remove themselves from any situation if they're uncomfortable. The older children become, the more you can outline other types of boundaries.

- **Engage older children in conversation about safety issues in movies, news or TV shows;** discuss prevention strategies/resolution.



- **Tweens and teens typically have more of a social media presence.** Stress that molesters often peruse social media sites to identify and learn about their potential victims' lives.
- **Prepare for behavioral/emotional outbursts and encourage communication through them.** Remain calm and convey there's no situation without a solution. ►►
- **Teens and tweens are at greater risk for running away and falling prey to sex trafficking.** Be wary of modeling agents, photographers or business ventures—including someone saying the child is "good looking" or "pretty" and can make money. Review business references and service records. Don't allow them to meet unless chaperoned by you or another safe adult.
- **Maintain a positive approach and make yourself available to talk about these issues anytime.** While fostering an open and safe environment, they need to know that you'll help to protect them regardless of the circumstances.
- **Teach if friends disclose, they must do the right thing and tell an adult.** Help them understand that by telling, they have the power to make abuse stop. Discuss how they could personally offer to accompany friends to speak with a safe adult.

#### ◀◀ **Conversation tips:**

- I'm sorry—I can see you're upset.
- Can you tell me what I said that upset you?



### **Discussing pornography**

Pornography is one of the most common ways molesters break down the adult/child barrier online and in person. Sexual predators often use pornography to arouse or entrap a youth, and may even tell youth they're teaching them about sex to help them be future "good sexual partners". The molester relies on the child's natural curiosity about sexual activities and the tendency to keep information about sexual activities a secret.

Parents should explain what pornography is and establish that images of naked people aren't appropriate for anyone to see. Tell youth if anyone shows them naked images (even photo-shopped, naked images of themselves), they can and should tell you, and they won't be in trouble because they saw the images. Youth should also know to tell you whenever an adult asks to take the child's picture or asks the child to take a naked adults' picture.

## Responding to a Disclosure

### ► Sudden, problematic behavioral changes exhibited by a child:

- Moody or aggressive
- Loses interest in school
- Extreme changes in personal hygiene
- No longer enjoys or wants to participate in an activity

Most children don't lie about abuse. A child may disclose directly or indirectly (such as telling about a friend, or relating a "story" or "hypothetical" situation). In your ongoing communication with children, tell them to let you know what they're dealing with so you can be there to support them.

◀ Pay attention to a youth's behavior. If it's somehow "off," or if there are sudden behavioral changes, continue to observe and calmly talk with the child to find out what's happening.

The situation may or may not be abusive, but clearly something is concerning. Follow these simple guidelines to reassure that communicating was the right thing to do:

1. **Let children talk, and listen carefully.** Be patient and just listen. Sometimes, children disclose without realizing, or send up "test balloons" as a pre-disclosure hint to check how their information might be received.
2. **Acknowledge the child's need for privacy—without isolation.** Find a place to listen that's transparent and doesn't put either of you in an inappropriate situation.
3. **Limit question quantity and length.** Be concerned with "who" committed the abuse, and just let the child say what happened. Ensure that your statements aren't accusatory. Don't attempt to determine credibility or ask questions if you have enough information to report to authorities. Let the professionals question the child.



### Remain calm and avoid displays of shock or disgust

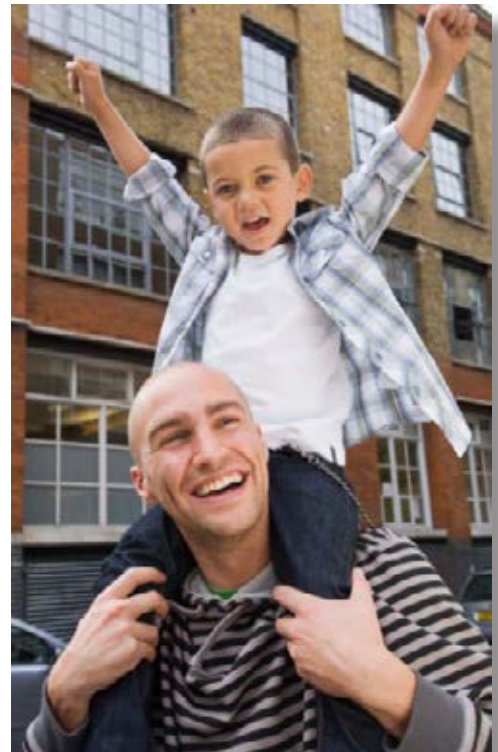
Ask yourself now, in advance, how will your face appear if there's a disclosure to you as a trusted adult? Most of our communication is represented by our body language—will you appear calm throughout the encounter? Remember, the abuser may

have already said adults won't believe the child. It's essential for the child to know you're listening without judgement. Your emotional or otherwise uncontrolled response may entirely shut down the child's willingness to communicate.

4. **Address their feelings; let them know that you trust and believe them.** A child molester may threaten children with dire consequences—including harming a pet or loved one. It's critical to treat it as if it's completely true. They also need to know it wasn't their fault.
5. **Don't promise confidentiality; do offer discretion.** When you say you'll need to communicate the information—with discretion—to the right people, they'll usually still disclose because they're assured you'll be putting mechanisms in place to protect them. ►►
6. **Be honest with the child about what happens next—**you'll communicate the incident to the proper authorities and you'll carefully share only with those needed to keep the child safe.
7. **Don't scold the child.** Such a reaction may confirm the child's fears about reporting and may stop the child from trusting safe adults in the future.
8. **Get immediate medical attention if necessary.** If the child needs immediate medical attention and local child protection officials are unavailable, call 911.
9. **Praise the child for reporting the incident.** Tell them they did the right thing by communicating and reassure them they'll be loved and protected no matter what.
10. **Obtain counseling/therapy for the child.** Various factors determine each child's rate of healing—including the adult's reaction to a disclosure. Children with a supporting family and competent professional help fare much better than others. Obtain the best professional help available to provide everyone involved with support to deal with the effects of abuse. Ask for help!

#### ◀◀ **Conversation tips:**

- I know this is very challenging to talk about and you're scared/embarrassed....
- Part of protecting you is communicating this to the right person.



#### **If the child tells someone else**

Try not to be surprised or upset if a child doesn't specifically tell you about an abusive situation. Remember that we're giving them tools to speak to multiple safe adults who can protect them. In most instances, the abuser or boundary violator is some-

one the child knows and trusts—frequently a trusted friend or family member. Children become very concerned about parents' reactions. As a result, they'll often seek someone else's advice and support to get through the initial disclosure.



### Youth-related programs should have:

- Background checks
- Safe Environment Training
- Abuse Prevention Policies
- Code of Conduct behavioral guidelines
- Established program monitoring
- Procedures to communicate concerns and report abuse
- Employee/Volunteer screening practices
- Access for parents to ensure safety

## When a Youth isn't Directly in Your Care / Supervised by a Third Party

Go over the personal boundary rules before placing youth under the supervision of others. Such occasions include childcare, babysitting, sleepovers, summer/athletic camps, overnight field trips, outings where sleeping or bathing is involved and situations where children aren't in your sight. Ask:

- Who's supervising/monitoring? What screening processes were used for staff/volunteers? What are the safety rules? What's the youth/adults ratio?
- Has anyone involved (adult or child) previously exhibited bullying or aggressive behavior?
- Is the child able to identify and trust his/her own instincts, and then act on those instincts and challenge an adult or other child.
- Does the child understand he/she can speak to a safe adult at any time, especially if he/she feels uncomfortable or "not right"?

In situations where your child isn't in your care, find out how it went. Were they comfortable? Did they have fun? Did anything happen that bothered them?

### Sleepovers and slumber parties

Sleepovers between children can be fun and also challenging because the youth aren't directly supervised by you in an environment you control. As the parent or caring adult, it's your responsibility to evaluate each situation for safety and decide if you're willing to accept the risks.

Children need to know that the same boundary safety rules apply. If the child is scared or uncomfortable, let them know they can come home. Also, tell the host that you have that agreement and if the child wants to come home for any reason, you'll be right there to get them. Have a code only known to you and the child, such as

to call you and ask about the pet dog, or a very specific type of "medicine." If a child mentions that code on a phone call it could be a signal for you to let the host know you're on your way to retrieve the child. No explanations are necessary.

Children should also know that sleepovers don't always work out in a fun way. You may also want to reassure them that sleepovers may still be an option in the future with the right circumstances; so that he/she is more willing to call you if something bad does happen, without fear for the future.



## Technology Safety Guidelines

While the benefits of the Internet far outweigh the risks, online communications could be an avenue for vulnerability to abuse, cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate material and unsafe people.

If your child has Internet access on any device, discuss Internet safety.

One youth's lack of account privacy settings could make another child's personal information from shared photos available for anyone to see, save and use.



### Technology basics caring adults need to know:

- Communicate often with children regarding online activities
- Internet technology is often mobile, located on various types of devices that need monitoring
- The risks of each device, game or application
- To approve all devices/applications before providing youth access
- To establish limits/boundaries for technology usage, and proper behavior
- To install and use filtering/monitoring software
- The safety features of each device, application and game
- How to review account settings/updates; learn the provided access by reading the small print
- Parents and guardians have a right to access their children's accounts to ensure safety

### Cyberbullying: Stop, block, report

Cyberbullying is the use of technology to humiliate, threaten, tease, manipulate and/or harass. Youth should know if they encounter cyberbullying, they have a responsibility to put a stop to it—this means DO NOT forward material (such as gossip, explicit videos, embarrassing information, sexts, etc.) to peers or engage in the harassment. Use

the phrase, “Stop, Block, Report.”

“Stop” and don’t respond directly to the threat or encourage it, “Block” by blocking the person/account, and then “Report” by saving the evidence and telling a safe adult as soon as possible. Depending on the material, it may be necessary to report to the website or app administrators—or the police.

### **Technology / internet basics youth need to know:**

- Nothing is private on the Internet
- Not everyone online is who they seem
- Never accept account requests from unknown people, regardless of mutual friends
- Always think twice before posting
- Double check for identifying information
- It's possible to track a location visually or within embedded data in a photo
- Check with a safe adult before meeting or doing anything with an online "friend"
- Proper responses to cyberbullying



### **Fostering Conversation with Youth about Technology Safety**

An adult's first goal is to protect youth, and also help them make better decisions for the future. Consider going through the youth's account with them to identify problematic posts or exchanges. Below are conversation-starter suggestions:

- **Do you feel safe when using this application, game or program?**
- **Do you know of anyone who's experiencing threats online?**
- **What are some ways to respond if you or your friends begin to feel uncomfortable?**

### **Oversharing / posting revealing information**

Youth who don't have a strong foundation of personal boundaries post more revealing information online without understanding consequences. In fact, revealing personal information and oversharing is a common social media error for everyone. The prob-

lem is sometimes youth judge their personal self-esteem and popularity on the quantity of responses and attention received. They don't realize that who they are as persons doesn't depend on their popularity—in person, or online.

- **How do you choose your online friends?** Are you selective about who has access to your life/content revealed on the Internet? Is there anyone associated with your account who you don't know well?
- **What does “personal” or “identifying” information mean to you?** What do you share about yourself, your friends or family? Are there images related to you or your friends online that identify you? ►►
- **Will you show me your account's security settings?** What can others see based on the account you've created? What are the benefits and risks?
- **Will you show me how to use the device?** How do I make an account?

◀◀ **Online posts should avoid providing your:**

- Full names or initials
- DOB
- School
- Neighborhood
- Home
- Frequently attended stores
- Phone number(s)
- Relationship to other social media accounts



**One posted / forever available**

Encourage youth to think twice before posting anything. Sometimes material communicated online is illegal, embarrassing, too personal, etc., and could have a lasting impact on the older youth's reputation and future. Shared information could also make youth

more vulnerable to abuse by inadvertently identifying a specific school or location. Teach them to always review and consider what's revealed before posting, with the understanding that once placed on the Internet, it will forever be available for someone to see or find.

## Conclusion: Making Boundary Safety Work

Teaching boundary safety is only one part of a multi-faceted solution for protection from child sexual abuse. The more we know, the more we can prevent, and learn how to respond appropriately if it does happen. Remember: you have the tools to create a safer environment, and to build on the foundation that you already have with the youth in your care.



### Recap of Important Points:

- One conversation isn't enough when boundary safety is concerned.
- Take advantage of learning opportunities and teachable moments.
- Adults are the primary protectors of children, but there are personal boundary tools we must teach children to empower and help them to protect themselves when outside of our immediate care.
- Abusers are often known individuals, and trusted by the youth and the family.
- Due to the manipulation of the abuser and the shame that a victim might feel, it may be very difficult for them to talk about abuse.
- Children disclose in a variety of ways, and the adult's reaction can affect the communication and healing.

### Ripple legacy effect

The interaction you have with youth, and with others on their behalf, has the potential to impact generations to come. Your behavior will affect how others behave with youth, and how youth expect behavior from adults,

and how youth react with other youth, and so on.

As a result of implementing the items learned in this guide, children become less susceptible and less attractive to people who want to harm them.



## Situations that Require Reporting

All states have laws that require reporting child abuse. Please refer to your state's requirements for specifics.

**To communicate about a warning sign or violation of a code of conduct, that does not signify or cause you to be suspicious of actual abuse:**

- *Communicate directly with the person and/or a supervisor*
  - If an individual exhibits a warning sign, it doesn't necessarily mean he/she is an abuser—they could have poor boundaries and be unaware of the rules or inappropriate behavior. Regardless, the behavior must be addressed.



**To communicate about the same warning sign again if you've already communicated directly with the person:**

- *Communicate directly with a supervisor*

**If you know or suspect that a child is being abused by an adult: ►►**

- *Call the Child Protective Agency in your state*
  - The number can be found through a quick Internet search, or via a phone directory.
  - Your call can be anonymous (keep a written or electronic record with pertinent information regarding the phone number, date, time and content of the report).

### ◀◀ **What does it mean to have a suspicion of abuse?**

- One could have a suspicion of abuse if the thought or concern of abuse has entered one's thought process.
- If one has a suspicion of abuse, communicate with your state's Child Protective Services Agency.

### **The protector role**

Do you have the privilege of being a trusted adult? Regardless of your specific role in any child's life, by the very nature of being an adult you're a protector of children. You must understand how to respond appropriately—especially if a child trusts you with a disclosure regarding an uncomfortable situation, or even abuse.

Everything you do as a partner with the VIRTUS® programs makes a difference for all children in your environment. Remember, not all children have a caring or safe adult who's looking after them for their safety. Even if it's not your child, bring your concerns to the appropriate party.

**Keep in mind:**

- Children may change their “story” or pretend as if they originally lied after disclosing.
- Sometimes the “story” may differ because of fear, or in response to an adult’s strong reaction.
- The truth is that children rarely lie about abuse, and thus we must always treat disclosures as completely true.



## Other Situations that Require Reporting

**If suspicion or knowledge of child abuse is committed by a volunteer or employee of any organization in which children are involved:**

- *First call the Child Protection Agency in the state*
- *Then communicate with a supervisor within the program; keep communicating with a higher ranking supervisor if no actions appear to be taken*

**If the child is in immediate or imminent danger (i.e., the situation is occurring at present):**

- *Call 911*

**If abuse happens within your family, follow the same reporting rules.**

**If you, or a youth in your care, are sent sexual messages or images and asked to share, report to [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com).**

**If you’re aware of cyberbullying, report to the website or the application’s administration.**

The police may also need to be informed, as well as the related organization where the youth will have contact with his/her bullies, such as a school.

### Err on the side of protecting the youth

It’s not your responsibility to verify a disclosure of abuse—rather, it’s your job to report to the proper authority. If you suspect abuse—meaning that the thought or suspicion has entered your head that the child could be abused—you must protect the child from the suspected abuser, call child protective services as soon as possible, and seek professional services for the child and everyone else affected (see “Responding to a Disclosure”).

There are many instances of abusive situations that could either have been prevented or addressed much more quickly with the action of caring adults communicating their concerns. Keep in mind that any perception as to the effectiveness of the agency cannot impact your willingness to do the right thing and report.

Your contribution to making the right call could be the difference between the life and death of a child—and your action could prevent a youth’s pain and turmoil for years to come.

**Thank you for your willingness  
to be a protector of children.**



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