

Diocese of Fort Worth On and off Site Youth Ministry Guidelines

Have fun, share faith, be safe, show care for the youth of your church

There are some who believe that if you have a safe youth ministry, you probably won't have a fun youth ministry. We need to challenge this myth by creating fun and enjoyable youth ministry experiences but within a safe and caring environment. The following guidelines will enable you to create a safe and caring environment and you add the fun!

Permissions, waivers, medical release forms

The diocesan release forms (A,B,C, and D) must be utilized by every youth and adult participant in the parish youth ministry program not only for the protection of the ministry but as a sign of the Church's care and concern for the youth in your parish. You are encouraged to put these release forms onto your computer and personalize them for your parish use.

The annual kick-off for youth ministry programming or the orientation for parents and teens should provide an opportunity for these forms to be distributed, signed and returned with a minimum of work. Another moment would be the time of religious education registration. There should be an understanding that youth are not registered for any programming or classes until these forms are on file. Forms A, B and C are for youth while Form D is for adults.

Keeping Children and Youth Safe Training

All adults who serve directly with young people for more than 1 time must go through this diocesan training program and update programs annually. Additionally, all young people who are serving in a ministerial role must go through the Teen Leader Keeping Children and Youth Safe Training Program. Parish leaders can go through the "Train the trainer" program and then offer this training to youth in your parish as needed.

Adult to Youth Ratio 1 adult – 6 youth

It is important to consider the adult to youth ratio at every youth ministry event. The diocesan guideline is a minimum of 1 adult to every 6 teenagers.

This general guideline should be understood as a *minimum standard* and it should be noted that some youth ministry events will require a higher ratio of adults to youth. For example: a weekend hike in the wilderness probably needs a 1-4 ratio, handing out bag lunches to homeless people in an inner-city setting may call for a 1-2 ratio. A mission trip to a foreign country will require a 1 adult to 4-5 youth.

Taking teens into dangerous or hostile situations is prohibited

There is an element of danger every time we gather young people and there simply is no way to take out the possibility of all danger lest we decide not to do anything with young people which is not possible because of our call to ministry.

Having said that, there are certain activities that need to be thought through carefully before deciding to participate in. Examples of these kinds of dangerous activities are: mountain climbing, white water rafting, boating, etc. It would be a good idea to contact the risk manager of the Diocese or the Office of youth ministry for direction on choosing a potentially dangerous

activity. There are certain activities that represent hostile environments that young people should not be brought into. Example of hostile environments are: any activity where there is demonstrating (one group/person against another) even if a noble cause is the focus or taking young people into an area where violence abounds. There are many ways to invite young people into responsible participation in their community and in their faith without taking them into harm's way. **NO CAUSE IS WORTH PUTTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN DANGER OR A HOSTILE SITUATION.**

Using a private home for youth activities

If you use private homes for off-site activities, there should always be two adults present at the activity regardless of the number of youth and at least a 1 adult to 6 youth ratio as is our diocesan guideline for youth ministry events. Please limit the access to private areas of the home. Keep the activities in a public space like the living room, den, etc.

The home owners should be aware of the increased liability risk they incur. They should check with the homeowner's insurance agent to see if they are protected for church group activities. Some policies cover such activities while others require an additional rider.

Attendance

Keep accurate records of attendance at all youth ministry events (see enclosed sample attendance form - Form B) to clarify any question of the presence of youth at a particular event, program or class. Parents may believe youth, especially those who drive themselves, were at a particular event, when in truth, they were not.

Youth present on the premises but not at an activity would be invited to come in or asked to leave. Contacting parents of youth who do not attend programs, classes, events that they are signed up for can be a way to encourage future participation by being welcoming and showing concern.

Arrival and Dismissal

Youth leaders are urged to remember their responsibility to and for youth exists between the time of arrival and the time of departure. Clearly state parish policy regarding both: Generally, fifteen minutes prior to the start of the program and fifteen to thirty minutes after the program give parents and/or youth ample time to make connections and meet deadlines.

Youth are never to be left alone on the parish premises: A responsible adult must remain with the youth until all the youth have left. Ideally, two adults should share this responsibility.

If it is necessary for a young person to leave the program early, clearly state that notification from the parent or guardian is required. Do not dismiss a young person to the care of an adult who is not the parent or guardian without express permission.

Transportation

Because you need to get your youth to the off-site youth ministry event or experience, transportation will always be an issue. Use the following guidelines:

- Are all drivers age 21 or older?
- Are all vehicles in good working condition?

- Have the driving records been checked?
- Are all vehicles insured and if the vehicle is non-owned, does the driver have permission to utilize the vehicle?
- Have the vehicles been state inspected?
- Does the driver have a current driver's license?
- If driving the bus or any vehicle above 15 passengers, does the driver have a Class B license?
- Are the proper number of students assigned to each individual vehicle, depending upon its capacity (number of seat belts)?
- Have the drivers been advised on the route of travel and what to do in the event that they become lost? A clear map or clearly written directions should be the standard.
- Are all drivers advised to travel as a group or in pairs?

All drivers should be questioned verbally as to their driving record and their vehicle should be inspected. This will take the mechanical argument away from any plaintiff attorney in the event of an accident involving injury. Please use the Driver Information Sheet enclosed for volunteer drivers for youth ministry events (should be filled out and signed once a year and kept on file).

See unacceptable drivers taken from Catholic Umbrella Pool II Vehicle Safety Program

Camp facilities

When choosing a camp site for camping, retreat or some kind of outdoor adventure, it is a good practice to see the camp first hand. What shape is the camp in, how hospitable is the camp staff? How difficult will it be to get quick medical attention if necessary? Is the camp accredited and by whom? The most widely recognized accreditation is with the American Camping Association (ACA). This organization maintains a strict set of safety standards for staffing, buildings, programs, and services for all types of camps, religious and secular alike.

Dangerous camp games and situations

Everyone wants to have fun but follow these safety principles for safe fun:

- avoid games that might result in headfirst collisions with other people or natural objects. The risk of a broken neck and paralysis is enormous.
- Avoid games that incite reckless or overaggressive behavior.
- Avoid games that are hard to supervise. If you can't stop an activity quickly, you don't have enough control.
- Avoid pile on games.

Sport games and physical challenge activities

Minimize risk by using the following guidelines:

- Don't play on an athletic field or in an area without first inspecting it for hazards and dangerous debris.
- Don't mix big and small, weak and strong kids in contact sports. Smaller kids usually get crushed.
- Don't make everyone in your group play the game. The reluctant participant is often the first one hurt.
- Don't incite or encourage aggressive or rough play.
- Don't let the athletic or challenge equipment be used without supervision.

- Don't hesitate to step in and stop a situation that is getting too rowdy, rough or uncontrolled.

Water Safety

Water activities require special precautions. A certified lifeguard must be present when swimming at a pool, public or private, a lake, or the beach. Young people must use appropriate certified life preservers when using any kind of water craft and be instructed on the proper use of the craft before using it. Each craft should have an adult on board. Motorized craft must be driven by those age 25 or older who have been properly instructed on the use of the craft.

Behavior Guidelines

It is important to write out the behavioral expectations that you have for teenagers in a "code of Behavior". This is a starting point for clearly naming expected appropriate behavior from the teens and adults chaperoning the event(s). These guidelines should be signed by the teens and the parents at the beginning of the year along with the medical release and liability waiver. These guidelines should be orally reviewed at the beginning of the event or program and should be made part of any orientation of parents and new youth participants.

Confidentiality

Young people must be sure that anything that they share with any adult will be held in confidence and that a breach in this confidence can be of great harm except in the following circumstances:

- the risk of danger to the youth or another person that is reasonably foreseeable by the adult; e.g., suicide threats.
- the story shared is one of child abuse.