

## Protecting God's Children for Adults

### Virtual Boundaries: Appropriate Online Safety Measures

By [The VIRTUS® Programs](#)

Never has the concept of "virtual boundaries" been more important than today, as more people are signing on to various virtual platforms to connect with others. As a result, we find ourselves increasingly needing to delineate boundaries more clearly, so that our online behavior is just as appropriate as it should be in-person, and so that children are safe. Regardless of your role or position in the life of a child, the focus of this article is to provide a context of appropriate boundaries and best practices to help keep online interaction and discussion with youth appropriate and with proper oversight.



#### **Definitions: how do boundaries compare to virtual boundaries?**

Our lives are made up of a series of relationships—including relationships between family members, colleagues, peers, acquaintances, mentors, friends and others. Every healthy relationship requires a series of boundaries, which can be imagined as lines that separate one person from another. Boundaries can be physical, emotional, behavioral and spiritual, and they differ depending on the relationship and that relationship's context.

Considering that, more than ever, people are using technology to work, communicate, visit and even distance-learn, many questions surface about how to maintain appropriate boundaries, particularly those between adults interacting with minors, and how to monitor everything.

#### **Challenges of boundaries in online settings**

Boundaries in online, virtual settings are challenging to set and maintain, primarily because the virtual platform, application (app) or "online setting" becomes a "location" that is intrinsically outside of the sight and hearing of others. The most serious risks in an online "off-site" environment involves adults failing to maintain proper boundaries, or youth misperceiving the online attention they receive as something more than educational and platonic. Interacting via technology allows for personal thoughts, emotional content and private feelings to be shared more readily than "in person." Technology also allows for one-on-one conversation outside of the purview of others, removing accountability and perhaps increasing notions of undetectability for people who don't have the best intentions.

The truth is the vast majority of youth-serving adults will not abuse the nature of online interaction intentionally—but some will. Consequently, *all* of us have a greater responsibility to ensure our own behavior is appropriate. We must, to accomplish the goals of the specific online interaction, and so that we don't unintentionally condition a child to more easily accept someone else's inappropriate online behavior. Regardless of your role in the life of a child, the main goals of your online and live interaction with youth are the same: provide children with what they need, and keep them safe while doing it.

### **Best practices for caring adults who are utilizing technology as a means of communication**

For those who are working with, or ministering to, youth through technology—whether temporarily or for more of a long-term situation—there are specific rules and best practices for safe adults to follow regarding social media, online interaction and the Internet. First, always defer to your overarching organization's policies.<sup>1</sup> What follows is a list of additional best practices on how to interact with minors in your care—safely—while appropriately meeting, chatting, educating, visiting and ministering to them via the Internet.

#### **Best practices for all youth-serving adults:**

- **Utilize technology (devices, applications and platforms) sanctioned by the organization.** This also includes maintaining private your personal phone number whenever possible, as most online video conferencing options have built-in audio and voice options.
- **Keep personal social media accounts private.** Adults working or volunteering with youth should not use their personal emails or social media accounts to communicate with minors (or their personal phone numbers). If the organization does not have its own official account for you to use, work with supervisors to create one that allows them to also have oversight.
- **Avoid "friending" or communicating with minors using personal accounts or private messages.** Under no circumstances should a caring adult be utilizing a personal account to send a "friend" request to a minor who is in their care, or known to them, because of work or ministry.
- **Meet with minors in online groups, never alone or 1/1.** Virtual meetings can include other students or parents to maintain transparency. Other adults in your organization should also be included when possible and/or necessary for proper oversight.
- **Maintain appropriate communication with both minors and other adults.** Anything sent to an individual minor should also be copied to their parent or guardian. Keep language professional

and formal, just as you would "in person."

- **Communicate with youth during appropriate timeframes.** While it is understandable that sometimes normal operating schedules can be interrupted, it is imperative that proper boundaries are observed when communicating specifically with minors.
- **Be mindful of what students will view and hear from your own surroundings during online meetings/classes.** This includes what is visually shown/seen and heard. Consider how certain spaces may be inappropriate, such as, sitting on a bed to videoconference, or showing an environment with underclothing strewn about, etc.

**Accept the increased responsibility to intervene if you see or suspect inappropriate content or evidence of abuse.**

Youth-serving adults are wonderful for many reasons—one of which is because of how they are vigilant about protection when children are in school or activities. Sometimes this means communicating to child protective services when aware of signs or suspicions of child abuse and neglect. However, when kids are never in school or in public activities during times of stress, there could be more risk because they don't have that additional contact with people who are there to help them—and the red flags of abuse aren't as obvious when someone is behind the screen of technology vs. while in person—however flimsy that screen may be. When interacting with youth online, youth-serving adults, or any caring adult for that matter, must respond appropriately to anything said or observed that may put youth in harm's way (or has already put them there). Imagine the serious consequences that could come from an adult who does not take action after having concerns about a youth's safety.

**Additional best practices for *parents and guardians*:**

- **Model appropriate behavior.** Everything that you do with technology can be observed by others—this includes how much time you spend on the computer, the balance between Internet time and home life, what you do online and on your technological devices such as a phone or tablet, how you respond to inappropriate situations you encounter, how you communicate about yourself, the language you use, the images you post, etc. In the case of parents with youth at home, all of it is being observed by developing, impressionable brains.
- **Be available.** First, try as much as possible to be directly engaged in the technology utilized by the child, seeing what they see online, hearing what they hear—asking them questions and processing it together. However, sometimes we temporarily utilize technology with youth while something else is being accomplished—preparing a snack within eyesight, answering a quick work email next to them, etc. Depending on the child's age, if you cannot be immediately and directly engaged in the online interaction or material with the youth, then ensure that you are

nearby and ready to communicate if/when necessary.

- **Expect to be included in all communication between the youth-serving adult(s) in your life, and your youth**—then follow up to ensure it happens. Your written permission should be obtained for any youth-serving person/organization to communicate electronically with a minor. Monitor closely any video calls made.
- **Control access.** Communicate to the youth about what sites and apps are acceptable to use; control what apps are actually accessed or purchased, utilize password access and share them with each other, install safety protection software, etc.
- **Limit minor's use of technology.** Schedule technology "down time," since minors (depending on age) could be online all day in classes, or... gaming. Consider limiting digital devices to particular times during the day so it doesn't dominate everyone's day and attention. And, get everyone outside for exercise and fresh perspective!
- **Monitor youth behavior on the devices or apps themselves.** There's no tool you can use that will work as well as personally communicating and reviewing the technology, but it is also helpful to install safety protection software and utilize all of the apps' "parental controls." This could also mean reviewing the apps on the device, creating parallel accounts so that you can interact with, and observe your youth on the site, etc. Additionally, enable and regularly monitor privacy settings of apps and devices your child uses. Develop and discuss family internet rules/expectations and how to hold each other accountable. Keep things consistent.
- **Assist minors with understanding what it means to maintain privacy in the digital world—and the importance of it.** This has to do with what youth share about themselves online, intentionally and unintentionally. We take the time to teach them to take a second look before posting anything personal, including what information can be gleaned about them from their surroundings, location, clothing, communication, etc.
- **Instruct "next steps" if inappropriate behavior or material is observed via any of their apps or digital devices**—this could include material that intimidates/bullies, manipulates, harasses or reveals private information. The first step is for the youth to tell a trusted adult—they need to know they can come to you or another adult if they feel uncomfortable or shaken (even if you're in a meeting, or doing something else that is important). The second step is to report. There may be reporting features within the app to report abuse; the CyberTipline is also an excellent reporting tool.<sup>2</sup>

- **Maintain boundaries even with your friends and family who "aren't in the know,"** and educate them when possible. But, just remember that their behavior isn't dictated by any organization's "social media" or "technology use" policy and despite their good intentions, there could be some issue that crop up. Monitor these interactions as well, plan to monitor, interrupt, educate and then have conversations with youth afterward if something was amiss.

#### **Helpful reminders for *everyone*:**

- **If you see something inappropriate or illegal, it's essential to communicate it to the right person or place.** This could mean [communicating with the child protective services](#) in your state<sup>3</sup> if you even suspect abuse; it could also mean reporting directly within the site or app, or reporting the information to [report.cybertip.org](http://report.cybertip.org).<sup>4</sup>
- **Your online behavior matters, even if no one is "watching."** Build a positive online reputation so you are teaching minors what they should expect from safe adults online.
- **Sometimes we might need coping assistance when we are anxious, sad, stressed, overwhelmed, during times of uncertainty, etc.** This happens with youth, too, and sometimes a professional's help should be enlisted. Take a moment to breathe and evaluate! If an adult or youth in your life needs more help than you can (or should) provide, consider the resource of online counseling or therapy, which is an alternative for people who are unable to go to an actual office for help.

Let us partner together on how to best serve youth during times when we communicate to them via electronic means. Becoming more aware of the risks, behaving transparently and intervening when others' behavior seems concerning, helps protect children and those who genuinely care for their welfare.