

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

The following guidelines will enable you to evangelize and catechize the youth and to create a safe and caring environment and you add the fun!

Permissions, waivers, medical release forms

The diocesan release forms (A, B, and D) must be utilized by every minor and adult participant in parish programming and events not only for the protection of the ministry but as a sign of the Church's care and concern for the young people in your parish.

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 and B are for youth, while Form D is for adults.

These forms are available in print and online at this link: <https://fwdioc.org/diocesan-forms>

Safe Environment

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 Safe Environment Training Program.

Confidentiality

Young people must be sure that anything 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.

Behavior Guidelines

It is important for everyone to understand the Code of Conduct and Behavior for each event. These are on the Youth Form B which should be signed by the parents. These guidelines should be orally reviewed at the event or program and should be made part of any orientation of parents and new youth participants.

Ratios for Adult Chaperones to Children/Youth

A chaperone for the purpose of monitoring youth activities is an adult (21+) who has completed diocesan safe environment training and has had an approved background check.

Two (2) or more safe environment compliant adults (21+) must always be present for all events involving minors under the age of 18.

Two (2) safe environment compliant teens (14-17 years old) may assist in supervising children/youth activities, providing they are under the direct supervision of at least one (1) adult chaperone who is 21 years or older. Example: A group of children in vacation bible school may be supervised by one adult (21+) and two (2) safe environment compliant teen helpers (14-17 years old).

This general ratio guideline is a minimum standard, it must be noted that some youth ministry events will require a higher ratio of adults to youth. Factors to be considered when determining the appropriate number of safe environment compliant adults necessary to chaperone or supervise an event with children or youth include:

- Age of the children/youth engaged in the event or activity.
- Maturity of the children/youth engaged in the event or activity.
- Type of activity participants will be engaging in during the trip/retreat (e.g., overnight activities require a higher adult: youth ratio (minimum of 3:10).
- Length or duration of activity (longer events 12+ hours require more chaperones).
- Geographic location and any associated risks. International travel will require special considerations and may require additional chaperones.

Young adults (18-20) who have completed all diocesan safe environment requirements including training and an approved background check may assist another adult (21+) chaperone to help meet adult: youth ratio requirements. As chaperoning entails having responsibility for discipline and accountability for the group, young adults (18-20) shall not supervise a group of youth alone or in combination with another young adult (18-20) without at least one adult aged 21 or older.

Short (day) events: Minimum of 2 safe environment compliant adults for every 10 children

2 safe environment compliant teens (age 14-17) may take the place of one of the adult chaperone so long as they are under the direct supervision of an adult chaperone who is 21+ years.

12+ hours or overnight events: Minimum of 3 safe environment compliant adults for every 10 children. No overnight trip shall be chaperoned by less than three safe environment compliant adults.

Overnight events require at least two (2) chaperones of the same sex as the participants.

Example: If an overnight event includes 8 girls and 9 boys, then there must be at least two male and two female chaperones for the event to enable safe monitoring of the activities during the overnight event/trip.

Overnight Retreat Policy

With respect to ensuring the integrity of the safety of our youth within the Diocese of Fort Worth the following Diocesan Overnight Retreat Policy is as follows:

Any youth oriented overnight retreat must have approval from the Department of Catechesis and Evangelization and Office of Youth Ministry:

Any parish or group who desires to hold an overnight retreat must submit to the Department of Catechesis and Evangelization and Office of Youth Ministry an explanation in writing/e-mail of the nature and purpose of the event.

Overnight Confirmation Retreats are prohibited. Instead, appropriate Days of Reflection are better suited both catechetically and pastorally to assist a student in understanding the nature, premise, and intent of the sacrament of Confirmation.

Diocesan Guest Speaker Approval Process

The purpose of the Diocesan Guest Speaker Approval Process is two-fold:

To ensure all incoming lay speakers/groups are properly vetted for fidelity to the doctrinal teachings of the Catholic Church as directed by the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

To ensure that all incoming lay speakers/groups are properly vetted and up to date with their Safe Environment status in order to assure the safety of all parishioners within the Diocese of Fort Worth.

To begin the process of inviting a guest speaker to your parish or event please utilize the following documents: <https://fwdioc.org/approved-speaker-guidelines-en-8-9-21.pdf> <https://fwdioc.org/bilingual-request-form-8-12-21.pdf> <https://fwdioc.org/bilingual-testimonial-of-suitability-8-12-21.pdf>

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. However, there are certain activities that need to be thought through carefully, before deciding to participate. 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 our Diocese, Christina Ablorh, for direction on choosing a potentially dangerous activity. There are certain activities that represent hostile environments to which young people should not be exposed. Examples of hostile environments include activities where there is a demonstration of 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 to responsible participation in their community and their faith without taking them into harm's way. **NO CAUSE IS WORTH PUTTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN DANGER OR INTO A HOSTILE SITUATION.**

Taking Teens OUT OF STATE

Only high school teens of at least 14 years of age should be taken to out of state or out of country activities and/or events. Teens younger than 14 and not in high school should not be taken to out-of-state or out-of-country activities and/or events. Remember also that release forms must be notarized if going out of state or out of the country.

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 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) to clarify any question of the presence of youth at a particular event, program, or class.

Parents may believe youth were at a particular event, especially those who drive themselves, 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 ministers and those who are adults serving the youth are urged to remember that 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 into the care of an adult who is not the parent or guardian without express permission.

Transportation

In general, it is best to limit any church-provided transportation as much as possible. Thus, whenever possible, it's best to have participants meet at the location. If that is not practical, the next best option is to hire a contracted carrier or utilize public transportation (i.e. airlines, city buses, etc.) If public transportation is used, no further information is required. However, if transportation is provided through a contracted carrier, signed contracts should be executed with appropriate hold harmless/indemnity language protecting the parish and the Diocese. Also, contracted carriers should provide proof of insurance with minimum limits of liability of \$2,000,000 CSL (Combined Single Limit) for in-state travel and \$5,000,000 CSL for travel involving multiple states.

The third option would be utilization of volunteer drivers. A volunteer driver should always be a minimum of 21 years of age and not have any impairment which could prohibit safely driving the vehicle. If the volunteer will be responsible for transporting other individuals, the recommended minimum age is 25. Volunteer drivers should complete the Volunteer Driver Form.

Keep in mind that the use of 11(including driver) to 15 Passenger Vans is Prohibited!

Please use the following guidelines when determining if volunteer drivers and vehicles will be used:

- Are all drivers aged 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 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.
- 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 combine bigger students with smaller students in contact sports.
- Don't force everyone in your group to play the game if they do not want to.
- 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 persons aged 25 or older who have been properly instructed on the use of the craft.