



## **200.51**

□ POLICY

■ GUIDELINE

### **YOUTH PROTECTION**

#### **BEST PRACTICES FOR SCREENING AND MONITORING ADOLESCENT VOLUNTEERS**

##### **Introduction**

In many parishes, adolescents provide a substantial amount of service in programs for younger children. Service projects that provide babysitting for parents during the holidays or assistance with religious education classes or nurseries during Mass are just a few of the ways that adolescents serve parishes and learn about the responsibility of parish life. Often these projects are part of preparation for Confirmation.

However, it is important not to assume automatically that adolescents are “safe” just because of their participation in ministry. Research tells us that adolescents are a high risk group for sexual abuse of children. In fact, studies in the United States indicate that juveniles are responsible for 40 percent of the sexual assaults on children under the age of 6 and 39 percent of the attacks on children ages 11-16.[i] One study in the U.S. shows that 13 to 14 year olds are responsible for more than three times the number of sexual molestation cases of children under the age 12 than any other age group over 16.[ii]

Over the past several years, through *Protecting God's Children for Adults* sessions and our diocesan policies and audits, we have raised awareness about the need to screen adults before allowing them access to our children—and the need to screen and monitor those with access to children is not just confined to adults. We must pay attention to the adolescents who are caring for and ministering to our young children.

##### **Screening**

Many parishes are looking for guidance in their efforts to conduct thorough screening and meet the needs of ministry to all the children in the community. There is no easy way to screen adolescents. In fact, some traditional screening tools will not help when the applicant is an adolescent. We cannot conduct civilian criminal background checks on juveniles, for example.



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Even those with convictions are protected from discovery through background checks and the record is wiped clean when the young person turns 18.

This means that it is essential that policies be established and enforced that govern the interactions between adolescents and the young people they serve. Traditional screening tools including applications, references (perhaps including letters of references from non-related adults who are familiar with the young person's character), and personal interviews are crucial parts to any effective screening process.

Parish policies and procedures must also take into account the limited ability to screen adolescent applicants. For example, require that a policy-compliant adult supervise all interactions, programs, and events involving adolescents and younger children. In addition, maintain a policy similar to the Boy Scouts' "two-deep leadership." Within a parish, this means that there be no less than two responsible adult leaders present with young people, and both of them must be compliant with all diocesan policies.

Establishing policies and going through the traditional application and interview processes can help parishes to establish a responsible process for screening adolescents who are involved in children's ministries.

#### **Training**

Because of the sensitive nature of the material, adolescents are not permitted to attend Protecting God's Children for Adults sessions. Parish leaders should work with adolescent volunteers to make them aware of parish and diocesan policies.

The *Protecting God's Children Quick Reference Guide* brochure should be shared with adolescent volunteers to make them aware of our plan to protect children and youth. When sharing information about child sexual abuse with adolescent volunteers, particular attention to the following will also be beneficial:

- The harm sexual abuse causes.
- The danger of dwelling on unhealthy fantasies.
- The importance of reporting suspected abuse, including abuse committed by a peer.



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#### **Warning Signs**

Some of the behavioral warning signs of risky adolescents are the same as those of risky adults. Additionally, the following signs are unique to the adolescent offender.

Risky adolescents may:

- Explore his or her own natural sexual curiosity with younger children or those of differing size, status, ability, or power. This means an adolescent may be more overtly sexual with young children.
- Focus on being with younger children rather than with their own peers. This adolescent spends an unusual amount of time with younger children when he or she could be with peers.
- Share “secret” places or hideaways with younger children or create and play “special” games with them that involve too much touching and demands for silence.
- Insist on physical contact with a child, even when the child resists the attention.

[i] Oliver, B. (2007) Child Abuse & Neglect, “Three steps to reducing child molestation by adolescents”, Vol 31, 683.

[ii] Ibid.

Based on *Screening and Monitoring Adolescent Volunteers*, by: Sharon Doty, J.D., M.H.R. and published by The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, 2008.