

Parenting for Prevention

STUDY GUIDE



Faith Communities Keeping Children & Youth Safe | www.dovesnest.net | anna@dovesnest.net

Circle of Grace is a Christian safe environment curriculum that helps to form and educate children and youth about the value of positive relationships with God and others. It teaches children and youth how to identify and maintain appropriate physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual boundaries; recognize when boundary violations are about to occur; and demonstrate how to take action when boundaries are threatened or violated.

Adults assist children and young people to recognize God's love by helping them understand that each of us lives and moves in a Circle of Grace. You can imagine your own Circle of Grace by putting your arms above your head then circling them down in front of your body, including side to side. This circle, front to back, holds who you are in your body and through your senses. It holds your very essence in mind, heart, soul, and sexuality.

Whether or not your church is currently using *Circle of Grace* (email anna@dovesnest.net for a license or questions about accessing your curriculum), parents and caregivers can learn more about *Circle of Grace* concepts and how to introduce and affirm them at home. We all know a parent is a child's first teacher! God has a vision for healthy relationships where all are respected, loved, and cared for. From early childhood to adulthood, our children are learning about their bodies and how to treat the bodies around them. As a faith community, we should be part of that journey.

Perfect prevention is impossible. But children are safer when they:

1. know their own boundaries and how to respond to inappropriate behavior;
2. know others' boundaries and how to get consent; and
3. are monitored by aware and supportive adults.

This three-page discussion guide includes age-specific suggestions as well as questions to promote conversations. It covers three areas: boundaries, consent, and parenting practices. The guide can be presented in one session or split into three, and it can be used in small groups, Sunday school classes, parenting groups, and more. As a parent, grandparent, caregiver, or teacher, here are some suggestions for building children's skills in cultivating loving and faithful relationships.

For more information, go to dovesnest.net. Working together, we can continue to increase the safety of all of our children.

Thank you for partnering with us to keep kids safe!

Thanks to Samuel Voth Schrag for this resource. Samuel is pastor of Peace Mennonite Church in Dallas, Texas, and a member of the Dove's Nest board. He is married to Rachel Voth Schrag, and they have two children, Jonah and Hannah.

Boundary Training

Children need to know what is and is not appropriate behavior from those around them.

How can we equip them to say no and to report safely?

“How do we reduce the horrifying amount of sexual violence in this country? We talk to our boys. Parents, family members, educators, clergy and other leaders have the opportunity and responsibility to model and teach consent from the time kids are old enough to walk.”¹

- a) **Teach children about their bodies.** Use correct anatomical names, and be explicit about what is and is not appropriate touch.
- b) **Encourage them to say no.** A child who never says no to a parent or caregiver will never say no to another adult. Back them up if they don't want to give or receive hugs.
- c) **Encourage communication.** Take children seriously. Listen carefully, and help them name feelings.
- d) **Trust children.** Encourage them to report things that happen that frighten them or make them uncomfortable. Practice talking about emotions and difficult experiences. Respond calmly with love and trust.
- e) **Talk with children.** Talk about setting boundaries, making choices before situations arise, the risks associated with early sexual activity, and the dangers of power imbalances in relationships. Also name and discuss situations that should be avoided, the risks associated with drug and alcohol use, and techniques to stay safe.

Discussion Questions:

1. How have you talked about physical boundaries with your children? If you have not, do you have ideas for starting the conversation? What concerns do you have?
2. How have you talked about sex and faithfulness with your children? How did your parents talk with you?
3. How would you like the church to talk to children about sex?
4. How can you support healthy boundary development in children at church?

¹ “I've Talked with Teenage Boys about Sexual Assault for 20 years. This Is What They Still Don't Know,” Laurie Halse Anderson, *Time* website, January 15, 2019, <http://time.com/5503804/ive-talked-with-teenage-boys-about-sexual-assault-for-20-years-this-is-what-they-still-dont-know/>

Consent Training

All children need to know how to respect others' boundaries and what consent means.

How can we equip them to respect others?

Consent needs to be informed, enthusiastic, sober, ongoing, and freely given.

- a) **Be attentive and respectful yourself.** Each child is a precious child of God. You want all children to appreciate that they are made in the image and likeness of God and that sexuality is a gift.
- b) **Start young.** More than 30 percent of abuse is committed by people under eighteen. Talk often, but not necessarily long. Short, clear reminders, perhaps that relate to something on the radio or television, are more effective teaching moments than “the talk” or long lectures.
- c) **Talk about consent in age-appropriate ways.** Use sentences like “We don’t touch people without their permission,” “Make sure to ask instead of grabbing that toy,” “You can say no to that,” and “We don’t touch another person’s penis, vagina, or butt.”
- d) **Define consent.** Be clear that consent needs to be informed, enthusiastic, sober, ongoing, and freely given. There needs to be a “yes!” Most sexual assaults occur between people who know one another, often when a person does not take “no” for an answer. All children should know what it means to give consent themselves and also what it means for others to give consent. Everyone has the authority to move from “yes” to “no.”
- e) **Name the consequences.** Consequences include harm to others and to one’s self from sexual violence.
- f) **Talk about the media.** Discuss ways that it provides a warped vision of consent and healthy sexuality.
- g) **Talk about power.** This includes male/female dynamics, age dynamics, group pressure, and about Jesus’s vision of mutual love and servant relationships.
- h) **Talk about pornography, and monitor internet and phone use.** Pornography use is widespread among adolescent males in particular, and often includes nonconsensual sexual behavior, which evidence suggests is shaping their behavior and understanding. ²

Discussion Questions:

1. What are your thoughts about consent and healthy relationships?
2. How have you talked to the children in your life about consent?
3. How have you talked to them about healthy relationships?
4. What do you think your children would say about healthy sex if you asked them?

² Foubert, John D. “The Public Health Harms of Pornography: The Brain, Erectile Dysfunction, and Sexual Violence,” *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Article 6 (2017)

Parenting Practices

As parents or caregivers, we also have things we can do to keep our children safe.

What suggestions would you add to this list?



- a) **Model good boundaries.** Treat your children and the children in your life with respect. Don't touch them without permission, and listen carefully to them.
- b) **Build relationships of trust.** Set appropriate boundaries for your child but give freedom within those boundaries. Be clear and honest about what you do and do not monitor. Be curious rather than accusatory. Tell the truth about sexuality. Clear, honest explanations help build a framework of understanding.
- c) **Know what your children are up to.** Know where they are and who they are with. Encourage a buddy system—go with a trusted peer, or don't go at all. Teach your children how to contact you, and encourage them to do so.
- d) **Watch for grooming behavior.** Pay attention to people who want to be alone with your children, give them individualized attention, or seem overly generous. Don't give in or go along. Abusers—who are almost always people parents know and trust—are experts at manipulation, using flattery, minimization, jealousy, intimidation, and anger to cover their behavior. "Don't worry so much" from someone who you're worrying about is a red flag.
- e) **Trust.** Trust children if they report. Report their concerns to professionals, not just to a pastor.
- f) **Look for the "real question."** Often children will bring a trial balloon to see how you respond before digging into a more serious problem.
- g) **Recognize changes in a child's behavior.** Change in behavior is a signal of change in a child's life. It is important to tell your children "I will always love you" while asking them about the changed behavior. Make sure you continue to observe carefully and inquire with others who care for and about your child.
- h) **Encourage good practices in your communities.** Encourage two adults at every function, education for adults, windows in doors, etc. If communities won't take basic preventative steps, don't participate, and be public as to why you're not participating.
- i) **Trust your instincts.** Listen to your gut feelings. If you have doubts, listen to them. Your body often knows what your head hasn't yet figured out.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are there suggestions on this list that caught your attention or ones that you have questions about?
2. Are there any things you might add?
3. Are there ways that your church community or other kind of community might do better? (No community is perfect!)