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### Protecting God's Children for Adults

Vol. 20 No. 7

## Minors Who Are Serving or Assisting in Volunteer-Type Activities

By [The VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> Programs](#)

**Editor's Note:** This article is pertaining to situations regarding minors who are serving or assisting as a



volunteer or employee within a ministry or program. It is not intended to cover personal situations that occur outside of a parish, school, or diocese, such as a minor babysitting other children.

### Article:

As adults, we have the responsibility (and privilege!) of keeping children and youth safe from abuse and other harm. Although it is important to give minors the tools they need to help us keep them safe-it is the role of adults, not minors-to protect children and the vulnerable.

This usually makes sense on paper, but sometimes it can be confusing in real life situations. What does it mean to say that adults are the primary protectors of children? That we are responsible for their safety? That children are not responsible for the safety of other children, yet, that children can help safety efforts?



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### The VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> Programs

Within a program or ministry, no minor should be in a supervisory role over other children or youth. Putting a minor in charge of other minors within a program could result in risk management issues as well as ethical concerns. However, this does not mean minors cannot serve in volunteer/service capacities, or even as employees in some cases. Consider the following:

- In an employee type of activity, one example of employment for a child within a diocese, parish or school may involve answering phones over the weekend or after hours for a parish. Another may involve simple filing responsibilities.
- With a volunteer type of activity, a teen may sign up to assist with a church bake sale, or may assist with usher duties, or may assist with nursery or childcare operations during Mass, or, may help out with serving food at a parish or school event. Sometimes youth may be asked to assist in volunteer-type activities with catechesis or religious education activities; they may often be called "assistant catechists."

Please note, when we denote that children should never be "in charge" of "supervising" other children, this is not limited to situations of long time periods. In other words, "that children may never be responsible for the safety of other children," it does mean that even if a minor is acting within a youth leadership role in volunteer-type activities, that they should never have the sole responsibility of supervision of children within a program, no matter how short the time period.

Meeting this standard involves always having adults present and responsible for supervising programs, even if there are minors present who are assisting. While minors can certainly assist with leading small groups, classes or activities, it is important to always have adults also supervising to be responsible for maintaining the safest environment possible. The role of the youth in leadership positions is to help, but not to be "in charge" or supervising any children. When there is a minor in a leadership role, the adults overseeing them should make it very clear that the minor is not in charge of, nor do they have supervisory power over anyone else.

Something to keep in mind is that when it comes to minors serving in volunteer types of activities, these are different situations than when they are just with their friends or peers. For example, if a teenager goes to a shopping center with friends, they are not in a leadership position and these parameters would not apply. This is also true if the youth is going to a friend's house-they would not be responsible for supervising the actions of their friends (as this role would fall to the adults in the house).

**Whether you are interacting with children as part of your volunteer or employee role, or, be very clear in your communication to children that they are not responsible for each other. It is not the child or youth's job (or role) to protect anyone within a ministry or program.** Misinforming children by saying that "one person's welfare is a child's responsibility" could make a child feel more guilt if they were not able to prevent or stop abuse from occurring for themselves or a friend. The distinction is that there are times when children are being abused, or they know a peer needs help, but they do not always know the best way to assist. Youth may make promises with their peers to keep safety secrets in an attempt to protect their friends, not realizing that it's most important to deliver knowledge about unsafe situations to safe adults. They'll also need to know that it's never their fault (nor will it ever be their fault) if they or someone they know has been abused, or is hurting. Being a safe friend means that children do the "safe thing" for themselves, and for each other-meaning that they perform action when and where they can, such as taking the information to a safe adult, or that they intervene in age-appropriate safe ways when they are aware of a problem.

In their role as helpers, it should be communicated to youth who serve in positions for the church or school that:

- It's my role as a safe adult to keep you safe, and you can help, if you can.
- If there are any issues or concerns that they have or become aware of, these should be communicated to a safe adult.
- This includes if another child discloses sexual abuse or inappropriate behavior to another friend; it is not the responsibility of the minor to report this information to the authorities, nor is it their actual responsibility to communicate it to an adult. Rather, it is helpful for them to communicate it to a safe adult (who would then make an official report) if they believe they can.

When we understand that children and youth can help safe adults to protect them by acting as "helpers," we are better able to give them the tools they need to help us maintain safe environments. Thank you for everything you do to be a protector of children and the vulnerable.

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**1) What are some elements to remember as we interact with youth, whether they are serving or assisting in volunteer-type activities or simply participating within our ministerial programs?**

- A)  It is the role of adults to keep youth safe.
- B)  Youth have the responsibility to keep themselves and their friends safe when they know they're in danger.
- C)  Clearly communicate with youth that they are not responsible for each other.

- D)  Adults must be present during programs or events and are responsible for supervising.
- E)  All of the above.
- F)  A, C and D only.
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