



Why Should We Have a "Healthy Caution" Toward Adults?

All adults have a responsibility to keep children and youth safe while in their care, including employees and volunteers within parishes, schools and other child-serving environments. In the *Protecting God's*

Children[®] (PGC) program, we use the term "healthy caution" to help people ascertain how to approach the creation of safe environments. We are not proponents of blindly trusting anyone to be around children and youth. Instead, safe adults should have a "healthy caution" toward all adults in our child-serving ministries and programs. This article provides context to the phrase and gives helpful tips to caring adults.

An example of the term "healthy caution" being used in the PGC training is the statement "*Every adult must also maintain a healthy caution about any environment in which they entrust children—including activities and internet interactions.*"

What exactly do we mean when we say it's important to have a "healthy caution" toward adults who could have contact with children and youth? Let's review.

WHAT HAVING A HEALTHY CAUTION **DOES NOT** MEAN:

Having a healthy caution toward adults does not mean we assume that every adult is a potential abuser, lurking around every corner and ready to abuse children. In fact, we do want to increase awareness, but we do not want to feel paranoid or powerless about abuse. Paranoia causes unneeded anxiety that can actually interrupt our efforts at creating healthy and safe environments.

Having a healthy caution does not mean we expect parents to be involved in every single interaction or activity in which their children are participating. We know that adults cannot be physically present in every event of a child's life, and we acknowledge that the older children become, the more autonomy they should have—within reason. But, this means that *we have to equip these children* to be able to come to us when they are struggling in more autonomous situations.

Having a healthy caution does not mean that you personally must keep a "closer eye" on certain people, or that you should be a vigilante protector. These examples are one side of an extreme. Instead, we are asking everyone to have the perspective of caution that is situated more in the "middle ground." In this way, we are aware that abuse can happen in communities—even our own—and we are willing to do the right thing in response to concerns.

Having a healthy caution does not mean that we ignore warning signs of inappropriate behavior. There are clear signs of behavior that are inappropriate or problematic, which can be against a policy or code of conduct, or outlined in a Virtus safe environment training. We have learned the importance of noticing these behaviors and speaking up about them, rather than "turning a blind eye," justifying or rationalizing the behavior as harmless or "just the way that person is." It could be innocuous, but it could also be part of the grooming process or conditioning children to inappropriate behavior—and for these reasons, it must be addressed.

We all have a collective responsibility to ensure that any ministerial environment and all of the people within it are as safe as possible. When we know more, we have a greater responsibility for caution regarding their protection. Our overarching mindset should be to have the knowledge that children are vulnerable, and since we know this, there are greater responsibilities surrounding their care.

HERE IS WHAT HAVING A HEALTHY CAUTION TOWARD ADULTS **DOES** MEAN:

* Requiring all adults to follow the rules outlined in the Policy or Code of Conduct, regardless of their role or position.

* Being willing to take a look at our own personal behavior and boundaries, to better align them to appropriate best behavioral practices, so as not to condition vulnerable children to more likely be violated or abused by someone else.

- * In ministerial environments, **monitoring the behavior of all adults** when interacting with children and youth—no one receives special accommodations to violate the rules, and we are all held to a baseline standard.
- * Having frequent conversations with the children in our care regarding healthy relationships and appropriate interactions, and what they can do if they feel uncomfortable, scared or unsafe. Role playing these conversations, and how they might bring it up to a safe adult, can be extremely helpful in equipping children with the tools to be able to protect themselves in situations in which they feel uncomfortable or violated. In our personal lives, being willing to be more aware of the behavior of the adults around us, and **speaking up when something is amiss—regardless of how much we know or trust them** (not to accuse them, but to bring attention to something problematic). If you're afraid of how someone might react to an honest discussion about concerns, this might not be a healthy relationship
- * **Communicating any concerns** regarding inappropriate behavior within ministerial environments or relationships to a supervisor or safe environment office, and suspicions or disclosures of abuse to the appropriate child protection agency or local law enforcement.
- * Leadership **taking swift action** on any concerns that are communicated regarding the behavior of any adult.
- * Safe adults **maintain transparency** for both in-person interactions between adults and children, as well as interactions involving technology.

Maintaining a healthy caution toward adults is being welcoming, but also mindful, when it comes to adults interacting with children. On one end of the spectrum, if we have *zero caution*, that means we are open and fully trusting of anyone who comes in and interacts with children, without any oversight or monitoring (if we think of this as a Pendulum, it would be completely to one side). This can easily happen in faith-based and child serving organizations, and the consequences can be grave. On the other hand, having *extreme caution* could lead to paranoia to the extent that no one would be able to interact with children and youth, perhaps even assuming that any adult is out "to get" children (this involves the pendulum swinging all the way to the other side). This is more of a "fear" type of response, and it isn't healthy or practical.

Conversely, having a healthy caution is the middle ground (where the pendulum is situated evenly in the middle). Keep in mind that we all have different experiences, subjective levels of boundaries and understandings of what that equilibrium position should be. This is why we can rely on the organization's policies and code(s) of conduct to help us find that appropriate middle ground and keep the pendulum in the middle where it belongs.

Our collective experience and research have shown us that children are vulnerable and need protection. We also know there are adults in the world who manipulate and abuse children for their own gain, but that there are plenty of safe adults who are willing to help when properly educated. The larger our cohort of safe adults who are reacting to this public health issue of child abuse—based on the facts and known solutions, rather than fears—the more likely environments involving children will have adults who are mindful of their own behavior and carefully monitoring the behavior of others. When someone behaves inappropriately, it "sticks out," and we're more able to address the issue when we're looking at the same standards and expectations of appropriate behaviors as outlined in the policy or code of conduct. Having a healthy caution and implementing appropriate behavior gives us the opportunity to interrupt boundary-violating or grooming behaviors, prevent abuse before it can even happen, and put a stop to it abuse when it does occur.

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1) Which of the following demonstrates having a healthy caution toward adults interacting with children?

- A) Regularly role-playing conversations with children about how to speak up when they feel unsafe or violated.
- B) Being transparent only with in-person interactions, instead of maintaining transparency across all environments that include in-person or interactions involving technology.
- C) Requiring all employees to follow the rules outlined in the Policy or Code of Conduct, and ensuring there is at least one registered volunteer for every event where multiple volunteers may be present. As long as the lead volunteer is monitoring the behavior of others, the organization is showing a "healthy caution."
- D) All of the above.