

Church Safety Best Practices when Working with Youth during a Pandemic

Introduction: In this season, where COVID-19 compels congregations to gather virtually, many adults are wondering what that looks like for youth ministry. What boundaries are appropriate? The Yale Youth Ministry Institute has compiled these recommendations, for your consideration as you develop your own policy of church safety practices for virtual gatherings. (Note: While the advice below attempts to be universally applicable across all settings, it is highly encouraged that leaders be informed of their insurance provider's recommendations and policies.)

Recommendations:

1. Remote gatherings with youth should be advertised in advance, and should take place at particular times (e.g. 7pm on Sunday nights; Tuesday evening Bible study, etc.). This communicates clear expectations and consistency related to virtual youth events.
2. Two adults (not related to one another) should be present during all virtual gatherings with youth.
3. All adults interacting with youth virtually should still be background-checked and trained, in accordance with the congregation's church safety policy.
4. Every adult interacting with youth virtually should be well-versed in mandated reporter policies. It bears remembering that mandated reporting needs to happen within a short timeframe from a reporter's awareness of an incident.
5. Attention should be given to camera placement, and to the background visible, when gathering virtually.
6. Appropriate attire should be worn at all times when gathering virtually with youth.
7. All scheduled virtual gatherings should be password-protected.
8. When using a platform where this is an option (e.g. Zoom, Facebook), the meeting should be recorded, with recordings saved for the same amount of time as permission forms and other such documents are saved (per the congregation's church safety policy).
9. When interactions with youth occur outside of scheduled meetings, a "rule of three" should be initiated whenever possible. (A "rule of three" includes at least one other adult in the communications.) When this is not possible, every communication should be saved for documentation, and a copy of those documents should be given to the minister, or another trusted adult leader in the church community.
10. Unless an emergency, interactions with youth should take place at normal times of day (e.g. casually chatting with youth in the middle of the night is rarely appropriate).
11. If youth have previously signed a Behavioral Covenant for their youth group, that covenant remains in effect when gathering virtually. If no covenant is in place, one could be developed, so as to ensure common expectations and a safe environment for everyone.
12. Any incidences in misconduct, inappropriate behavior, or other safety concerns should be reported immediately to the youth leader and/or church minister.