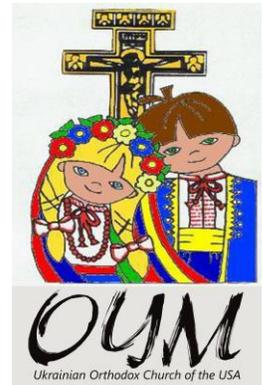


Office of Youth & Young Adult Ministry Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA

General Best Practices in Youth Protection for Parishes



What is Youth Protection? Youth Protection is a set of policies, training and regulations put in place for the safety and care for youth in organizational settings. Brian Wendell, with the Boy Scouts of America, describes youth protections this way, “Think of Youth Protection like the virus-protection software on your computer. The software is updated regularly with the newest definitions of ways your computer could be threatened. The software company—McAfee, Norton, etc.—blocks known malicious sites and software, and it warns you when a link could be harmful. But it’s still up to you to use common sense and not click those links. And reporting suspicious Web sites is your job, too.”

What does this have to do with the church? As the church, the body of Christ, the protection and safety of all its members should be foremost in our thoughts and actions. When we drive a car, we put on our safety belts, follow the rules of the road, stay sober, don’t text, etc. We hopefully do everything we can to keep our body safe from harm and from harming others while on the road. Protecting the “body” of Christ’s church is just as important and just as many factors should be considered when doing so.

With concern to our youth, it is our responsibility as adults in our parish communities to care for those in our charge. Just as parents put the safety of their children as a priority.

St. John Chrysostom tells us, “*With us everything should be secondary compared to our concern with children, and their upbringing in the instruction and teaching of the Lord.*” If we are to be an integral part in the upbringing, instruction and teaching of the Lord, then we must also integrate how we keep them safe while doing so.

This best practice document will provide you with a guideline for developing youth protection in your parish. This is not an exhaustive guide but hopes to provide clergy, youth workers and parishes with a strong basis to establish their work.

Who is a youth worker? A youth worker should be defined as anyone in the direct care or ministry of youth. For our purposes, these roles may include: clergy, church school teachers, youth ministers, youth event volunteers, JR UOL advisors, event drivers, dance instructors, and sports coaches.

Where do we start?

There are some very basic and essential steps when beginning a youth protection plan for your parish. Let’s get started!

State Regulations – Each state has its own unique set of requirements for individuals working with youth. In most states, if you are not in compliance with their requirements, you are held accountable to the standards of the requirements whether you are following them or not. Claiming that you were not aware of your state requirements will not absolve you of possible prosecution or fines. It is your responsibility to keep informed!

Most state information may be found in the state department of human resources. If you are unable to locate in that department, a simple on-line search “(state) youth protection” should pull up resources to locate your state requirements.

Once you determine your state requirements, they should be a core component to your parish plan.

Insurance Expectations – The next step should be to contact your parish insurance carrier to determine what their expectations are for youth protection. Most insurance carriers will have some stipulation concerning youth protection standards for them to carry your policy. These standards will also help to guide your policy.

What do expect?

Most states and insurance companies will require some level of background checks for those working with youth in your parish. The level and frequency will vary. If your state and insurance company do not require background checks (although this is highly unlikely), it would be a best practice for your parish to hold this as part of your protection plan regardless.

The Office of Youth Ministry can provide background checks for parishes through Praesidium services. You can contact our office to discuss if this option fits your needs.

You should also expect the insurance company to require you to have a protection plan in place for your parish. In many states, if you do not have a protection plan, they would hold you accountable to a plan from a comparable entity to yours.

How do we develop a plan?

- Once you have determined your state and insurance requirements, utilize these as a basis for developing your plan. Items to consider for inclusion in your plan.
 - ✓ Create a code of conduct/guidelines/expectation for participants and advisors. You may want to include the youth in the creation of conduct expectations or a youth covenant. An example covenant and advisor guideline may be located at www.uocyouth.org/
 - ✓ Provide proper consent forms for participation, health/insurance information, liability, use of image, etc. Examples may be located at www.uocyouth.org/. Enumerate how these documents should be stored and who has access to them.
 - ✓ Have incident report forms, youth progress monitoring, etc to utilize as needed or warranted.
 - ✓ Ensure all youth workers know procedures for reporting suspected abuse to civil authorities and within the parish structure.

- ✓ Provide proper training and instruction for your youth workers in youth protection AND in youth work. This is vital to ensuring that your youth workers feel secure in their ministry. Confident and knowledgeable youth workers will hopefully lead to a well run ministry. Training opportunities could include: St. Sophia Youth Ministry Certification Course, online youth protection training through the Office of Youth Ministry or approved agencies, Orthodox retreats, workshops and conferences for youth work, a tailored training session conducted by the Office of Youth Ministry (in person or through webinar service), on-line webinars sponsored by Orthodox or youth professional institutions (ex. Boy/Girl Scouts, insurance company, local law enforcement). Training may also include safe driving courses for adults responsible for transporting youth to and from events. It may also be prudent to include parents in training sessions, so that they are aware of what your parish is doing and for their own awareness.
- ✓ Create a youth worker best practices for your parish. A best practices manual would include items such as supervision of youth (rule of three), discipline, how to handle difficult discussions such as drugs abuse, self-harm, or suicide.
- ✓ Require youth workers to complete an information/application form and a yearly ministry review
- ✓ It is suggested that parishes submit information on their youth workers to the Office of Youth & Young Adult Ministry on a regular basis. Information should include: Name, position, email, status of clearances (this does not mean results! Status, refers to when they were last submitted to the parish.) If anyone in you parish was flagged as unsuitable for service with youth, these names should also be submitted.

General Best Practices to Consider for the Youth Worker Manual

Supervision –

- Youth workers should not be left alone with only one child. There should always be at least three individuals together at anytime. This could be any mixture of adults and youth.
- If in a separate room, the door should have a window or be left ajar if possible.
- Adequate numbers of adults should be calculated for youth activities. You can obtain these ratios from your state or insurance company. For example, 1 adult for every 6 children preschool children and 1 adult for every twelve teenagers. However, it is our recommendation that a least two adults be present even with the lowest possible amount of your participation. This will ensure coverage in the event of having to deal with an emergency.
- Youth should not be left alone. Statistically it has been found that incidents occur when youth are unsupervised.

Discipline –

- Youth workers should never physically reprimand a youth. This is grounds for removal and possible prosecution.
- Youth workers should be trained on proper ways to discuss behavior issues with youth. We need to remember that every opportunity we are presented with our youth is a opportunity to bring the closer to Christ or to push them away. The way we discuss poor judgement, poor

behavior or the breaking of rules/covenants can mold the youth's future development as an individual and within Christ's Church. The Office of Youth Ministry can provide on-line and in-person training on these techniques (on-line training may also include professional training used by our camping ministry).

- Youth workers should be required to fill out either incident report forms or progress monitoring forms if there are any issues with youth behavior. These should be filed in a secure location and may be used if a situation escalates.

How to handle difficult situations – If we are doing our jobs correctly, we are creating strong and trusting relationships with our youth. When this occurs, youth, especially adolescence, may come to a youth worker do discuss issues that are weighing on them. Important techniques to know and develop:

- First and foremost, we should never react to our youth with disdain or judgement when they share something with us. We must remember that we interact with them as the presence of Christ and His Church.
- Don't put words into their mouths. Utilizing Empathetic Listening techniques, guide them in a discussion about what they are feeling, thinking and what to share. A resource for Empathetic Listening may be found <http://www.crossroadinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Camp-Counselor-as-the-Empathetic-Listener.pdf>
- Ensure that you are upfront with youth at all times, that you, as a youth worker, are available to them. You may speak in confidence but if something within a discussion raises red flags to a youth worker, they may need to speak to a parent, professional, or clergy. Youth workers CANNOT and SHOULD NOT keep secrets. Proper training will aid youth workers in discerning situations of when to keep information confidential and when to bring in others.
- Training is key in learning how to properly handle all difficult discussion.
- Youth workers should guide youth to further discussions with spiritual fathers. Youth workers can even offer to go with the youth to initiate the conversation.
- Once again, the Office of Youth Ministry may provide training in-person or on-line for handling difficult situations/conversation. On-line training also includes a professional service used by our camping ministry.
- Prayer – as in all things, prayer is one of our greatest gifts from our Lord in times of trial and uncertainty. Pray with your young person. Pray for your young person. Pray for their parents. Pray the Lord grant you the proper skills to handle the situation.

Emergency Plans – It is always wise to have a plan of action in the event of an emergency. Ensuring that all youth workers are appraised and well versed in the emergency procedures ensures a smooth and safe result. Emergencies to consider:

- Youth/adult with potentially tragic physical condition
- Youth/adult in need of emergency medical help
- Youth/adult in need of first aid
- Location is on fire
- Youth is lost or leaves location without divulging whereabouts

- Procedures for trips off parish property
- Natural disaster or accident at parish property (fire, flash flooding, etc.)

Being prepared is more than half the battle. Suggestions for emergency plans may be obtained from the OYM office. These plans are based upon emergency procedures enacted during our camping programs.

We realize that accomplishing and maintaining youth protection in your parish may seem like a daunting task. However, with some planning and organization, it will soon become routine and a necessary part of your parish ministry.

Let us remember the words of St. John Chrysostom, *“Neglect of children is one of the greatest sins, and it is the highest degree of impiety. And so that I might not seem to draw an unfounded conclusion, I will demonstrate this with experience itself, so that you will know that even though we may have everything we need, and all is beautifully arranged, we will nevertheless be subjected to the most extreme punishment if we do not take care for the salvation of our children.”*

For further questions or consultation, please contact the Consistory Office of Youth & Young Adult Ministry at uocyouth@aol.com.