

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Good Boundaries Yield Healthy Relationships

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Imagine that you are standing in the middle of 25ft circle in the middle of a school gymnasium. The circle represents your life. Everything inside the circle is you and everything outside the circle is not you.

Think about what fills up your circle:

- Everything you care about
- All the things you believe and value
- Your opinions and points of view
- Your likes and dislikes
- The people and things you love
- The people and things you find attractive and unattractive
- The things you know and don't know
- The things you want
- The things that are uniquely YOU!



A million things make you different from the person next to you and every one of those differences establishes a boundary. The more you know about these things, yourself and how you operate, the more you can see and establish boundaries for greater harmony and a more efficacious ministry. Your boundaries, in turn, allow you to help others set appropriate boundaries in their own lives.

The problem is that even though boundaries are very important to our effectiveness in serving others, unless they are violated in some way most people don't think much about them. We instinctively honor some boundaries. For example, when someone steps too close to us within our "personal space" and we are uncomfortable, we simply move away or leave. We learn how to deflect questions that are "too personal" by changing the subject or pretending we didn't hear. We feel uneasy when a clerk at the retail store asks for our phone number or address before they ring up our purchases. We frequently give out the information? Then we wish we hadn't? Because the minute we give out our phone number we are sure that we will start getting a barrage of phone calls? Probably at dinner time? From persistent and, often annoying, telemarketers.

We don't usually think about these situations as violations of personal boundaries, but they are. They are simple boundary violations, but violations never the less. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable about something or upset about a situation that occurred to us without realizing that the reason we are responding in this way is because a boundary violation occurred. Beginning to recognize boundaries and notice how they impact all our relationships can make a real difference in our own lives and the effectiveness of our individual ministries.

Boundaries” are the limits that define one person as separate from another or others. They promote and preserve personal integrity and give us a clear sense of self and how to function in relation to others.

Boundaries are unique to each individual and they are based on perceptions, personal histories, values, goals, culture and concerns. They bring order to life and definition to the way people let others treat them. They also bring understanding as to why others do and say the things they do in relationships.

Boundaries are inner limits and can be grounded in personal, moral, legal, or professional considerations and are physical and emotional. For example, one of the most basic boundaries is physical space. Think about it. When someone steps too close for comfort, what do you do? What do others do? How do you react? Do you step back or simply tolerate the behavior? What about other people’s reactions? Are they the same as yours?

Another powerful boundary involves language. One of the most powerful words human beings can use to establish a boundary is “no”. Are you someone who has difficulty saying “no” or who reacts negatively when someone else says “no” to you? Do you find it uncomfortable saying “no” to someone you care about, or someone in authority, or someone you respect? Do you react negatively or strongly when you hear “no” from someone you are trying to help?

“No” establishes a boundary. As boundaries are not always physical, noticing your own and other peoples’ reactions to that word can help you see where there are uncertain or unclear boundaries, showing you what it looks like to violate boundaries without touching someone.

Identifying and honoring personal boundaries is essential to providing responsible, effective ministry. Seeing that some boundaries are not appropriate and “resetting” them is also a hallmark of good ministry skills. Violating boundaries can destroy the pastoral relationship and interrupt any possibility of a successful ministerial relationship.

In professional situations, people are at risk when their needs and the conditions that produced the needs demand resolution and they must rely on professionals to deal with the issues. Dependence on professionals such as counselors, clergymen, physicians, and social workers exposes the needs of the individual requesting support.

Violating boundaries also occurs when a trusted person or someone in a professional relationship takes advantage of the vulnerability of an individual seeking assistance. Violating boundaries is destructive. It destroys trust and can destroy lives. It is critical that people in this type of ministry pay attention to this risk because pastoral relationships are particularly susceptible to violation of personal boundaries.

For example, when a member of the faith community is seeking counsel, there is always an imbalance in the power in the relationship. Boundaries are violated when the personal needs of the person in authority infringe on the physical, sexual, emotional or spiritual boundaries of the person seeking help. Those in interpersonal and counseling ministries must be aware of these risks and pay attention to some basic guidelines that help maintain balance in difficult circumstances or challenging relationships.

You also may be confronted with situations where the boundaries are not so clear. In some cases, the person seeking help may be asking for or expecting support that you feel is beyond the appropriate boundaries of the particular relationship. In those situations, the questions to ask are: “Does this (the action or encounter) serve the needs of the person seeking my counsel or service?”, and/or “Will that action or encounter empower the person to be better able to deal with their own circumstances and situations?” If any act or encounter with someone who is seeking assistance or support from you is suspect, or if the answer to either or both of the questions is “no” or even “probably not”, don’t do it. Find another way to support the person that does not cross the line or negatively impact your boundaries, or theirs.

Preserving appropriate boundaries within the context of ministry is the responsibility of the one providing the service. That person is always in a position of authority in the situation. Being alert to risky situations; noticing and pointing out risky boundaries; and adhering to strict standards of conduct can help assure that the ministerial relationship is one that nurtures the person seeking assistance and leaves the person who is serving with an experience of making a difference in the life of another.

Until each of us is aware of our own boundaries and sensitive to the boundaries of the other people in our lives, even well-intentioned people will intrude on personal space. As you become clearer about your boundaries and become more aware of the boundaries—or lack of boundaries—with those to whom you serve, you will greatly increase your effectiveness in meeting the needs of those seeking your care. Good boundaries yield healthy relationships.