

Legal Issues - Touching Policy

Second article in a series on the subject of Child Abuse in America. This a significant problem and camp leaders are increasingly finding themselves faced with difficult decisions in dealing with this issue. We share with you here information submitted by Ed Ditto {West of Heaven Christian Camp in Oklahoma} in hopes that it will guide other camps in their preparation to deal with this issue. Although adopted for a church youth group in a local congregation, we hope portions can find application in a youth camp setting. PLEASE consult your local and state authorities before placing policies into effect.

We live in a society where child abuse is a reality. One way the church deals with this issue is by taking steps to protect the teens in our care. The church has implemented a policy on touching and affection that will safeguard our teens while promoting a positive, nurturing environment for ministry to them. The guidelines below are to be carefully followed by anyone working with our teens. A general guideline is **WWJT**: What/Where/Who/When/Why Would Jesus Touch? Conscientious application of this general guideline should insure a healthy environment. Some specific guidelines are given followed by several examples.

- Touching and other forms of appropriate physical affection between workers and teens are important for a teen's development and may under the appropriate circumstances be suitable in our church setting.
- Physical affection should be appropriate to the age of the child or teen. (For example, it may be appropriate for a four-year-old to sit in a nursery worker's lap and give a kiss on the cheek, but it is not appropriate for a teenager and youth leader to behave this way.)
- Appropriate touching should be initiated by the teen. It should be a response to the teen's need for comforting, encouragement, or affection. It must **not** be based upon the adult's emotional need.
- Touching and affection should only be given when in the presence of other youth ministry workers. It is much less likely that touches will be inappropriate or misconstrued as such when two adult workers are present and the touching is open to observation.
- Touching behavior should not give even the appearance of wrongdoing. As ministry workers our behavior must foster trust at all times; it should be above reproach.
- A teen's preference not to be touched must be respected. Do not force touch or affection upon a reluctant teen.
- Church workers are responsible to protect teens under their supervision from inappropriate touching by others.
- Church workers must promptly discuss inappropriate touching or other questionable behavior by other workers with their ministry leader.

Some examples (not an exhaustive list) are: "High Fives" are almost always appropriate. Holding hands except at prayer time is usually not appropriate. A pat on the top or back of the shoulder is usually appropriate. "Shoulder-to-shoulder" hugs may be appropriate. "Full-on, front-to-front" hugs are seldom appropriate. Opposite sex back rubs are rarely appropriate. A teen girl playfully feeling a male youth worker's cleanly shaven face may rarely be appropriate. A male youth worker playfully feeling a teen girl's shaved leg is never appropriate. Opposite sexes sitting on each-other's laps, shoulders, or anywhere else is seldom appropriate. Opposite sex wrestling or play fighting is seldom appropriate.

{If you would like to share information you have on this or other Legal Issues, please submit to the editor}