

# Family, Faith and Circle of Grace

## Introduction

If you are reading this introduction, you are probably considering how to incorporate your diocese's youth safety curriculum, *Circle of Grace*, into your family faith formation program. You are probably also wondering why it's important.

The USCCB Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth requires all dioceses to teach a safety program to their children and youth. This requirement spans all the religious education ministries, including family faith formation. It is always an exciting time when parents are involved in their child's faith formation. The Archdiocese of Omaha is experiencing the same growth in forming families together. We recognize the importance of providing our parishes and our *Circle of Grace* partners guidance on incorporating the curriculum in your family program.

This is intended to be used for parish religious education or family faith formation programs. We invite schools as well to consider a "*Family, Faith and Circle of Grace*" night with their parents.

**Safety programs for your children and youth could never be more important than now. Parents/guardians being present, and part of the gathering reinforces to their children the value of this important safety curriculum.** You will see in the following chapters, that we are recommending the model of families gathering first, then children/youth and parents receive formation on safety separately.

There are several reasons for this model. First, it gives the parents time to discuss key topics without being guarded because the children and youth are present.

Secondly, it gives the children and youth a chance to discuss the lesson with their peers. Sometimes, kids are reluctant to participate when parents are present. There are many reasons kids might not tell their parents, who love and do everything to protect them, when there is concerns about boundaries or abuse. The reasons can range from wanting to protect their parents, to believing the abuse/boundary violation was their fault. Those who hurt children do everything possible to silence the child including statements about their parent not believing them. Therefore, *Circle of Grace* has the child identify trusted adults in addition to their parents.

Each grade teaches three key components: 1) sacredness of the person, 2) boundaries and 3) what action needs to be taken when there is a concern. The following *Circle of Grace* meditation/concept is used throughout the curriculum.



## *Family, Faith and Circle of Grace*

*Each family gathers in a circle quietly. Parents are asked to first raise their hands high as a visual way of inviting and covering their family in this holy space. Then the group leader directs the following:*

*Families raise your hands above your head  
and then bring  
your outstretched arms slowly down  
Extend your arms in front of you  
and then behind you  
embrace all of the space around you  
Slowly  
reach down to your feet.  
Know that **God** is in this space with you.  
This is your **Circle of Grace**.  
You are in it.*

*What would our world look like if families all lived believing and truly knowing that God is that close?*

# Summary of the Key Concepts of “Circle of Grace”



## **God gives each of us a Circle of Grace where He is always Present:**

*Raise your hands above your head, then bring your outstretched arms slowly down.*

*Extend your arms in front of you and then behind you embrace all of the space around you  
slowly reach down to your feet.*

*Know that **God** is in this space with you. This is your **Circle of Grace**; you are in it.*

## **God is Present because He desires a relationship with us.**

- God is with us when we are happy and sad. God does not cause bad things to happen to us. He loves us very much.
- God desires to help us when we are hurt, scared, or confused (unsafe).
- Having faith may not take away all of life’s struggles. It is because of these struggles, God promised to always be present; providing guidance and comfort in our time of need.

## **God helps us know what belongs in our Circle of Grace**

- Our feelings help us know about ourselves and the world around us.
- God helps us know what belongs in our *Circle of Grace* by experiencing peace, love or contentment when something or someone good comes into our *Circle of Grace*.

## **God helps us know what does not belong in our Circle of Grace**

- God desires to help us when we are hurt, scared, or confused (unsafe).
- The Holy Spirit prompts (alerts) us that something does not belong in our *Circle of Grace* by giving us “a funny or uncomfortable feeling” that something is not safe. This feeling is there because God wants us to be safe.

## **God helps us know when to ask for help from someone we trust.**

- God gives us people in our lives to help us.
- God wants us to talk to trusted adults about our worries, concerns or “funny/ uncomfortable feelings” so they can help us be safe.



## Code of Conduct for Children and Young People

I understand that I am created by God and live in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I understand that God does not want or cause bad things to happen.

I understand that God is with me even when I am hurting or sad.

I understand the *Circle of Grace* that God gives me and others.

I understand that I can help stamp out “bullying” by not being a silent bystander.

I understand that speaking out and taking positive actions when bullying occurs makes a difference.

Because of this understanding, when I interact with someone, either in person or when using technology such as texting and social networking, I will strive to:

- Have my actions be safe and show respect toward myself and others.
- Have my words and actions represent the truth.
- Identify and maintain appropriate and healthy boundaries and relationships.
- Talk with my parents/trusted adult if I have concerns (bullying) or if there is a question about these boundaries are violated.

Student \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

Parent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

# FAMILY, FAITH AND CIRCLE OF GRACE

## *Grade K through High School*

Dear Parent,

Out of concern for all God's people and in response to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, we have a program for the safe environment education of children and young people supported and mandated by

*Diocese/eparchies will establish 'safe environment' programs. They will cooperate with parents, civil authorities, educators, and community organizations to provide education and training for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, and others about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children. Dioceses/eparchies will make clear to clergy and members of the community the standards of conduct for clergy and other persons in positions of trust with regard to sexual abuse.*

*Article 12 – Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*

This program is called ***Circle of Grace***. It is meant to complement and be integrated into the excellent programs and curricula for the formation of children and young people in our schools and religious education programs. ***Circle of Grace*** aims to equip our children and young people by arming them with essential knowledge and skills grounded in the richness of our faith. This program helps children and young people to understand their own (and other's) dignity in mind, body, and spirit.

### ***What is a Circle of Grace?***

The Catholic Church teaches that God has created each of us as unique and special. Genesis 1:27 tells us that we are created "male and female in God's image" and that God saw this as "very good." In that goodness, we are meant to respect ourselves and everyone else as persons created and loved by God.

Adults assist children and young people to recognize God's love by helping them to understand that each of us lives and moves in a *Circle of Grace*. You can imagine your own *Circle of Grace* by putting your arms above your head then circle down in front of your body including side to side. This circle, front to back, holds who you are in your body and through your senses. It holds your very essence in mind, heart, soul, and sexuality.

*Why is it important to help our children understand their Circle of Grace?*

God intends our relationships in life to be experiences of divine love. Respectful, nurturing, loving relationships increase our understanding of our own value and help us to love others. It is never too early to help children and young people understand how very special they are and how relationships in life are called to be sacred. Understanding this can help them to protect the special person they are and to be respectful of others.

Adults, especially parents, as they strive to provide a safe and protective environment, hold the responsibility to help children and young people understand and respect their own dignity and that of others. A truly safe and protective environment is one where children and young people recognize when they are safe or unsafe and know how to bring their concerns, fears, and uncertainties to the trusted adults in their lives.

*How is the Circle of Grace Program different from other protection programs?*

According to research, one in four girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused by age eighteen.<sup>1</sup> Many protection programs focus on “stranger danger”; however, up to ninety percent (90%) of the time the perpetrator, such as a relative or family friend of is known to the child or young person. *Circle of Grace* goes beyond just protection by helping children and young people understand the sacredness of who they are and how to seek help through their relationships with trusted adults.

Please feel free to contact your Family Faith Formation Director if you have questions or want more information.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org) or <http://nccanch.acfhhs.gov>

## **Key Steps for Administrators, Directors of Religious Education, Youth Ministry Directors, and Leaders When There is a Sensitive or Concerning Situation**

If a child discloses clear information of abuse and immediate safety is a concern the following steps should occur:

- Assure the child that you will contact people who can help them be safe.
- Ask Director/Administrator for help reporting and with further interaction with the child/family. (Refer to your diocesan policies and state law)
- Authorities will be responsible for interviewing the child so keep questions to a minimum.
- Ask authorities who will contact the parents and when this will occur.
- Assure the child that you will be there for them during the process as much as possible.
- Keep written documentation.

When a child discloses information that is concerning but not threatening immediate safety, the following steps should be considered:

- Always coordinate with your Director/Administrator when dealing with these situations.
- Decide when and if the parents should be notified depending on relationship with parents and issues around the concern (example: a parent is very sick in the hospital and you become aware that the young grade school child is left home alone). Consider approaching parents to offer assistance.
- Keep written documentation of your concerns.
- Use your best judgment in sharing information with parents regarding your conversation with their child.
- Consider reporting to the authorities (refer to diocesan policies and state laws).

**There may be many reasons that an upset child approaches you or discloses potentially concerning information. Only ask enough questions to determine if there is reasonable cause to report. Below are general guidelines when you find yourself in this type of situation.**

1- Open-ended questions are best. These questions help you enter into the world of a child without coloring it with assumptions.

(Child starts crying in class.) Below are examples:

- If your tears had words, what would they say?

- I am here to listen.
  - Tell me more.
  - And then what?
  - I want to understand your hurt.
- 2- **Directed** questions when there is more information:  
(Child states they are upset with their Uncle/Aunt)
- Tell me more about your Uncle/Aunt.
  - What are the things that are upsetting you?
- 3- **Avoid Leading Questions:**
- Did your Uncle hurt you?
  - Did your Aunt touch you in your privates?
  - Did they tell you not to tell?

### **Working with Parents in Sensitive Situations:**

Talk in a confidential area and when asking questions, remember to keep them open ended and non-accusatory.

#### When immediate safety is a concern and a report has been made:

- Seek advice from the authorities (CPS and Police) as to who will contact parents. (You may interfere with the investigation if you contact parents before authorities.)
- Always coordinate with your Director/Administrator and pastor when dealing with parents in these situations.
- If parents become aware of your report: reinforce that you are following diocesan policy and state law regarding reporting and need to defer to the authorities during the investigation.
- It is **not** your role to determine guilt, but to report concerns per the law.

#### When immediate safety is not a concern and a report has NOT been made:

- Share the facts in a calm and nonjudgmental manner with parents.
- Avoid assumptions. For example: Ted was crying in class and told you someone is bothering him. He did not define bother or identify the person. It is important not to assume guilt of the parents.
- Assume parents will be supportive and concerned unless they demonstrate otherwise.
- Offer supportive resources such as counseling.



**Below is a sample of a quick reference card that Directors and Administrators can give their leaders. It will assist them in knowing what action steps to take regarding sensitive situations. “Key Steps When You Have a Sensitive/Concerning Situation” can be found in this section.**

### **Quick Reference Card for Leaders**

- A** Be **Attentive** to comments and behaviors during class.
- C** **Contact** Administrators/Directors prior to the dismissal of class if comments or behaviors are concerning.
- T** **Team** approach is always best. Collaborate with your administrator/director/pastor to help clarify child’s statement/behavior and to determine if there is a need to report to the authorities.
- I** **Initial Report** to the authorities may be needed. Know your state law and requirements for reporting abuse and neglect. The child abuse hotline number is
- O** **Other Resources** are available through your Diocesan Safe Environment Coordinator, \_\_\_\_\_ can be reached at
- N** **Note** all observations/statements and actions taken, make a file

# *Suicide Prevention Information*

This information is included because we all want children and young people to be safe. Prevention programs such as *Circle of Grace* primarily focuses on how to identify and seek help when abuse or boundary violations occur.

The Circle of Grace concept is to tell their trusted adults not only about potential harm from someone outside their Circle of Grace but also about self-harm. All of us strive for the safety of children and young people from outside sources, but we must recognize the real crisis of our youth considering self-harm or suicide.

Below are some facts, warning signs, questions to ask and resources. Please share them with your staff and volunteers because one life lost is too many.

## **Facts:**

- Since 1999 suicide rates have increased 24%. Suicide is now the tenth leading cause of death in the US.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among the ages 10-14 and the second leading cause of death for youth/adults ages 15-34.
- Every 13 minutes someone dies of suicide. While more females attempt suicide, males are four times more likely to die by suicide.
- 20 percent of American high school students report having seriously considered suicide during the previous 12 months.
- 8 percent of high school students make a suicide attempt.
- 70 percent of youth who make a suicide attempt frequently use alcohol and/or drugs.
- Being bullied and suicide-related behavior is closely related.

## **Warning Signs:**

- Talking about or making plans for suicide
- Expressing hopelessness about the future
- Talking about being a burden
- Displaying severe or overwhelming emotional pain or distress/ mood swings
- Withdrawing from or changing social connections or situations
- Changes in sleep (increase or decrease)
- Anger or hostility that seems out of character or out of context
- Recent increase in anxiety, agitation, irritability or behaving recklessly
- Telling people good bye
- Giving away possessions
- Excessive drinking or substance abuse

### **Ask Questions:**

Ask the Question (*it is a myth that asking will give the youth the “idea” of suicide. Be sure to have suicide crisis information in hand, plenty of time to listen and a private place to visit*)

- “I have the feeling you are thinking about suicide but are having trouble bringing it up”.
- “Are you thinking about suicide?”
- “Sometimes people in certain situations feel suicidal. Have you been thinking about killing yourself?”
- “Have you ever wanted to stop living?”
- “Do you have a plan to kill yourself?”
- “If so, ask how, where and if they have a means (such as gun/pills/rope or other means)”.

### **Listen, Reassure and Persuade:**

- Listen and look for warning signs/risk factors.
- Validate their feelings.
- Find out what is important to the person and why they choose to live.
- Inform them that you need to contact their parents/guardians so they can get professional help. Assure them you will help them talk to their parents.
- Remind the person that seeking help isn’t a sign of weakness and treatment is available to help them feel better.
- Provide them with resources:
  - 1- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1800-273-TALK (8255))**
  - 2- **Boys Town National Hotline (1-800-448-30000, text VOICE to 20121 or [www.yourlifeyourvoice.org](http://www.yourlifeyourvoice.org)**

### **Take Action:**

- Don’t leave youth alone once you have determined he or she is at risk.
- Contact parents/guardians and review the following:
  - 1- Need to seek professional help or call 911 if safety is an immediate issue
  - 2- Instruct the parents to remove means like guns and pills from the home
  - 3- Provide them with resources:
    - a) **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1800-273-TALK (8255))**
    - b) **Boys Town National Hotline (1-800-448-30000, text VOICE to 20121 or [www.yourlifeyourvoice.org](http://www.yourlifeyourvoice.org)**

*Remember, that not seeking help for a suicidal child/youth is considered neglect. If you have concerns about the parents getting help for their child or youth you must contact the authorities.*

*Information obtained from CDC.gov and Nebraska Health and Human Service- dhhs.ne.gov*

# “DON'T BE DUPED” SAFETY PLAN

We want you to remember this safety plan by using the acronym DUPE.

1. *Write on the board*

*D- Discern*

*U- Understand*

*P- Protect*

*E- Execute your plan*

*Read each question allowing a few moments for quiet reflection before discussing*

## **The letter “D” stands for Discern**

- What prompting is the Holy Spirit giving you about this person or situation?
- Does this person or situation respect your Circle of Grace?
- What would your parents or others who love you say about this situation?
- What trusted adult can you talk to about the situation?

## **The letter “U” stands for Understand**

- In every situation we need to remember that the Holy Spirit is always with us to help us stay safe.
- The Holy Spirit gives us feelings or instincts and we need to listen to them.
- Understanding a situation and our response to it requires us to listen to the holy spirit, our family and friends.
- Answering the following questions will help you understand if a relationship is healthy and belongs in our Circle of Grace
  1. How long have you known this person?
  2. Is your knowledge of this person face-to-face or only via technology?
  3. How much do you know about this person?
  4. How have you verified what this person has told you about themselves?
  5. What do your feelings (instincts) tell you about this person or situation?
  6. How many things do you have in common with this person?
  7. Is the relationship respectful of your boundaries and the other person’s?
  8. Are you able to say, “No,” to this person and the “No” is accepted.
  9. Does this person’s age or status influence your behavior in the relationship?
  10. Does this person ever ask you to keep secrets?

## **The Letter P stands for Protect**

Part of protecting ourselves in uncomfortable situations is to know the following 3 key areas that may make a situation or person unsafe. They are:

### **Unequal Power**

- Are they significantly older, more popular, or a bigger size than you?
- Are they in a position of authority?
- Do they have access to more resources such as money, knowledge, car, etc. than you?

### **Secrecy**

- Are they asking you to keep secrets from your parents, friends or other adults?
- Are they asking you to not tell about gifts, time together on line, in person or activities you do together?
- Do they say no one will understand your relationship?

### **Forced Isolation**

- Do they get angry when you want to hang out with your friends?
- Are they angry if you don't answer your phone or text right away?
- Do you feel like they are trying to control you with their words and actions?

### **The letter “E” is for Execute your plan**

- There are other things you can do to protect your *Circle of Grace* when your parents or trusted adults may not be around. Some of them are:
  1. Don't reveal personal information on the internet/social media. That includes full names, school, grade, address, phone, sports teams, church groups, etc. Perpetrators try to identify young people by learning about their activities and schedule patterns. Be particularly cautious of social networking websites such as myspace.com and personal blogs.
  2. Stay away or get away from situations that make you feel uncomfortable.
  3. Tactics may include saying, “No,” walking away, calling a parent.
  4. Avoid unsafe situations, which involve alcohol, drugs, or smoking etc.
  5. Be cautious about situations in which one is left alone without a trusted adult.
- To protect your *Circle of Grace*, you need to tell trusted adults you need help when uncomfortable.
- Notify your parents or another trusted adult whenever someone has violated your boundaries, such as trying to control you or not respecting your *Circle of Grace* or someone else's *Circle of Grace*.

*Continue by saying:*

Trusted adults want what is best for you; they want your Circle of Grace to be respected.

Discuss with your parents the three other persons whom you feel are trusted adults. Then let the trusted adults know you have chosen them. Share with them what Circle of Grace means to you and the safety plan. Today is a good day to start those conversations.

*NOTE: This safety plan is in grade 7 and grade 8 lessons to assist youth when they get into a situation that may make them uncomfortable. Please use it at your discretion for other grades or as a handout for parents*