

### WHEN TO BREAK A CONFIDENCE WITH CHILDREN/YOUTH

Recently there have been questions raised about when a youth leader/Sunday school teacher should break a confidence that a child or youth has shared with them.

We checked with special authorities in youth ministry, including: the youth staff of the General Board of Discipleship; Kenda Creasy Dean, faculty and head of youth ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary; Joy Melton, author of *Safe Sanctuaries*; and a certified youth counselor.

All agree that keeping confidences in children and youth ministry is essential, except in three instances:

1. When the child/youth indicates that he/she has been or is being harmed (sexually, physically, or emotionally).
2. When the child/youth indicates that he/she has done harm in the past or talks about doing harm to him/herself such as suicide or cutting.
3. When the child/youth threatens or talks about harming someone else.

#### HELPFUL HINTS

- If a youth ever says “Can you keep a secret?” or “I have never told anyone this before...” it may be important to let the young person know that you can keep their confidence unless you determine that they are being harmed or pose a threat to themselves or others.
- Make sure you listen to the young person. If you are the first person they have told, they may try and minimize the story, feel guilty about it, rationalize, or may even deny it the next day. In many cases, they don’t always remember everything in a neat chronological order. Just listen and assure them it is not their fault and that there are caring people who will help. It is extremely rare that a young person or child will make up a story of abuse – take them seriously.
- Do not discuss the situation with other youth or adults.
- Remember the young person, their family and the situation in your personal prayers.

Dealing with the uncomfortable, broken, painful and sick parts of life is a part of the ministry you are called to. These are the situations and human circumstances that cry out loudest for God’s healing and reassuring presence experienced through one another. We wish these painful realities didn’t exist, especially for young people, but they do exist, and you and I are called to respond each day with care and wisdom. It is important for those of us working with children and youth to provide a safe environment for counseling. However, the greater good and safety of the child/youth takes precedent over confidentiality.

## **REMINDER**

It is critical that persons working with children and youth understand the boundaries of confidentiality and when it is essential to break a confidence.

Clergy must make sure that those working with children and youth are trained in listening for and spotting abuse as well as understanding when to break a confidence.

Children and youth workers and volunteers should immediately go to the pastor if there is a suspicion so that it is reported within 24 hours. The pastor should work with the children and/or youth worker or volunteer to not only report the incident but provide the appropriate response to the child or youth.