

CIRCLE OF GRACE
Safe Environment Curriculum
Grade K through Grade 8

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 curriculum for the safe environment education of children and young people supported and mandated by

Diocese/eparchies are to maintain "safe environment" programs which the diocesan/eparchial bishop deems to be in accord with Catholic moral principles. They are to be conducted cooperatively with parents, civil authorities, educators, and community organizations to provide education and training for minors, parents, ministers, educators, and others about ways to sustain and foster a safe environment for minors. Dioceses/eparchies are to make clear to clergy and members of the community the standards of conduct for clergy and other persons with regard to their conduct with minors.

Article 12 - Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People

This curriculum is called *Circle of Grace*. It is meant to supplement 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 curriculum 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 the 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 curriculum different from other protection programs?

According to research, one in four girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused by age eighteen.² Many protection programs focus on “stranger danger”; however, up to ninety percent (90%) of the time the perpetrator of abuse is known to the child or young person such as a relative or family friend. *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. It has a strong parent component throughout the curriculum.

Please feel free to contact your school or parish office if you have questions or want more information.

² www.usccr.org or <http://nccanch.acfbhs.gov>

Summary of the Key Concepts of “Circle of Grace”



God gives each of us a Circle of Grace (see below) 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.*

Knowing 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 grownups about our worries, concerns or “funny/ uncomfortable feelings” so they can help us be safe. If a parent or trusted adult is not available or unable to help us, God wants us to go to another trusted adult until we get the help we need to be safe.

Common Circle of Grace Questions of Parents

1) How is this connected to the “Safe Environment” ?

Circle of Grace is the safe environment curriculum for children/youth. The goal is to help children/youth understand the sacredness of who they are and how to seek help when needed through their relationships with trusted adults.

2) What information can this curriculum give my child that they are not getting already?

The *Circle of Grace* Curriculum reinforces in a peer setting that their faith community cares about their safety and wants them to understand how to seek help if they feel unsafe for any reason. It will help them identify potentially unsafe situations and know how to handle them by seeking help from trusted adults.

3) You indicate that this curriculum will provide them with “life skills”, what do you mean by this?

It reinforces that they are valued by God and others. It gives them information on boundaries and practical directives of what to do if someone makes them feel uncomfortable when in their *Circle of Grace*. It is a good foundation for healthy relationships that will help them throughout their lives.

4) Will this curriculum be age appropriate?

Yes! The lessons were written with great attention to the stages of child development.

5) How can parents support what is being taught?

Parents will receive parent letters as well as take home activities for several of the lessons to do with their children. Talking with your children about the *Circle of Grace* at home will help your children to understand the importance of the lessons and that the lessons apply everywhere. Additionally, you are your child’s most important teacher in the area of relationships. Much of what your child will learn and later imitate about relationships comes from what they learn by your example. Creating an atmosphere where they know that they can talk to you about anything provides a valuable safety net for your child because they know they have you to turn to whenever they have a concern. The *Parents First* Newsletter has excellent information on parent to child dialogue on healthy sexuality.

6) Is there accountability attached to this curriculum implementation?

Yes! There will be an ongoing evaluation of the curriculum to ensure its effectiveness and to incorporate any suggestions that would improve the quality of the program.

7) Will there be resources (people and material) available if I have questions?

Yes! Your parish/school along with your diocesan safe environment coordinator is there to help you with any questions.

8) Shouldn’t parents be the ones teaching their children about sexuality?

Absolutely! This is NOT a sex education program. *Circle of Grace* will provide children with a sound understanding of their own value and of God’s care and presence in their lives. It will also help them notice the signals that tell them when they do not feel safe and how to talk to a trusted adult. All of this will be a good foundation for healthy relationships. However, this is not a sexuality education program. Many parents will appreciate that this program will provide a spiritual framework that will allow parent-child communication about the value of all that they are, including their sexuality. Those conversations are most effective between parent and child. There are grade specific Parents First newsletters to assist you in these conversations.

9) Is this a mandatory curriculum for my child?

The United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) developed the Charter for Protection of Children and Young People. Article 12 of this document states that each Diocese will have a safe environment program for adults and minors. If you have questions or concerns about your child participating in the *Circle of Grace* Curriculum, please contact your Director of Religious Education, Principal, etc.

Parenting and Sexuality

"The Basics"

Be attentive and respectful.

Your child is a precious child of God. Especially in the area of sexuality, you want your children to appreciate that they are made in the image and likeness of God and that sexuality is a gift. Your respect for them as you hold them, bathe them, care for them will teach them better than words that their bodies are to be respected. They will learn of their value in your care. When they are told about their *Circle of Grace* in religious education and/or school, it helps them to believe that God is with them and for them because they have already experienced your love and your care. They will grow up knowing that they are meant to respect others and are to expect respect from others.

Teaching children about their bodies must happen in an age-appropriate way. For young children, the best guideline is to answer their questions as they arise. Try to always connect sexuality and spirituality in simple, short ways. Include God in the answer to help them recognize that sexuality is something special and created by God. For older children, it may be necessary to initiate discussions. More about that below.

Know what you really believe and why.

If you don't know what the Church teaches in regards to sexuality and why, there are many great resources available.

Saint John Paul II's explanation of the Church's teaching on sexuality, "Theology of the Body," is an excellent approach explaining the "Why's" behind Catholic teaching in regards to sexuality and our bodies. His work is a new way of conveying the Church's teaching on God's design for male and female. Since the Church teachings are not malleable, understanding the "Why's" is a great motivator which encourages youth and all faithful to strive to live a life in accord with Christ and His Church. This teaching beautifully articulates how we are meant to be a total gift to another.

At the time that many of today's parents were being formed in the faith regarding our bodies and sexuality, the Church did not have the fullness of Pope John Paul's Theology of the Body. Unfortunately for many, sexuality was reduced to a bunch of "rules." This lack of knowledge has led many individuals down paths that they otherwise would not choose for themselves today, and most likely not for their children. Even a minimal grasp of St. John Paul's Theology of the Body can assist in the inevitable conversations you will have with your children on these matters.

It is vital that you think about what you really believe about the place of sexuality in human life and why. Your own sexual history will considerably influence how you feel about sexual expression. If you were sexually active outside of marriage, you may find it difficult to tell your child to wait until marriage. If you waited until marriage, you may fear that your child will find you woefully outdated. Or you may find you are much more able to explain the benefits of waiting until marriage by talking about how that strengthened your own marriage.

Anticipate how you will respond if your child asks what you did. Whether or not you answer the question directly depends on you. Some parents who were sexually active before marriage decide at some point, usually when the child is older, to tell the truth. However, if you fear that telling them will not be helpful to them or your relationship with them, it is not necessary to reveal your own history. It is important that you consider how your answer will impact future communication with your child. Be as honest as you can, not only about your actions but also about your feelings, then and now, as well as about the consequences in your own life and relationships. Children are naturally curious about Mom and Dad and how they handled things.

Carefully consider how you will explain to your child why sex belongs in marriage. It is not enough to just say that it does. In advance, make a list of reasons why you believe sex belongs in marriage. Helping your children understand *why* will help them to make this value their own. Think about how you will react to questions about not only where babies come from but questions about oral sex, masturbation, family members who are not married and have children, and many other issues that will arise. These questions are not just possibilities — they are questions every child should talk about at some time with their parent(s). If you ignore their initial questions, you may not get another chance. They will sense your discomfort and go other places with their questions.

Talk often but not necessarily long.

When something related to sexuality comes up in a conversation, respond appropriately but do not take every opportunity to preach or lecture. If you do, your child will soon “tune” you out. Frequent matter of fact responses that state your values with sensitivity to what they are concerned about will be sufficient.

Know their world.

Pay attention to the environment your children live in. Watch television with them. If they have access to the internet, take an interest in what they enjoy. Given the many sexualized messages in media, you will find many opportunities to engage your children in conversation. Listen to their music with them and talk with them about what they enjoy. When you are in the car, allow them to tune the radio and just listen. Ask them to explain songs to you, objectionable ones or wonderful ones. Something about talking to Mom or Dad about the music often teaches young people a great deal. It gives them a chance to talk about what they believe and it gives you a chance to hear it. Resist the impulse to launch into a lecture. Ask open-ended questions like:

What do you like about this song/movie/video?

Tell me the story of the song.

What do you think of the message of the song/movie/video?

How do you think that song makes women/men feel?

Take time when they want to talk.

Children often ask questions or make comments at very inopportune times. If you are in a public place, tell your child you will talk later when you are alone – and do so at the earliest opportunity. If you are not in a public place, make it a priority to respond as soon as possible, preferably when they ask, because that is when they are most interested in your answer. If you feel you don't know how to answer, explain what you know and assure them you will think more about it and talk more later. And do it! If you fail to come back and fully respond, they will think you are uncomfortable and will be less likely to ask you again.

Take time to celebrate transitions with special times spent together. Growing up with the accompanying body changes is usually a time of uncertainty and confusion for children. Having a celebration says, "This is a good and wonderful thing." Be honest about your own struggles, fears, and discomforts when you were going through the same transitions. Children usually like to know what it was like for you to go through the same things.

*“To maintain a joyful family
requires much from both the
parents and the children.
Each member of the family
has to become, in a special way,
the servant of the others.”
Pope John Paul II*

Use correct terminology even when it makes you a little uncomfortable.

Sometimes, your parents may not have used correct terminology and therefore using it is uncomfortable for you. Break the cycle by using the appropriate language that is correct and respectful of the body as created by God. Remember that God created all the amazing parts of your beautiful child and they are simply learning about God's creation. This teaches them to respectfully name their body and gives you an opportunity to teach them about respecting their *Circle of Grace*. Be sure you explain any terms that are unclear. If you show discomfort, you are sending them a negative message about their bodies that will not lead them to respect and reverence themselves and others.

What is the real question?

Sometimes children ask a question to "test the water". But there is a bigger question they really want to know about that they either are hesitant to ask or cannot figure out how to say. Gently listening and drawing them into a conversation is important. Respond to what they ask, always watching for clues that they need more information or reassurance. They need to know that it is OK to ask you anything. You should be their "expert" even if you don't feel like one. Otherwise, they will look for their answers someplace else.

Talk about risk behaviors.

Don't wait too long to discuss risk behaviors like sexually transmitted diseases, broken hearts, pregnancy, and the myriad consequences that result from early sexual activity. Many parents are unaware how very early children are learning about sexuality from their peers and the media. But much of their information is inaccurate and certainly not value-based. Talking with your child about these things will not make them more likely to be sexually active. In fact, studies show that children whose parents talk openly with them and communicate their values are less likely to be sexually active.

Tell stories.

Recounting stories is a good way to communicate. Use the stories of friends, acquaintances, a story from the news, even your own, if you are comfortable doing so. You can change the details and names if you are concerned about them knowing who it is. A good story communicates in very effective ways. And we all remember stories. Resist too much explanation after you have talked about the values you are trying to communicate. In your own life, you have been touched often by others who have suffered by their sexual choices. Helping your children to understand that sex outside of marriage can result in painful consequences is important.

Talk about humans.

When you talk about human sexuality, talk about human beings. As obvious as this may seem, countless stories exist about parents who tried to explain the "birds and the bees" by talking about birds and bees. Children need to learn about their bodies and those of the opposite sex by talking with you about human bodies. When correct language is used, you are honoring yourselves and your bodies as created by God. Of course, all such conversations must happen in the context of the child's age and level of understanding. However, consider that children often have access to information about sexuality long before you did at their same age.

Create a trusting relationship.

Children and teens need appropriate limits and boundaries. These help them to know they are cared for. It is appropriate to know where your child is and to expect that they communicate with you if plans change. They should be faithful to the time they agreed to return and open and honest about their activities.

Discuss together why you are establishing the limit, rule, etc. Always make their safety and well-being the true priority and communicate that to them. Help them to see that limits will help them remember who they are and that they are loved.

As children grow, the respect between parent and child must also grow. Balancing appropriate boundaries and trust is not simple. However, if children feel they are not trusted, they will not be trustworthy. Asking detailed questions of an adolescent after every outing says, "I'm not sure I trust you so I have to check up on you." That is not to say that an interested inquiry like "Was the movie good?" is inappropriate. Children should know that their parents care about them and their activities. But interrogation on a regular basis does not lead to an increase in the trust in the relationship. Tell your children that the trust between you is very special and that you hope they appreciate that too.

If your child violates your trust, do not hesitate to let him/her know that you are very disappointed and that it will take some time to rebuild that trust. Additional boundaries (a more restrictive curfew, greater supervision, or other rules) may be appropriate until you are again confident that he/she can be trusted. This is all part of helping children understand that trust in relationships is fragile and important. It will help to prepare them to value trust in adulthood.

Respect your child's desire for some privacy, especially as they get older. That does not mean that you never go in their room, put their clothes away, or look in a drawer for a something. What this means is you do not intentionally "snoop" around. You do not routinely rummage through drawers, closets, etc. You demonstrate trust, treating them as you would have liked to be treated at their age. It is important for your child to understand that you will check all their technical devices, phones and accounts to make sure they are safe.

Connect sexuality and spirituality.

Grow in your own understanding of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. Help your children to understand sexuality is a basic component of personality in and through which each of us relates to God, self, and others. It is a wonderful gift of God which enables each of us, through our bodies, to lovingly and respectfully care for one another. As your children grow in appreciation of and respect for their bodies and the bodies of others, help them to understand why sexual activity belongs in marriage. Help them to see that waiting until marriage will lead to self-respect, commitment, and intimacy — not to mention a better sexual relationship in marriage.

Tell the truth.

Always tell the truth. Don't exaggerate to frighten them into or away from certain behaviors. If you are unsure how much to say, particularly to a very young child, respond to only the question they have asked. If they want more information and you have taken time to honestly respond, they will continue to ask about what they really want to know. On the other hand, by keeping your first response simple, you may have satisfied their curiosity for now and they may later — days, months, or years — return for more information.

Do not hesitate to honestly explain the consequences of sex outside of marriage. While very young children may not need detailed information, certainly by junior high, young people need to hear from their parents about the negative consequences of pre-marital sexual activity. Do not expect that they are receiving accurate information elsewhere about sexually transmitted disease, emotional harm, and pregnancy. Educate yourself and them. Their future happiness and choices depend on it.

Gender Identity and Gender Dysphoria

God created mankind in his image; In the image of God, he created them; Male and Female he created them. (Gn 1:27)

Any discussion of sexuality should begin with our Catholic belief that “the dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God.” Like human life itself, sexual difference is not arbitrary but is willed by God. Image and likeness find their expression in each of the two sexes as they provide an “image of the power and tenderness of God.” Men and women are equal in dignity and yet are different from one another in important ways, including in their bodies and how they relate to each other and to the world. Sexuality affects every aspect of who we are (see CCC 1700, 2332-35).

As Pope Francis said in *Amoris Laetitia*, our “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.”

Today, the reality of creation, sex and gender is sometimes misunderstood and ignored. Young people are being taught by schools, peer groups and media that their identities are self-defined and that the body can be manipulated to match their self-perception (gender identity). People with gender dysphoria feel a conflict between their biological gender, how their body feels to them and the cultural role or expectations of their sex at birth.

The most vulnerable young people may believe the lies that their feelings of unhappiness, or not fitting in, prove that they are confused about their gender identity. Rejection can put them at risk for self-destructive behaviors like substance abuse, suicide and abusive relationships.

Parents must address gender ideology with their children in a straightforward way, by speaking the truth with love. Reinforce the truth- sex cannot change. And while parents need to encourage their children to treat kindly those who are experiencing confusion about their gender identity, parents must also reinforce the truth- hormones and surgery can alter the appearance of the body, but they cannot change the sex of even one cell of the body.

What if you become aware that your child is experiencing gender dysphoria? Maintain a loving relationship with your child and reflect God's unconditional love. Seek appropriate help to assist you and your child to deal with your child's feelings, and to provide information and moral guidance as you help your child realize the person who God created him or her to be.

Special Parent Letter

Technology and Unsafe Behaviors

Dear Parent,

Circle of Grace is a faith-based safety curriculum used by your arch/diocese. Each grade teaches sacredness, boundaries, and action plan if a child feels unsafe or uncomfortable. The lessons focus on the many safety challenges the student faces in technology and every day life.

This letter was sent to you directly because it's important that you know about popular unsafe behaviors your child may encounter in today's culture. The technology guidelines have been discussed in the classroom but NOT the listed unsafe behaviors. We do encourage you to have a conversation with your child about the technology guidelines and these unsafe situations.

Here are some guidelines you can review with your child about how to know if a relationship is safe. The guidelines can apply to real life or online relationships.

1. How long have you known this person?
2. Is your knowledge of this person face-to-face?
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?
9. Does this person's age or status influence your behavior in the relationship?
10. Does this person ever ask you to keep secrets?

Caution your child:

1. Not to reveal personal information on the internet. 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.
2. To let you know about any time they feel bullied. Help them understand how to respond to bullies, whether that is on social media, a text, at school, or in another setting.
3. To be sensitive to comments that devalue or criticize others for their physical attributes, race, religion, economic status, etc. Model appropriate respectful behavior yourself.
4. To avoid unsafe situations involving alcohol, drugs, and smoking.
5. To be cautious about situations in which they are alone with an adult.

Unsafe Behaviors

The young people will not be presented the following information about unsafe and potentially dangerous behaviors.

- Cutting is a form of self-harm in which a young person cuts or scratches themselves deep enough that it may bleed. This cutting can be on their wrists, arms, legs or stomachs, places where they can hide the scars that will form. Cutting can be a symptom of deeper emotional issues so it is important to seek professional help for your young person. Cutting can lead to suicide ideation. If you have any concerns about the call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline- 988, Boys Town National Hotline 1-800-273-8255 or text VOICE to 20121
- In 2020, Suicide is the second leading cause of death in ages 10- 24 and 24 -34 years old. Someone dies of suicide every 13 minutes.
- Sexting is when someone sends sexually suggestive photos/texts to another person by way of the cell phone or social networking site. This behavior has significant legal and emotional consequences.
- In recent years, both nationally and locally, young people have died playing asphyxiation games (also known as the choking game and the fainting game) either alone or in groups.
- There is also a prevalence of potentially dangerous behaviors including genital contact (Rainbow Parties, Chicken Games). In these situations, problem-solve with your young people the appropriate ways to remove themselves from this environment (e.g. I have to call my mom/dad now, I have to go to the bathroom, I don't feel good, etc.).
- Netflix and Chill is an internet slang term used as a invitation to watch Netflix together and have sex.

Thank you for your support of the Circle of Grace Curriculum. It is essential and appreciated as we strive to provide the safest possible environment for our child. If you have any questions, please call your school or parish office.