

When do I tell a parent about something concerning going on in their child's life? What are the boundaries of confidentiality with a student?

Eugene, a youth leader, knew the physical and emotional pain that came from cutting himself. As a teenager, he struggled with depression and had hurt himself to try to cope with the emotional pain of his life. While that prepared him to empathize with young people, it did not teach him what to do when a youth disclosed self-harm. Eugene wanted to talk with the parents but did not know when or how to disclose without losing the teenager's trust.

Navigating the delicate balance between maintaining a student's trust and ensuring their safety can be challenging. As youth leaders, we often become confidants for our students, but there are moments when we must decide if parental or professional intervention is necessary for the well-being of the child.

Prioritize Their Safety and Input

Always prioritize the safety and well-being of the student. If there's an immediate threat to their safety or the safety of others, it's essential to follow your local mandatory reporting laws and involve their guardians or authorities right away. However, for less urgent matters, consider asking the young person about involving their family. Instead of saying "Do you want to tell your caregivers," say, "How are we going to involve them, and what should that look like?" Giving them multiple choices about when and how to broaden the conversation can put the emphasis on their own agency. It allows them to be conversation partners in their own health and well-being.

Determine What Confidentiality Looks Like For Your Ministry

Review or establish a clear confidentiality policy for your youth ministry, ensuring that both leaders and students understand when confidentiality might be broken or expanded for safety reasons. "Expanding" confidentiality means that it still stays within confidence, but that additional people might need to be brought into that circle of trust. Knowing these answers before they're needed can help ensure that adults are more likely to make rational, informed decisions in complicated situations. Whatever you decide, make sure you are following local laws and your organization's child safety guidelines.

Discuss the Importance of Trust

Engage in open conversations with your students about the importance of trust, explaining that their safety is the top priority and sometimes requires involving others. Have them share hypothetical examples from their own experience to demonstrate what situations should maintain confidentiality or when it could be necessary to involve more people.

While maintaining trust is crucial, never compromise on the safety of a student. It's essential to be transparent about the boundaries of confidentiality from the outset, so young people understand the parameters of your relationship.

Check Out
This Resource →

Confidentiality in
Youth Ministry



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