

CIRCLE OF GRACE  
*Safe Environment Program*  
*Grade K through Grade 8*  
*"Respecting All God's People"*

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 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 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 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 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>2</sup> 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.

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

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<sup>2</sup> [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org) or <http://nccanch.acfhhs.gov>

## *Common Questions of Parents*

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

*Circle of Grace* is the safe environment program 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 program give my child that they are not getting already?**

The *Circle of Grace* Program 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 program 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 program 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 in the program?**

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, not just at school. 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.

### **6) Is there accountability attached to this program implementation?**

Yes! There will be an ongoing evaluation of the program 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! There will be a parent packet given to all parents that includes contact numbers.

### **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 program 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 children/youth. If you have questions or concerns about your child participating in the *Circle of Grace* Program, 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.

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## Opening Prayer

Leader calls class to prayer by asking children to join in the Sign of the Cross.  
Then say together,

**Holy Spirit, show us the way,  
Be with us in all we think, do, and say. Amen.**

*It is important to begin the lesson by explaining that God does not want or cause bad things to happen. There will be children who may have already experienced unsafe or hurtful situations. It is important to reinforce it is not their fault. We want our children to understand that God is with them and for them even when they are hurting or sad.*

## Lesson Activities

### Getting Started

Review Circle of Grace concepts:

1. We are all made in the image and likeness of God and therefore we are sacred and holy, deserving of great respect.
2. Jesus told us that he would always love us and His Spirit would always be with us. If we are always in His presence, we are always in a special, holy place. We call that place our *Circle of Grace*.
3. If we remember that we are in a *Circle of Grace*, that God is there with us and we are surrounded by His love, we will remember to behave with special respect for ourselves and for others. God is with us because he desires a close relationship with each of us.
4. Leader to reinforce the children's understanding of the difference between a safe secret and an unsafe secret (see Vocabulary). It is important to point out that safe secrets many times are told eventually like surprises (birthday or Christmas gifts). A secret is not safe if someone tells you never to tell it especially to a trusted adult.

### **Activity**

*The topic of this activity is the use of the internet. Have children make a list of positive and negative uses of the internet. Think about the analogy of how the use of a hammer can be used to build things( positive) or destroy things (negative). This may be a good analogy for the children. Examples of positive and negative aspects of the internet are listed below:*

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Communication	Damage someone's reputation by texting a lie
Information	Steal someone's identity
Entertainment	View inappropriate sites

### **Discussion – Children's Rules and Guidelines for Internet Safety**

*Present and discuss the following (copy of these rules and guidelines are at the end of the lesson for the children to take home to their parents):*

***BE SMART: ( Never forget your internet safety rules with any electronic device or in any location!!)***

- Never give out personal information such as your address, telephone number, parents' names and phone numbers, or where you go to school or grade level.
- Never assume someone is who they say they are. They are not "friends" if you have never met them in person.
- Treat everyone that you encounter online as a stranger using the same rules for dealing with strangers online as you would for strangers you see on the street.
- Never agree to meet someone that introduced themselves on the internet without a parent's or trusted adult's approval.
- Never send a picture or anything else to someone who requests it.
- Tell a trusted adult if someone sends you a picture or message that makes you uncomfortable or you know your parents would not approve.
- If you come across information on the internet that makes you feel uncomfortable, tell a trusted adult immediately.
- Never respond to any messages or send any messages that are mean, threatening, or make anyone feel uncomfortable. Go tell a trusted adult immediately.
- Follow the rules established by your parents for computer, phone and internet usage.
- Never download or install software or do anything that could jeopardize a family's privacy. If it happens by accident, go tell a trusted adult immediately.
- Other than your parents, do not share your internet password with anyone and change it regularly.

## **Discussion – Identify and maintain appropriate internet boundaries**

*List examples and discuss how one would know if there is a violation of boundaries.*

*Leader, make sure the following points are covered. The goal is to start to develop an internal sense of conscience about appropriate Internet boundaries.*

*Some suggested points to review:*

- If you feel unsure or unsafe, you are probably not “safe” in what you are doing.
- You are not safe if someone tells you to keep your communication with them a secret.
- It is important that you are comfortable with a trusted adult seeing what you are writing/doing on the computer/tablet/gaming system or cell phone.
- Could you say face to face to a person what you wrote about the person on the internet?
- Sending messages that intentionally harm or embarrass another person is not respecting their *Circle of Grace* and is considered cyberbullying.
- Sometimes we are tempted to lie on the internet; doing so may increase our tendency to lie in real life and is disrespectful of our *Circle of Grace*.
- Your *Circle of Grace* boundaries should not be crossed when you use the internet. This is to keep you safe and respect others’ *Circle of Grace*.

## **Activity – Telephone Game**

*This activity is to help the children understand how stories or conversations on the Internet may occur and not be totally accurate or true.*

*Suggested Instructions:*

1. Seat 6-8 children in a circle with backs to each other sitting so that the story can be heard by one person at a time.
2. Leader makes up a story with 3-4 details (e.g. soccer game, sleepover, school activity).

*Possible stories:*

- a. Three friends are going to go to a movie on Friday afternoon after school. They decide to go to the theater at the mall. One of their moms goes with them. At the movie they have popcorn and a soda. It is a funny movie that lasts two hours. After the movie they go out for pizza.
- b. The Saints had a soccer game on Saturday morning. They were playing the Knights. The game was played at Tranquility Park. The teams were playing for first place in the league. The final score was 3-2 in favor of the Knights.
- c. An author came to visit our school. The author writes mystery stories. The author has written ten stories and had six of them published. The author lives in Montana on a ranch. He has three horses and a dog.

3. The leader has a ball of string that is stretched throughout all of the children (each child is able to touch part of the string).
4. Leader tells the story to the first child and surrenders to that child the tail of the string (that child now has the tail and the string that was between the leader and the first child).
5. That child moves to another child in the circle and hands off the stretched string and retells the story as heard from the leader.
6. The story is retold until all in the circle have a turn.
7. The final person repeats the story as they recall it. That child now has all of the string in a ball or wad.
8. Discuss if the story is the same as when the story was first told or if details changed as the story was passed on.
9. The string may be replaced with Talking Sticks (Native American story telling) or cards or any other suitable objects for the children to surrender to each other as the story is passed along.

#### **Activity-** Internet Smart Worksheet

1. Hand out two Internet Smart Worksheets to the children (see the end of the Grade 4 Lesson.)
2. Have the children complete one in class and be ready to discuss. Tell them this worksheet will not be collected. The second worksheet is to be completed with their parents and returned with the parent's signature.
3. The leader reviews each scenerio with the class and ask the following questions:
  - How hard was it to know how you would act in each scenerio?
  - Do you think some of the scenerios seem to make you choose between your friends and doing the right thing?
  - Can you give me some other difficult situations?

#### **Action Plan**

*Pass out the Parent Information Sheet*

*After reviewing the following information have the children write both of the action plans on the Parent Information Sheet.*

*Instruct the children to take the Parent Information Sheet home.*

**Scenario A:** You are unsure or feel unsafe while viewing something or interacting with someone while using the computer or other technical device (ie: phone, tablet, gaming system etc) and you know your parents would not approve.

#### **Action Plan**

1. Do not exit the site.
2. Find a trusted adult and show them what you are concerned about.
3. Review how you got to this point on the computer.
4. Have an adult help you exit the site.

**Scenario B:** You are unsure or feel unsafe when you are asked by someone to view something on the computer/technical device (ie: phone, tablet, gaming system etc). It makes you uncomfortable and you know your parents would not approve.

**Action Plan**

1. Walk away from the computer.
2. Tell a trusted adult.

**Closing Prayer**

Thank you, God,  
for always being with me in my Circle of Grace.  
Thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit  
who helps me know what is good.  
Thank you for giving me people who care about me  
and want me to be safe.  
Amen.