



YSO Policy: Boundaries

Boundaries are the lines that should exist between youth and staff/ adult volunteers. The goals of having boundaries are to protect the youth and the staff and to create a safe environment for everyone.

This is a policy from a youth center. For this policy, BE SAFE recommends the following:

- Include social media and texting in your boundaries policy, or create a separate sub-policy for media boundaries.

Policy:

Basic rules in establishing and maintaining boundaries with youth:

- As a staff, volunteer, or mentor, you are not a youth's FRIEND. There is a difference! Being FRIENDS implies equal exchange of information and being on the same level. As an adult, you are not on the same level as youth.
- Go with your gut feeling. It's OK to say no to youth if you feel the boundaries are grey. For example, if they ask you to join them for dinner, go see a movie, or become Facebook friends, and your gut feeling is one of discomfort and uncertainty, go with your gut and say no. This may change as you become more comfortable.
- Ask your supervisor or a colleague for advice if you aren't sure if a boundary is being crossed or not. If you are a new youth worker, this is an area you will need to learn over time. So don't be afraid to ask!

Here are some examples of boundaries to keep in mind (this is not an exhaustive list):

DO's	DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions when you see that a youth has something on their mind to see if they want to talk. This isn't being nosy! • See yourself as a mentor and supporter for the youth, providing advice when needed. • Call youth out on inappropriate and rude behavior. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't buy food for youth. • Don't give/loan money. • Don't hang out with youth as FRIENDS (at night, on weekends, etc.). • Don't engage in romantic relationships with youth. • Don't go to a youth's house.

As a new volunteer or staff, it's safer to keep boundaries clearer, more black and white. As you gain more experience over time, you can learn what are the boundaries that you feel comfortable with and that are still appropriate within the program culture.

Grey Areas: There are always exceptions and grey areas. With these, it is always good to inform the program director/ supervisor before you do something with youth that may seem in a grey area. For example, if you are having dinner with some youth, it may be OK. You should inform the director before you take any questionable actions and make sure she knows and she may be able to let you know if it seems to be crossing a boundary or not.

Examples of Grey Areas with Youth:

- Giving your email address.
- Accepting or making friend requests on Facebook.
- Eating out with youth alone or in a group (this includes other activities like going shopping together, going to a museum or show together, etc.).
- Exchanging cell phone numbers.





YSO Policy: Boundaries

These are all things you should talk about with your supervisor. It may seem harmless to do any of the above, but with teens, they may get confused about your relationship. And parents may also raise questions.

Questions to Ask Yourself When in Doubt:

- If a parent saw me doing XYZ action with this/these youth, would they be 100% OK or would they be suspicious or worried?
 - If there is a chance parents would be worried or suspicious, DO NOT DO IT.
- Would this action make the youth I'm interacting with think we're friends or still see me as a staff/ youth worker/ advisor?
 - If the youth would think of you more as a friend than as a youth worker, DO NOT DO IT.
- Is this the kind of thing I usually do only with friends?
 - If yes, this may not be appropriate to do with youth who are NOT FRIENDS.
- Are the youth I'm interacting with old enough to understand the difference between being friends and having a mentor/ advisor relationship?
 - If no, having more black and white boundaries is safer.

If you're still in doubt after asking yourself these questions, talk with your supervisor or co-workers at the Youth Center.

Facebook and Social Networking (as a special case)

Ask yourself these questions if and when getting or sending Facebook friend requests to/ from the youth:

- How comfortable are YOU being Facebook friends with the youth? (both in terms of what the youth would see on your page and what you would see on theirs) How much personal stuff do you share on your page?
- Does the age/ maturity level of youth affect whether you would accept youth as Facebook friends?
- What is the purpose of your being Facebook friends with the youth?

Some tips if you do decide to accept a youth as a Facebook friend:

- Have tight privacy settings on the youth so they can only see certain things on your profile.
- Set up a new Facebook page just for the youth at the Youth Center.
- Make clear to the youth that your being Facebook friends is a privilege and you hope they don't abuse that privilege, and you will do the same for them.

Scenarios as Case Studies:

What do you think you would do in these situations? Talk them over with your supervisor.

A teen shares with you information about his/her dating life. Do you...

- Listen intently and ask questions for more information?
- Listen intently and share your own experiences?
- Listen intently but not say much in return?
- Other:

Food for thought: generally, don't share too much about yourself. How much you say in return, though, depends on how well you know the youth. Go with what you feel comfortable with but also try to understand why the youth is telling you these things: to get attention, to really get help, to get information out of you. In each of these cases, you may only share so much.





YSO Policy: Boundaries

A group of teens asks you to have dinner with them nearby the program. Do you...

- Say yes and go along for dinner.
- Say no and leave it at that.
- Say no and explain that as an adult you are not supposed to eat with youth.
- Other:

Food for thought: generally, don't hang out with youth in out-of-program time. But this all depends on your relationship with the youth. Try to understand why the youth are asking you out: to get you to buy food for them, to get to know you better, because they think you're cool. There maybe some situations where going out to eat with youth is OK. Check in with your supervisor if you are in doubt.

- A 12 year old Facebook- friends you after knowing you for a few months.
- A 15 year old Facebook- friends you because you tutor him in the homework help program.
- A 17 year old Facebook- friends you after working with you in a leadership program for half a year.

Do you treat these youth differently?

Food for thought: as a new staff or volunteer, you should hold back from accepting youth as FB friends at first, especially if you are not comfortable with that kind of relationship. However, as you get to work with and know youth, think about why you might want to be FB friends with the youth who friends you. Is there a need? Is there a benefit the youth can gain that they can't through seeing them at YC? What would be the purpose of being FB friends?

One of the youth you work with in a program texts you every so often to ask about meeting times and letting you know that s/he is late. Do you...

- Text back to acknowledge response?
- Talk to the youth to not text you anymore?
- Talk to you the youth to ask him/her to email you or call your work phone instead?
- Other:

Food for thought: first of all, how does that youth have your phone number? Did you give it to her? Did she get it from someone else? Once you've figured out that issue, then think about how comfortable you are receiving and sending texts and whether that's the best way to communicate with the youth in your program. Be sure to set some boundaries with the youth if you are using text to communicate with them—not texting you late at night, not texting you for non-program related issues unless it's an emergency.

A teen tells you that his family doesn't have a car and can't go to places like Cosco or BJ's, and he wants to stock up on stuff for himself before he goes to college. Do you...

- Offer to take him?
- Offer to take him and some friends?
- Let him know you can't take him because it's not appropriate.
- Other:

Food for thought: for new staff and especially volunteers, you should not take him. There are issues of liability using your own car and also, you are not here to be a parent to a youth. In general, it's not a good idea to be taking personal outings with one youth. If you feel this is a necessity, then suggest bringing another friend along and make it a field trip. But this should only be done in exceptional cases.





YSO Policy: Boundaries

Talking to youth about boundaries:

While you are establishing your own sense of healthy boundaries with youth, it may also be appropriate to explain to youth why you are setting boundaries. For example, if a youth wants you to be their Facebook friend and you decline, you can explain to them why—you aren't friends and you don't think it's appropriate; you don't feel comfortable having someone their age seeing all the things on your Facebook profile.

For teenage youth, the "why" behind decisions made are helpful in their own growth and development. Try to explain things if and when you can, so they can understand the reasoning behind choices we make and learn how to have healthy boundaries.

Boundaries is all about building healthy and positive relationships with the youth that we serve. At the Youth Center, we believe that these relationships are the foundation for all the work we do and that having black and white lines or policies sometimes prevent us from building these relationships. Therefore, being aware of boundaries, especially the grey areas, is very important.

This is something you will get more comfortable with as you become a more experienced youth worker. This guide is meant to help you navigate some of these issues first in your own mind and then with the help of your colleagues. We will revisit this topic and specific cases from time to time in staff meetings. And your colleagues and supervisor are ALWAYS a resource to tap into for more advice!

