

A Volunteer Guide to Working with Foster, Adoptive & At-Risk Children



It is a unique privilege and opportunity to interact with children and young people as a volunteer. This guide will help you establish safe and responsive environments which help to safeguard children and young people. It may also help to reduce the risk of adults being falsely accused of improper or unprofessional conduct. We hope that this will be a positive experience for both children and volunteers!

Unique kids, unique needs:

For a variety of reasons, the nurture and discipline needs of children who have been verbally, emotionally, physically or sexually abused are more complicated than those of children who have not been abused.

Their reactions to guidance, interactions with you and their peers, as well as general demeanor may be very different than a typical child. It's important to be aware of a child's special needs or differing abilities BEFORE they arrive. Parents are usually happy to share their child's strengths and challenges with you during registration. You might also ask parents (in advance, not EVER in front of the child or group) how you might best accommodate them.

A foster mom noted in her registration paperwork that 7 year old Jemaya has sensory issues, and is bothered by loud sounds and crowds. A volunteer follows up with Jemaya's mom a few days before the event and asks how they should best handle the praise and worship time (which is loud AND in a crowd), or any other upsetting situations. Jemaya's mom says that she will send a pair of ear plugs with Jemaya that she can use at her discretion, and encourages volunteers to allow her to participate from the edges of the room, as opposed to in the middle of the crowd. Volunteers working with Jemaya are made aware of these accommodations, and are able to help her happily navigate the activities of the evening.

By working with parents, and being open to unique solutions to each child's individual needs, we as volunteers can help children overcome barriers to fun and participation.

Some children may not have commonly diagnosed special needs you're familiar with (such as Down syndrome or hearing impairment). Sometimes these "invisible" issues can be the most challenging and puzzling to deal with as a volunteer.

9 year old Tyler spent many of his early years in a series of foster homes. He is smart, athletic and funny, and very small for his age. Sometimes Tyler acts like a much younger child (including using a baby voice and sucking his thumb), to get his way, avoid confrontation with adults, or to get attention. His mom asks that he be treated like a typical 10 year old, and that adults not "be fooled or manipulated" by the behaviors she mentioned above. During a magician's performance at a respite night, Tyler cranes his neck and sways back and forth in his seat, claiming that he can't see. Finally he tries to climb onto a volunteer's lap to sit higher. Instead of allowing the behavior, the volunteer offers Tyler a choice: to stay in his seat or to sit on the floor near the front of the auditorium instead. Tyler crosses his arms, frowns and pouts, but decides to stay put.

This may not seem like a victory, but the situation was handled in a kind and appropriate manner that gave Tyler a choice. He chose to sulk, but brightened up later in the evening when the group shifted to more active stations.

Remember these keys to setting kids up for success:

- Correct without shaming or breaking your emotional connection
- Redirect a child BEFORE their behavior escalates
- Be specific with your expectations
- Be flexible
- Offer choices when possible
- Be aware of your tone, word choice and eye contact
- Praise the child, indirectly if necessary

Discipline and group management:

Corporal punishment is not allowed.

*If the discipline method causes physical discomfort, it is not OK. For example: going without a meal, withholding bathroom breaks, push-ups, yanking something from a child's hands, or standing in the corner on tip-toes.

It's important to maintain your cool, even when a child's behaviors are very frustrating. This can be tough as sometimes children push limits.

How to deal with difficult behaviors:

- Take breaks BEFORE you are worn out
- Walk away and ask for help if you feel angry or overwhelmed
- Some children may benefit from one-on-one guidance
- A change in direction or activities (with input from the children) may curb disruptive behavior
- Respond with humor if possible
- Remember that you are likely not the cause for this behavior. You are dealing with a child who has experienced great loss and trauma, and this may cause them to reject and hurt others to maintain control of a situation.
- Where possible, try not to discipline children/ young people in front of others it can sometime be more effective to use time out or quiet words when dealing with disruptive children/young people
- If you have to exclude a child/young person from the group, make sure they and a parent/guardian knows why and for how long. It is advised that excluded children/ young people are offered an appropriate route to re-join the group

14 year old Bella is irritated to be at the respite event. She's had a bad attitude since she arrived, putting down other children, saying the activities are lame, and pretending to sleep on a couch in one of the rooms. When Christie, a volunteer, offers to help Bella with a craft, Bella explodes and calls Christie an expletive. Christie feels hurt and angry, and like she might cry. She knows she can't respond in a calm way, so she leaves the room. The other volunteers calmly manage the situation, reminding Bella to speak kindly to others, and offering her the opportunity to help with another task if she doesn't wish to participate in the craft. Christie spends 10 minutes gathering her thoughts, letting leadership know about the situation, and calming down. When she returns to the group she opts to work with other children, and allows another volunteer to take the lead with Bella. Those directing the event check in on the group more frequently afterwards to make sure things are still under control.

Physical contact with children:

A “no touch approach” for adults who work with children/young people is often impractical. Every situation is unique therefore adult leaders should maintain self awareness of the dynamic of each situation and judge what is appropriate based on the needs of the individual child/ young person. Children with backgrounds of abuse or neglect often struggle with appropriate boundaries. In a new environment, with someone they don't know well, they may be more likely to push the limits.

Here are a few basic guidelines when it comes to physical contact:

- Avoid being with a child or young person in a one-to-one, out of sight situation, and never touch a child or young person in such a situation.
- Do not presume that physical contact is acceptable to a particular child or young person. Even non-intrusive touch may be inappropriate if a child or young person indicates he/she does not wish to be touched.
- Respect and respond to signs that a child or young person is uncomfortable with touch.
- Be aware of, and follow the toileting and diaper changing policy for the classroom, group or age of children they will be working with.
- Use verbal directions rather than touch (ask a child or young person to move in a particular way, rather than physically place the child or young person in the required position).

Before you touch a child, ask yourself:

- *Is contact relevant to this activity or the skill being developed?*
- *Have I asked their permission to do so? (even very young children deserve the dignity of being asked “may I pick you up?” or “can I hold your hand in the hall?”)*

Riley is an active 4 year old who ran right in the door when he arrived at the event. He immediately tried to hug the volunteer greeting him. Instead of allowing him to do this (since they had never met before), the volunteer knelt down and put his hands on Riley's shoulders, keeping him at arms' length. He said it was nice to meet him, and asked for a high-five. Later in the evening Riley tries to cling to a volunteer's leg, touch a volunteer's hoop earrings, sit on someone's lap, and put his arm in the sleeve of a volunteer's jacket she was wearing. Although a little comical, the volunteers didn't humor these inappropriate interactions. They redirected Riley (sometimes physically separating themselves from him if necessary) without shaming him, but still reminding him to give personal space.

These volunteers understand that Riley's behaviors are not cute, sweet or loving. They are helping him form appropriate boundaries by reinforcing personal space. It may seem cold or unfriendly to literally keep a child at arm's length... but a child like Riley needs help understanding how to appropriately interact with others. For his health and safety, and theirs.

At times, volunteers will be required to give practical assistance to a child or young person who is hurt or needs particular assistance or encouragement.

Examples of appropriate physical contact are:

- administration of first aid or supporting children and young people who have hurt themselves
- assisting with the toileting and personal care needs of a disabled child or young person (it's best to have parents explain the best way of going about this)
- gestures to comfort a child or young person who is experiencing sadness or distress, such as a hand on the upper arm or upper back
- non-intrusive touch (congratulating a child by shaking hands, a pat on the upper arm, or a high five)

Privacy & Respect:

When you are working with a population of children that may have unique, or troubling backgrounds, it's important to be sensitive to their need for privacy.

Please avoid asking personal questions to children or adults about where a child "is from" or if they are adopted. A child's status in the family as foster child, biological child, kinship or adopted should never be displayed or asked about.

You should not take photos of the children you are working with unless you are designated as a photographer for the event and parent consent forms have been signed. Additionally, it's never appropriate to post information or pictures of a child on social media, church websites, etc.

Ross is enjoying volunteering at a respite event at his church. He wants others to know how rewarding it is to volunteer at the respite event. He takes a "selfie" with a boy in his group giving a "thumbs up", and posts it to Facebook and Instagram.

While Ross's post doesn't share any specific information about a child, it is a violation of that child's privacy, and the trust of his parents for such a post to be made.

Time for Fun!:

With a little thought and prayerful preparation, you should now feel ready to spend a fun and exciting evening with some precious kiddos. If you have ANY questions about how to handle a situation, feel free to check in with the event leadership!