



## **Protecting God's Children for Adults**

### **What About that 'Gray Area' When Someone Accidentally Touches a Kid?**

The warning signs of those who pose a potential risk to children include someone who goes overboard touching children—someone who wrestles with or tickles a child other than his or her own, for example. What if someone is sincerely committed to preventing child sexual abuse and doesn't want others to see him or her as a risk of harm to kids, but accidentally and unintentionally "touches" a child in an inappropriate way? How should he or she respond?

There are activities that youth ministers and others in children's ministry have used for many years to accomplish legitimate goals in ministry—activities that could result in accidental touching that might be considered sexual in nature. I'm referring to games that are designed to build trust and develop bonds between youth or children's ministers and the youngsters they serve.

For example, there is a game that involves testing someone's level of trust by asking the young person to fall into the arms of someone who is behind him or her—and to do this without looking back. In that game, it is possible that the "catcher" could end up with his or her hands on the falling person's chest. There could be an accidental touch that might be considered intimate or sexual. Meanwhile, the objective of the exercise is purely positive.

The team-building activity of passing an orange or a ball from one person to another without the use of hands can also result in accidental touching that could be viewed as intimate or even sexual. That is clearly not the intent of the exercise but it could be a possible by-product.

Essentially there is nothing wrong with either of these exercises. Both are *intended* to produce positive results. Both were developed to help foster *positive* rapport in relationships by emphasizing character building on issues such as trust and responsibility. However, both exercises have the potential for accidental or unintentional intimate contact.

The quandary for youth and children's ministers is thoroughly evaluating every potential interaction with young people from a "safe environment" point of view. In addition to accomplishing our legitimate ministry goals, we must make sure that no activities involving children result in conditioning—allowing certain kinds of touches to occur in a safe environment that would generally be viewed as unsafe or inappropriate if they occurred in a different context. We must become overly cautious, if necessary, to make sure that we don't condition children or the greater community to accept any form of physical touching that, in the wrong context, would be inappropriate.

Everyone knows that accidents happen. And nobody wants to be potentially thought of as a predator because of an *accidental* touch. Therefore, many people wonder how to respond to truly "accidental" touches within the context of safe environment guidelines.

People are accustomed to viewing or reviewing the actions of others in the context of *their own* intentions and motivations. While motives are important, the Protecting God's Children program has established a higher standard for adult-child interaction. The key to applying the higher standard is to look to see how a child molester *could* or *would* use an activity or an accidental touch as a part of the grooming process.

To fully apply this higher standard, there can be no more "legitimate ministry activities" that include the possibility of sexually intimate touch. We must put our creative minds together to find new ways to accomplish these worthy ministry goals—fostering trust, responsibility, teamwork, etc.—without placing children at risk.

And, because accidents do happen, there may come a time when an intimate touch occurs *accidentally*. Under those circumstances, we must explain to the child or young person that the touch was an accident. We must make it clear to the young person that accidental or not, any touch that makes someone feel uncomfortable is not okay.

Frequently, adults apologize for such embarrassing moments and try to minimize what happened because they think it is important to avoid making a "big deal" over an accidental touch. Although an apology is key, it is not enough when it comes to reinforcing appropriate boundaries in ministerial relationships. To make sure that an accidental touch doesn't set

a child up for a future (intentional) touch by a potential child molester, make sure the child understands that the touch was not okay, how the accident happened, and why we must all work together to make sure the same accident never happens again.

**Bottom Line:** The new standards of behavior for creating safe environments may bring up situations that are, indeed, confusing and difficult for those who are committed to providing youth and children's ministry. However, quality ministry that protects children while it brings God's message to life is a gift that keeps on giving for a lifetime.

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