

Circle of Grace

Safe Environment Training

Honoring Relationships

Different Boundaries for Different Relationships

Grade 5-8 Alternative Lesson

Philosophy

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 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 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, as they strive to provide a safe and protective environment, hold the responsibility to help children understand and respect their own dignity and that of others. A truly safe and protective environment is one where children 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 Curriculum different from other safety programs?

According to research, one in four girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused by age eighteen.¹ Many protection programs focus on “stranger danger,” however, up to ninety percent of the time the perpetrator is a relative, family friend or other person known to the child/young person. *Circle of Grace* goes beyond just protection by helping children understand the sacredness of who they are and how to seek help through their relationships with trusted adults.

Goal of the Circle of Grace Curriculum - Grades K-12

The goal of the *Circle of Grace* curriculum is to educate and empower children and young people to actively participate in a safe environment for themselves and others.

Objectives of the Circle of Grace Curriculum - Grades K-12

- Children/Young People will understand they are created by God and live in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Children/Young People will be able to describe the *Circle of Grace* that God gives each of us.
- Children/Young People will be able to identify, discern and maintain appropriate physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual boundaries.
- Children/Young People will be able to identify all types of boundary violations.
- Children/Young People will demonstrate how to take action if any boundary is threatened or violated.

¹ www.usccb.org, or <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov>

Leader Guidelines

- A **Leader** is defined as clergy (priests or deacons) school administrator, director of religious education/formation, teacher, or catechist who has been trained to teach the *Circle of Grace* Curriculum.
- Every leader should read the Philosophy, Goals and Key Concepts to better understand and prepare to teach the *Circle of Grace*. The Key Concepts review the essence of the curriculum, that God is always present in our *Circle of Grace* because He desires an intimate relationship with His children.
- The time frame may vary depending on size of class, age of young people, amount of discussion, etc.
- Vocabularies with definitions are intended for the leader. The explanation of vocabulary should be integrated within the context of the lessons to assist the young people in their understanding of the *Circle of Grace* Curriculum. The depth of the young people's understanding will depend upon their age and developmental stage. A master vocabulary list is in the administration/director section. The pertinent vocabulary is listed in each lesson.
- Leader's instructions for each lesson are italicized. Non-italicized text needs to be presented by the leader to the students.
- If possible it is always "best practice" to have two adults in the room during the lesson due to the sensitive nature of the material.
- Leaders will need to keep a record of what lesson is taught each year.
- Ongoing reinforcement of the concepts is encouraged throughout the year. Hopefully, the language of *Circle of Grace* will become a part of a positive culture of respect, care, and faith that will help protect our young people and help them to know what to do when they feel unsafe.
- Your School Administrator, Religious Education Director, or Youth Minister Director will be sending out a letter to all parents regarding *Circle of Grace*. Lesson specific parent letters should be handed out as directed. Parent information is included in the administration/director section. Every parish/school is encouraged to provide parent education opportunities both to inform parents about the *Circle of Grace* Curriculum and to foster greater communication in families.
- Evaluations for each grade are to be completed and returned to the School Administrator or the Director of Religious Education/Formation. The evaluations will be used to complete the Summary Evaluation that is used for ongoing improvement of the curriculum and for the audit records.

Summary of the Key Concepts of “Circle of Grace”



God gives each of us a Circle of Grace (see below) where He is always Present:

*Raise your hands above your head, then bring your outstretched arms slowly down.
Extend your arms in front of you and then behind you
embrace all of the space around you
slowly reach down to your feet.*

Knowing that God is in this space with you. This is your Circle of Grace; you are in it.

God is Present because He desires a relationship with us.

- God is with us when we are happy and sad. God does not cause bad things to happen to us. He loves us very much.
- God desires to help us when we are hurt, scared or confused (unsafe).
- Having faith may not take away all of life’s struggles. It is because of these struggles, God promised to always be present; providing guidance and comfort in our time of need

God helps us know what belongs in our Circle of Grace

- Our feelings help us know about ourselves and the world around us.
- God helps us know what belongs in our *Circle of Grace* by allowing us to experience peace, love or contentment when something or someone good comes into our *Circle of Grace*.

God helps us know what does not belong in our Circle of Grace

- God desires to help us when we are hurt, scared or confused (unsafe).
- The Holy Spirit prompts (alerts) us that something does not belong in our *Circle of Grace* by giving us “a funny or uncomfortable feeling” that something is not safe. This feeling is there because God wants us to be safe.

God helps us know when to ask for help from someone we trust.

- God gives us several trusted adults, in addition to our parents, to talk to about our worries, concerns or “funny/ uncomfortable feelings” so they can help us be safe. If a parent or trusted adult is not available or unable to help us, God wants us to go to another trusted adult until we get the help needed to be safe.

Honoring Relationships: Different Boundaries for Different Relationships

Sometimes children reveal personal information or details about incidents that, in order to respect confidentiality, need to be handled outside of the group environment. If this happens, tell the child, "Thank you for sharing that, _____. That sounds really important. I will talk to you about that later (at the end of class, at the break, as soon as humanly possible, etc.)." When this happens, be sure you talk to the child at your first opportunity and alert the administration. Remember that you are the responsible reporter in cases of suspected abuse.

This lesson complements the following Catholic teachings:

- Jesus' life as a model for our own
- God calls us to be responsible for our actions
- The importance of serving others as Jesus did
- God teaches us to lead healthy lives and make good choices
- God has made each of us in His image
- Our conscience helps us to know what is right and do what we believe is right

Lesson Objectives

Youth will be able to:

1. Understand and describe their *Circle of Grace*.
2. Recognize the key elements of behavior that are consistent with Catholic teaching.
3. Understand that living a Christian life requires appropriate boundaries.
4. Recognize ways young people are pressured to ignore appropriate boundaries
5. Develop a strategy to resist pressure to ignore appropriate boundaries.

Vocabulary

1. **Circle of Grace**: The love and goodness of God which always surrounds me and all others.
2. **Safe Secret**: A secret is safe when it does not hurt others or me.
3. **Unsafe Secret**: A secret is unsafe when I think that someone, including me, could be hurt or get in trouble if I do not tell. A secret is always unsafe if someone states you are not to tell your parents or trusted adults
4. **Trust**: Being able to count on someone to help me to stay safe within my *Circle of Grace*.
5. **Trusted Adult**: An adult that helps us stay safe in our *Circle of Grace* and helps us respect others in their *Circle of Grace*.

6. **Boundary:** The borders or limits we need to keep ourselves safe within our *Circle of Grace*.
7. **Appropriate Behavior:** A behavior/action that is acceptable in a specific situation and is respectful towards all individuals followed by a feeling of contentment & peace
8. **Inappropriate Behavior:** A behavior/action that is not acceptable and is disrespectful towards another followed by a feeling of unsureness and/or hurt.

Materials Needed

1. Whiteboard or chalkboard
2. Summary of Key Concepts of Circle of Grace for each student (front of lesson)
3. Large size paper or small poster board
4. Writing Materials
5. Tape
6. Parent letter (back of lesson)

Opening Prayer:

Leader calls class to prayer by asking youth to quiet down and join in the Sign of the Cross. Then say together,

**God our Father,
Today and always,
We ask you to guide us through your Holy Spirit,
In developing all our relationships and decisions,
Help us to honor appropriate boundaries that respect who we truly are...
Children of God made in Your image.
Amen**

Getting Started

It is important to begin the lesson by explaining that God does not want or cause bad things to happen. There will be children in every group who may have already experienced unsafe or hurtful situations. It is important to reinforce that 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.

Distribute and review the Summary of the Circle of Grace Concepts in the front of the lesson. Spend some time helping the youth to relate each section of the summary to their everyday life.

Have the summary available for youth to reference. The points below will aid in the discussion.

- a. We have learned about *Circle of Grace* in the past. Our *Circle of Grace* is the love and goodness of God that always surround us.

- What does this “look like” for a youth in middle school?
- b. God helps us know what belongs in our *Circle of Grace* by allowing us to experience peace, love or contentment when something or someone good comes into our *Circle of Grace*.
 - Name some “good things” that come into our *Circle of Grace*.
- c. The Holy Spirit prompts (alerts) us that something does not belong in our *Circle of Grace* by giving us “a funny or uncomfortable feeling” that something is not safe. This feeling is there because God wants us to be safe.
 - Name some things middle school youth encounter that does not belong in their *Circle of Grace*.
- d. God wants us to talk to trusted adults about our worries, concerns or “uncomfortable feelings” so they can help us be safe and take the right action.
 - Who would you talk to about an uncomfortable feeling?

Opening Activity – Family, Friends and School Relationships

Today we are going to talk about relationships. The type of relationship determines whether words/actions are appropriate or inappropriate. Our first activity will help us discuss these behaviors within different groups of people and how we can stay safe in our Circle of Grace by using guidelines for maintaining proper boundaries.

1. *Divide the class into groups of 4-5 youth.*
2. *Give each group 2 large sheets of paper/small posterboard.*
3. *Have each group divide the paper/poster board into three horizontal sections. Have them write Family at the top of the First Column, Friends at the top of the second, and School at the top of the third as shown*

Family	Friends	School

4. Have each group write down appropriate behaviors for each category in each column. Reiterate the definition of Appropriate Behavior. Have them come up with as many as possible. Give them 7-10 minutes to complete this activity.
5. When time is completed, hang the paper/posterboard on the wall or whiteboard so that everyone may see them. Discuss what the youth have written in each column and why these behaviors are appropriate. (Stress that the behaviors are respectful toward each person, and each person most likely are feeling contentment and peace)
6. Discuss how appropriate behavior can improve our relationship with God and how it respects our Circle of Grace
7. Now have the youth take the second paper/posterboard and divide the page into three columns just as before.
8. Each group will write down inappropriate behaviors for each category in each column. Reiterate the definition of Inappropriate Behavior. Have them come up with as many as possible. Give them 7-10 minutes to complete this activity.
9. When time is completed, hang the paper/posterboard so everyone can see them. Discuss what has been written in each column and why these behaviors are inappropriate and may be unsafe. (Stress that the behaviors are disrespectful toward each person, and each person most likely is feeling hurt and uncomfortable)
10. Discuss how these inappropriate behaviors can hurt our relationship with God and disrespect our Circle of Grace.

Large Group Discussion Re-Cap:

Appropriate behavior has everything to do with the situation or group of people we are with at the time. Those groups of people might be family, personal friends, or the larger community,

such as at school. Obviously, we share more, dress differently, or sometimes act differently depending on which group of people we are with at that time. Ask the following questions.

1. Do you think people have different boundaries or levels of trust depending on which group of people they are with?
2. Should appropriate behavior be used in our everyday lives, even if others are not behaving as they ought to?
3. Do people sometimes use inappropriate behaviors or words that they are not aware they are using?
4. What would you do if an inappropriate behavior was unsafe? (*Review the term "Trusted Adult"*)
5. Who is/are your trusted adult(s)?
6. When is it okay to keep secrets in relationships? (*Review the definitions of safe secret and unsafe secret*)

Allow for a few responses. Write them on the board.

Wrap Up Discussion and Activity

We are called to follow Jesus, so our behaviors, how we treat others, and the words we use should be consistent with His teaching and our Circle of Grace.

Ask the following questions of the group:

1. Which behaviors are more pleasing to God, others, and ourselves?
2. How do appropriate and inappropriate behaviors impact our lives and the lives of those with whom we have relationships?
3. What does God desire for our relationships?
4. How can we promote healthy behavior and boundaries in our relationships as Catholics?

Allow for a few responses. Prompt youth to identify key responses:

1. Desire to have a relationship with God & do what is right
2. Participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation when we do wrong
3. Call on God in prayer when we have questions about right and wrong
4. Ask others to pray for us

Have youth write their own closing prayer. Include the three points below:

- Thank God for a relationship that is important to them
- Ask God to help a relationship that needs His grace
- Express what hope they have in their current and future relationships

Ask for a volunteer to read his/her prayer for the closing prayer.

If there are no volunteers the following may be used:

Closing Prayer:

Leader calls class to prayer by asking youth to quiet down and join in the Sign of the Cross. Then say together,

Almighty God,

You know our weaknesses and difficulties. Strengthen and heal the connections in our lives, in our families, and with our friends. Lead us to do Your will in this world, to love and respect each other, and represent You in all we do. Bless us with peaceful and healthy relationships and help us share your love with the world. Thank you for being compassionate and sending Your Holy Spirit to help us do good for those whose lives we touch, and for all humankind.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

Opening Prayer:

**God our Father,
Today and always,
We ask you to guide us through your Holy Spirit,
In developing all our relationships and decisions,
Help us to honor appropriate boundaries that respect who we truly are...
Children of God made in Your image.
Amen**

Closing Prayer:

**Almighty God,
You know our weaknesses and difficulties. Strengthen and heal the
connections in our lives, in our families, and with our friends. Lead us to do
Your will in this world, to love and respect each other, and represent You in all
we do. Bless us with peaceful and healthy relationships and help us share your
love with the world. Thank you for being compassionate and sending Your
Holy Spirit to help us do good for those whose lives we touch, and for all
humankind.
In Jesus' Name, Amen**

Circle of Grace
Parent Letter
Honoring Relationships:
Different Boundaries for Different Relationships
Grade 5-8 Alternate Lesson

Dear Parent,

Circle of Grace is a faith-based safety curriculum used by your archdiocese/diocese.

Today your child learned how to honor relationships and how to set boundaries in those relationships. Three types of relationships (family, friends, and school) were discussed and how each can determine how we behave. The lesson also taught how our behaviors impact ourselves and others.

Through discussions and activities, the lesson assists your child in understanding the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors within each type of relationship. When someone acts inappropriately that can lead into situations that may cause hurt and harm to self and others. Also, the students were taught how to identify and respond when a behavior is inappropriate. The lesson encourages them to talk to a trusted adult when this occurs.

Although the lesson did not discuss relationships that take place with online gaming and social network sites, it is important to discuss with your child how to stay safe. Talk to your child about what is appropriate and what is inappropriate when meeting or talking to people online. There are many resources that your school should have regarding how to be safe online. Always encourage your child to talk to a trusted adult when he/she has questions and/or feels unsafe.

Thank you for allowing us to be a partner in providing a safe environment for your child!

Grade 5-8 Alternative Evaluation

Date _____ Leader _____

Parish/School _____ City _____

Number of young people in class _____ Grade-level/s of students _____

Each grade's curriculum was designed to meet the overall program objectives.

Please check if each of the objectives of the *Circle of Grace* Program were met.

1. YES _____ NO _____ Youth understand they are created by God and live in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. YES _____ NO _____ Youth will be able to describe the *Circle of Grace* that God gives each of us.
3. YES _____ NO _____ Youth will be able to identify and try to maintain appropriate boundaries within their families, friends, and school.
4. YES _____ NO _____ Youth can identify inappropriate behaviors in families, friends, and school.
5. YES _____ NO _____ Youth can demonstrate how to take action if a boundary is threatened or violated.

Please list what worked well and any resources that you would like to share with others (use back if necessary).

Please list any suggestions that would improve lessons (use back if necessary).

Return to your School Administrator or Director of Religious Education.