

Role Boundaries

Within the Catholic tradition (and other religious contexts), defining and maintaining role boundaries can be more difficult due to the blurring of lines between roles and connections formed through faith, pastoral, school or community activities within parishes, agencies and entities.

EXAMPLE

Rebecca is a volunteer choir leader at St Luke's parish. The parish is also attended by her extended family. She has teenage children who attend the parish youth group. Some of the young people who attend youth group also participate in the choir, including her niece and nephew. She sometimes drives her children and other children to and from youth group because their parents are working. In addition, as a parishioner, she and her children interact with many of the parish families socially because of their connection through the secondary school and the parish tennis club.

Rebecca has a number of roles with her parish – whilst she has an “official” role within the parish as a choir leader, she also has other roles within her family and in the broader social network created by her children's connection with the parish youth group, secondary school and tennis club. It will be important for Rebecca to clearly define her role to ensure that she is able to create safety for children and young people, to ensure that children and young people know when she is acting in her “official” role and when she is interacting socially.

In relation to role boundaries, several specific risks exist:

- A person may use their role to form a connection with a child or young person for the purposes of engaging in sexual abuse.
For example, a Children's Liturgy volunteer favours a particular child who attends the program on Sunday mornings. The volunteer is aware that the child's mother is experiencing significant mental health issues at this time, and the volunteer has offered to take the child camping on the weekend to target the child. The parent has granted permission for the child to attend because the volunteer is a “trusted” person within the parish. The volunteer's behaviour is beyond the scope of their parish role and the camping activity will occur outside the organisation's supervisory structures thereby placing the child at risk.
- Exploitation of connections formed through a parish, agency or entity role place children and young people at risk.
For example, a youth leader sells young people who attend the youth group second-hand computers and phones. Whilst the merchandise is affordable, the young people are not able to get their money back when the equipment stops working. When the young people complain to him about the faulty equipment, he tells them to stop coming to youth group and not to cause any problems. The youth leader has exploited his position to take advantage of the young people who attend the youth group for financial gain.
- A person may engage in behaviour that is beyond or inconsistent with the requirements of their role.
For example, during a home visit to a family, a pastoral associate learns that a young person is “stressed out” about his upcoming exams. The pastoral associate provides the young person with some tablets (alternative natural medicine) to help deal with exam stress. Providing medication is beyond the reasonable expectations of a pastoral associate's role and places children and young people at risk of harm, as the pastoral associate is acting beyond the limits of their expertise.

Role Boundaries

Role/position descriptions can provide clear guidance about the person's role within the parish, agency or entity and are recommended for employee and volunteer roles – see **INFORMATION SHEET: Role/position descriptions**.



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