



# Honor Thy Children

Archdiocese of Louisville continuing education for the awareness and prevention of child abuse

## Winter Break Is Here: Is Your Child Ready to Stay Home Alone?

As the holiday season arrives and winter break begins, many families experience changes in daily routines. With parents working, running errands, or attending holiday events, children may spend more time at home without adult supervision. This can be a natural opportunity to build independence—but only when children are truly ready. Deciding whether a child can stay home alone is an important safety consideration, and readiness depends on more than age alone.

While many child development experts suggest that children around 11 or 12 years old may be ready to stay home alone for short periods, every child matures at a different pace. Families should consider their child's maturity, comfort level, and ability to make safe decisions, as well as their home environment, nearby support network, and how long they will be away. Some states have laws that establish minimum ages for staying home alone—often ranging from 8 to 14 years old—and many include language about "unreasonable amounts of time." Families

are encouraged to review local guidelines before making a plan.

Children who are ready to stay home alone are typically able to think before acting, use common



sense, and follow clear safety rules. This includes resisting peer pressure, avoiding risky behaviors, and recognizing when a situation feels unsafe. Children should also feel comfortable being alone and able to stay occupied without relying solely on screens. Understanding basic safety expectations—such as not opening the door to strangers, not telling callers or posting on social media that they are home alone, and knowing what to do in an emergency—is essential.

Preparation is especially important during winter break, when days are longer and routines are

less structured. Children should know how to reach parents or caregivers, trusted family members or neighbors, and emergency services. Important phone numbers should be posted in a visible place, and children should understand when it is appropriate to call 911. A first aid kit should be accessible, and children should be familiar with how to treat

minor injuries and when to ask for help. Emergency supplies such as flashlights and batteries should also be easy to locate. Talking through common scenarios ahead of time can help children feel confident and prepared. Families should review alarm systems, cooking rules, emergency exit plans for fire or gas leaks, and expectations around caring for pets. Clear guidance should be provided about answering phones or doors, letting someone into the home,

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Archdiocese of Louisville

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If you need support or someone to talk to:

- © Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky or Indiana:  
800.CHILDREN/  
800.422.4453  
[www.pcaky.org](http://www.pcaky.org)  
[www.pcain.org](http://www.pcain.org)
- © Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline  
800.4.A.CHILD  
800.422.4453  
[www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org)

Are You  
Safe Environment  
Compliant?

Are you working regularly with children?

If so you must have attended an Archdiocese of Louisville Safe Environment Training.

Has it been 5 years since your initial in person training? You must complete your 5 year refresher training

You must also have a satisfactory background check not older than 5 years.

See your Safe Environment Coordinator today to verify your compliance!

# HOLIDAY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

The holidays bring opportunities for joy, connection, and tradition—but large gatherings can also present situations where children may feel uncomfortable or unsure how to speak up. By being intentional and proactive, families can help create environments where children feel safe, respected, and empowered.

Below are practical, child-centered rules to help keep safety and communication at the forefront this season.

## HUGS ARE ALWAYS OPTIONAL

Teaching children about consent is essential at every age. Children should always feel empowered to say "no" to hugs, kisses, tickling, or any interaction that makes them uncomfortable.

Practicing consent helps protect children. When kids understand that their body belongs to them—and that no one has the right to touch them, take photos of them, or ask them to touch someone else—potential abusers lose their advantage.

If a relative feels hurt when a child declines physical affection, parents can model a respectful response:

"Please don't take it personally. We're helping [child's name] practice setting boundaries because it helps keep them safe. Would a high-five work instead?"

## USE A SECRET WORD OR PHRASE

Children may need a discreet way to signal that they're uncomfortable or need to talk. Work together to choose a secret code word/phrase

If your child uses the code, you agree to stop what you're doing and talk privately right away.

Examples might include:

"I need help in the bathroom."

"I have a headache."

"I left something in the car."

Before arriving, gently remind your child...

"Do you remember the secret code in case you feel scared or uncomfortable?"

*Make it a family habit to talk after holidays or big events.*

*This can happen in the car ride home, at bedtime, or the next day.*

*Ask open-ended questions:*

*What was the best part of the gathering?*

*Did anything make you feel sad, scared, or uncomfortable?*

*Did anything surprise you?*

*Is there anything we should do differently next time?*

*These conversations reinforce trust, normalize speaking up, and help children process their experiences.*



## LEAVE THE DOORS OPEN

During gatherings, maintain an open-door policy whenever possible. While privacy is important for bathroom use or caregiving, there is generally no need for adults or older children to be alone with a child during holiday events.

Check in frequently so you know where your child is, who they're with, and what they're doing. If you realize you haven't seen or heard from your child in a while, go find them.

Be especially attentive when children of different ages are playing together.

Even when nothing inappropriate is happening, it's helpful to stay aware of conversations, activities, and media exposure.

## KNOW YOUR SAFE ADULTS

Children should know that, in addition to their parents, there are other adults they can turn to for help. Help your child identify a small group of approved "safe adults" they trust and feel comfortable talking to.

Encourage children to name these adults and explain that if one person isn't listening or available, they should keep telling another safe adult until someone helps.

Archdiocese of Louisville Victim Assistance Coordinator, Martine Siegel is available (502.636.1044) should you have any questions when it comes to child holiday safety



## Winter Break (cont...)

and what to do if they are accidentally locked out. Practicing these situations together can reduce anxiety and reinforce good decision-making.

Setting clear rules and boundaries helps keep children safe during unstructured time. Parents should establish a routine for checking in when children arrive home, whether by phone, text, or video call.

Creating a simple daily plan or family media use guidelines can help children stay engaged and reduce risk during long winter days at home. Starting small can help ensure success. Keeping initial periods of time alone brief and choosing low-stress times of day allows both parents and children to build confidence. As children demonstrate responsibility

and comfort, time alone can be gradually increased. If families have questions about safety or developmental readiness, a pediatrician or trusted resources such as the American Academy of Pediatrics can offer guidance. With thoughtful planning, communication, and trust, winter break can be both safe and empowering for children and families.

## Why Safe Environment Training Matters

From time to time, people ask why Safe Environment Training is required. It is a fair question—and one that deserves a thoughtful and honest answer. At its heart, Safe Environment Training exists for one simple but vital reason: to protect children and vulnerable people and to ensure that our Church communities are places of safety, trust, and healing. This training grew out of the reforms adopted in 2002 through the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Charter was a direct response to abuse that occurred in the church—abuse that should never happen anywhere, and especially not within a faith community entrusted with nurturing young people. Along with many other reforms, the Charter called on all dioceses in the United States to provide education and training on child sexual abuse for people of all ages. Safe Environment Training is one way the Church continues to honor that

commitment. It is also important to recognize that sexual abuse is not limited to any one institution. Abuse occurs in every segment of society, and research shows that the majority of

abuse before reaching adulthood. Even if abuse never occurred within Church settings, this training would still be essential.

Safe Environment Training is not just about policies



abused children are harmed by parents or other family members. Because the Church is one of the largest youth-serving organizations in the country, the responsibility to be informed, vigilant, and proactive is especially significant. Statistics remind us why this matters: approximately one in four girls and one in six boys will experience

or compliance—it is about people. Since the program began, tens of thousands of individuals have participated in live training sessions. Again and again, participants share how the experience has opened their eyes. Some come forward to share their

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## Caregiver Support

Offer support to the caregivers (parents/guardians) of the abused child. The caregiver is probably hearing these allegations for the first time and will likely be very distressed.

Caregivers often experience a range of emotions, including guilt, anger, confusion, pain, and betrayal. Inform them as to what you know and have done.



Listen to their fears and concerns and assist them by providing the names of community resources.

If one of the caregivers is the one alleged to have abused the child, he or she will be defensive and angry.

Do not confront the alleged caregiver about the abuse.

Allow law enforcement personnel and investigators to handle this. Your responsibility is to ensure the safety of the child

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No child or adult should ever experience abuse by anyone, especially a church minister. We all have the right to be treated with dignity and to expect our church to reflect the goodness of God in all of its dealings.

We hope that this information is helpful to all in our communities who are working to prevent and respond to childhood sexual abuse. Please let us know if you need further assistance or information by calling or emailing our victim assistance coordinator, Ms. Martine Siegel, at 502/636-1044; [victimassistance@archlou.org](mailto:victimassistance@archlou.org)

We must heed God's call to care for the most vulnerable among us and to continue our efforts toward wholeness and health in dealing with sexual abuse.

## Matters...cont

own stories of childhood abuse, recognizing for the first time that what they experienced was not their fault and that help is available. Others describe how the training empowered them to act, including reporting abuse that was occurring in their own families or communities. What often begins with skepticism frequently ends with gratitude and a deeper understanding of the importance of this work. The training also equips adults who may never have experienced abuse personally to recognize warning signs in children

they encounter, whether in the Church, at school, in sports programs, or in their neighborhoods. Many people are unaware that all adults in Kentucky are mandated reporters of child abuse. Safe Environment Training ensures participants understand this responsibility and know exactly how to make a report when concerns arise. Ultimately, Safe Environment Training is about education, empowerment, and prevention. By teaching adults and young people how to recognize abuse,

respect boundaries, and speak up, we help create lasting cultural change. This shared responsibility strengthens our community and moves us closer to a future where children are safer, survivors are supported, and silence no longer allows harm to continue. Safe Environment Training is not simply a requirement—it is a commitment. A commitment to protecting the vulnerable, to learning from the past, and to ensuring that our Church remains a place of faith, trust, and safety for all.

Have you ever seen an adult interacting with a child in such a way that made you feel uncomfortable with what you observed? It is human nature to minimize or doubt these suspicious feelings and opt to believe that you are overacting. These are "uh-oh" feelings, and they should not be ignored. Here are signs that encourage further inquiry

Refuses to let a child set any of his or her own limits.

Insists on hugging, touching, kissing, tickling, wrestling with, or holding a child even when the child does not want this affection.

Is overly interested in the sexuality of a particular child or teen (e.g., talks repeatedly about the child's developing body or interferes with normal teen dating).

Manages to get time alone or insists on time alone with a child with no interruptions.

Spends most of his/her spare time with children and has little interest in spending time with someone his or her own age.

Regularly offers to babysit many different children for free or take children on overnight outings alone.

Buys a child expensive gifts or gives money for no apparent reason.

Frequently walks in on children/teens in the bathroom.