

# Youth Ministry - Safe to take risks

## Workshop Outline

**Session length:** 90 minutes

**Audience:** Church safeguarding leads (especially those advising youth leaders)

**Aim:** Help safeguarding leads move from “avoid risk” to “enable wise, proportionate risk” so young people can grow and learn to safeguard themselves.

### **Learning outcomes (participants will be able to):**

- 1) Explain why risk-taking is a normal part of adolescent development (and why “zero-risk” is not a realistic goal).
- 2) Describe how safeguarding in youth ministry differs from children’s ministry, with an emphasis on empowerment and capability-building.
- 3) Apply a simple proportionality framework to common anxiety areas (e.g., 1–1 mentoring, transport, residentials, peer relationships, LGBTQI+ young people, young leaders).
- 4) Give youth leaders advice that is both protective and enabling, including “what would make this wise?” rather than “don’t do it”.

### Facilitation notes (to keep discussion constructive)

- **Hold duty of care and empowerment together:** avoid framing that implies “anything goes”, but also avoid “safest option is always to stop”.
- **Ask for the real context:** “What’s the age range? Setting? Staffing? History? Known concerns?” before giving advice.
- **Separate hazards from discomfort:** “Is this risky, or unfamiliar?”
- **Turn ‘no’ into ‘not yet’:** if something isn’t currently safe, name what would need to change to make it viable.
- **Use consistent language:** ‘wise, proportionate, accountable, planned’ are more helpful than ‘common sense’.
- **Make space for values differences:** keep returning to safety, dignity, anti-bullying, and clear processes.

Time	Activity	Method / prompts
0–10	<b>Welcome, purpose, and psychological safety</b>	Quick round: name, role, and one safeguarding decision in youth work you’ve found difficult. Set tone: curious, non-judgemental, learning-focused.
10–25	<b>Input: adolescent development &amp; risk</b>	Short teaching using the “lowest reasonable risk” idea. <b>Table question:</b> Where do you see “risk anxiety” showing up in your setting?
25–35	<b>Discussion: children’s work vs youth work</b>	Use the contrast line: “keep children safe” vs “help young people keep themselves safe.” <b>Pairs (5 min):</b> What changes in the advice you give? <b>Plenary (5 min):</b> capture themes.
35–60	<b>Case studies (round 1)</b>	Small groups choose <b>one</b> scenario (1–1 mentoring OR transport OR residential). Apply the 6 prompts: purpose; real risks; proportionality; supervision/boundaries; listen to youth leaders; plan-for-when. Feed back: “What would you say yes to, and under what conditions?”
60–75	<b>Case studies (round 2)</b>	Small groups choose <b>one</b> scenario (peer relationships OR LGBTQI+ young people OR young leaders). Focus on empowerment: what skills/culture help young people safeguard themselves? Share one insight per group.
75–85	<b>Open Q&amp;A / consult the room</b>	Participants name live questions. Facilitator keeps answers practical: “What’s the principle? What would make it safer? Who needs to be involved?”
85–90	<b>Action + feedback</b>	Each person writes: (a) one change to the advice they give, (b) one question they will ask youth leaders next time, (c) one area they want more input on. Quick feedback: one-word checkout or short form.

## Adolescent development and the need to take risks

For safeguarding leads, it helps to start from a developmental reality: adolescence is a stage where young people *need* to test limits as they move from dependence towards independence. Taking risks is not automatically “poor behaviour”; it is often how teenagers learn judgement, build confidence, and discover their capabilities. This is also reflected in brain development: in adolescence, reward-seeking and sensitivity to peer influence can increase, while the skills involved in pausing, planning ahead, and weighing longer-term consequences are still maturing.

In practice, this means young people often grow through *managed* experiences rather than purely through instruction. “Healthy risk” in a church youth context might include: sharing a story in a group, joining a residential, travelling to an event, trying a challenging activity, taking on leadership, navigating friendship conflict, or having an honest conversation with a trusted adult. If our advice removes every element of risk, we may reduce immediate anxiety—but we can also unintentionally block the very experiences that form resilience, faith, and independence.

So the safeguarding question is usually not “How do we make this zero-risk?” but “What is the *lowest reasonable risk* that still allows growth?” Safeguarding becomes most helpful when it equips leaders to take *proportionate* steps: clarifying what the real hazards are, strengthening supervision, setting boundaries, and planning how to respond if something goes wrong. This approach protects young people *and* keeps ministry realistic.

- **Start with the purpose:** What developmental or discipleship benefit does this activity offer that can’t be gained in a “no risk” alternative?
- **Name the real risks (not just the imagined ones):** What are the specific, likely harms (and to whom), rather than a general sense that it feels risky?
- **Check proportionality:** Are the controls (ratios, venue checks, transport plan, permissions) matched to the level of risk, or driven by worst-case thinking?
- **Strengthen supervision and boundaries:** Who is accountable, what are the roles, and what clear behaviour and communication expectations are in place?
- **Listen to youth leaders’ expertise:** Ask what they have done before, what went well/poorly, and what they need from safeguarding to run it well.
- **Plan for “when”, not “if”, something happens:** What is the response plan for illness, injury, a disclosure, missing young person, or a safeguarding concern?

Used well, this kind of thinking helps safeguarding leads give advice that is both *protective* and *enabling*—supporting youth leaders to offer stretching opportunities where young people can grow safely.

## Children's ministry and youth ministry: different aims, different safeguards

A helpful way to understand proportionality is to compare children's work and youth work. In children's ministry, our primary aim is to keep the children safe. In youth ministry, our primary aim should be to help the young people keep themselves safe. One of the key principles of youth ministry is *empowerment*—supporting young people to grow in agency, voice, and responsibility. That includes helping them develop the awareness, skills, and confidence to safeguard themselves (and to seek help early). This does not reduce our duty of care—but it changes what “good safeguarding” is trying to achieve.

Practically, safeguarding leads may be more comfortable with strict control in children's work (because adults hold almost all responsibility), whereas youth work needs a staged approach that increases freedom alongside capability. The question becomes: what decisions can young people safely practise making *now* (with support and supervision), so they are better equipped to manage bigger risks later when the church is not present?

- **Children's work:** adults design the environment; children are protected within it.
- **Youth work:** adults coach judgement and **empower** young people to take increasing responsibility for their own safety (with appropriate support and supervision).
- **Children's work:** simple rules and tight supervision reduce exposure to harm.
- **Youth work:** clear boundaries plus space to choose helps develop internal safeguards (e.g., help-seeking, consent, peer pressure awareness, managing online contact).

Empowerment-focused safeguarding asks, “How are we equipping young people to recognise concern, set boundaries, and speak up?”—not only, “How are we preventing every possible incident?”

## Common risk anxieties (and how to respond proportionately)

Some areas of youth ministry reliably raise anxiety for safeguarding leads—often because they involve blurred boundaries, unsupervised moments, or situations where allegations and misunderstandings can arise. The aim here is not to normalise poor practice, but to show how clear expectations, accountability, and supervision can make these activities both safer *and* more empowering for young people.

### 1–1 mentoring / pastoral support

- **Why it feels risky:** one adult + one young person can create vulnerability to grooming, over-dependence, or allegations if expectations are unclear.
- **What “good” looks like:** mentoring is *accountable* (named supervisor), *time-limited*, and *role-defined* (not therapy; clear aims and boundaries).
- **Proportionate safeguards that enable it:** meet in visible/public settings (or rooms with visibility), agree frequency/length, keep brief factual records, use approved communication channels, and have a clear route for escalation or handover if concerns arise.
- **Empowerment focus:** build the young person’s help-seeking skills and support network rather than creating a “single trusted adult” dependency.

### Transport: travelling in vehicles with young people

- **Why it feels risky:** enclosed space, limited visibility, potential for being alone together, and heightened emotion (late nights, post-event debriefs).
- **What “good” looks like:** planned transport, vetted/approved drivers, clear pick-up/drop-off arrangements, and no ad-hoc changes without informing the leader in charge.
- **Proportionate safeguards that enable it:** avoid 1–1 journeys where possible; if unavoidable, keep it exceptional and planned (parent/carer informed, leader aware, route/time agreed). Use more than one young person in a car where feasible, and keep professional conversation boundaries.
- **Empowerment focus:** teach young people what appropriate adult behaviour looks like in these settings and how to raise a concern if anything feels wrong.

### Residentials and trips

- **Why it feels risky:** overnight setting, changing/showering, tiredness, and more opportunity for peer-on-peer issues.
- **What “good” looks like:** clear ratios and roles, separate sleeping areas, transparent boundaries for adults, and a culture where young people know how to ask for help.

- **Proportionate safeguards that enable it:** written plan (including night-time expectations), consent/medical info, appropriate sleeping arrangements and rooming decisions, designated welfare lead, and clear procedures for missing young people, self-harm, or disclosures.
- **Empowerment focus:** involve young people in setting group agreements (respect, privacy, consent, online behaviour) and in thinking through “what would you do if...?” scenarios.

## Relationships between young people (peer-on-peer)

- **Why it feels risky:** intensity of teenage relationships, peer pressure, “banter” that becomes bullying, and the possibility of sexual harassment or coercion.
- **What “good” looks like:** leaders take peer dynamics seriously, set expectations early, and respond consistently to harmful behaviour without shaming.
- **Proportionate safeguards that enable it:** clear behaviour policy, supervision that notices patterns (not just incidents), structured time as well as free time, and channels for young people to speak to someone other than their usual leader.
- **Empowerment focus:** teach and reinforce consent, respect, digital boundaries, and bystander skills (how to step in or get help when a friend is being harmed).

## LGBTQI+ young people

- **Why it can feel complex:** confidentiality and information-sharing, differing views within families and churches, and a heightened risk of bullying, isolation, and mental health difficulties for some young people.
- **What “good” looks like:** the young person is treated with dignity, listened to carefully, and kept safe from harm (including peer abuse). Leaders are clear about confidentiality limits and record/respond to concerns in line with safeguarding processes.
- **Proportionate safeguards that enable it:** explicit anti-bullying expectations, careful supervision of peer interactions, and a plan for how leaders will respond to disclosures or harassment. Avoid making a young person’s identity the focus of group attention; focus on behaviour, safety, and support.
- **Empowerment focus:** help young people identify trusted adults, understand what help is available, and practise safe ways to seek support—especially if they feel unsafe at home or online.

## Young leaders (under-18s serving in children's/youth teams)

- **Why it feels risky:** young leaders sit in a “between” space—old enough to take responsibility, but still children in safeguarding terms. Boundaries can blur (friend/leader), and they may be exposed to situations or disclosures they are not equipped to handle.
- **What “good” looks like:** young leaders have a clear role description, are *never* treated as adult members of staff, and are supported by named adult leaders who understand both youth work and safeguarding.
- **Proportionate safeguards that enable it:** increased supervision (especially in 1–1 moments), age-appropriate training and induction, clear guidance on physical contact, social media, and confidentiality, and a simple escalation route (“if X happens, you immediately tell Y”). Avoid placing young leaders in positions of sole responsibility (e.g., being the only leader in a room or taking sole charge of a small group).
- **Empowerment focus:** use young leadership to build skills and character—while also teaching self-care, how to say no, and how to seek support when they feel out of depth.

In each of these areas, a good test is whether our safeguarding advice mainly says “don’t do it”, or whether it helps leaders do it well. The most useful next step is usually a short conversation with the youth leader: what is the purpose, what has been tried before, what worries them most, and what safeguards would make this a wise, proportionate risk?

## Case study worksheet (use for any scenario)

1. **Purpose:** What growth/discipleship outcome are we aiming for?
2. **Young people’s voice:** What do young people need/want here, and what are they ready for?
3. **Real risks:** What specific harms are reasonably foreseeable (likelihood/impact)?
4. **Safeguards:** What controls make this wise (supervision, boundaries, environment, comms, consent, training)?
5. **Empowerment:** What helps young people safeguard themselves in this scenario (help-seeking, consent, bystander skills, digital boundaries)?
6. **Decision:** What are we saying “yes” to? What are the conditions? Who signs it off? What gets recorded?
7. **If something goes wrong:** What is the response plan and who is responsible?