



Children’s Grade Level Safe Environment Requirements **for Parish Religious Education Programs**

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee Safe Environment Program has required children and youth in our parishes and schools to receive grade level, age-appropriate child sexual abuse prevention lessons since 2004. These lessons are part of our *Promise to Protect, Pledge to Heal* and are required as part of our continued compliance with the *USCCB Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

In the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the approved grade level safe environment training curriculum for children and youth is the *Circle of Grace* program. The *Circle of Grace* program was developed by the Archdiocese of Omaha and was the product of a collaboration among educators, archdiocesan leadership, mental health professionals, school counselors, and catechists. This curriculum utilizes recognized best practices in child sexual abuse prevention and teaches them through the lens of the Catholic faith. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee Safe Environment Office provides the *Circle of Grace* curriculum to all of our parishes and schools to use at no cost to the parish or school.

Parents are essential partners in their children’s development and safety. The Circle of Grace curriculum contains additional information for parents/guardians to help them start conversations with their children about personal safety and to equip families with the language and skills to help them keep children safe. However, it is important to recognize that for some children home may not be a safe place for them. It is important for children and youth to hear about personal safety concepts from adults in multiple areas of their life including from the Catholic Church. Individuals that harm children and youth can be any age, gender, or relationship to the child.

Providing safe environment education lessons to our children and youth is a vital part of protecting our children and youth in our parishes, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. These lessons are in support of our mission to help prevent abuse and neglect by empowering our young people, teaching them what healthy boundaries are, and encouraging them to talk to a trusted adult when someone makes them uncomfortable. The safety and well-being of the most vulnerable members of the Body of Christ is and always should be one of our top priorities.

Minimum Requirements

All children and youth in kindergarten through 12th grade enrolled in a parish religious education or Christian formation program are required to receive at least one safe environment lesson each year on personal safety from the archdiocesan approved child sexual abuse prevention grade level curriculum *Circle of Grace*. Some grade levels have comprehensive multiple lesson curriculum, and in years when these lessons are taught. These lessons are not sex education.

All parishes and schools are required to use the *Circle of Grace* curriculum. The curriculum, lesson plans, administrator's guide, and parent letters are available on the Archdiocese of Milwaukee Safe Environment webpage under Educator Resources. Access to the curriculum is password protected and requires login to the MyArchmil website.

The instruction of these lessons must be documented for all grade levels with enrolled students in Kindergarten through 12th grade.

It is recommended for parents/guardians to be given the choice to opt their child out of receiving these lessons in the religious education setting. Opt-Out documentation must be kept on file at the parish.

Parishes are required to document the Children Data for their religious education programs each year. All students enrolled must be accounted for as either receiving the lesson (trained), opted out, or not trained*. (See [Documenting Children Data](#).)

**Parishes must provide explanations for any children/youth that did not receive training on the Annual Safe Environment Compliance Documentation Report as well.*

Preparing Catechists

Directors of Religious Education Programs should provide their program catechists with the lesson/s, parent resources, and instructions for turning in program attendance and documentation.

Circle of Grace lessons can be adapted to meet the needs of the class and program.

Supplemental speakers, presentations, and materials can be used in conjunction to the *Circle of Grace* lessons. However, supplemental materials cannot replace the *Circle of Grace* lessons. Activities and discussions from a grade level's lessons can be combined into one lesson, if needed.

The total recommended time to complete a grade level's lesson/s is about 60 minutes total. This can be done over the course of 20 minutes each over a few classes or all lessons combined into one 60-minute class period. Whether it is taught all at once or spread over 3 successive lessons, the entire grade-level lesson must be taught.

It is best practice for the lessons to be taught by the catechists, DRE, or youth minister. If the regular catechist or youth minister feels uncomfortable teaching the lesson, it would be appropriate for another person in the religious education program to teach the lesson. It is not best practice to have parents/guardians provide lesson instruction to their own child. A

parent/guardian providing the *Circle of Grace* instruction at home should only be done due to Opt-Out, Absence, or due to extenuating circumstances such as health and safety precautionary measures.

Grade levels can be combined for instruction as needed. Appropriate suggested grade level grouping would be within the kindergarten -3rd grade levels (early elementary), 4-5th grade levels, 6th-8th grade levels (middle school), and 9th grade -12th grade (high school) levels.

Communicating with Parents

Directors of religious education/faith formation can use the *Circle of Grace* Parent Letter found in the Circle of Grace Administrator's Guide to inform parents of the Circle of Grace program. This letter and any other parent information or resource can be found in the Kindergarten – 8th Grade Administrator Guide on pages 34-44 and in the High School Administrator Guide on pages 15-16, 23-37.

Parents should be made aware of when the lessons are occurring and the process for how to refuse (opt-out) the lesson.

The corresponding post-lesson parent newsletter for the lesson taught should be sent home to the parent either via email or printed out and sent home with the student after the last lesson of that grade level for the year. These are found on the Safe Environment webpage under Educator Resources and are organized by grade level. The only exception to this is the 6th grade lesson letter, which should NOT be sent home with the student due to the sensitive nature of the letter.

If a parent/guardian wishes to preview the lesson that will be taught to his or her child, please share the lesson with the parent and let him or her know that the DRE is willing to discuss any questions or concerns that the parent/guardian may have.

Absent Students

Students that are absent the day of the Circle of Grace lesson instruction should have either a makeup date of instruction or should have the materials sent home to the parent/guardian for instruction at home. If materials are sent home for the parent/guardian to complete with the child, it is required to receive some verification from the parent/guardian that they taught the lesson. This verification should be in writing either via email, signed lesson completion verification, or returning some type of work product from the child from the lesson.

If a lesson has been sent home due to absence for completion at home and no verification is received back from the family regarding the lesson being completed, the catechist or DRE can follow up via an email or note once reminding them to verify that they completed the lesson or the catechist can talk to the child verbally in class to have a follow up discussion having the child provide a summary of the content of the lesson. If no response is received back and we cannot confirm that the child was taught the lesson at home, the child would be considered not trained.

Lesson Content

Each *Circle of Grace* grade level consists of the following components:

1. Philosophy of the *Circle of Grace* Program and explaining the importance of teaching abuse protection to our children and youth
2. Learning Objectives of the *Circle of Grace* Program
3. Leader Guidelines and helpful information for the catechist or other person instructing the lesson
4. Summary of Key Concepts
5. Circle of Grace Program vocabulary and terms
6. Lesson Plans
7. Reproducible Lesson/Activity Materials

Kindergarten -3rd Grade -Comprehensive Grade Levels

These lessons are the foundation of safe environment training and repeat/reinforce key personal safety concepts. The most important lesson content is the Discussion and Activity portions of the lessons. These lessons are important to be taught and repeated each year to reinforce these foundational concepts of personal safety.

Children should all be able to demonstrate the following by the end of 3rd grade:

1. Define his or her *Circle of Grace*.
2. Identify which behaviors are appropriate in his or her *Circle of Grace*.
3. Be able to recognize and distinguish safe/unsafe situations and secrets.
4. Demonstrate “How to ask for help” and trusted adults.

The 2nd grade year typically involves sacramental preparation and has a greater level of material to cover outside of the Circle of Grace curriculum. It is recommended to use the kindergarten and 1st grade levels to teach all lessons for Circle of Grace with greater emphasis, and then combine the lessons for the 2nd grade level.

4th Grade – 5th Grade Levels

These lessons are focus levels that are centered around specific topics. The topics for each grade level are introduced at the general developmentally appropriate age. The most important lesson content is the Discussion and Activity portions of the lessons.

Children should be able to demonstrate the following by the end of 5th grade:

1. An awareness of internet safety.
2. How media can influence how one views healthy relationships.

6th-8th Grade Levels

The 6th -8th Grade Circle of Grace curriculum builds upon the comprehensive lessons taught in the kindergarten-3rd grade lessons.

Children should be able to demonstrate the following by the end of 8th grade:

1. Respect for his or herself and others
2. An understanding of how to identify healthy relationship.
3. What to do when someone violates his or her boundaries.
4. Recognize safe and unsafe situations in a person's *Circle of Grace*
5. An understanding that each person is a unique and precious member of God's creation.
6. An understanding that threats to one's Circle of Grace are unacceptable and how to respond to those perceived threats.

In 6th grade, the *Circle of Grace* curriculum begins to address more specific issues matching the developmental changes and challenges young people face as they enter middle school. These 3 lessons in 6th grade form one whole, resulting in a much higher time commitment for a religious education program.

Recognizing the limited time parish programs have with young people, along with the foundational aspect of the 6th grade lessons, the Safe Environment Office and Office of Evangelization & Catechesis offer parishes two ways to teach the *Circle of Grace* curriculum at the middle school level.

Option 1: Teach the full *Circle of Grace* curriculum as normal for each grade level:

- 6th grade: Teach all 3 lessons without alteration over three successive sessions. These lessons could also be scheduled as a longer retreat day for 6th graders.
- 7th grade: Teach the full 7th grade lesson* in one session or spread out over multiple sessions.
- 8th grade: Teach the full 8th grade lesson* in one session or spread out over multiple sessions.

Option 2: Combine all 6th-8th grade students together and teach the middle school lessons on a 3-year rotation:

- Year 1: Teach all 3 lessons from 6th grade without alteration, either in three successive sessions OR as a retreat day.
- Year 2: Teach the 7th grade lesson* to 6th-8th grade combined
- Year 3: Teach the 8th grade lesson* to 6th-8th grade combined

**Supplemental lessons are available to be used as additional options in place of the 7th or 8th grade lessons.*

Please Note: The parent letter for the 6th Grade lessons should NOT be sent home with the students due to the sensitive nature of the content of the parent letter. The parent letter for the 6th grade lesson should be given directly to the parents/guardians.

9th Grade – 12th Grade Levels

These lessons can also be used on an alternating lesson cycle, in a retreat setting, or in a small group setting. Alternate lessons are available. High school programs can combine the high school aged classes or separate into groups for different lessons.

Program Specific Adaptations & Recommendations

1. **Family Faith Formation** program adaptations and recommendations are located in the Circle of Grace Administrator's Guide on page 12. (Additional guidelines or family faith formation programs are expected from the *Circle of Grace* program in 2022.)
2. Recommendations for **special needs** for students can be found in the *Circle of Grace* Administrator's Guide on pages 13-21.

Questions or Assistance

Safe Environment Office

Suzanne Nickolai

Email: Nickolais@archmil.org or (414) 769-3449

Cynthia Rivera-Garcia (Habla Espanol)

Email: Riveragarcia@archmil.org or (414) 769-3447

Office of Evangelization & Catechesis

Gary Pokorny

Email: Pokornyg@archmil.org

Doug Ulaszek

Email: ulaszekd@archmil.org

Contact Cynthia Rivera-Garcia (riveragarcia@archmil.org) in the Safe Environment Office or Jennifer Murphy (murphyjc@archmil.org) in the Office of Evangelization & Catechesis for assistance with logging into the MyArchmil website to access the curriculum.