

Guidelines on Expression at Youth Conferences

Verbal Expression

Free Speech. The freedom of speech guaranteed by the Constitution has no age limit. By their nature in our society, teenagers often learn by “testing the waters.” Stretching limits is, in fact, appropriate developmental behavior for teens. One of the greatest values of youth conferences is to provide a safe environment for such learning and stretching, which leads to deeper sharing and understanding.

In order to protect the environment and its participants, the Youth-Adult Committee (YAC) has instituted rules that govern behavior at YAC-sponsored events. With the exception of limits imposed by law and certain specific types of speech outlined below, there is no rule restricting free speech at youth conferences.

Artistic License. Youth at YAC conferences find an accepting audience for a wide range of artistic expression. In fact, the range of acceptable expression possibly rivals that available anywhere in society to youth. Censorship is not consistent with a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The Unitarian Universalist Association has, on several occasions, passed resolutions opposing censorship and efforts to restrict free speech, particularly of students.

The only instance when censorship at a youth conference would be appropriate would be if the context of the expression was primarily meant to cause harm (see below). On the other hand, while singing a typical rap song, being physically or verbally suggestive of sexual organs or actions, or performing graphic slam poetry at a con talent show might cause some viewers discomfort, these actions do not violate YAC conference rules. “Artistic” actions, however, that would violate YAC rules include:

- singing a White supremacist song (no violence);
- using Playboy centerfolds in an art project (no sex); or
- painting graffiti on church property (no vandalism).

“Profanity.” Many years ago, comedian George Carlin popularized the “seven words you can’t say on television.” His point was that no word is, in and of itself, obscene. Words are words. Outside the boundaries of artistic expression (discussed above), YAC takes the position that no word is by its inherent nature “obscene.”

Therefore, when one attends a YAC conference, one should expect to hear words such as fuck, shit, piss, cock, etc. as part of some routine conversations. In part, this is just youth expanding the boundaries they are not permitted to cross at home or in school. For some youth, swearing provides a healthy release of frustration. And, sometimes, it is just shock value intended to elicit a response.

On the whole, however, barring its use in a hateful context (see below), swearing is not a violation of YAC conference rules.

Context of Speech. Hate speech – that is, speech whose primary intent is to cause harm, threaten, or offend -- is not tolerated at conferences. Hate speech is considered violence, which is forbidden by YAC rules. Examples of unacceptable speech include:

- shouting "Fuck you!" in anger at another person; or
- using racial, ethnic, sexuality, gender, or similar slang in a derogatory manner, such as making fun of or belittling someone with terms such as "faggot," "prick," "nigger," or "dago;"

while acceptable speech includes:

- casual conversation involving words that some people might consider gutteral, so long as the primary intent is conversational; or
- a discussion of the use of derogatory labels and their impact on people, society, etc.

Inappropriate Speech. YAC conferences are covenanted gatherings whose primary purpose is to enhance and promote the Unitarian Universalist identity of participating youth. This is done in a wide variety of ways, including activities that focus on learning, leadership, community building, worship, social action. All of these activities depend heavily on the shared leadership of youth and adults to promote spiritual growth of youth. The relationship between young people and adult advisors and sponsors must be one of mutual respect if the positive potential is to be realized.

There are no more important areas of growth than those of self-worth and the development of a healthy identity as a sexual being. Adults play a key role in assisting youth in these areas of growth. Wisdom dictates that youth and adults suffer damaging effects when adult leaders become sexually involved with youth persons in their care; therefore, adult leaders must refrain from engaging in sexual, seductive, or erotic behavior with youth. Neither shall they sexually harass or engage in behavior with youth which constitutes verbal, emotional, or physical abuse.

This does not preclude hugging or other physical contact between youth and adults. Just as adults can mentor youth intellectually, so too can they mentor youth in appropriate acts of touching and physical contact that are necessary for healthy emotional development. No rule is intended to eliminate the spiritual love and care conference participants feel toward each other.

Physical Expression

YAC conference rules have always prohibited overt and covert sex. Clearly, this prohibition includes the acts of intercourse and oral sex. Just as clearly, this rule does not exclude most forms of kissing or hugging. However, the inclusion of other forms of intimate contact are less clear and fall within a spectrum of acceptability. Similarly, YAC conference rules prohibit violence. Again, there are obvious prohibitions (angry assault) and obvious acceptable actions (games such as Wink). And, as with sexual physical expressions, the spectrum of “violent” physical expressions has a broad gray area of allowable actions.

Types of physical contact. Any physical expression that causes unwanted harm to the recipient is not allowable. Such harm can be emotional, such as unwanted intimacy. Harm can also be violent, such as harm from painful hitting. However, the degree of harm varies from one person to another. One person may enjoy active wrestling, or “phoofting,” a long-time tradition in some districts. Another may wish to avoid all physical contact. Therefore, a reasonable degree of common sense is necessary to assess the level of unwanted harm caused in a particular incident relative to the amount of honest miscommunication .

Conferences must be a safe environment for the covenanted group of participants. Therefore, safety must generally take precedence over individual wishes. Nothing will destroy the covenant faster than unwanted physical injury or sexual contact. As a result, YAC must err on the side of caution to protect the community. Likewise, participants must respect the wishes of each other, and it is the responsibility of every participant to make those wishes clear so that misunderstandings do not occur. No participant in a conference should ever be forced to accept unwanted physical contact.

Context of physical contact. There are times when the context of physical contact as perceived by observers can be misconstrued as in violation of YAC rules. Since such misunderstandings can lead to mistrust and even suspension of support, it is important for participants in conferences to observe the spirit of the rule in addition to its literal meaning. Obviously, enforcing contextual meanings of rules is far more difficult than enforcing their literal meanings. While conferences must remain safe environments and vehicles for youth to express themselves freely, caution must be observed that danger is not read into every situation.

The guiding principle regarding context should be the protection of individual participants and the protection of the community. Therefore, for example:

- a “puppy pile” of three or more youth sleeping together in a common room is allowable; two youth sleeping together alone in a separate room is not.
- suggestive sex play in a talent show act is allowable; exposure of genitalia is not.

-- breaking a wrist in a properly-controlled game of Wink is an unfortunate accident; holding someone down against their will to phoof them is not.

Physical contact that is imminently dangerous (that is, not just possible, but highly probable) or overtly exclusionary cannot be permitted.

“No means no”. It is absolutely essential that all participants in a youth conference take responsibility for maintaining the rules of the conference. This means that people must make clear when someone is doing something to them to which they do not consent. Likewise, when someone is doing something to another person, and that person asks them to stop, the action must stop.

Exclusivity. Youth conferences are communities. While friendships are certainly encouraged, the primary function of conferences is to bring together groups of people for worship, social action, learning, and fun. While exclusivity is not specifically prohibited, everyone is encouraged to participate as fully as possible for the maximum benefit of all. Examples of the kinds of behaviors that are not encouraged include:

- someone off by themselves for extended periods, not participating in group activities;
- couples segregating themselves from others;
- “clique-ish-ness.”

These behaviors include adults attending conferences, as well. The conference community benefits from the participation of adults and is threatened by observers who set themselves apart from the youth. Of course, every adult has their own comfort level for participation. However, adults should be discouraged from lurking on the fringes of the community. The youth gain no benefit from their participation and the adults gain no benefit from the sharing potential of ministry with youth.

-Created by Jeff Liebmann, YAC adult co-chair, '02-'03