



SHEPERD

TRAUMA-INFORMED YOUTH MINISTRY

A practical field guide for safer, clearer, restorative youth ministry.

LEADER TRAINING + PRINTABLE TOOLS

A GENERATION REGENERATION MINISTRIES RESOURCE

FRAMEWORK ATTRIBUTION

The SHEPERD and FACTS frameworks were developed for Generation Regeneration Ministries. They incorporate generally accepted safeguarding, trauma-informed ministry, and factual-documentation principles.

SHEPERD

**SAFETY CREATES
SPACE FOR
TRUTH.**



EPHESIANS 4:15

A practical field guide for seeing students clearly, setting safe boundaries, communicating wisely, and building a path to restoration.

CORE CONVICTION

We are not called to diagnose their trauma. We are called to shepherd the teenager carrying it.

SEE • HEAR • EXAMINE • PROVIDE • EXPRESS UNDERSTANDING • REVEAL TRUTH • DISCUSS

Leader Training + Printable Tools

For churches, youth pastors, staff, volunteers, and ministry teams

Before You Use This Guide

This resource is a ministry training tool, not legal advice, medical advice, mental-health treatment, or a substitute for professional safeguarding consultation. Every church should maintain written child-safety policies and follow applicable reporting laws. When there is an immediate threat to life or safety, contact emergency services. When abuse, neglect, exploitation, stalking, threats, sexual misconduct, or other potentially criminal conduct is disclosed or suspected, follow your church safeguarding process and the reporting requirements that apply in your jurisdiction.

A CRITICAL DISTINCTION

Being trauma-informed does not mean being consequence-free. Compassion can change how we respond without erasing accountability or another person's right to safety.

How to use the guide

- Train all youth staff and volunteers in the same language before a crisis occurs.
- Review student expectations every week. Repetition is not failure; repetition creates predictability.
- Use SHEPERD for the student-facing conversation and the Safety + Communication Pathway for the adult-facing response.
- Document serious incidents factually and promptly.
- Use restoration plans when a student has been removed and a safe return is being considered.
- Rehearse parent, victim-family, and law-enforcement communication before you need it.

The governing idea: NO SURPRISES

NO SURPRISES

Establish the boundary before it is crossed, the consequence before it is needed, the reporting pathway before there is a crisis, and the restoration process before someone needs to walk it.

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1. The SHEPERD Framework

SHEPERD is a simple response framework for moments when a student is hurting, dysregulated, disclosing something serious, or behaving in a way that tells you more may be happening beneath the surface.

S - SEE

See the student before you see the behavior. Notice changes, patterns, body language, withdrawal, anger, fear, fixation, escalation, or sudden shifts in participation.

H - HEAR

Listen before you fix. Give the student room to speak without interrogation, minimizing, preaching over the pain, or promising secrecy you cannot keep.

E - EXAMINE

Examine the situation for safety, urgency, risk, required reporting, and the limits of your role. Ask: What happened? Who may be at risk? What must happen now?

P - PROVIDE

Provide what is appropriate within your role: calm presence, physical safety, supervision, separation, practical support, a trusted adult, parent contact, or connection to professionals.

E - EXPRESS UNDERSTANDING

Communicate empathy without pretending you fully understand. "Thank you for telling me." "That sounds heavy." "I'm glad you came to me."

R - REVEAL TRUTH

Bring biblical truth into the wound without using Scripture to silence it. Help students separate what happened to them from who God says they are.

D - DISCUSS

Discuss what happens next. Do not end with the disclosure. Identify the next safe step, who will be involved, and what the student should expect next.

CLOSING QUESTION
"Okay, what is our next step?"

2. Predictability Creates Safety

Students do better when expectations are known, language is familiar, and adults respond consistently. A trauma-informed environment is not vague. It is predictable.

LEADER PRINCIPLE

Kids need consistency - and they need a lot of reminding. Repeating an expectation every week is not overkill; it is part of creating safety.

Use first-person expectations

“I” statements place responsibility with the student. They communicate: I have choices. I am responsible for my choices. My choices affect myself and others.

Expectation	What it means
I CAN STAY SAFE	I can keep my hands, feet, objects, body, and words from harming myself or another person.
I CAN SHOW RESPECT	I can respect myself, other students, leaders, the building, and other people's property.
I CAN LISTEN	I can stop, look, and listen when a leader is speaking or giving an instruction.
I CAN PARTICIPATE	I can engage appropriately in games, worship, teaching, small groups, and transitions.
I CAN TAKE RESPONSIBILITY	When I make a poor choice, I can own it, accept the consequence, repair what I can, and choose differently next time.

Review them every week

Keep the language the same across leaders and environments. Students should know the expectation, what it looks like tonight, and what happens when they choose not to meet it.

3. The Shepherd's Fence: Weekly Expectations

THE METAPHOR

The fence establishes the boundary. A good fence is visible before a sheep reaches it.

Suggested weekly leader script

"Before we start, we are going to remind ourselves what keeps this room safe. Our expectation is: I CAN STAY SAFE. That means I keep my hands, feet, objects, body, and words from hurting myself or someone else. You are responsible for your choices. If you need help getting back on track, a leader will help you. If you choose behavior that is unsafe or continues after redirection, there will be a consequence. We will tell you what happens next - no surprises."

What "NO SURPRISES" requires from adults

- Do not invent consequences while angry.
- Do not threaten consequences you will not follow through on.
- Do not enforce the same behavior differently based on which leader is present.
- Do not make safety expectations optional because a student has a difficult story.
- Do explain consequences in advance and revisit them often.
- Do distinguish ordinary disruption from behavior that requires immediate safety intervention.

MINISTRY CULTURE

Same expectations. Same language. Same basic response. Every leader. Every week.

4. The Rule of Proximity

RULE OF PROXIMITY

Before increasing the consequence, decrease the distance - when it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Many ordinary behavior problems can be redirected without public correction. Move closer. Use a quiet voice. Give a brief reminder. Offer a seat near a trusted adult. The goal is the least intrusive intervention that safely works.

Typical progression

PRESENCE - move closer and allow your calm presence to interrupt the behavior.

VOICE - quietly remind the student of the expectation.

REDIRECTION - give a specific next action: "Come sit here," "Put that away," or "Take a minute with me."

BOUNDARY - state clearly what must stop and what will happen if it continues.

CONSEQUENCE - follow the pre-established response.

RESTORATION - help the student re-enter healthy participation when appropriate.

When not to move slowly

Students are not entitled to a full sequence of warnings when someone is in danger. Violence, credible threats, stalking behavior, sexual misconduct, weapons, severe bullying, abuse disclosures, or other serious safety concerns may require immediate separation, emergency response, reporting, or removal according to policy and law.

5. The Voice, the Hook, and Consequences

Sometimes a shepherd's voice is enough. Sometimes intervention has to become firmer. The point of the hook is not punishment for punishment's sake; it represents a boundary strong enough to interrupt unsafe movement.

KEY DISTINCTION

The hook is not rejection. It is intervention.

Consequences should be

- Known in advance whenever possible.
- Connected to the behavior.
- Proportionate to the seriousness and risk.
- Delivered calmly, without humiliation or revenge.
- Documented when the incident is serious.
- Followed by a clear path forward when return is appropriate.

Choice-and-responsibility language

Instead of: "You made me kick you out." Try: "You chose to continue behavior that was unsafe after the boundary was clear. The established consequence is that you are leaving tonight. We will talk with your parent/guardian about what happens next."

A BOUNDARY CAN BE LOVING

Understanding why a behavior happened does not require allowing the behavior to continue.

6. When Behavior Becomes a Safety Issue

Youth pastors should not carry serious safety decisions alone or rely solely on relational mentoring when behavior has escalated into a threat to another person. A mentor may be part of the support plan, but mentoring is not a substitute for safeguarding, parental involvement, qualified assessment, or law-enforcement / child-protection involvement when required.

Warning signs that require escalation beyond ordinary discipline

- Threats of harm to self or others.
- Physical assault or repeated aggression.
- Stalking, fixation, unwanted following, repeated boundary violations, or surveillance of another student.
- Sexualized behavior directed toward another person, coercion, exploitation, or grooming concerns.
- Abuse, neglect, or exploitation disclosures or suspicions.
- Weapons or credible plans to cause harm.
- Escalating conduct despite prior interventions.
- Behavior that places volunteers, staff, students, or the public at significant risk.

DO NOT BECOME THE INVESTIGATOR

Preserve facts. Protect people. Follow policy. Make required reports. Let the appropriate authorities conduct the investigation.

A generalized case lesson

A student's diagnosis, disability, trauma history, or vulnerability can tempt caring adults to shield the student from consequences. But when increasingly dangerous behavior is treated only as a mentoring problem, the ministry may fail both the person being harmed and the student whose behavior is escalating. Earlier accountability cannot guarantee a different future, but avoiding necessary intervention can remove opportunities for learning, treatment, documentation, and protection.

7. The Shepherd's Circle: Who Needs to Know?

SHEPERD guides the student-facing conversation. The Shepherd's Circle guides the adult-facing response: who must be brought into the situation, in what order, and for what purpose.

1. Immediate safety

Separate people, secure supervision, address medical needs, contact emergency services if there is immediate danger.

2. Ministry safeguarding leadership

Notify the designated pastor, safeguarding lead, or church leader according to written policy.

3. Parent / guardian

Communicate promptly unless doing so would violate a safeguarding directive, interfere with an official response, or increase danger.

4. Victim / victim's family

Center safety, information, support, boundaries, and what will be different going forward.

5. Qualified professionals

Refer for mental-health, behavioral, medical, or disability-informed support when the situation exceeds ministry competence.

6. Police / child protection

Report when required by law or when immediate / serious criminal or child-safety concerns require official involvement.

LEADER QUESTION

"Who needs to know this so that the next right action can happen?"

8. How to Communicate with Parents

Principles

- Be prompt.
- Be factual.
- Separate what you personally observed from what someone reported.
- Avoid loaded labels such as “creepy,” “crazy,” “predator,” or “bad kid.”
- State the expectation that was violated.
- State the immediate action the ministry took.
- State what happens next.
- Do not promise outcomes you cannot guarantee.
- Document the communication.

Parent communication structure

WHAT HAPPENED - concise factual description.

WHAT WE DID - immediate safety response.

WHY - expectation, policy, or safeguarding concern.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT - removal, meeting, report, assessment, restoration process, or other next step.

WHAT WE NEED FROM YOU - meeting, pickup, supervision, information, consent, or follow-through.

SAMPLE LANGUAGE

“I want to tell you exactly what happened and what we did. At approximately 7:15, your student followed another student after being told to stop. A leader intervened and separated them. Because this crossed our safety boundary, your student is being removed from tonight’s program. We will meet with you before any return is considered. I also need to explain the next safeguarding steps we are required to take.”

9. How to Communicate with Victims and Families

The person harmed should not become responsible for managing the offending student's consequences, rehabilitation, apology, or restoration. Safety and support come first.

What victims and families need to hear

- “We took what happened seriously.”
- “Your safety matters.”
- “Here is what we did immediately.”
- “Here is what will be different going forward.”
- “Here is who you can contact if you remember something else or have another concern.”
- “You are not required to meet with, forgive on demand, hug, speak to, or reconcile with the other student.”

What not to do

- Do not disclose confidential information about another student merely to reassure the family.
- Do not minimize because “he has a disability,” “she has trauma,” or “they did not mean it.”
- Do not pressure the harmed student to participate in a restorative meeting.
- Do not promise that a student will never return unless that decision has actually been made.
- Do not make spiritual language a substitute for concrete safety action.

IMPORTANT

Restoring a student to community and restoring a particular relationship are not the same thing.

10. How to Communicate with Police / Child Protection

When an official report or emergency response is appropriate, communicate facts rather than conclusions. Do not conduct your own forensic interview or attempt to prove the case before reporting.

Use the FACTS structure

FACTS	What to communicate
F - Firsthand	What did you personally see, hear, receive, or observe?
A - Allegation / report	What did the student, parent, volunteer, or witness report? Use their words as accurately as possible.
C - Context	Where and when did it occur? Who was present? What immediate risk exists?
T - Taken action	What did the ministry already do to protect people or preserve safety?
S - Stored information	What documentation, messages, incident reports, camera footage, or other records exist? Preserve them according to policy.

Do not delay a required report

Do not wait for a staff meeting, parent permission, a pastoral investigation, or certainty beyond what your jurisdiction requires. Churches should know in advance who makes reports, but internal procedure should never be used to obstruct or unlawfully delay a required report.

SPIRIT-LED AND POLICY-READY

Prayer and discernment should permeate the response. But "I prayed about it" is not a substitute for a required report, emergency response, or safety policy.

11. Disability, Trauma, and Accountability

CORE PRINCIPLE

Accommodation is not exemption from safety.

A disability or trauma history may change communication, supervision, sensory supports, expectations for processing speed, professional involvement, or the structure of a restoration plan. It does not erase another person's right to safety.

Ask two questions at the same time

What support does this student need in order to understand and succeed?

What boundary is necessary to keep this student and everyone else safe?

Agency within boundaries

Trauma-informed leadership does not mean children control the boundaries. It means leaders offer meaningful choices inside boundaries that are not negotiable.

EXAMPLE

"For the next four weeks, you will sit beside an adult leader during large group. You may choose which of these three trained leaders you sit with."

12. The Path to Restoration

Removal answers: What must happen right now to keep people safe? Restoration answers: What must happen before a safe return can be considered?

Five restoration steps

1. Stabilize

Immediate safety, separation, parent contact, reporting, and documentation are complete.

2. Understand

Leadership gathers the information it is appropriate to gather and determines what requirements apply before return.

3. Plan

A written restoration plan defines expectations, supports, boundaries, consequences, and review dates.

4. Return

If return is appropriate, re-entry happens under the agreed plan. Restrictions may remain in place.

5. Review

Leadership evaluates whether the student is following the plan and whether safety conditions should remain, change, or end.

Restoration is not automatic

Some conduct may require a long-term restriction, professional clearance, different ministry placement, or no return to a particular environment. A restoration process should never promise access that leadership cannot safely provide.

THE PATH

Tell them the expectation before they break it. Tell them the consequence before you give it. Tell them the path back before they need it. Then do what you said you would do.

13. Restoration Contract Template

Use this template only after immediate safety and reporting obligations have been addressed. Adapt it to your church policy and local requirements.

Student name: _____

Parent / guardian: _____

Date of plan: _____

1. What happened

Write a brief factual description of the behavior that led to removal. Avoid shaming labels.

2. My responsibility

Student statement: "I understand that I am responsible for my choices and that my choices affect other people."

3. My return expectations

- I CAN STAY SAFE.
- I CAN SHOW RESPECT.
- I CAN LISTEN.
- I CAN PARTICIPATE.
- I CAN TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.

4. My specific boundaries

5. My support

What trained adults, accommodations, check-ins, seating plans, schedule changes, professional supports, or other resources will help the student succeed?

6. What happens if I do not follow the plan

7. Review date and next step

Student signature: _____ Parent / guardian: _____

Ministry leader: _____ Date: _____

14. Serious Incident Documentation Form

Date / time:

Location:

Leader completing report:

People involved

What I personally observed

What was reported to me

Immediate safety actions taken

Who was notified

Parent / guardian	Date/time + by whom:
Safeguarding / church leader	Date/time + by whom:
Police / CPS / emergency services	Agency + date/time + report/reference # if provided:
Victim / family communication	Date/time + by whom:

Evidence / records preserved

Next action / person responsible

15. Leader Decision Card

USE IN THE MOMENT

SHEPERD the student. Then use this card to decide what the adults must do next.

1. Is anyone in immediate danger?

YES -> Separate, supervise, call emergency services if needed. NO -> Continue.

2. Is there suspected abuse, exploitation, stalking, sexual misconduct, serious violence, a credible threat, or other potentially criminal conduct?

YES -> Follow safeguarding/reporting procedure and applicable law. Do not investigate on your own.

3. Does a parent/guardian need to be contacted now?

Usually yes for serious incidents, unless doing so conflicts with a lawful safeguarding direction or increases danger.

4. Is another student or adult the victim?

Address their safety and support separately. Do not force reconciliation.

5. Can the student remain safely in the program tonight?

If no, remove according to policy and clearly explain what happens next.

6. Is return appropriate?

If possibly, require a restoration plan. If not, document the decision and communicate it appropriately.

7. Who owns the next step?

Name the adult responsible. Do not end a crisis with "someone should follow up."

16. Biblical Foundations for Loving Accountability

The biblical picture of love is not passive avoidance of hard consequences. Scripture repeatedly connects correction, discipline, wisdom, protection, truth, and restoration.

Proverbs 19:18

Discipline is connected with hope. Loving correction can interrupt a destructive path rather than quietly allowing it to continue.

Proverbs 13:24

Biblical love does not treat all discipline as cruelty. Diligent correction can be an expression of care.

Hebrews 12:5-11

God's discipline is presented in the context of belonging, love, training, and growth toward righteousness.

Galatians 6:1

Restoration should be gentle, spiritually mature, and watchful - not humiliating.

Ephesians 4:15

Truth and love belong together. Love without truth becomes permissive; truth without love becomes harsh.

Matthew 18:15-17

Jesus gives a pattern in which sin is addressed rather than ignored, with escalating involvement when a person will not listen.

Romans 13:1-4

Civil authorities have a legitimate role in restraining wrongdoing; churches should not treat every serious matter as an internal pastoral issue.

Micah 6:8

Justice, mercy, and humility belong together. Ministry should not use mercy as a reason to abandon justice or use justice as a reason to abandon mercy.

TEACHING LINE

Protection from danger is love. Protection from every consequence is not necessarily love.

A careful way to say “loving someone to death”

Our instinct to protect can become harmful when it shields a person from every boundary, consequence, or intervention. We cannot know whether a particular consequence would have changed someone's future. But we can refuse to confuse avoidance with mercy. Sometimes the loving response is the difficult response that interrupts harm, protects the vulnerable, and gives a young person a clear opportunity to change.

17. Training Scenarios + Discussion Questions

Scenario A: The disruptive student

A student repeatedly interrupts teaching, mocks another student, and ignores two verbal reminders. No one is in immediate danger.

Discuss: Where does the Rule of Proximity begin? What is the least intrusive intervention that could work? What consequence was already communicated?

Scenario B: The fixation

A student repeatedly follows another student, sends unwanted messages, and waits outside activities for them after being told the attention is unwanted.

Discuss: What moves this beyond ordinary behavior management? Who needs to be told? What safety boundaries are needed for the targeted student?

Scenario C: The disclosure

A student tells a volunteer something that may indicate abuse and asks the volunteer not to tell anyone.

Discuss: What should the volunteer say? What facts should be documented? Who makes the report? What should not be investigated by the ministry?

Scenario D: The assault

A student hits a volunteer during an escalation. The student has a disability and later apologizes.

Discuss: What happens immediately? How does disability affect support without erasing accountability? What must happen before return?

Scenario E: The victim family

A parent says, "I don't care about your restoration process. I want to know my child will be safe."

Discuss: What can you appropriately promise? What details about the other student should remain private? What concrete changes can you explain?

Final team exercise

Have every leader write down the answer to each question below. Compare answers. If the team gives different answers, your policy or training is not yet clear enough.

- Who has authority to remove a student?
- Who contacts parents?
- Who is the safeguarding lead?
- Who makes mandated reports?
- Who calls police when there is immediate danger?
- Who communicates with a victim's family?
- Who stores incident documentation?
- Who decides whether a student can return?
- Who writes and monitors a restoration plan?

FINAL CHARGE

Spirit-led shepherds should not be improvising safety policy while adrenaline is high. Pray deeply. Prepare clearly. Protect courageously. Restore wisely.

SHEPERD

SEE • HEAR • EXAMINE • PROVIDE • EXPRESS UNDERSTANDING • REVEAL TRUTH • DISCUSS

Connection before correction. Safety before solutions. Truth without spiritual bypassing. Accountability without rejection.

NO SURPRISES.

Clear expectations. Clear consequences. Clear communication. Clear path to restoration.