

ECM · COUNTY BIRTHDAY SOCIAL



Talking with Youth: A Volunteer Guide

How to be a warm, safe, and respectful presence inside the detention center

The Birthday Social is, at its heart, an hour or so of ordinary celebration — pizza, frozen custard, a card, a gift, and people who show up. What makes it extraordinary is that it happens inside a detention center. The youth you'll meet are minors in custody, and a few simple ground rules protect them and you. This guide covers how to talk with them, what to avoid, and what to do if something hard comes up.

1 • Why this matters

Many of these young people have been let down by adults. Showing up consistently, listening well, and treating them as the beloved children of God they are — without prying, preaching, or promising things you can't deliver — is the work. You don't need to be a counselor. You need to be a steady, smiling, kind adult for the duration of the social.

2 • Confidentiality

What you see and hear inside the building stays inside the building. Do not use a youth's full name outside the facility — not in conversation, not in a social media post, not in a church newsletter. Do not photograph them. Do not discuss their cases, families, or anything they told you with anyone except ECM staff or the chaplain. This is not a suggestion; it is a legal and ethical obligation. A breach can jeopardize a youth's safety, their case, and ECM's ability to keep hosting.

3 • Conversation: what works

Talk to them the way you'd talk to any teenager at a birthday party — **light, curious, encouraging.**

- Aspirations — what they'd like to become.
- Hobbies, music, movies, sports — theirs and yours.
- The future — what they want to do after release, what they're working toward.
- Their interests and skills; ask them to teach you something.
- The food — whether they've had Ted Drewes before, favorite type of pizza.
- Their birthday — what they'd wish for, what they're looking forward to.

4 • Conversation: what to avoid

- **Their case or charges.** Don't ask why they're here, when they get out, or what court said. If they bring it up, you can listen briefly and gently steer back to the present.
- **Their families in detail.** Don't ask who's visiting, who isn't, where their parents are. Family wounds are often raw.
- **Gang affiliation, neighborhood turf, or 'who you run with.'** Even casual questions can carry weight you don't intend.
- **Contact-info exchange.** Do not give a youth your phone number, address, or social media, and do not ask for theirs. If they ask for yours, decline warmly — it's a facility rule.
- **Promise-making.** Don't promise to write, to visit, to send money, to call someone, or to 'see them after.' These promises are kind in the moment and devastating when they break.
- **Comparing them to other kids, other units, or 'how last month's group was.'** Each youth and each night is its own.
- **Talking over them or about them to other adults as if they aren't there.** Speak to the youth, not around them.

5 • Physical contact and boundaries

A handshake, a high-five, a fist bump — all welcome. Beyond that, follow the facility's lead. Some of these young people have histories that make touch complicated; let them set the distance. Most often in the birthday social setting, you may be interacting with children through windowed doors and/or windows. Let this be as little of a barrier as possible; this is one way that physical contact awkwardness can be eliminated.

6 • If a youth discloses something

A youth could tell you something hard — that they're being hurt, that they want to hurt themselves, that they plan to hurt someone, that they're being abused by a peer or staff member. This is rare, but you should be ready.

- Stay calm. Thank them for telling you. **Don't promise to keep it a secret** — you can't, and you shouldn't.
- Tell them you're going to make sure the right person hears this.
- Find the chaplain or facility staff immediately. The chaplain is the bridge — they know who to tell and how. If you cannot find the chaplain, tell any staff member and ask them to contact the chaplain.

- After that, it is not yours to carry. Do not investigate, do not confront anyone, do not write about it. The reporting obligation has been met the moment you hand it to staff.

This is the single most important sentence in this guide: if a young person trusts you with something hard, your only job is to pass it to the chaplain. You are not expected to fix it, judge it, or hold it alone.

7 • The chaplain's role

The chaplain on site is a pastoral presence — they know the youth, the staff, and the rhythms of the facility. They are your go-to for any question you're unsure about: who to talk to, whether something is appropriate, what a youth meant, how to handle a moment that felt off. If you have a question during the party, ask the chaplain. If something is weighing on you after the party, the chaplain or ECM office staff are the people to call.

8 • Faith and the line on proselytizing

ECM is an Episcopal mission, and the party is rooted in the conviction that these youth are beloved children of God. That conviction shows up as warmth, dignity, and care — not as pressure. Please don't evangelize, hand out religious literature, ask youth whether they're 'saved,' or steer conversation toward faith unless a youth opens that door themselves. If a youth asks about your faith, answer honestly and briefly; you're sharing, not recruiting. The chaplain is the right person for any deeper pastoral conversation.

9 • A few things to remember

- You showed up. That is the whole assignment.
- Listen more than you talk and **smile!**
- Treat each youth as the beloved child of God they are — without condition, without curiosity about why they're here.
- When in doubt, ask the chaplain.
- What happens here, and what you hear here, stays here.