

Western District Conference Safe Sanctuaries Abuse Prevention Policy
from the WDC Policy Manual

Revised October of 2021

E. Safe Sanctuaries Abuse Prevention

1. Introduction

As Christians, we take our responsibilities to our children, youth, and vulnerable adults very seriously. While we may not be able to prevent abuse in every situation, it is possible for us to greatly reduce the risk by following a policy of prevention. We are responsible to create an environment of safe sanctuary for children, youth, and vulnerable adults who participate in Western District Conference sponsored events and for those who work with them. Thus, we establish this Abuse Prevention Policy to demonstrate our concern for and commitment to the safety of children, youth, and vulnerable adults. We also serve as a model of such risk management for the congregations of Western District Conference.

2. Purpose

It is the purpose of this policy to 1) protect from abuse the children, youth and vulnerable adults that participate in WDC sponsored events and 2) protect our staff, both paid and volunteer, from unfounded and/or malicious allegations of abuse through a comprehensive plan that includes screening, training, and supervision. The policy is designed to increase supervision and accountability and decrease opportunities for isolation and secrecy.

Adults interacting with minors. WDC's intent is to provide a safe and loving environment where children are nurtured and cared for in a way that allows them to become all they are capable of being. This includes valuing them, regarding them positively, treating them with respect and care, and observing appropriate boundaries. Discipline of children should be used to teach and correct rather than punish. Caring touch is valuable to children. Touch should be in response to the need of the child and not the need of the adult. Touch should be open rather than secretive. (For example, a hug in the context of a group is very different from a hug behind closed doors.) Touch should be initiated by the child rather than the adult. Resistance from the child must be respected. Touch should always communicate respect for the child. Adults will adequately supervise children and youth, to prevent bullying and other inappropriate behavior.

Minors interacting with minors. Children and youth (under the age of 18) must be encouraged to treat each other with respect, observing appropriate boundaries with each other. The following behaviors between minors are considered inappropriate and/or abusive and will not be tolerated:

- Bullying
- Hazing

- Derogatory name-calling, ridicule or humiliation
- Publicly singling out another child for negative treatment or exclusion
- Any kind of sexualized touch
- Sexually explicit language
- Showing of sexually explicit images
- Hitting, slapping, pushing, holding against a child's will or otherwise harming another child

Factors considered in evaluating whether abuse has occurred include the following: differences in age, responsibility, trust, power, development, awareness and understanding, coercion, and threats, whether implied or verbal. There is a difference between normal childhood sexual exploration and inappropriate sexual behavior or abuse. The difference has to do with a difference in the level of sexual understanding, coercion, and age.

3. Scope

This policy shall be applicable to all activities or events involving children, youth and vulnerable adults within events sponsored by the Western District Conference of Mennonite Church USA.

4. Definitions

- a. Abuse: physical, emotional, or mental harm; intentional, negligent or reckless behavior that is harmful, injurious or offensive.
- b. Child Abuse: an act committed which is not accidental and which harms or threatens a child's physical or mental health or a child's welfare. Abuse of a child is any action (or lack of action) that causes injury, endangers, or impairs a child's physical, mental, or emotional health and development. Child abuse includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.
- c. Physical Abuse: deliberately or intentionally causing bodily harm to another person. Examples: assault, shaking, slapping, burning, scalding, kicking, choking, punching, beating, shaking, holding underwater, or pulling hair.
- d. Sexual Abuse: when any person who has less maturity or power is tricked, persuaded, enticed, or coerced into any sexual contact or interaction for the sexual stimulation of the abuser or another person. Examples: any sexual contact with a child, fondling, intercourse, exposure to pornography, sodomy, exhibition of any sexually explicit conduct, sexually suggestive language, intentional sexual exposure. The power imbalance may result from the abuser's greater size, age, position, experience, or authority.
- e. Emotional Abuse: A pattern of behavior that attempts to control, and/or attacks a person's emotional development, sense of self-worth, dignity and identity (Examples: constant criticism, teasing, belittling, insulting, rejecting, ignoring, or isolating a child)

- f. Neglect: Failure to protect a child from harm or failure to meet needs for essential medical care, nutrition, hydration, hygiene, clothing, basic activities of daily living or shelter, which results in a serious risk of compromised health and safety.
- g. Sexual harassment: unwelcome or sexual advances, requests for sexual favor, and/or verbal or physical conduct or written or electronic communication of an intimidating, hostile, or offensive nature.
- h. Child: For the purpose of mandatory reporting, anyone under the age of 18.
- i. Vulnerable Adult: a person 18 years of age or older with diminished physical, mental or emotional capacities.
- j. Adult: a person 18 years or older.
- k. Volunteer: a person who leads or assists in conducting activities on behalf of Western District Conference and does not receive monetary compensation.
- l. Staff: a person employed by the Western District Conference who leads or assists in conducting activities.
- m. Activities: any activity or program in which children, youth or vulnerable adults are under supervision of staff persons or volunteers.
- n. Background Checks: researching references and records for indications of past or potential abusive and/or criminal activity.

5. Screening Procedures

Careful screening is important for the prevention of abuse. It provides some assurance that the most reliable, committed and experienced staff and volunteers are in place for every program that involves children, youth, and vulnerable adults. The following are minimum standards:

- a. All adults, volunteer or staff persons, who have regular and/or direct contact with children, youth and vulnerable adults must complete the Voluntary Disclosure / Participation Covenant and an Applicant Notification & Release of Information for Background Report form. (See end of policy.)
- b. Background screenings shall be conducted by the Conference Minister or by staff designated by the Conference Minister. Minimum screenings include:
 - i. Reference checks from Voluntary Disclosure form.
 - ii. Review of the State Public Offender Registry within the state where each volunteer is a resident.
 - iii. National criminal background check.
- c. The policy shall be implemented in the following manner:
 - i. All staff and volunteers who have regular and / or direct contact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults will submit to screening procedures.

- ii. The screening procedure shall be repeated every two years or sooner if indicated.
- iii. The staff person in charge of the event is responsible for reviewing and approving each application before a person's service begins.
- iv. All records are confidential and will be maintained for a period of at least five years by the Conference Minister or staff designated by the Conference Minister.

6. Reporting

We will follow mandatory reporting guidelines from Kansas Statute 38-2223: (1) When any person who has reason to suspect that a child has been harmed as a result of physical, mental or emotional abuse or neglect or sexual abuse, the person shall report the matter promptly as provided in subsections (b) and (c);

(b) *Form of report.* (1) The report may be made orally and shall be followed by a written report if requested. Every report shall contain, if known: The names and addresses of the child and the child's parents or other persons responsible for the child's care; the location of the child if not at the child's residence; the child's gender, race and age; the reasons why the reporter suspects the child may be a child in need of care; if abuse or neglect or sexual abuse is suspected, the nature and extent of the harm to the child, including any evidence of previous harm; and any other information that the reporter believes might be helpful in establishing the cause of the harm and the identity of the persons responsible for the harm.

(c) *To whom made.* Reports made pursuant to this section shall be made to state 24-hour protection hotline in the state where the suspected abuse occurred: Nebraska Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline 800-652-1999; Kansas Protection Report Center Hotline 800-922-5330; Oklahoma Child Abuse Hotline 800-522-3511; Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Hotline 800-252-5400.

7. Supervision

Competent and trained staff and volunteers are important to any event. The procedures described below are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse to children, youth, and vulnerable adults and to protect staff and volunteers from unfounded accusations. To achieve compliance with Safe Sanctuaries, it may be necessary to combine groups, recruit and train additional volunteers or cancel an event. Recognizing there is safety in numbers, children and youth will be instructed to use the "buddy system." The following are **minimum** standards, and each event may adopt more stringent requirements if necessary.

8. Guidelines

- a. There will be a window in the door of all offices and classrooms used during WDC events and activities. If no window is available, the door will be left open while in use.
- b. Two approved adults (staff or volunteers) should be present during the entire time of all WDC supervised events and activities. (Two leaders per classroom or two leaders within line of sight in large rooms or out of doors.) One leader can be in contact with groups of three or more youth as long as they are in line of sight of other leaders. If both boys and girls are present, then the leaders shall include both men and women.
- c. Youth may volunteer to help with children's programs, provided at least one adult is present and is trained in maintaining safe interpersonal boundaries and appropriate touch.
- d. No person shall supervise any group of children or youth unless he/she is at least five years older than the children or youth.
- e. All who are supervising will have knowledge of the building or context of the event. They should be able to find quickly: exits, lights, phones, first aid kits, restrooms, storm shelters.
- f. All volunteers and staff will be trained in maintaining safe interpersonal boundaries and appropriate touch. All displays of verbal and physical affection shall be non-sexual in nature and intent and have the prior consent of the recipient. Examples of appropriate displays of affection include a side-to-side hug, handshake, high-five or pat on the back or forearm. A refusal to participate in holding hands for any activity, except for safety in crossing the street, will also be respected.
- g. Children will be encouraged to use bathroom facilities before and after class or during group time. Any adult other than the child's parent assisting a child in the bathroom will stand outside the door. If the child needs assistance there will be a second adult present during the process. Two adults (if child's parent not present) will be present when changing diapers or checking for injuries under children's clothing or diapers. In the unlikely event that two adults are not present for a needed diaper change or assistance in the bathroom, the adult present will notify the parent that the contact occurred.
- h. Children will not be allowed to leave a designated event early unless a parent or guardian accompanies them as they leave. Youth participants in an event will not be allowed to leave a designated event early without permission of parent or guardian.
- i. Overnight functions will be supervised by two adults, each at least five years older than the youth in attendance. The parents / guardians of all registrants must have

complete information about the event ahead of time (starting and ending times, schedule, contact information, supervision arrangements). The adult leaders should not sleep in the same room as the youth. If the physical space makes this impossible, adults may sleep along one side of one room and the youth on the opposite side. Two adults will need to be present in the sleeping room.

- j. All volunteers and staff will be given a copy of the Abuse Prevention Policy and guidelines.

Voluntary Disclosure / Participation Covenant

Name_____

Address _____

Phone_____email_____

Name of church where you are a member:_____

List names and addresses of other churches you have attended regularly during the past five years:

Write a brief description of your church volunteer work with minors during the past five years:

List any gifts, training, education or other factors that have prepared you for ministry with children or youth:

Have you ever been investigated, accused or convicted of sexual or physical abuse?

___ Yes ___ No If Yes, what was the resolution? Use back side of paper if needed.

Please list two personal references. Do not include relatives.

Name_____ Phone: _____

Address_____

Name_____ Phone: _____

Address_____

I affirm to the best of my knowledge that the information in this form is correct. I authorize Western District Conference to contact any individuals or organizations to provide the confidential information requested. I have read the Safe Sanctuaries Abuse Prevention Policy for Western District Conference Events and agree to observe and participate in the procedures as stated above.

Signature_____ Date_____