

WDC Safe Sanctuaries Abuse Prevention Policy
(Excerpt from WDC Policy Manual)
Revised and Approved by Executive Board - November 16, 2024

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 safe practices for the congregations of Western District Conference (WDC).

2. Purpose

It is the purpose of this policy to 1) protect from abuse the children, youth and vulnerable adults who participate in WDC sponsored events and 2) equip our staff, both paid and volunteer, 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 and choice of the child and not the need and choice of the adult. Touch should be open rather than secretive. Touch should be initiated by the child rather than the adult. Resistance from the child must be respected. It is a best practice to give a child a choice regarding touch, e.g. "Would you like a hug, a high five, or nothing today?" Abide by the child's choice. 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
- Grooming behaviors
- 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/or age.

If staff or volunteers suspect abuse of a minor by another minor, they should inform the WDC staff person in charge of the event, to take further action as appropriate.

3. Scope

This policy shall be applicable to all activities involving children, youth and vulnerable adults within events sponsored by WDC.

4. Definitions (**Indicates a definition adapted from the Mennonite Church USA prevention and accountability resource - Draft 4, July 2024*).

- a. **Abuse*: When a person in a position of power or trust uses that position to exploit or violate someone more vulnerable. That exploitation or violation can take a variety of forms including abuse of power, bullying, elder abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and spiritual abuse.,
- 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 (including spiritual abuse) and neglect.
- c. **Child Neglect*:
 - o *Physical*: Failure to provide necessary food or shelter, or lack of appropriate supervision.

- Medical: Failure to provide necessary medical or mental health treatment
 - Educational: Failure to educate a child or attend to special education needs.
 - Emotional: Inattention to a child's emotional needs, failure to provide psychological care, or permitting a child to use alcohol or other drugs.
- d. *Child Sexual Abuse: Physical contact with a sexual or intimate part of the body, other forms of sexual activity, or any activity engaged in for the purpose of sexual gratification.
- Physical contact includes, but is not limited to:
 - Touching, grabbing, patting, slapping, pinching, rubbing, fondling, groping, poking, or other forms of contact, whether over or under clothing.
 - Rubbing one's genital area up against another person or touching another person with one's genitals, whether over or under clothing. This includes instances when an individual acts as though the rubbing was inadvertent but in fact it was intentional.
 - Sexual or intimate body parts include, but are not limited to: Breasts, buttocks, genitals, groin area, upper thighs.
 - Other forms of sexual activity include, but are not limited to:
 - Photographing, videotaping, or making any other visual, descriptive, or auditory recording of sexual activity or the sexual or intimate parts of a person's body.
 - Displaying to another any writings, photograph, videotape, or other visual or auditory recording or sexual activity or the sexual or intimate parts of a person's body.

Children are unable to consent to any form of sexual activity with an adult.

- e. *Physical Abuse: Non-accidental physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to severe fractures or death) by way of bodily contact (such as punching, betaing, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting with a hand, strick, strap or other object, burning, or otherwise causing harm) to a child or adult.
- f. *Sexual Abuse: Any type of non-consensual sexual contact, including but not limited to:
- Sexual penetration: Any act of vaginal or anal penetration, however slight, by a person's penis, finger, other body part, or an object, and/or, regardless of whether penetration occurs, any oral-genital contact.
 - Sexual contact: Any intentional touching of a person's breasts, buttocks, groin, genitals, or other intimate parts. Touching may be over or under clothing, and may include making another person touch the abuser, or making the person touch their own body.

- Non-contact sexual acts: Observing a person's nudity or sexual activity or allowing a person to observe sexual activity; recording, photography, transmitting, showing, viewing, streaming or distributing intimate or sexual images, audio recordings, or sexual information; exposing one's genitals or inducing a person to expose their own genitals; or communicating romantic or sexual desire, interest or content.
- g. *Emotional Abuse: Acts toward an adult or a child that cause or have a substantial likelihood of causing harm to the person's physical, psychological, social or spiritual well-being. Often emotional abuse is a pattern of behaviors such as shaming, insulting, degrading, intimidating, threatening, humiliating, and/or domineering.
- h. *Grooming: Grooming is the process by which a person draws a victim into a sexual relationship and maintains that relationship in secrecy. The offender targets a person and uses compliments, gifts, special favors or privileges to gain the trust of the potential victim, their family, friends, or community. The offender will isolate the victim and control the victim with requirements of secrecy or use threats to maintain secrecy. Grooming of a child/youth may often start with grooming the parent/guardian to gain their trust in order to gain unquestioned access to the child.
- i. *Sexual harassment: Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct or written or electronic communication of a sexual nature that creates a hostile environment.
- j. *Child or children: A person or persons under the age of 18.
- k. *Vulnerable Adult: "Any adult who is infirmed or diminished in capacity due to age, illness, or disability, and who is wholly or partially dependent upon one or more other persons for emotional, psychological, or physical care or support. Such dependency may be temporary as in the case of an accident, illness or birth of a child. Also included is any adult who by virtue of a crisis, experiences vulnerability leading to dependency on another, or lacks agency in a pastoral relationship as in the wake of death of a family member or job loss." (*Model Policy for the Protection of Vulnerable Adults*, the Episcopal Church, 2018) "Any person 18 years of age or older who is unable to legally consent, unable to comprehend the nature of certain actions, or susceptible to coercion or abuse. This may include individuals who are mentally or physically disabled and the elderly." (*Child Protection in a Ministry Environment*, Brotherhood Mutual, p. 32)

- l. *Elder Abuse: Abuse perpetrated against someone who is vulnerable because of their advancing age. There are several common types of elder abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual, financial and neglect.
- m. Adult: a person 18 years or older.
- n. Volunteer: a person who leads or assists in conducting activities on behalf of Western District Conference and does not receive monetary compensation.
- o. Staff: a person employed or compensated by WDC who leads or assists in conducting activities on behalf of Western District Conference.
- p. Activities: any event or program sponsored by WDC in which children, youth or vulnerable adults are under supervision of WDC staff persons or volunteers.

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. Background check including National Sex Offender check and National and County 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, and conducting a personal interview with the applicant before their 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 state law in the state in which the alleged event occurred. In addition, all credentialed leaders and WDC staff have a moral and ethical requirement to act “as if” they are mandated reporters when responding to potential abuse. 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 defined by state law.

(a) *Form of report.* 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.

(b) *To whom made.* Reports made pursuant to this section shall be made to the 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.

After legally mandated reporting has occurred, the person making the initial report shall report to the WDC staff person in charge of the event the nature of the report, unless the reporting is a complaint against the WDC staff person. If that is the case, the secondary report shall be made to the WDC Conference Minister. If the complaint is against the Conference Minister, the report shall be made to the Mennonite Church USA Denominational Minister for Church Safety.

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 false allegations. 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 and unrelated 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 healthy 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 the following quickly: exits, lights, phones, first aid kits, restrooms, storm shelters.

f. All volunteers and staff will be expected to maintain safe interpersonal boundaries and healthy 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, with consent, include a side-to-side hug, handshake, high-five or pat on the forearm. A refusal to participate in holding hands for any activity, except for safety in crossing the street, will also be respected. A child should always be offered a choice regarding touch, e.g. "Would you like a hug, a high five, or nothing today?" and the adult shall abide by their choice.

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 unrelated adult present during the process. Two adults (if child's parent or guardian is not present) will be present when changing diapers or checking for injuries under children's clothing or diapers. In the unlikely event that two unrelated adults are not present for a needed diaper change or assistance in the bathroom, the adult present will notify the parent and write a brief report to the staff person in charge of the event 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 at least two unrelated 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 unrelated adults will need to be present in the sleeping room.

9. Accountability.

- a. When allegations of abuse or misconduct by a non-credentialed staff person or volunteer who are leading WDC activities are discovered, disclosed or suspected, the alleged offense will be reported to the individual's pastor or church leader to be processed according to their congregational safe church policy. WDC is responsible to inform parents or guardians for children who were under direct supervision of the person credibly accused, that an abuse allegation has been reported. The individual will be prohibited from leading future WDC activities. When allegations of abuse or misconduct by a credentialed staff person or volunteer who are leading WDC activities are discovered, disclosed or suspected, the alleged offense will be processed according to the current Mennonite Church USA ministerial misconduct prevention and accountability process. WDC is responsible to inform parents or guardians for children who were under direct supervision of the person credibly accused, that an abuse allegation has been reported.

10. Training

- a. All volunteers and staff will be given a copy of the Abuse Prevention Policy and required to watch a safe sanctuaries training video provided by WDC or have participated in safe sanctuaries training in their congregation in the past two years. They will be asked to sign an affidavit that they have received and read the Abuse Prevention Policy and will abide by it, and that they have watched the training video or have participated in safe sanctuaries training in their congregation in the past two years.

Voluntary Disclosure / Participation Covenant

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____ email _____

Name of church where you are an active participant or 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 or vulnerable adults during the past five years:

List any gifts, training, education or other factors that have prepared you for ministry with children, youth or vulnerable adults (please indicate which age group you want to work with):

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. At least one must be your pastor or acting church leader. 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 of Western District Conference and agree to abide by it. I have also watched the safe sanctuaries video, or have received safe sanctuaries training in my congregation within the past two years. . An electronic signature shall be accepted as a person's signature.

Signature _____ Date _____

NOTICE REGARDING BACKGROUND INVESTIGATION

A consumer report (background screening report) and/or an investigative consumer report which may include information obtained through personal interviews concerning your character, employment history, general reputation, personal characteristics, police record, education, qualifications, motor vehicle record, mode of living, may be obtained in connection with your application for and/or continued employment, contract for services or volunteer services with Western District Conference. A consumer report and/or an investigative consumer report may be obtained at any time during the application process or during your employment, contract for services or volunteer services with Western District Conference. You have the right, upon written request made within a reasonable time after receipt of this notice, to request disclosure of the nature and scope of any investigative consumer report. Please be advised that the nature and scope of the most common form of investigative consumer report obtained with regard to applicants for employment is an investigation into your education and/or employment history conducted by Safe Hiring Solutions LLC, P.O. Box 186, Crawfordsville, IN 47933 888-215-8296.

AUTHORIZATION

By signing below, I, _____, hereby voluntarily authorize Western District Conference to obtain either a consumer or an investigative consumer report about me from a consumer reporting agency and to consider this information when making decisions regarding my application for and/or continued employment, contract for services or volunteer services at Western District Conference. I understand that I have rights under the Fair Credit Reporting Act, including rights discussed above, and have received a Summary of My Rights Under the FCRA. This report may be delivered in either written or electronic form.

Print Name (last, first, middle): _____

Social Security Number: _____ Date of Birth (MM/DD/YYYY): _____
(For ID Purposes Only)

Drivers License Number: _____ Drivers License State: _____

Any other names I have been known by: _____

Current Address: _____

Previous Addresses (Last 7 Years): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

____ Check for CA, MN or OK applicants only, if you would like to receive a copy of the consumer report if one is obtained.

Return completed form to Western District Conference, wdc@mennowdc.org, or PO Box 306, North Newton, KS 67117