

CHILD AND YOUTH PROTECTION POLICY

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Jesus welcomed the children and charged caregivers with removing stumbling blocks from their path (Matthew 18:6). Since the beginning of the Christian church, members have been charged with the care of “the least of these”. Our very word for worship space, “sanctuary”, denotes a safe space for all to grow and flourish. These are some of the many reasons that we, Christians, should pay particular attention to the care and protection of children and youth. In addition, as Presbyterians, our constitution mandates that clergy, certified educators, and church officers report suspected child abuse. (*Book of Order*, G-6.0204b-ministers of Word and Sacrament, G-6.0304b-elders, G-6.0402b-deacons, and G-14.0732b-Christian educators).

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Matthew 18:5 (NRSV)

Definitions

- Children/Youth – All persons under the age of 18 years. Persons who are in the fifth grade and younger are known as *children*. Persons who are in the sixth grade and older are known as *youth*. Persons 18 years and older are legally considered an adult.
- Child/Youth Abuse – This policy includes any/all acts of physical, verbal, or psychological abuse directed at a child or youth by an adult (18 years old and older) or at a child or youth by another child or youth. Abuse includes, but is not restricted to, abusive language or physical maltreatment which may, or does, cause mental, psychological or physical harm.
- Head of Staff/Moderator of Session - Ultimately, all final decisions as to situations which fall within the boundaries of the Child Protection Policy will be made by the head of the Staff/Moderator of Session.

SELECTION OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

Employed Staff

All persons employed to serve in a supervisory capacity for children/youth shall:

- Be at least 18 years of age.
- Be provided with a written position description.
- Complete an application form including job references from any jobs working with children and youth (appendix F & G.)
- Provide three character references (appendix F).
- Be interviewed according to the personnel policies of Northwest Presbyterian Church (appendix E).
- Submit to a background check at the church’s expense.

Volunteer Staff

All volunteers serving in a supervisory capacity for children/youth shall:

- Be at least 18 years of age.
- Be a member/regular attendee of Northwest Presbyterian Church for at least six months.
- Be provided with a written position description.
- Be interviewed by the appropriate staff person with whom the volunteer will be serving (appendix E.)
- Complete a written volunteer application form that includes permission for a background check at the church’s expense (appendix F & G).

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Youth Volunteers

- Must be active member of Northwest Youth Ministry.
- Complete the Staff/Volunteer Application form and have it signed by parent or guardian.
- May assist in Children's Ministry as long as two adults are present and there is at least a five year age difference between the Youth Helper and the supervised children. When it is not possible for two adults to be present, the "floating leader" must be notified.

Supervising Volunteers

- Ideally at least two adults—staff and/or volunteers--should be present in a supervisory role during any church sponsored events or activities for children/youth. When this is not possible, a "floating leader" shall be identified and notified of the staffing situation.
- Children /Youth shall not be allowed to leave the designated meeting area without permission/supervision.
- Unauthorized visitors shall not be allowed to remain with the group.
- Written parental permission must be obtained in these following situations:
 - When an adult might be spending time alone with children or youth in an unsupervised situation (for example when tutoring a minor or in a mentoring situation);
 - When transporting a child or youth;
 - For any off-campus church activity;
 - For special programs such as lock-ins and out-of-town mission trips.
- Install clear glass windows in classroom and office doors; door should be left open when room is occupied with a child or youth and clear glass is not present in the door.
- Use a church identification procedure for nursery, early childhood, and elementary age children, such as a "check in/check out" system. Also obtain, in writing, from parents a list of authorized adults who may pick up their child/children (for example parents, grandparents, neighbor, etc.).
- Educate all volunteers and paid staff who work with children and youth as to the church's policies and procedures regarding violations. The training will be one initial introduction workshop educating participants of the scope and nature of the Northwest Presbyterian Church Child/Youth Protection Policy and the *Stewards of Children* Seminar.

Training Volunteers

Jesus said "Let the little children come to me and do not stop them; for it is to such of these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matthew 19:14)

As Christians we are charged with the care and nurture, both spiritually and physically, of our children and youth. Part of fulfilling this charge is to do all we can to prevent child abuse in all of its forms.

A comprehensive approach to preventing child abuse includes educating those who work with children and youth. The goal of this education would be to provide child/youth workers with the tools to prevent, recognize, and respond to abuse. The training should include the following topics:

- Review of Northwest's Child Protection Policy.
- Understanding what constitutes child abuse – i.e., the various forms of abuse (Appendices A and C).
- Statistics regarding the incidence of the different forms of abuse (Appendices B and C).
- Review of the warning signs of abuse (Appendix A).
- Review of current state law with regard to abuse and mandatory reporting.
- Review of the requirements for mandatory reporting as stated in the *Book of Order*.
- Discussion of the church's incident reporting procedure.

STANDARDS OF CONDUCT

Two-Adult Policy

Ideally at least two (unrelated) adults age 18 years or older will supervise all church sponsored programs and activities involving children and youth whether on or off campus. Adults must always remain in sight of one another except in emergency situations. Adults in leadership roles are expected to avoid situations where they are alone with children and youth by having leadership teams of at least two adults for all activities. The presence of two or more adults prevents awkward circumstances where child abuse could occur or be alleged, allows shared leadership and facilitates appropriate discipline. The policy extends to all overnight and off-campus events. Under NO circumstances can one adult alone take or accompany children or youth on any off-campus or overnight outing. However, it is permissible for one adult driver to transport several children and youth in a single vehicle in a convoy of vehicles traveling to or from an event.

Adults are to avoid one-adult, one-child situations. If it is necessary for a child to get home after an event, an effort should be made to contact the family and inform them of the situation before transporting the child. If it is necessary for an adult to drive alone with a child, the adult should notify another adult before and after the period during which he/she is alone with the child.

When one-on-one interactions between children and youth and employees/volunteers are necessary (e.g. in emergency situations, occasions of pastoral care, Confirmation Mentoring), care must be taken to conduct the meeting in an environment that provides visibility by other adults. Another adult must have knowledge of the employee/volunteer's whereabouts and with whom they are meeting.

Floating Leaders

Having someone move from class to class to check in on the needs of teachers is a good way to avoid violation of the two-adult rule. If a worker needs something, he/she only needs to wait for the "floating" person, rather than leaving the children with only one adult. The "floating leader" shall be a staff member, member of the Christian Education Ministry Team or a person designated by that team. The "floating leader" shall be clearly identified for the staff and volunteer leaders and rotate from class to class to check on the needs of teachers and leaders.

Open Door Policy

Doors to rooms in which children and youth are present are to remain open. If noise increases to a level that disturbs other classes, the door may be shut if there is a clear glass window panel or a Dutch door. Nothing should impede vision through the glass and at least two adults must be present in each room. Employees and volunteers are expected to avoid any situation which they could be alone with children and/or youth or out of sight of others except in emergencies. This is to protect the minor from possible abuse and the adults from possible false accusations. (See above paragraph regarding the "floating leader" if the two adult policy cannot be met.)

Six Months Policy

Any person in a leadership position with children or youth must have been a member of the church for at least six months or regularly attended the church for at least six months. Any exceptions must be approved by the Christian Education Ministry Team and/or the Session. No exceptions will be granted for overnight situations.

Training for Adults

All employees, church officers and any volunteers who work with children and youth are required to attend one initial introduction session to the Northwest Presbyterian Church Child and Youth Protection Policy and procedures being implemented by Northwest Presbyterian Church. This initial training session includes the *Stewards of Children* seminar. Staff and volunteers will be asked to attend any subsequent training that provides updates or revisions to the policy. The church will offer regular training opportunities.

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Written Covenant

Adult leaders are required to read, sign and adhere to all policies related to identifying, documenting and reporting child abuse (Appendix G). Adult leaders are required to report to the Head of Staff/Moderator of Session, Director of Discipleship and Engagement, or Director of Youth Ministry any circumstances that under this policy affect their ability to work with children and youth (Appendix H).

Stewards of Children Seminar

For Northwest Presbyterian Church to be proactive in recognizing and preventing youth and child abuse, it is strongly recommended that persons in leadership positions of any organizations that use the facilities of our church and who serve children and youth attend the *Stewards of Children* seminar. Presently this would include the following organizations: Buckhead Prep School, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, music teachers and sports organizations. Seminar registration fees will be paid by the organizations (\$25.00 per person). Northwest Presbyterian Church will provide the appropriate fees and materials to its staff and volunteers at no cost to them.

Rest Room Supervision

The exact nature of the supervision will depend on the age of the children. The following are some general guidelines:

- Adult leaders will make sure suspicious or unknown individuals are not occupying the restroom before allowing children to use the facilities.
- Adult leaders will always supervise children using public bathrooms to ensure their safety.
- Adult leaders will call on other leaders who may be “floating” from room to room to assist with restroom supervision in order to maintain the two-adult rule.
- If adult leaders are assisting young children, doors to the facility must remain open.
- Adult leaders will stand in the doorway while children are using the restroom in visual sight of another adult. The policy allows protection and privacy for the children and protection for the adult leaders.

Workers Less Than 18 Years of Age

While in some situations youth may provide excellent help, people under the age of eighteen cannot be expected to have developed the judgment and maturity required to be fully responsible for supervising younger children. Any youth helper must be supervised by adult teachers/leaders. Ideally, there should be two adult teachers/leaders present in these situations. When this is not possible and there is only one adult teacher/leader present supervising younger children, the staff person and/or the person in charge of the program must be fully informed of the leadership situation.

Minimum Five-Years Older

Youth and adult leaders should be at least five years older than the children or youth with whom they are working. It is extremely difficult for a person who is too close in age to have the credibility needed to be the leader of a group of children or youth. The leader is apt to be viewed as a peer rather than as a leader.

Guidelines for Healthy Discipline

The purpose of discipline is to teach the child appropriate behavior in a loving and nurturing way. It is important to work with each child to determine what he or she needs to fully participate, but not to the detriment of other children in the group. Appropriate discipline will vary with the age of the child or youth, but praise and other forms of positive reinforcement for good work/behavior are appropriate. Distracting the child or youth from the objectionable behavior, separating the child or youth from the group into a different part of the room and having a choice of activities available are also appropriate. If objectionable behavior persists, parents and other childcare/youth workers should be enlisted to help.

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Miscellaneous

- Employees and volunteers will respect the right of children and youth not to be touched in ways that make them feel uncomfortable. This is best done by asking permission from the child or youth before hugging or otherwise touching. Adults will discourage children and youth from touching others in an inappropriate manner.
- All volunteers and staff will wear proper identification tags while supervising activities for children and youth. (i.e. proper tag could read “Sunday School Teacher” and person’s name).
- Groups/Classes shall remain in the assigned spaces. If there is a change, the Associate Pastor or Director of Youth Ministry must be informed and approve the change.
- All nursery and preschool children are to be released from the classroom to a parent/guardian or an adult designated by a parent/guardian; all nursery and preschool classrooms should utilize name tags for younger children for easy identification. A “sign in and out” procedure will be implemented for all preschool classes (see page 2 bullet 6).
- All outside groups using the facilities must comply with these rules and must provide the specified leadership of each group with the Child and Youth Protection Policy of Northwest Presbyterian Church
- Every minor participating in church sponsored activities must have an annual parent/guardian approved “information sheet” on file with the Associate Pastor or the Director of Youth Ministry, as appropriate. If a minor is to go on any field trip or other church sponsored activity away from the church grounds, parents/guardians must complete a *Parent/Guardian Permission Form*. A parent/guardian signed and notarized Medical Consent Form must be on file and updated at least once during the program year (Appendix I).

Prohibited Conduct

- Verbal, emotional, physical or sexual abuse to children or youth.
- Disciplining children by use or threat of physical punishment or by failing to provide the necessities of care.
- Using, possessing or being under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs or being impaired by legally prescribed drugs.
- Smoking or use of tobacco.
- Profanity, inappropriate language or jokes or any kind of harassment.
- Possession of obscene or pornographic materials.
- Carrying any type of weapon on church property.
- Sharing inappropriate details of their personal lives or asking children to share inappropriate details through any form of communication: written or oral.
- Dating relationships between youth participants and/or adult leaders.
- Because gift giving can be a form of “buying” silence of loyalty, gift giving must be done on a group basis and for specific occasions only (e.g. third grade Bibles, confirmation materials, etc.). Giving gifts to individual children or youth is allowed only with the permission of parents/guardians and the appropriate committee/Session.

RESPONDING TO INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR, BREACHES IN POLICY AND ALLEGATIONS/SUSPICIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

In order to maintain an environment free of destructive acts toward all children and youth, the paid staff, teachers, parents, and volunteers of the church must be aware of their responsibility to report any questionable circumstances, observation, act, omission, or situation thought to be in violation of the Northwest Presbyterian Church Child and Youth Protection Policy. All questions or concerns of any suspected abusive behavior or harassment shall be directed to the Head of Staff/Moderator of Session, Associate Pastor, or Director of Youth Ministries (Appendix G).

Though Georgia law does not include clergy, Elders, Deacons, or Christian Educators as mandatory reporters of child abuse, the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) requires clergy, Elders, Deacons, and

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Christian Educators to report “to ecclesiastical and civil legal authorities knowledge gained in the course of service to the church, of harm, or risk of harm, related to the physical abuse, neglect, and/or sexual molestation or abuse of a minor or an adult who lacks mental capacity when (1) such information is gained outside of privileged communication ; or (2) he or she reasonably believes that there is risk of future physical harm or abuse (Book of Order G.0204b-ministers of Word and Sacrament , G-6.0304b-Elders, G-6.0402b-deacons, and G-14.0732b-Christian Educators)

The promises our church makes in baptism are not always taken so seriously. Children have been victimized in congregations that have promised to guide and nurture them in the faith, a faith that should inform their sense of worth in the eyes of a God who created, sustains, and redeems. What message does a church then send to a child if a Pastor, Elder, Deacon or Christian Educator does not act when abuse is known to have occurred? Would God have us stand by just because the law does not demand that clergy report instances of abuse? How does silence in the face of abuse fulfill the promise we have made in baptism? When it comes to abuse, we do not need the law to make us mandated reporters – in Baptism we have already made this promise.

What to do if Abuse is Reported

In the event that a child or youth discloses that abuse has occurred, or anyone personally witnesses any occurrence of a Prohibited Act as stated in this Northwest Presbyterian Church Child and Youth Protection Policy, that person will be asked to complete a Suspected Abuse Incident Report (Appendix H). Written documentation related to the matter should be kept in a confidential file. Anyone who witnesses such an occurrence should consider the following recommendations as to how such a situation should be handled to insure the security of the child/youth involved and to protect against physical, emotional, or psychological injury, to all persons involved.

Responding to Policy Violations – Any suspicion of abuse is important. Take every report and suspicion seriously by listening carefully, attending to the person reporting with genuine concern, and following their report with the following action:

- Personally secure the safety of the child or youth involved.
- Report the incident immediately to the Head of Staff/Moderator of Session, Associate Pastor or Director of Youth Ministry.
- Allow the designated person to provide instructions for reporting of the incident to the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the child or youth involved.
- The Head of Staff/Moderator of Session (or designated person) should complete an internal investigation in addition to that which will be carried out by the authorities, following the required notifications (Appendix H).
- Do not personally confront the alleged or accused violator of the policy.
- The Head of Staff/Moderator of Session (or designated person) will be solely responsible for all communications with the alleged or accused violator or with the media on behalf of Northwest Presbyterian Church
- Report the incident to children’s protective services in the presence of the church’s designated person.

Responding to Accusations –It must be recognized that abuse is rarely isolated, and there are many victims, often including the person accused of committing abuse. Therefore, care should be provided, not only to the primary victim and his or her family, but also to the greater community. However, the primary victim must be given priority and policy should be centered on his/her safety. After a person is accused of violating the church’s protection policy, the following steps should be taken for the safety and security of all those involved:

- The Head of Staff/Moderator of Session or designated person (Associate Pastor or Director of Youth Ministry) should be notified.
- The individual accused of violating this policy should be notified by the church’s designated spokesperson.
- The individual accused of violating this Policy will be temporarily relieved of his or her duties until

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the accusation has been investigated by an appropriate authority such as law enforcement, or a child protection agency. No church has the right to investigate an accusation without reporting that accusation to an appropriate authority.

- The individual accused is prohibited from having further contact with the victim and his or her family.

Responding to Substantiated Accusations

- Any person found to have committed a Prohibited Act as set forth in this Child and Youth Protection Policy is prohibited from future participation in all church-sponsored activities involving children and youth.
- If a paid staff member is found to have committed a Prohibited Act as set forth in this Child and Youth Protection Policy his or her employment will be terminated and the reason for termination will be disclosed to future employers and the church Session.

Unsubstantiated Accusations

In the event of an unsubstantiated allegation, the Head of Staff/Moderator of Session (or designated person) will decide as to whether the individual will be allowed to return to work as an employee or volunteer at Northwest Presbyterian Church. They will consider the individual's likely effectiveness in working with children or youth following an allegation and investigation of child abuse. An employee has the right to appeal the decision to the Personnel Committee. A volunteer has the right to appeal the decision to the Clerk of Session who will address the situation with the Session in the appropriate time and manner but within 30 days of the allegation being made.

Pastoral Care to all parties involved.

When the abuse of a child or youth occurs in the church, there are many victims in addition to the one who has been harmed; and all are in need of healing ministry.

The other victims may include

- Family members of the child/youth who was harmed;
- Peers of the child/youth;
- Parents of the child/youth victim's peers;
- Remaining workers with children/youth;
- Congregation as a community of faith;
- Family of the accused abuser.