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# SAFE ENVIRONMENT POLICY



Policy for the Protection of  
All People from Abuse

# The SAFE ENVIRONMENT POLICY

## Policies for the Protection of All People from Abuse

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# The SAFE ENVIRONMENT POLICY

Policy for the Protection of Children and Youth from Abuse

## Introduction

For the sake of the witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are intentional, open and clear about the integrity and standard of conduct to which each congregation, institution, organization or agency in ministry is called and to which its leaders are held accountable. This document is intended to provide guidelines for a “Safe Environment” for children and youth in congregational life.

Who are child abusers? In 75% of reported cases of sexual abuse, the offenders were known to the victims or their families. Research has shown that child abusers come from all ethnic and economic groups. Based upon the case studies that have been made, many who abuse children do so out of ignorance of proper disciplinary techniques, thereby inflicting emotional or physical abuse. Unlike physical abuse of a child, which may be accidental, child sexual abuse is a premeditated act. Child molesters defy the stereotypes we have created. It is not easy to identify these individuals.

Note: Children with handicaps often become target for all kinds of abuse. Their handicapping conditions may increase parental frustrations, resulting in neglect, emotional abuse, and physical abuse. Vulnerability to sexual abuse is increased due to physical or mental conditions perceived by the abuser to increase the child’s helplessness.

## Theological / Biblical Framework

Children are a blessing and a gift from the Lord. Psalm 127:3 (CEV)

For members in our congregations, becoming a Safe Environment for children, youth and their families affirms our Baptism into the priesthood of believers.

Directly from the Affirmation of Baptism, Evangelical Lutheran Worship page 236:

“You have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and to share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?”

As the church, we bear witness to God’s grace in our lives that comes to us through Holy Baptism. Many of the children to whom we offer a Safe Environment have not been baptized. Many of their families and caregivers have not been baptized. Indeed, many of us who work to form Safe Environments for children and youth have not been baptized. As we work together for the well-being of children, youth and their families, we ultimately invite people to receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Scriptures for Reflection:

Mark 10:13-16 Jesus blesses the children

Mark 9:33-37 Who is the greatest?

Mark 4:35-5:1 Jesus stills a storm.

There are many other scriptures in both the Old and New Testament that give the responsibility for care of all children to the adults, parents, grandparents, God parents, etc. Every congregation is called to be a place of hope and healing for people of all ages in their community.

## Poverty, Children and Advocacy

Children who live in poverty tend to suffer from a wide range of health related problems, including hearing and vision problems. Many poor families are unable to afford notepaper, books or activities that promote learning. Special fees for art supplies, science labs or team sports may be out of reach. Poor children have far less access than others to computers. People living in poverty often do not have health insurance. Poverty can bring a quiet sense of shame for children and their families.

Racism, sexism, citizenship status, and classism are all factors that affect the economic health and well-being of families. The impact of poverty makes it almost impossible for children to grow up feeling safe, secure and protected. When parents or care givers are consumed with survival issues, there is little time or energy left for tending to the emotional and spiritual needs of their children. If our congregation is truly committed to helping the children, our focus needs to be broadened beyond our own families and the families in our congregations to encompass all children.

What can our congregation do to respond to poverty with children and youth?

- Be informed about issues such as abuse, hunger, safety, housing, education, gangs, drugs.
- Support parenting needs.
- Create mentoring programs.
- Be involved in any recovery programs needed, including responding to natural disasters.
- Write letters to support change in public policy regarding needs, (Example: WIC, affordable housing)
- Consider a sister-parish relationship with a church experiencing poverty in or out of this country.
- Pray for the children.
- Work together with other congregations and community organizations to help support families living in poverty.

## Acknowledgements

This Model Guideline is written to increase our capacity to care for our children and youth.

Resources used to create this document include:

Safe Environment for Children, ELCA

The Boy Scouts in America

The Girl Scouts in America

The Episcopal Church – Safe Guarding God’s Children

Guidelines for a Safe Environment Congregation – First Edition and Second Edition

# Definitions

Relationships among people are at the foundation of Christian ministry and, as such, are central to the life of the church. Defining healthy and safe relationships through guidelines, policies and codes of conduct is not meant, in any way, to undermine the strength and importance of personal interaction in our ministries. Rather, it is to assist in more clearly defining behaviors and practices that allow the church to more fully demonstrate its love and compassion for children and youth in sincere and genuine relationships.

## Children and Youth

A child is defined as anyone under the age of 12 years old.

A youth is defined as anyone who is at least 12 years old, but not yet 18 years old. A youth may also be an individual who is 18 years old or older, but still in high school.

## Church Personnel

For the purposes of these guidelines, the following are included in the definition of Church Personnel **when they are functioning in their respective roles for the church:**

1. All Rostered leadership whether stipendiary, non-stipendiary, who are engaged in ministry or service to the church.
2. All paid personnel whether employed in areas of ministry or other kinds of services by the synod, congregations, schools, camps or other agencies. For example: Pre-schools, After-school Programs, Theater Groups, Choirs, and Day Camps.
3. Those who contract their services to the church, its congregations, schools or other agencies.
4. Volunteers, including any persons who enters into or offers him or herself for a church related service, or who actually assists with or performs a service, whether or not they have been selected or assigned to do so. Volunteers include members of advisory boards, committees, etc. For example: Adults serving as sponsors at youth gatherings, as drivers, at camp, in Sunday school classrooms, etc.

For the purposes of this guideline, the following are included in the definition of **Church Personnel Who Work With and Around Children or Youth:**

1. All clergy whether stipendiary, non-stipendiary, who are engaged in ministry or service to the church.
2. All persons who supervise or assist with supervising children or youth including Sunday School teachers, VBS teachers, and youth group leaders.
3. All persons who provide transportation to children or youth without other adults in the vehicle infrequently, generally no more than three times a year. (i.e. driving to camp, synod gatherings, service projects, etc.)
4. All persons who work or assist in the nursery or child care, whether on an emergency basis or otherwise.
5. Adults who participate in overnight activities with children or youth.

## Types of Abuse

**Child Neglect:** Omission of the child's basic needs, physical, environmental, emotional and nutritional, that are necessary for a child's well being, or the failure to protect a child or youth from harm.

**Emotional Abuse:** Verbal or nonverbal violence toward a child that gives the child the message that the child is "not good" and never will be. Verbal abuse is a very common malady that attacks every human being at some point in their lives; some more than others. It can be a very devastating form of abuse when the person experiences the attacks frequently. Emotional abuse is mental or emotional injury to a child or youth that results in an observable and/or material impairment in the child or youth's growth, development or psychological functioning.

**Physical Abuse:** Physical violence toward a child. Physical abuse is non-accidental injury, which is intentionally inflicted upon a child or youth. Often it is the transference of adult anger.

**Sexual Abuse or Sexual Molestation:** Any sexual contact with a child by an adult or an older youth. These acts may range from touching of the penis, vagina, buttocks, or breast/chest area to sexual intercourse. This includes any activity which is meant to arouse or gratify the sexual desires of the adult, child or youth.

Sexual abuse perpetrated by another child or youth is any contact or activity of a sexual nature that occurs between a child or youth and another child or youth when there is no consent, when consent is not possible, or when one child or youth has power over the other child or youth. This includes any activity which is meant to arouse or gratify the sexual desires of any of the children or youth.

**Drug & Alcohol Abuse:** There is an increase in the use of alcohol among junior and senior high school students. Children or youth that show up at church under the influence of alcohol or drugs, who bring these substances with them on church retreats, camp or other activities or those who are reported by peers to be intoxicated may need help to stop dangerous behavior.

**Economic Exploitation:** Economic exploitation is the deliberate use of a child or youth for money or power. This includes forcing a child to work, using someone against their will or using another person's labor without offering them adequate compensation.

**Bullying:** Bullying happens when someone hurts or scares another person on purpose. Usually, bullying happens over and over. Bullying also can happen on-line or electronically. Cyber bullying is when children or teens bully each other using the Internet, mobile phones or other cyber technology. Unfortunately, not everyone takes bullying seriously, including adults.

## Code of Conduct of Church Personnel

Relationships in ministry should, ideally, always be experienced as caring and without intention to do harm or allow harm to occur. This code of behavior is recommended to help the church create safe environments for children and youth and for those who minister with them. All Church Personnel are asked to carefully consider this Safe Environment Guidelines: Model Guidelines for the Protection of Children and Youth from Abuse as part of developing a local policy.

- Church Personnel understand that the church will not tolerate abuse of children and youth and agree to comply in spirit and in action with this position.
- Church Personnel agree to not physically, sexually or emotionally abuse or neglect a child or youth.
- Church Personnel will respond to children and youth with respect, consideration and equal treatment, regardless of sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, culture or socioeconomic status. Church Personnel should serve as a positive role model for children and youth by maintaining an attitude of respect, patience, and maturity. They should avoid even the appearance of favoritism or impropriety.
- Church Personnel agree to comply with the congregation's local policies for general conduct with children and youth.
- In the event that Church Personnel observe any inappropriate behaviors or possible policy violations with children or youth, church personnel agree to report their observations to the church leadership.
- All Church Personnel acknowledge their obligation and responsibility to protect children and youth and understand there may be legal requirements to report known or suspected abuse of children or youth to appropriate church leaders and state authorities in accordance with these policies.

## Screening and Selection

Any and all **Church Personnel who Regularly Work With or Around Children or Youth** should be screened and selected utilizing at least the following:

1. A standard application completed by the applicant that includes an authorization for the release of information to conduct background checks and the code of behavior. (Examples in Appendix)
2. Criminal records check in any state where the applicant has resided during the past seven (7) years, and other states, if any, as determined by the church. This check is to be updated every 5 years
3. Sexual offender registry check in any state where the applicant has resided during the past seven (7) years. This check is to be updated every 5 years.
4. Driving or Motor Vehicle records check if the person may be transporting children or youth.

All information gathered about an applicant should be carefully reviewed and evaluated to make a determination, in consultation with others as necessary, of whether or not it is appropriate for the applicant to work with children or youth. Church Personnel who work with or around children or youth should have a personnel file that is kept where other church records are kept.

**New Members:** It is recommended that a person be a member of the congregation for a minimum of 6 months, and preferably 1 year before being invited to work with children and youth. Church Personnel who transfer between congregations or organizations and apply for or are asked to or who do undertake a position working with or around children or youth should undergo the same screening and selection process as noted above. This requirement may be met through a transfer of a copy of their personnel file to the new congregation, school, agency or program together with completion of a new application, individual interview, reference checks and copies of criminal background in the applicant's personnel file.

## Education and Training Requirements

One hour of child abuse awareness education and training is recommended for all **Church Personnel who Work With or Around children or Youth** before they start their work with children or youth.

Training will be offered twice a year, fall and spring.

## Desirable and Undesirable Behaviors

Christian ministries are committed to creating and promoting a positive, nurturing environment for our children's and youth ministries that protect our children and youth from abuse and our church Personnel from misunderstandings. When creating safe boundaries for children and youth, it is important to establish what types of affection are appropriate and inappropriate; otherwise that decision is left to each individual. Stating which behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate allows Church Personnel to comfortably show positive affection in ministry, and yet identify individuals who are not maintaining safe boundaries with children or youth. The following guidelines are to be carefully followed by all Church Personnel working around or with children or youth.

### Appropriate and Inappropriate Affection

Love and affection are part of church life and ministry. There are many ways to demonstrate affection while maintaining positive and safe boundaries with children and youth.

**Some positive and appropriate forms of affection are listed below:**

- Brief hugs. Preferred hugs are side-to-side hugs, one-arm hugs and a-frame hugs.
- Pats on the shoulder or back
- Handshakes
- "High-Fives" and hand slapping
- Verbal praise
- Touching hands, faces, shoulders and arms of children or youth
- Arms around shoulders
- Holding hands while walking with small children
- Sitting beside small children
- Kneeling or bending down for huddles with small children
- Holding hands during prayer
- Pats on the head when culturally appropriate (for example, this gesture should typically be avoided in some Asian communities.)

The following forms of affection are considered inappropriate with children and youth in ministry settings because many of them are the behaviors that child molesters use to groom children or youth and their parents for later molestation or can be, in and of themselves, sexual abuse.

- Inappropriate or lengthy embraces
- Kisses
- Holding children over three years old on the lap
- Any sexualized touching; Touching bottoms, chests or genital areas other than for appropriate diapering or toileting of infants and toddlers.
- Showing affection in isolated areas such as bedrooms, closets, staff-only areas or other private rooms.
- Occupying a bed with a child or youth (example: hotel stay, youth retreat)
- Touching knees or legs of children or youth
- Wrestling with children or youth
- Tickling children or youth
- Any type of massage given by a child or youth to an adult
- Any type of massage given by an adult to a child or youth
- Any form of unwanted affection or physical contact
- Comments or compliments (spoken, written, or electronic) that relate to physique or body development. Examples would be, “You sure are developing,” or “You look really hot in those jeans”
- Snapping bras or giving wedgies or similar touch of undergarment
- Giving gifts or money to individual children or youth
- Private meals with individual children or youth
- Inappropriate email or written communications with children or youth.
- Private scheduled meetings, outings or events just with child or youth

## Other Harmful Behavior

Inappropriate behaviors and interactions can be detected and stopped. Some behavior may be inherently harmful to children or youth or are the types used by child molesters to groom children, youth and their parents, or may create the conditions where abuse can occur more easily. Furthermore, some behaviors and interactions are potentially harmful to children or youth in and of themselves.

### **Examples include, but are not limited to:**

1. Using, possessing, distributing or being under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs, or the misuse of legal drugs while serving as sponsors, participating or assisting with programs or activities specifically for children or youth.
2. Dating or becoming romantically involved with a child or youth.
3. Having sexual contact with a child or youth.
4. Youth or children left unsupervised or given an inappropriate amount of responsibility.
5. Adults sharing inappropriate jokes, stories or personal confessions with children or youth. This includes conversations about their own sexual activities, dreams and fantasies, or discussing their use of sexually oriented or explicit materials such as pornography, videos or materials on or from the internet with children or youth.

6. Dancing, games, skits, or jokes that make fun of a person's gender, ethnicity, socio-economic reality or sexual orientation.
7. Possessing any sexually oriented materials (magazines, cards, videos, films, clothing, etc.) on church property or in the presence of children or youth except as expressly permitted as part of a pre-authorized educational program.
8. Using the Internet to view or download any sexually oriented materials on church property or in the presence of children or youth.
9. Giving gifts or sending special or private emails or other communications to only certain children/youth. Outside of an appropriate mentoring relationship.
10. Holding children over the age of three on the lap.
11. Intentionally transporting children or youth alone.
12. Intentionally leaving one adult alone with one child or youth at any time
13. Asking a youth to transport another youth or child. (Youth transporting youth should only be done with written parent permission.)
14. Adults meeting alone with a youth or child in a private location, including a Sunday School room, a home, hotel room or cabin.
15. Housing one adult with one child or youth at a camp, youth gathering or other overnight event.
16. Programs for infants and children under six years old should have procedures to ensure that children are released only to their parents or legal guardians or those designated by them.
17. Sleeping in the same bed, sleeping bags, tents, hotel rooms or other rooms with children or youth unless the adult is an immediate family member of all children or youth in the tent, hotel room or other room. It is preferred that even immediate family members have their own rooms. It is acceptable to have multiple adults sleeping with multiple children or youth participating in one open space such as a church basement or camp lodge.
18. Dressing, undressing, bathing, or showering in the presence of children or youth unless unavoidable.
19. Using physical punishment in any way for behavior management of children and youth. No form of physical discipline is acceptable. This prohibition includes spanking, slapping, pinching, hitting or any other physical force. Physical force may only be used to stop a behavior that may cause immediate harm to the individual or to a child, youth or others.
20. Using harsh language or degrading punishment.
21. Participating in our allowing others to conduct any hazing activities relating to children's or youth ministry or camp activities.

## Monitoring and Supervision of Programs

The monitoring and supervision of programs and activities involving children or youth is important for safeguarding children and youth and involves several aspects. Structural guidelines or standards for the programs and activities for children and youth can provide a system for managing this supervision. These include such things as clarity on who approves new programs, how many adults need to be present and the like. In addition to setting structural guidelines the church leaders should make sure the guidelines are followed. Programs and activities have to be monitored and supervised to do that.

### Examples include, but are not limited to:

1. Documentation of applications, screening requirements and training are kept up to date over time so that standards do not decrease.
2. Church Personnel should not be alone with a child or youth or multiple children or youth where other adults cannot easily observe them. This includes hotel rooms, classrooms, offices, etc. One-to-one conversations with children or youth should be held in an open or public or other place where private conversations are possible but occur in full view of others.
3. Church Personnel over the age of 21 should directly supervise Church Personnel under the age of 18 and be physically present during all activities. This includes day camps, youth gatherings, outdoor ministry events, field trips, etc. Another possibility is to use the four-year age gap or something comparable as an alternative.
4. Signed Permission to Participate forms (including Emergency contact information and consent for treatment) should be required.

## Action Plans

### Confidentiality

When a youth asks if you can keep a secret, you should tell them that you are not able to make that commitment. Assure them that you care about them and that you want to hear what they have to say. This includes abuse, suicide threats or information regarding crimes.

### Action plan when you suspect abuse:

1. Document your concerns.
2. Share concerns with supervisor, pastor or board chair.
3. Report confirmed abuse to legal authorities.

### Action Plan for Known Sexual & Physical Abuse:

1. Give Affirmation & Hope
  - Praise the youth for having the courage to come forward.
  - Give hope through your willingness to listen, understand and care for them.
2. Give Assurance.
  - I will accept you no matter what.
  - God loves you no matter what.
  - You can be totally honest.
  - Please don't be afraid to tell the whole story.
  - Don't be afraid to admit your fears or present your perspective.
  - I promise to listen and to do everything I can to understand you and help you. (Only say this if you intend to follow through.)

3. Assist the child or youth in facing the Issue. If this is a sexual abuse issue, this is a conversation that needs to be heard by more than one Church Personnel, if possible. Encourage the child or youth to talk with another adult, preferably of the same gender. This is for your protection, as well as the child or youth, if questions of further sexual abuse arise.
4. It is important for the child or youth to understand they have been abused. Even if the child entered the relationship willingly, a sexual relationship between an adult and a child or youth is abusive.
5. Encourage the child or youth to get professional help. Assist them or have someone in the church assist them in connecting with a professional counselor.
6. Acknowledge your responsibility to document the abuse and to share this information with the authorities.
7. Continue to be part of the healing of the child or youth as appropriate.

## Reporting Inappropriate Behavior, Policy Violations or Abuse

### Reporting Inappropriate Behavior or Policy Violations

1. When Church Personnel observe any inappropriate behaviors, behaviors that are inconsistent with the policy they should promptly report their observations.
2. Such inappropriate behaviors or possible policy violations that relate to interactions with children or youth should be reported in one of the following ways:
  - a) A telephone call, email, or meeting with the immediate supervisor of that person,
  - b) A telephone call, email, or meeting with the pastor or other leader in authority,
  - c) A telephone call, email, or meeting with the church council president, organizational or agency board president.
3. All reports of inappropriate behavior or policy violations with children or youth need to be taken seriously.

### Reporting Abuse

1. Church Personnel may be legally required to report known or suspected abuse of children or youth to the appropriate state authorities.
2. Failure to report suspected abuse of children or youth may be a crime. Reports may be made confidentially or anonymously. Every state provides immunity from civil liability for persons required to report suspected abuse in good faith and without malice. Simply stated, "in good faith" means that the person submitting the report believes what he or she is reporting to be true.
3. In addition to reporting to the state authorities, Church Personnel are to report any suspected or known abuse of children or youth that may have been perpetrated by Church Personnel directly to the pastor, organizational or council president so that immediate and proper steps may be taken to ensure the safety of alleged victims.

4. Reports of suspected or known abuse that involve rostered Church Personnel should be reported to the Bishop or Assistants to the Bishop through a telephone call, or meeting.

## Guidelines for Counseling and Advising Children and Youth

Unless you are a trained, certified, professional counselor, you are not qualified to handle every situation that may arise as you serve children and youth in ministry. Issues that should be referred to your Pastor and/or to a trained professional after responsible reporting include:

- Child Neglect
- Emotional Abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual Abuse or Sexual Molestation
- Drug & Alcohol Abuse
- Economic Exploitation

### Suicide

Suicide is the second leading cause of death in 15-24 year olds. Suicide occurs 3-4 times more often in boys than in girls. The most common method is by gun. Cluster suicide is becoming a growing problem. Using alcohol or drugs or experiencing depression increases the incidence of suicide. Suicide threats or casual remarks should always be taken seriously. Report this immediately! The person may sound casual about suicide, but only because suicide seems no worse than the other mental pain that they are already suffering.

Parents of youth, the pastor in the congregation should always be alerted about suicide threats. Suicide threats often require the involvement of mental health professionals.

### Social Media

"Social media are a collection of online platforms and tools that people use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives, and media itself, facilitating conversations and interactions online between groups of people." -Doreen Moran, Digital and Social Marketing

#### **"Friending:"**

Friending youth is a powerful ministry tool when used appropriately. When adults "friend" people under age 18 they should also request to "friend" their parents. Involving parents in this decision is important. An example of this request:

*I would like to request to be your child's friend on face book and/or twitter. I prefer "friending" both youth and their parents as part of my practice to promote transparency and appropriate adult - youth relationships. I encourage you to monitor all of your child's social media practice. I am happy to support you in navigating social media with your youth.*

This practice promotes the safety of children and youth while providing good accountability with the adults who work with youth.

#### **Posts:**

Social media, by its very definition is a public forum. There is no privacy in social media, even with the use of security settings. Think before you post. Would you say this in a room filled with congregation members? With youth?

Be aware of unintended consequences interpretation posts.

**Groups or Pages:**

Consider communities that gather on facebook in the same way you would a community gathered in a room or a home. Youth Pages or Groups should be monitored at all times by Safe Environment Adults.

## SAFE ENVIRONMENT POLICY

Policy for the Protection of All People from Abuse

### Volunteer Signature Page

**Please sign and return this page to the church office as soon as possible.**

By Signing below, I acknowledge that I have read and understand this Safe Environment Policy.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name