

Protection Policy Training Guide for Local Churches

Purpose:

This training guide has been created for local churches to use when training leaders in the areas of ministry with children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults. It can also be used as part of the training with hospitality leaders (such as ushers and safety teams) and church staff. Please adapt this training guide to your ministry setting and context. This is not a replacement for your local church protection policy (it may be called something else in your church). Review your own protection policy to ensure that the key points have been covered.

We have included a basic outline that you can use for guidance and a script that you can modify for your context.

If you have questions about adjusting this training guide, please feel free to reach out to Rev. Kathy Pittenger, kpittenger@michiganumc.org or 517-347-4030 ext. 4077.

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I. Introductions & Opening

- a. Take a moment to invite people to introduce themselves and the ministry(ies) in which they serve. Even if you think everyone knows one another, it is a helpful way to open and give every person an opportunity to speak.
- b. Opening
 - i. We are called to create faith communities where children, youth, vulnerable adults, and those who minister with them are safe and can grow strong in their faith and positive relationships with others.
 - ii. Jesus taught that “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” (Mark 9:37, NRSV) and the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state that “...children must be protected from economic, physical, and sexual exploitation and abuse.” Furthermore, at a child’s baptism, we affirm our responsibility to care for the well-being of that child by pledging: “With God’s help, we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (From *The Book of Worship, Baptismal Covenant, Congregational Pledge II*).
 - iii. Working from these foundations it is important to establish and implement a protection policy and train those who work with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.
 - iv. Let us pray, Gracious God, we give you thanks for the ministries that impact children, youth and vulnerable adults. Thank you for the opportunity to come together today to learn or be refreshed about protecting the children, youth, and vulnerable adults in our congregation and community. Help us listen with our hearts and minds so that we may be able to teach, lead, support, and care for all your people in ways that honor you and one another. We pray in Jesus Name, Amen.

II. Training

- a. Overview of Protection Policy
 - i. Take a few moments to talk about your local church protection policy. You may want to give copies to those who are in your class, at least the policy portion (appendices may not be needed). And/or share where the full policy can be accessed.

- b. Important definitions (These definitions are based upon the Protection Policy Template for Local Churches from the Michigan Conference of the UMC; you may need to adjust these definitions based on what is in your policy or church definitions.)
 - i. Child/youth – an individual who is under the age of 18
 - ii. Vulnerable adult – an individual who because of age, developmental disability, mental illness, or physical handicap requires supervision or personal care or lacks the personal and social skills required to live independently
 - iii. Abuse – harm or threatened harm to an individual’s health, financial or welfare through physical abuse, bullying, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, maltreatment, and/or sexual harassment. For the purposes of this policy, ‘hazing’ is considered a form of abuse.
 - iv. Neglect - failure to act as a reasonably prudent person would do in the same or similar circumstance. In can include failing to prevent an act of abuse, negligent treatment, including the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care and protection from abuse, placing a child, youth, or vulnerable adult in unreasonable risk.
 - v. Elder Abuse – refers to any knowing, intentional, or negligent act by a caregiver or any other person that causes harm or serious risk of harm to a vulnerable adult. May include physical, sexual, emotional, financial/material, neglect, or abandonment.
 - vi. Include additional definitions as desired

III. Suggested Guidelines Based on Best Practices

a. Proper Supervision

- i. Identify who is eligible to be an approved volunteer (this should be outlined in your policy. The statements below are **suggested** guidelines. Please be sure to follow your written policy, first and foremost.
 1. Adults and Youth who are at least five years older than the oldest child in the ministry setting they are assigned. Please note, most policies do not allow churches to use youth in a lead or adult role as a volunteer.
 2. Be active at the church for at least 6 months, and/or require references from trusted individuals in the church or community.
 3. Complete all required paperwork (such as: application, references, background check release form)
 4. Anyone who has previously been convicted of, pled guilty or no contest to any crime of abuse or neglect or any act of conduct

of a sexual, molesting, seductive, or criminally deviant nature is not eligible to work with children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

ii. Rule of 2 and/or Rule of 3

1. Rule of 2 is that there are always two adults or qualified volunteers in each space. They must be unrelated and 5 years older than the students.
2. Rule of 3 is that there are always at least 3 people in a space. This could be 2 qualified adults and 1 child/youth or 1 qualified adult and 2 children/youth.
3. The ideal is to always have at least 2 qualified adults, but that may not always be the realistic. When only 1 qualified adult is in a space it is important to make sure that there is a floater or an adult who can walk through the hallways and check in on the space. Also, make sure there is either a window in the door or leave the door open.

b. Check-in/out Policy

- i. Each child/youth/vulnerable adult should have on file and/or provide the child's name, the emergency contact adult's name and phone number, and any allergies and behavioral concerns, as needed, for each event. This includes events like Sunday School that occur weekly.
 1. Ideally, each child should also have a signed media release on file with additional adult contact information including address and email information.
 2. During the check in process be mindful of sharing with parents and guardians the times you may be engaging in activities (like communion or snack time) when food allergies may be a concern.

c. Transportation

- i. The same supervision rules apply when transporting children/youth in a vehicle.
- ii. Drivers should be at least 21 years old. Drivers should have a driving background check before being permitted to drive children/youth from one place to another. Drivers should also be able to provide proof of insurance. (Make sure this information is the same as your policy or your churches insurance requirements.)
- iii. Children/youth should have a permission form on file giving permission from a parent/guardian for their child to ride with someone else.

- d. Overnights
 - i. Youth & adults in separate rooms
 - ii. Assign roommates based on similar age and maturity
 - iii. At least two youth in each room
 - iv. Adult rooms scattered between youth rooms (if possible)
 - v. Communicate openly with all youth and their parents/guardians in advance of the travel and accommodation arrangements becoming finalized.
 - vi. Whenever possible, consult students on where they would like to room before finalizing overnight accommodations.
 - vii. Establish a schedule, curfew, and conduct bed checks with adults visiting the rooms in pairs
- e. Good Touch/Bad Touch
 - i. Touch should always be initiated by the child, youth, or vulnerable adult
 - ii. Good (or welcome) touch is meant to affirm, support, care for or help make someone feel good about themselves (hug, handshake, fist bump, high five, etc.)
 - iii. Bad (or unwelcome) touch may make one feel uncomfortable, violated, disregarded, or harmed.
 - iv. Criteria for touching
 - 1. Location (head, shoulders, stop! Bathing suit areas are the no go zone)
 - 2. Duration
 - 3. Relationship
 - 4. Who initiates
 - 5. Cultural heritage
 - 6. Age of Child (holding an infant or toddler on a lap to comfort or read is acceptable, allowing an elementary school child or youth to sit on an adult's lap is not acceptable)
- f. Risks and Rewards
 - i. Consider the risks and rewards of activities. Consider the following factors:
 - 1. Safety
 - 2. Trust in the participants
 - 3. How controlled the environment is
 - 4. Who will ultimately be held responsible if someone is hurt?
- g. Restrooms
 - i. Infant/Toddler in diapers

1. Diapering should be done in the nursery or designated diapering space by a parent/guardian, staff member, or regular volunteer out in the open where others are present.
- ii. Toddler Potty Training
 1. Allow child to do as much on own as possible. Assist if needed making sure there is another adult present who knows that volunteer is assisting young child.
 2. If an accident happens, try to get the parent/guardian. If not available, regular volunteer or staff can change if there is paperwork on file giving permission for another person to change the child. It is best if you can have another volunteer within hearing distance who is aware of what is happening.
- iii. Children who are potty-trained
 1. Same gender volunteer takes student(s) to bathroom
 2. Check bathroom before child(ren) enters to be sure it is empty
 3. Wait outside bathroom for child(ren)
 4. Escorts child(ren) back to classroom
- h. Ministry with Children
 - i. Behavior is communication. Children who are hungry, angry, tired, or lonely may “act out.” Try to figure out what is going on and meet those needs if possible.
 1. Please note, many of our children have missed some critical life and behavioral skills during the time of isolation in the 2020/2021 school years. Do not assume that children are being “naughty.” Children are still struggling to catch up to the previous generations in areas of emotional and social development.
 - ii. Positive Discipline
 - a. Try not to just say “No!” Tell the child what behavior is expected. (Ex. Instead of saying, “Don’t stand in your seat!” respond by saying, “Chairs are for sitting, not standing. Please show me how you can sit in the chair.”)
 - b. Catch kids when they are showing good character (ex. “Thanks for sharing and allowing others to play with your toy.”)
 - c. Focus on building character and skills
 - d. Redirect, redirect, redirect!
 - iii. Take wiggle breaks
 1. Keep in mind that children have shorter attention spans and tolerances to certain activities. You are not a failure if students are struggling to listen, but it may mean that they need a break.

- iv. Adjust when needed
 - 1. Discuss with your team or pastor what the expectations are for your ministry setting. While it is ideal to get through the lesson, if your vision is to connect children to God, it may be more in keeping with your church's vision to adjust and play a game instead of finishing the lesson.
- v. Expectations
 - 1. Clearly establish your expectations for the classroom. Keep any rules simple and easy to follow. Tell the students what you want them to do, rather than what they should not do. (ex. "Don't hit your neighbor" versus "We keep our hands and feet to ourselves.")
- vi. Setting healthy boundaries (rules) with kids is helpful in the ministry setting. Encourage older kids to help create the expectations. Keep them simple. Learn about the expectations for the local elementary school and use them in your ministry setting. For example: Be responsible, respectful, kind and safe.
- i. Ministry with Youth
 - i. One on one conversations with youth may need to happen. Find a quiet and public space. This is especially true in mentoring situations
 - ii. You may need to walk the line with youth between confidentiality and keeping minors safe. Do not make promises of confidentiality, because you may not be able to keep those promises. Instead, assure youth that you will not disclose their information unless you are required to do so.
 - iii. Be aware of healthy boundaries in regard to communicating with youth via texting, email or social media. Direct communication between a youth and adult should not occur. Group texts, email groups and public means of communication should be used. Should no other options exist, you should always include or copy another leader in any direct contact with youth.
 - iv. Be aware of the current trends and influences on youth in today's culture such as, cyber-bullying, sexting, social media, bullying, and hazing. If you have a covenant of conduct for youth events, be sure it includes internet and communication safety guidelines.
- j. Ministry with Children and Adults with Special Needs
 - i. Have open communication with parents and individuals about how to care well and nurture their faith
 - ii. Consistency and routine are important. If the routine needs to change communicate that as early as possible and reinforce this

communication with a classroom or event schedule created with their cognitive skills in mind.

- iii. Reach out to professionals in your area (for example, a school social worker) to lead a training about working with children with special needs if that may be helpful.

k. Ministry with the Elderly

- i. Maintain the two-person rule (This is especially true if you are going to be doing a home visit with a single elderly adult. If a caregiver will be present, that meets the requirement.)
- ii. Maintain boundaries, awareness of their cognitive needs, and their comfort level with any touching. A person in cognitive decline may not consistently maintain the same level of awareness of their surroundings. When you reach out to touch their arm, they may panic thinking someone is trying to hold them down. Adjust your ministry practices in keeping to what maintains their comfort level in each moment. Just because it was fine during your last visit does not mean that it will be same each time.

l. Small Church/Rural Church Ministries

- i. Due to lack of willing volunteers or financial restraints, it may be challenging to comply with all the best practices/guidelines. It is important to have proactive conversations with your church's governing board about how to "open up" ministry areas so that these spaces can always be visible. For example, it may mean creating modified half-doors in the nursery or children's room(s) or installing a window in doors for visual access.
- ii. It is also important to have conversations about who will be floating if you are using the rule of 3 (with one approved adult in the room with at least 2 children) and who will be in the room at the end of worship to ensure the volunteer is not left with one child.

IV. **Additional information** relevant to your context (emergency drills, what to do and where to go in an emergency, check-in/out system, playground usage, other policies and procedures specific for your context or age group. If you are leading this group just for youth workers, you may want to add additional information about working with youth.)

V. **Reporting** (may wish to show the Michigan DHS video on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFrtr6ybHH8&t=27s> or the online process at <https://youtu.be/hz0CLJ6e9Xw>)

- a. What to do if a child/youth/vulnerable adult tells you about possible abuse
 - i. Listen!
 - ii. If possible and with the permission of the child/youth/vulnerable adult, invite another staff person or trusted adult in the conversation

- iii. Comfort and sit near the child/youth/vulnerable adult, but to not touch without them initiating contact
 - iv. Stay calm
 - v. Reassure the person (they did nothing wrong, and you believe them)
 - vi. Encourage the young person to tell you what happened, but do not press for details or interrogate. Do try to get the who/what/where/when details.
 - vii. If asked to keep a secret, respond with honesty, “I will not tell other staff or others, but I may have to tell someone who can help you.”
 - viii. After the conversation document your recollection of the conversation to be kept in a secure location digitally or physically.
 - ix. Remember, it is not your responsibility to gather evidence or further details. Report what you know and let the proper authorities take it from there.
 - x. Follow the steps for reporting abuse.
- b. What to do if you suspect abuse
- i. If a child or youth discloses that they feel like they may have been abused, you need to report it. It is not your job to determine if the disclosure is true or accurate, it is your moral responsibility to report it.
- c. What to do if you witness abuse
- i. Consult with the ministry leader or clergy immediately
 - ii. Keep a written record of the concerns and your follow up actions (i.e. whom you spoke with and when, not your own investigation)
 - iii. Name specific behaviors and your reaction
 - iv. In an emergency, call 911
 - v. Follow the steps for reporting abuse
- d. Mandated Reporters
- i. Clergy and many other professionals are mandated reporters. Volunteers may not be mandated reporters by law, but we have a moral and ethical responsibility to speak up when we witness or are concerned about abuse or neglect.
- e. How to report suspected abuse or neglect
- i. Child or Youth – contact DHS (oral & written report or on-line report; 855.444.3911 or <https://newmibridges.michigan.gov/>)
 - ii. Adult or Elder – contact Adult Protective Services (855-444-3911)
- f. It is our responsibility to contact the appropriate agencies in the event that we suspect abuse or neglect. It is not our responsibility to take any of the matters into our own hands or do further investigations.

- g. You may have additional information or guidelines in your protection policy that you may wish to lift up. Feel free to use that. The video is also a great resource.

VI. Dealing with the media

- a. If suspected abuse happens during a ministry event, the local church should make sure the clergy is informed. The district superintendent should be contacted. More information about how to respond is on the conference website. A best practice is to ask for the reporter's name and contact information and respectfully tell them that the designated spokesperson will be in touch as soon as possible. One response could be "I want to be sure you get the most accurate information. If you give me your contact information, I will ask our spokesperson to return your call as soon as possible."

VII. Paperwork (if needed)

VIII. Close with Prayer

- a. God of All People, we thank you for all the precious children, youth, and adults in this world. We know they mean so much to you. We pray you would help us do all we can to protect and share your love and grace with them. Lord, we bring to you all of the wonderful work being done to keep all your children safe, and we pray that you would bless every pair of hands that works in this endeavor. Bless our efforts and may everyone who walks through our doors know they are loved by you and by their faith community. Amen.