

# MINIMUM STANDARDS

## FOUR-STEP APPROACH TO PROTECTING YOUTH



### Volunteer Minimum Standards

The Gulf Atlantic Diocese requires that, at a minimum, each congregation, mission, and church plant is expected to have in place the following policy procedures. These minimum standards apply even if there are no children currently in attendance at church events. The diocese and your congregation are committed to creating a positive and healthy environment for students through the 4-step approach:



The abbreviated outline and following explanation of these 4 steps should, at minimum, be included in the training materials every volunteer receives in every church.

## ABBREVIATED POLICY OUTLINE FOR VOLUNTEERS

### FOUR STEPS TO KEEP KIDS SAFE

1

**AWARENESS** is an opportunity to prevent an abuser from ever having contact with children and youth in our programs. Awareness outlines careful screening and training of employees and volunteers in youth and children's ministries.

a. Screening includes:

- Reviewing signed standard applications for all paid staff and for all lead volunteers in youth and children's ministries;
- Conducting National Sexual Offender Registry/Criminal Background checks and renewing them every two years;
- Conducting personal and professional reference checks and a thorough social media search;
- Conducting face-to-face interviews;
- Requiring a signature stating that clergy, employees, volunteers and other adult members of their households have not been arrested for or convicted of child abuse or diagnosed with certain psychiatric conditions such as voyeurism or exhibitionism;
- Requiring a six-month minimum attendance rule for all volunteers serving in children's and youth ministries.

b. Training puts the power to protect in everyone's hands and is an important deterrent to child abuse. Those who work with children or youth must be trained to recognize the warning signs of potential abuse, commit to the safe practices and learn the procedures for reporting suspected abuse. Training includes:

- Reading Requirements: All members of the clergy, all members of the vestry, church employees, and lead volunteers must certify that they have read, understood and accepted the Gulf Atlantic diocesan policies on the protection of children and sign an acknowledgement form.
- Workshop Attendance Requirements: Every two years, clergy, vestry, staff, as well as all lead volunteers must complete a diocesan approved awareness training (*Ministry Safe*) as well as diocesan approved training on the policy itself by their congregational trainer.

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2. **INTERACTING GUIDELINES** help children and adults feel safe in ministry and help detect problems before they turn into an incident of abuse. Verbal interactions between clergy, staff members, or volunteers and children should be positive, constructive and encouraging. Staff members and volunteers should avoid talking to children or parents in a way that is or could be construed by any reasonable observer as harsh, threatening, intimidating, shaming, derogatory, demeaning, or humiliating.

Social media avenues are important ways for youth ministry staff and volunteer leaders to connect with students. Clergy, staff members and volunteers shall refrain from connecting with students on social media when students are younger than the minimum age as established by each social media outlet. Online behavior is treated equal to in-person behavior including two adult rule, appropriate language, tone, attire, topics and obtaining parental consent for connections.

Photos of children will not be used contrary to the wishes of parent(s). All churches will refrain from posting any personally identifying information about children pictured online or in print publications without prior permission from parent(s).

Children's staff members and volunteers are responsible for protecting children under their supervision from inappropriate or unwanted touch.

Physical contact should be for the benefit of the child and never be based on the emotional needs of a staff member or volunteer. It is the diocesan policy that staff members and volunteers are prohibited from using physical discipline in any manner for the behavioral management of children. No form of physical discipline is acceptable.

Appropriate interactions may include:

- Smiles
- Encouragement
- Handshakes and high fives
- Fist bumps
- Thumbs up
- Side to side hugs
- Pats on the shoulder or back
- Arm around the shoulder
- Holding hands while walking with small children
- Holding or picking up children who are 4 years old and younger

Inappropriate interactions include:

- Spanking, slapping, or any form of physical discipline
- Shaming or belittling a child or youth
- Meeting alone in non-public or isolated places
- Swearing in the presence of children
- Engaging in sexually oriented communications with or in proximity to children

- Using, possessing, or being under the influence of tobacco products, alcohol, or any illegal drugs when in the presence of children
- Wrestling
- Tickling
- Sitting in laps (except for nursery-aged children)
- Kissing on the lips
- Full frontal hugs or “bear hugs”
- Commenting on children’s bodies
- Forcing unwanted affection
- Being nude in front of children (such as on overnight trips, changing at pool parties, etc.)
- Contacting or “friending” a child or youth social networking sites without the parent’s permission
- Showing favoritism or possessiveness
- Calling, emailing, or texting too often (singling a child out – “grooming” a child)
- Giving gifts to children without the parent’s permission
- Ridiculing the beliefs of a child or youth or those of their parents
- Allowing a child or youth to do things against the wishes of the parents
- Offering children or youth cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs
- Allowing children or youth to view pornography or to visit inappropriate internet sites
- Asking a child or youth to keep “secrets” from his or her parents
- Wearing provocative or revealing attire
- Taking pictures while children are dressing or showering

Monitoring these interactions allows us to detect problems before they turn into an incident of abuse and helps adults avoid wrongful allegations of abuse when none has occurred. Vestry, clergy, staff, and lead volunteers must be diligent in monitoring and supervising children’s and youth activities in all settings at all times.

Our monitoring practices include the following:

- **TWO-ADULT RULE:** All children and youth activities shall be designed to be supervised by two or more individuals at all times; rule of three is always preferred; all rooms must have one lead volunteer at least.
- **SUPERVISORY PLANS:** An onsite or offsite written Supervisory Plan shall be in place for all educational, pastoral, recreational, or other programming that involves youth or children. Those tasked with supervising youth or children for a specific program must understand their responsibilities as outlined;
- No child or youth will ever be left unattended during, or following, a church activity;
- Clergy, staff members, and volunteers should not conduct unobserved meetings or interactions with children or youth;

- In a discipleship or mentoring relationship, the interactions should occur in a public place or where other persons are present;
- An understanding that everyone is tasked with watching for, and responding to, policy violations;
- An open invitation for parents to visit at any time unannounced;
- A careful review of new programs and/or significant changes to a program structure;
- Keeping interaction with children supervised and in full view of others at all times;
- Keeping unused rooms locked.

The following restroom policy will be in effect during all children's programming:

- Children who require diapering will be assisted by screened and trained females and in view of other workers;
- Children who are special needs or nursery aged and being potty-trained will be assisted with doors to restrooms remaining open and verbal instruction as much as possible;
- Elementary aged children will use a same-aged, same-biological sex buddy system whenever possible; staff members/volunteers are not to be alone with a child in a restroom.

When children are present in the sanctuary, parent(s) are expected to accompany their elementary aged child to the restroom or send them with an older sibling; we ask this knowing that restrooms are often the most likely place for abuse to occur in an institutional setting.

### 3

**REPORTING** by responding quickly gives us the power to prevent or stop abuse and gives the child more time to heal. If a child discloses abuse, remember to:

- Respect the child's privacy by finding a non-threatening place to talk;
- Ask a staff member or trained volunteer to join in listening to the child or youth's account, if possible;
- Keep calm, listen and avoid expressing shock or outrage;
- Let the child or youth know that he or she is believed;
- Assure the child or youth that the abuse was not his or her fault;
- Tell the child or youth, if helpful, that they were brave to disclose;
- Avoid questions that could make the child or youth feel responsible or plant ideas that could taint their recollection and account; child victims are often vague in their initial disclosure;

- Write down as accurately as possible what the child or youth disclosed; this information can be used in filing the Report of Suspected Abuse Form for the diocese and the Child Protective Services report if warranted;
- Respect confidentiality: be careful afterwards not to discuss the information with, or in front of, other people who do not need to know what happened;
- Remember to:
  - Endeavor to ensure the safety of the child;
  - Report to Legal Authorities in accordance with applicable laws;
  - Report the abuse allegation to church authorities.
- Follow the guidelines for *Caring for the Community*, including providing a victim-sensitive approach to pastoral care for all involved.

[Florida reporting information](#)

[Georgia reporting information](#)

[Alabama reporting information](#)

[Gulf Atlantic Diocese online reporting](#)

Gulf Atlantic Diocese hotline: 904-300-0512

## 4

**COMPLIANCE** is the fourth step of the diocesan process. Compliance generally refers to those who keep us accountable. This will mostly fall to the leaders of the church and diocese, not the volunteers. For the volunteers, however, an important part of helping keep our children safe and creating a safe environment for all, is holding each other accountable. If you, as a volunteer or staff member, see something that goes against this policy or good faith behavior, you have an obligation to speak up. If you do not feel comfortable speaking to your church leadership, please call the hotline.

THANK YOU FOR HELPING TO KEEP OUR CHURCHES SAFE!