

# Safe Sanctuaries Policies

## What is Safe Sanctuaries?

Safe Sanctuaries is how we protect children and vulnerable adults at our church. It is a set of policies, and our expectations for volunteers. It is a part of Methodist history as well – in 1996, the General Conference passed a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child abuse in the church. It was ratified at local, state, and global levels, and has been reaffirmed every year since.

## Why do we need policies?

Abuse is shockingly prevalent in our society today. Statistics from 2020 show that 1 out of every 7 American children experiences abuse during their formative years. 27% of abuse victims are younger than three, and 90% of victims know their abuser personally. The church is not immune to the presence of abuse. We must take proactive steps to protect the vulnerable in our care.

## Scripture that informs these policies

“People were bringing babies to Jesus so that he would bless them. When the disciples saw this, they scolded them. Then Jesus called to them and said, ‘Allow the children to come to me. Don’t forbid them, because God’s kingdom belongs to people like these children. I assure you that whoever does not welcome God’s kingdom like a child will never enter it.’” (Luke 18:15-17, CEB)

This scripture shows that children are not an afterthought to Jesus. They are a vital part of our community, and Jesus encourages us to learn from them.

“As for whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and be drowned in the bottom of the lake.” (Matthew 18:6, CEB)

Jesus takes the care of children *very* seriously. We need to take these policies seriously, too.

## Defining Terms

Children: birth through fifth grade

Youth: sixth through twelfth grade

Vulnerable Adults: adults with mental disabilities, physical handicaps, or those who are dependent in other ways. For example, a recently arrived refugee.

Power Dynamics: power is a person’s ability to exert influence or control. When one person is in authority over another person, power dynamics come into play. When we are working with youth or children, we are in a position of power over them. While we may feel that we are simply being friendly with them, children may experience this as bullying or inappropriate

behavior. They may also not feel comfortable speaking up to a person in authority. We must always remember that we are older, stronger, and hold more power than the children in our care.

Physical Abuse: when a person deliberately causes bodily harm to a child.

Mental Abuse: cruelty – when a person communicates to a child that he or she is worthless, bad, unloved, and undeserving of care.

Sexual Abuse: any sexual contact between a minor and an adult. Children under 18 are not legally able to consent to any sexual activity.

Ritual Abuse: the ritualized or stylized abuse of any of the aforementioned types.

Neglect: endangering a child's health through negligence. This could include withholding food, medical care, or education.

## **Reporting Abuse**

Once an incident of child abuse occurs or allegation of an incident is made, it is crucial that it be dealt with immediately.

1. Notify the staff leader of the ministry involve – this would be Libba McCluskey for youth or Heather Thompson for children. You can also speak to Pastor Don.
2. They will gather any necessary information and file a report with the county.
3. While the report is ongoing, any staff member or volunteer who is involved will suspend their work with children or youth.
4. Only the senior pastor can speak to media representatives.
5. Pastoral counseling will be available to any involved.

## **Supervision: the 2-Adult Rule**

Each group of children will be supervised by at least two unrelated adults.

Classrooms, meeting rooms, and offices will have windows in their doors, or will remain open. Choose the location of activities with mindfulness towards the visibility of the room.

Counseling: a student may come to an adult one-on-one for counseling, but it must happen in a public place, with the door open. It may happen one time and then the adult needs to contact the child's parent for permission moving forward.

## **Guidelines for Physical Touch**

Think contextually when it comes to physical touch. Sometimes touch can be a comforting kindness. At other times, it can be inappropriate.

Think about the context – are you in a classroom full of students and other adults? Are you alone with a student in a hallway? Is the student in question a two-year-old who scraped his knee? If so, he might need to be held for a minute. Yet, a senior high student who is expressing sadness might need distance. We have to consider not just what we are doing, but what it looks like.

Make sure to ask the student what they want – a simple, “do you need a hug?” teaches the student that their body belongs to them. As we model a healthy, appropriate relationship with adults, children will be better able to identify when an adult is asking them to do something wrong. This empowers them to identify and speak up against abuse.

If a student wants more contact than is appropriate, feel empowered to say no. Let them know that you care, but that we follow safe sanctuaries to keep them safe and healthy.

### **Secrecy**

Abuse thrives in secrecy. Youth or children’s volunteers should never ask a student to keep a secret from their parents, staff, or other volunteers.

Seek to communicate as openly as possible – share information. This protects our volunteers from false allegations and again, trains our children to understand what is appropriate in relationship with adults.

### **Healthy Ratios**

Minimum adult-to-student ratios are set at 1:8.

For children who are younger than five, that ratio drops to 1:4.

This does not negate the 2-adult supervision rule.

### **Off-Campus Activities**

Sometimes children and youth will attend activities outside of the church building. These activities must be supervised by at least two unrelated adults. With co-ed activities, there must be at least one man and one woman present.

On overnight trips, adults will not share rooms with students. The only exception to this rule is if a parent shares a room with his or her own child.

There should be at least two adults in a vehicle when transporting students to the activity.

Any time volunteers meet with students outside the church building, they must let the ministry staff know and they must get parental permission.

## **Transportation Policy**

All drivers must be at least 25 years old and must submit a ministry driver application.

Drivers must provide a valid copy of their driver's license.

Drivers must have and carry a cell phone.

Every passenger must wear a seatbelt at all times.

## **Social Media**

Ministry accounts: students' pictures may only be shared with parental permission and student consent. These accounts will never share students' names or any personal information.

Personal accounts: volunteers will not post pictures of students on their personal accounts.

They may communicate in publicly visible ways – comments, etc. They may not communicate in direct or private messages.

Let students initiate contact first – let them follow or friend request you first. This reinforces that they have control over their own privacy.

Staff or volunteers will not follow or interact with students on “disappearing” social media – i.e., snapchat.

## **Texting**

Texting is a great way of staying in contact with students! If a student consents, you are welcome to reach out via text, but remember to text like you would talk in person. Also, we never delete texts with students, ever. If parents or pastors would ever like to see a text conversation, we always want to be able to pull it up.

## **Zoom**

Zoom rooms should follow the same rules as physical locations – always have two unrelated adults supervising main rooms and breakout rooms.

We have the option to record zoom sessions – use it!

Set up zoom sessions so that participants enter a waiting room first; this allows you to know exactly who is joining the zoom.

## **Requirements for Volunteering**

1. Attend a safe sanctuaries training.

Note: reading through this document does not certify you as having been trained in Safe Sanctuaries. You still need to take the class and fill out the appropriate paperwork in order to volunteer with children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

2. Sign and submit a “receipt of policies” document.
3. Fill out an information sheet and a volunteer application.
4. Provide three character references.
5. Sign a release form that allows us to do a background check.

You will need to renew your safe sanctuaries training every two years. We will run your background check every time you update your training.

### Youth Volunteers

There are circumstances in which our older students can volunteer with our younger children:

1. They must be at least 12 years old
2. They must attend a safe sanctuaries training
3. They must be at least five years older than the children they supervise
4. They must fill out a volunteer application and reference form
5. They will be supervised by adults at all times