

Safe Environment Policies for Child and Youth Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Biblical and Theological Perspective

“They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.” (Isaiah 11:9).

The kingdom of God is described in a variety of ways throughout the Bible, perhaps none so picturesquely and with so much vivid imagery as in the book of Isaiah, chapter 11. It’s a beautiful and harmonious scene, culminating in the quotation above. This passage describes not only relationships within the whole of God’s creation, but also human relationships.

The fall of the human race into sin and the depravity that resulted have destroyed God’s original design and intent for this world and especially for our relationships. While it is true that sin in general affects the whole of human life, few sins tear at the fabric of relationships with as much human misery and pain as the sin of abuse. Abuse distorts the image of God, devalues human beings created in his image, and devastates its victims.

The biblical record realistically portrays the presence and results of abuse among the people of God (see, for example, the story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13). Studies and statistics today (see the Christian Reformed church survey by the Calvin College Social Research Center, Agenda for Synod 1992, p. 320) indicate an incidence of abuse within the church equal to that in the general population. Where such abuse is perpetrated by spiritual leaders within a congregation, there is not only a terrible perversion of power, but enormous spiritual damage results.

Yet the Bible’s message is not one of despair, but of hope! In Christ, God’s world is restored and God’s kingdom comes. In his life on earth Christ was the embodiment of righteousness, justice, peace, reconciliation, and love. Through his death, he redeemed his church; and by his Word and Spirit, he calls and equips us to model his kingdom until it comes in all its completion and glory.

The church is responsible for becoming a safe community that confronts sin, particularly the sin of abuse. The church seeks to bring healing to its victims and help to its perpetrators; and it consciously works for the prevention of all abuse. To that end, the Synod of 1992 affirmed “the church’s stance against this evil and encouraged victims to protest this evil and its aftereffects, which they may still be experiencing.”

Synod also called on the church to “encourage perpetrators to seek appropriate help.” Further, church councils are “to help their congregations to publicly acknowledge that the sin of abuse exists among us; to support efforts that such abuse be addressed promptly so that abused and abusers may experience the healing power of God’s grace; and to take positive steps to make their congregations safe for all persons.” (See Acts of Synod 1992 p. 673.)

In all of these and other ways, the church and each individual congregation can become a “colony” of the kingdom where “they will neither harm nor destroy on all {God’s} holy mountain” (Isaiah 11:9), where every tear is wiped away (Isaiah 25:8), and where there is peace.

- by Edward Tamminga and Nick VanderKwaak

Good News Christian Reformed Church wishes to provide a safe, caring, and nurturing environment for all her members. We also recognize the great value of volunteers and wish to support them in their roles as they minister.

We trust that the policies and guidelines here will help promote a safe and healthy environment. They will allow for the education of the whole church, and the pursuit of biblically healthy relationships modeled after Jesus Christ.

DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE

In order to help us determine the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, the following definitions are given.

Physical Abuse - Any non-accidental human act that results in physical pain or injury to a child – whether or not it leaves a cut or wound, or a mark or a bruise. Physically abusive behaviour ranges from slapping, pushing, shoving, punching, kicking, and biting to more severe forms like choking, severe spanking, beating, hitting with an object, burning, stabbing and shooting. In other words, physical abuse is any intentional means of inflicting pain or injury to another person. It is sometimes a single event, but can also be a chronic pattern of behaviour.

Physical Neglect - Not doing what one is supposed to be doing to meet the physical needs of someone in his or her care. Neglect interferes with or prevents a child's normal development.

Sexual Abuse - The exploitation of a child or any sexual intimacy forced on a child for the sexual stimulation or gratification of another person. Child sexual abuse can refer to taking advantage of child who is not capable of understanding sexual acts or resisting coercion, such as threats or offers of gifts. Sexual abuse may or may not involve physical contact. Examples of non-physical sexual abuse include people exposing themselves, displaying pornographic material, photographing a child for pornographic materials, obscene telephone calls, "peeping Toms," and requests to engage in sexual activity (where no physical contact occurs). Examples of sexual abuse involving physical contact including fondling of body parts such as breasts, crotch, buttocks, or sexual organs; intercourse; oral and anal sex.

Emotional Abuse - Attempting to control a child's life through words, threats, and fear; destroying a child's self-worth through harassment, threats, and deprivation. Emotional abuse weakens a child's mental and physical ability to resist, cuts off his or her contacts with others and causes a gradual loss of self-esteem – all of which reinforce a sense of helplessness and dependence on the abuser.

Spiritual Abuse – The mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support, or greater spiritual empowerment with the result of weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment. The individual is left bearing a weight of guilt, judgement or condemnation and confusion about their worth and standing as a Christian.

GENERAL PREVENTION POLICIES

For the purpose of this booklet:

Volunteers are individuals ages 18+ who serve in a youth program and/or who have direct contact with minors in their care or supervision.

Staff are those individuals paid by the church to serve in a child or youth program and/or have direct contact with minors in their care or supervision.

Children, youth or minors are individuals *under* sixteen years of age.

Helpers are individuals under 18 years of age who assist in Children's Programs. The age of helpers is defined within the guidelines of each separate program.

The following policies are for the prevention of abuse and the creation of a healthy environment.

1. **Discipline Policy.** Good News CRC has a Discipline Policy for volunteers/staff who work with youth. Volunteers/staff must agree to abide by the Discipline Policy.
2. **Risk Prevention Policy.** Good News CRC has a Risk Prevention Policy. These policies are for the specific child and youth programs – Nursery, Children's Worship and Sunday School, VBS, GEMS and Cadets, and Youth Group.
 - a. **TWO PERSON RULE** – Two volunteers (ages 18+) should be present for all programs involving youth. The two-person rule is preferred for all programs but is not always feasible. Where the two-person rule is not in effect, the establishment of hall monitors is a necessity.
 - b. **TRANSPORTATION OF CHILDREN/YOUTH** – It would be ideal to have two adults in a vehicle when transporting children, however this is not always feasible or practical. Leaders need to be cautious and use common sense.
 - c. **HALL MONITORS** – Hall monitors must be ages 18+ and agree to comply with screening procedures as outlined in the policy. Currently Good News Church has Council Members fulfill this role.

Duties include:

 - Monitoring the building and the programs occurring.
 - Assisting Children who need to leave the classroom.
 - Ensuring that younger children requiring assistance in the bathroom use the nursery washroom..
 - At the start of the service ensuring that two attendants are present in the nursery (two volunteers (18+) OR one volunteer (18+) and one helper (14-17)).

- Ensuring that door stoppers are in place in the bathrooms so that those doors remain open during the service.
- Checking the parking lot periodically, welcoming latecomers, being available to assist those who leave the service.

The presence of hall monitor allows for the necessity of occasional one-to-one contacts between volunteers and children, as monitors are there to observe at a distance.

3. **Screening Policy.** Good News CRC has screening procedures for volunteers and staff. All volunteers and staff must agree to comply with Good News CRC's Safety Policies. A volunteer or staff person who refuses to follow prevention policies or who violates policies may be required to relinquish his or her responsibility in a child or youth program.
4. **Education Policy.** Supervisors of any program serving minors, and where possible, other volunteers and staff, will attend training programs annually on the signs and symptoms of child abuse, awareness of abuse, reporting suspected child abuse, and the dynamics of abuse.
5. **Reporting Policy.** All Staff, leaders, teachers and others in positions representing Good News CRC are required to report any suspected or alleged incidence of abuse.

I. DISCIPLINE POLICY

As adults, it is important that we model behaviour that is Christlike. By our example we can teach children and youth what is acceptable behaviour and which behaviours do not show respect for our classmates and neighbours. An adult can stop unacceptable behaviour by intervening with a constructive form of discipline to the child/youth. The following discipline policy will reduce the risk of volunteers/staff being accused of being abusive. It provides clear guidelines about how to administer discipline in church-sponsored child and youth programs.

A. Discipline is NOT...

...*Physical abuse*

- slapping, kicking, punching, hitting, choking, pushing, shoving, hair-pulling, twisting, pinching, biting
- action that leaves a bruise, mark, wound, or cut
- action administered with any device or object
- action followed by a request/threat to the child/youth not to tell anyone what happened, not to report the action, or to show anyone a mark or bruise

Discipline is NOT...

... *Verbal abuse*

- shouting or yelling, threatening, hurling insults or obscenities, refusing to speak to a child, action that involves bribery, coercion, or threats
- action followed by a request/threat to a child to not tell anyone what happened, not to report the action

B. *Discipline IS...*

...Parental involvement

- parent(s) are to be informed and involved whenever a child/youth misbehaves beyond minor correction, or if a pattern of misbehaviour increases
- concerns about a child's behaviour should be reported to the program supervisor
- an aide or parent should be involved weekly in classrooms where misbehaviour is an ongoing problem

...Education

- expectations of children/youths' behaviour must reflect their age and level of comprehension. Similarly, discipline must reflect their age and level of comprehension
- children are to be reminded of the kind of behaviour that is acceptable for the setting. Older children and youth may benefit from having these expectations in written form.
- appropriate forms of discipline are to be reviewed with volunteers/staff before church-sponsored programs begin a new season. Then periodic reminders are to be given as needed.

...Intervention Strategies

- Whenever possible, leaders should intervene by choosing one or more of the following:
 - Distract the child/youth with another activity
 - Help the child/youth focus on another more acceptable behaviour
 - Isolate the child/youth from others if another volunteer/staff is available to assist
- Volunteers/staff ordinarily will not physically restrain a child in their care. Leaders will ask for assistance if a child behaves in a manner that seems to require restraint. The child's parent will be notified immediately and the child may be removed from the class until the parent arrives
- For young children, time-outs should not last longer (in minutes) than the age of the child. For example, a three-year-old should not have to sit for a time-out any longer than three minutes.
- When interventions do not work, staff/volunteers/leaders should get help before "losing their cool."

2. RISK PREVENTION POLICIES

POLICIES FOR YOUTH PROGRAMS

A. Nursery Program

- The nursery will be staffed by at least TWO attendants – either two volunteers (age 18+); or one volunteer (age 18+) and one helper (age 14 – 17). When two adult volunteers (age 18+) are not present, a hall monitor will be established.
- Helpers (ages 14 – 17) may volunteer for service, provided that one volunteer (age 18+) is present and the hall monitor is in place. Helpers may not care for child(ren) without adult supervision.
- Attendants may take children from the nursery only for good reason, such as in the case of illness. Any significant medical problem will be reported immediately to the child's parent(s). For children who do not require assistance in the bathroom, the adult attendant must remain outside the bathroom.
- Adult attendants (ages 18+) will assist children with washroom needs. Children unable to use the main washroom unassisted will use the nursery washroom.
- Changing of infants will be done in view of another attendant. Windows in washroom door are a necessity and should not be obstructed in any way (posters etc).
- Only one adult member of a family will serve in the nursery at a given time. A couple (husband and wife) will not serve in the same nursery room at the same time.
- Only parents/guardians may pick up children from the nursery.
- All policies apply to the nursery program.

B. Children's Worship and Church School

- Only one adult member of a family will serve in a classroom at a given time. A couple (husband and wife) will not serve together in children's worship or in church school in the same classroom.
- Whenever children's worship or church school is in session two adult volunteers/staff (ages 18+) will be present. If this is not possible, a hall monitor will be in place.
- Helpers (ages 12+) may volunteer to assist provided one adult is present.
- Only adults (ages 18+) may assist children with bathroom needs. Children requiring assistance must use the nursery washroom (possibly three and four year olds). Children who are able to use the washroom unassisted should use main washrooms. A hall monitor is available to supervise children in the hallway.
- Children should be encouraged to use bathroom facilities before and after class.

- Children should not leave the worship centre or classroom except for illness, bathroom needs or other compelling reason.
- Whenever children's worship or church school is in session, the worship centre or classroom door should allow for an unobstructed view of the room.
- While the appropriate display of affection between leader and child is an important part of conveying support and encouragement to one another, such displays can be misinterpreted. Examples of appropriate displays of affection are a brief hug, an arm around the shoulder, an open-hand pat on the back, a handclasp, or a light touch to the forearm. A leader's or a child's right to refuse any of these will be respected.
- All policies apply to children's worship and church school programs.

C. Vacation Bible School

- All VBS classes and activities will be conducted with at least two adult volunteers/staff. When this is not possible, a hall monitor will be established.
- Volunteers/staff will not meet alone with a child without another adult or leader nearby to observe
- Helpers (ages 12+) may volunteer to assist provided an adult volunteers is present present.
- Children will not leave their classroom except for illness, to use the bathroom, or other compelling reason.
- Whenever VBS is in session, the classroom door should allow for unobstructed view of the room.
- Classrooms held in off-site facilities such as Eden Homes, or the Christian schools will adhere to the same safety considerations as classrooms in the church building. Children will not meet in a confined space or without adequate supervision.
- Church volunteers or staff transporting a child in a vehicle must have a written 3parental permission to do so. A form will be signed prior to the program beginning.
- All policies apply to the VBS programs.

D. GEMS and CADETS

- Counsellors will provide adequate supervision of the counselees. Each cadet and Gem function will be supervised by at least two adult volunteers. When this is not possible (ie. Classroom settings), a hall monitor will be put in place.
- Helpers must be at least four years older than the oldest Cadet or GEM and may volunteer provided an adult volunteer is present.
- Counsellors and counselees may meet for one-on-one contacts. Such meetings will occur in a public place. (Public place being somewhere where they can be easily observed – door ajar or in a main area.) One-on-one contacts should not be a consistent practice. For longer contacts, whenever possible, parents should be notified. If not in the best interests of the child to notify the parents, the supervisor should be notified.
- If a child needs significant medical attention, the parent(s) will be notified immediately.
- Cadets or GEMS should not arrive more than ten minutes before the start of the class, nor should they stay longer than ten minutes after the class. This point should be stressed to parents as their responsibility.
- Churches that plan Cadet and GEM activities away from the church facility, out of town, or overnight will conduct them in general compliance with the aforementioned policies. Parents must give written consent for the youth to participate in these activities. Forms to be signed at the beginning of each year.
- Church volunteers or staff transporting a child in a vehicle must have written parental permission to do so. A form will be signed prior to the program beginning.
- While the appropriate display of affection between counsellors and their counselees is an important part of conveying support and encouragement to one another, such displays can be misinterpreted. Examples of appropriate displays of affection are a brief hug, an arm around the shoulder, an open-hand pat on the back, a handclasp, or a light touch to the forearm. A counsellor's or counselee's right to refuse any of these will be respected.
- All policies apply to the GEM and Cadet programs.

E. Youth Group (serves grade 9-12)

- Each Youth Group function will be properly supervised. At least two adult volunteers/staff (ages 18+) will be present. In a classroom setting where two adults are not present, a hall monitor will be established.
- Youth Group leaders will be at least four years older than the oldest program participant.
- Each year youth group leaders will sponsor a class about abuse for members of the youth group. Topics for this class might include date violence, biblical guidelines for dating relationships, awareness of the signs of abuse, a teenager's response to a teenage victim of abuse, or prevention of abuse.
- Youth group leaders may meet one-on-one. Any such meeting should occur in public (example: door ajar or in a main area). This should not be a consistent practice. For longer contacts, wherever possible, parents should be notified. If not in the best interests of the child to notify the parents, supervisors should be notified.
- Regardless of the relative ages, it is never appropriate for a youth group leader and a youth group member to date each other.
- In the context of group activities, youth group leaders will provide supervision of the youth in their care. Youth group leaders will not hold a youth group function without appropriate or sufficient supervision. Youth group functions will not be under the supervision of only one youth group leader. These guidelines also apply to activities away from the church site. Parents must give written consent for youth to participate in these activities. Forms to be signed at the beginning of each season.
- Church volunteers or staff transporting a child in a vehicle must have written parental permission to do so. A form will be signed prior to the program beginning.
- While the appropriate display of affection is often part of conveying support and encouragement to one another, such displays can be misinterpreted. Therefore, displays of affection between youth leader and youth group member ought to be limited to such actions as a brief hug, an arm around the shoulder, an open-hand pat on the back, a handclasp or handshake, or a light touch to the forearm. Restrict these displays to a public area. A youth group leader's or member's right to refuse such a display of affection will be respected.
- No persistent gift giving, phone calls, or letters of a personal nature will be directed to a youth group member by a youth group leader, or directed to a youth group leader by a youth group member.
- All policies apply to the youth group program.

3. SCREENING POLICY

Volunteers – To be considered for any volunteer position in the church, a person should have been a member of the church for at least 6 months. Leaders of programs will discuss with potential volunteers the job responsibilities and suitability of individuals for positions. Those wishing to serve in a volunteer position in the church (council members and volunteers positions in child and youth programs) will be required to have a police record check completed as well as fill in the *Code of Ethics*. This will allow the Safe Church Team to screen out any individual who may not be appropriate for involvement with youth. This would include individuals who have been convicted of abuse or assault or any crime against a minor. If the Safe Church Team has any concerns about the information gathered, the Team will bring these concerns forward to Executive Council.

Paid Positions – Those seeking a paid position in the church will be required to have a personal interview, and provide three references. The interview will take place by individuals appointed by church administration. The Safe Church Team will provide input to ensure questions regarding children/youth are included in the interview and in the reference process. In addition, all paid staff will have a Police Records Check after the first two screening steps are completed and will be required to sign the *Code of Ethics*.

Personnel Files – All information gathered from this screening process should be kept in a locked file cabinet in the church office with access limited to members of the Safe Church Team.

4. EDUCATION POLICY

- The Safe Church Team will assume overall responsibility for the education of the entire congregation in matters of abuse prevention and safety. The Safe Church Team will work with the Program Supervisors in planning specifics of the education.
- Education will be for children 3 years and older, youth, and all volunteers for children and youth.
- The entire congregation will be given opportunities to learn about abuse and abuse prevention.
- Church council and leaders shall participate in educational presentations which will make them aware of the issues of abuse, including signs and symptoms.

5. REPORTING POLICY

Internal Reporting

All staff, supervisors, teachers and others in positions representing Good News CRC are required to report any suspected or alleged incidence of abuse. The fact of emotional, physical or sexual abuse does not have to be proven by the reporting person. Any reasonable concern should be reported immediately. The main concern is the welfare of the child. Where a minor is involved, an appropriate office of Social Services will be contacted.

Reporting Flowchart

Volunteer → Supervisor of Program → Safe Church Team → Executive Council

Any reported abuse should be documented in an incident report written by the volunteer witnessing the occurrence (or hearing it from the victim). The law requires that all reports of abuse be reported. The Safe Church Team should be made aware of incidents and be involved. The report must be made to the Children's Aid Society within 24 hours. Good News CRC will cooperate with the Children's Aid Society and all law enforcement agencies. Records of reported incidents will be kept by the Safe Church team in a secure and confidential fashion.

External Reporting

In situations where there is a reasonable suspicion of child abuse but it takes place outside of church property and does not involve any church volunteers/staff, it is still mandatory in all Canadian provinces that it is reported. Example of this: Suspicion of child being abused by parent/family member.

See Good News CRC Safe Church Policy (full document) for further details on any points in this booklet.

