Code of Practice for staff and volunteers

*Adapted from Annexe 3 of the Church in Wales Safeguarding operational procedures and practice guidance, Choirs and church choirs with young people*

**Introduction**

 Staff and volunteers working and associating with children in the context of church activities where young people are present should be aware that safeguarding is paramount to both the parish church and diocese. This code of practice is published in order that best practice may be followed and misunderstandings avoided. It is clearly in the interests of all children and adults, and of the church itself, that staff and volunteers follow this code of practice to avoid putting themselves, colleagues and children at risk.

This code of practice attempts to set out guidelines for the ways in which all adults should interact with children in a group setting in order to maintain healthy and unambiguous relationships and avoid situations which may be misinterpreted or misused. For the purposes of this document a child is anyone of school age, even if over 18, who is currently in a church youth group, Sunday school, or other organised church activity.

The contents of this document apply to all staff and volunteers who come into contact with children, including clergy, chaperones, parent helpers, paid and volunteer leaders, whether or not they have direct responsibility for the children.

Some of the adults who are involved may also be parents of group members. In this instance, it is clearly acceptable for those adults to associate with children who are friends of their child in the normal way outside of the group setting. There is no need to avoid other children coming round to play with their child, or to avoid giving lifts to other children along with their own children, etc. Common sense must prevail. It may, however, be wise to make it clear to the parents of such other children that any arrangements made are private arrangements between parents and not connected to one’s position in the church.

All adults should take care that their relationships with children reflect the age, gender and maturity of the children involved. It is especially important that all aspects of demeanour, language and attitude, however conveyed, do not give rise to misunderstandings, especially when dealing with adolescent or older boys and girls.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

The formal group leaders are those principally responsible for the welfare of the group members. This may be the local clergy, or another experienced youth or children’s leader. At all times when the children are at the church group, except in extreme circumstances, at least one formal leader is present and in a position of principal responsibility for the children. This responsibility includes pastoral matters.

A team of volunteer leaders assist in looking after the children. They are responsible for pastoral matters during their periods of duty, and can deal with children’s food and drink, sickness, the attendance register, misbehaviour, and emotional issues. They are responsible to the formal leaders and should report any significant issues arising during their duties to them, who should in turn report them to the cleric or safeguarding officer as soon as reasonably possible.

**Physical Contact**

All adults should avoid physical contact with the children, except in the following circumstances:

• Restraining a child to prevent them harming or injuring themselves or others or doing damage to property. Only reasonable restraint must be used.
• Comforting a child in distress. This should be done with the knowledge of, and preferably in the sight of, other adults.
• Administering First Aid.
• Sharing the peace at the Eucharist with a handshake.

Physical contact should be minimal, appropriate, and not prolonged or often repeated. Adults should take into account the age of the child concerned and take care to avoid contact which may be wrongly interpreted. If any unusual physical contact occurs between an adult and a child, even accidentally, it is important that the adult reports the incident to the formal leader as soon as reasonably possible, no matter how embarrassing or trivial the incident may be.

**Conversation and Demeanour**

All adults should avoid comments in the presence of children, which could be taken to have sexual overtones, or be regarded as intimate: neither should they encourage debate or discussion of such subjects. There are a few possible exceptions to this rule. In situations where a child’s distress is caused by physical or emotional concerns which have to be acknowledged in the interest of helping the child at that time, a leader may need to listen to a child explaining a personal problem and respond appropriately. They should not promise to be a confidante in such circumstances and must report the incident to the formal leader, the churches safeguarding co-ordinator and Provincial Safeguarding Officer as soon as possible.

Adults should ensure that all topics of conversation with children are appropriate, bearing in mind the age of the child. They should use their professional judgement to ensure that they are not drawn into areas of conversation inappropriate to their duties or their relationship to the child concerned. The persistent and hurtful use of sarcastic, demeaning, or insensitive comments towards young people is a form of abuse and should be avoided.

Adults should consider the way that they dress to ensure that it is appropriate. Refrain from wearing short skirts or shorts or showing the midriff. Women should avoid wearing low cut, revealing tops during face to face and online video meetings. All leaders should be mindful of clothing with inappropriate logos, such as ones that are graphic, violent, contain bad language or can be read with sexual connotations.

**The Pastoral Role of Volunteer helpers**

The helper may be the first person a child confides in, particularly if there are difficulties at home. Such encounters may require more collaborative engagement with the school. It may be in some circumstances that the church, through the gathering of information from the helper regarding a child’s home situation, should work in collaboration with the school the child is attending, who may also be alive to the child’s care or unhappiness. For example, a parent not collecting a child, or a child being a prime carer for a parent or having to do domestic work at home that impact on the child’s well-being. These situations require pastoral care and working with other agencies, especially the school. Advice should be sought from the Provincial Safeguarding Officer if the helper has any areas of doubt.

**Infatuations and Crushes**

Adults should be aware of the possibility of infatuations and crushes developing, particularly in the case of adolescent and older children. They should alert a colleague if they observe a child developing an infatuation which could put that colleague at risk. Adults should remain professional and not add to the child’s problems by joking about or providing any such situation. If they are concerned about a particular developing situation, they should talk with the formal leader about it. Should a child initiate an unacceptable physical or verbal approach, the adult concerned should gently but firmly disengage himself/herself and explain that such closeness is not appropriate or acceptable. However, they should be careful not to react in such a way as to humiliate the child.

If a child develops a tendency regularly to stay behind with an adult as if to help, or to discuss matters, he/she should act to avoid this situation developing, either by asking another child to help with the same task, inviting another adult or child into the room, or preventing the opportunity recurring.

**Off--site activities**

When group activities occur away from the church or regular group setting, adults should adhere to the same standards of conduct and behaviour, even in situations where they are ‘off-duty’ but in the presence of group members. Adults should consider how their deportment and conversation may be perceived by children and understand that they may be held up as role models by some children.

Adults should be vigilant in foreseeing problems which may occur in unfamiliar settings. On residential trips children have less access to their parents, and some degree of homesickness may be experienced, in particular by younger children. While it is appropriate for adults to reassure children in this context, they should not allow an inappropriate relationship to develop on account of a child’s neediness or difficulties. Where adults detect a danger in this regard it is important that they bring other appropriate adults into the situation, so that the child concerned is not dependent on any one adult.

**Social events**

There are a number of social events in any group calendar. Adults should be aware that the more relaxed relationships that may sometimes be appropriate in these contexts can be misinterpreted by young people. It is important to emphasise that the standards of conduct and behaviour around the children should be no different from those in group activities. Adults should be aware of the particular care which should be taken with older, more mature members in these circumstances.

**Meetings between adults and children outside group activities**

It may appear to some that a church should only be concerned with interaction between children and adults during regular group activities. However, were a situation involving a child and adult from the church group to develop outside the bounds of group activities, this would obviously impact on the church.

It is usually inappropriate for an adult to arrange to meet with, to agree to meet with, or to prolong an accidental meeting with a child outside the group environment. If adults foresee such an occasion developing, they should discuss it with the formal leader. There are few exceptions to this rule, but one is a case where an adult is privately engaged by a parent in teaching or tutoring a child. It is also possible that an adult may need to engage professionally with a child in a different context (e.g. as a member of staff at a school).

It is appropriate for members of staff to meet with children in the presence of their parents outside group activities. However, parents should be encouraged to make their child aware of the appropriate relationship with the adult concerned to avoid confusion both in and out of the group situation.

**Communication with members outside group activities**

With parents’ consent, the email addresses of older members can be added to a database, so that they receive the same emails as their parents do relating to group activities. These email addresses are held only by the formal leader and will not be used by him or her to communicate with the child individually.

Staff, volunteers, and visitors should not communicate directly with individual children outside group activities. All media of communication are inappropriate, including telephoning, texting, e-mailing, letter writing, sending parcels, and other forms of electronic and non-electronic communication. Only the formal group leaders should hold mobile phone numbers for children if they are given them, and they may use these only for official purposes relating to group activities. An official purpose might be to check on an older child’s whereabouts on a residential trip if parents have given permission for their child to be unsupervised for a limited period, or in the event that an urgent message must be sent to a child. Such communications should never be prolonged, and no one member of staff should regularly contact the same child.

For non-urgent communications, it is always advisable to contact the child’s parents and ask to speak with the child concerned. This kind of contact should not be regularly directed at any particular child. Parents have the right to withhold consent for an adult to talk to their children outside group activities, and to act as intermediary where it is important that a message gets through.

Where an adult needs to contact a particular member as indicated above, they should contact them via the home telephone number or parents’ mobile number rather than via the child’s mobile phone. If the child happens to answer the home phone rather than a parent, the member of staff or volunteer should use his/her discretion in deciding whether it is appropriate to talk directly to the child or whether to ask to speak with the parents first. In the case of the younger children, it is likely always to be appropriate to talk to the parents first. All conversations should be brief and to the point.

Adults should avoid giving their contact details to any member and should avoid accepting friend requests from children on Facebook. It is, however, possible that a child may discover contact details and contact an adult by text or email, or by telephoning. If the communication is a simple one related to group activities, it is fine to reply with a brief answer to a question. But if such communication becomes repeated or strays into areas not directly related to the group, however, innocent, it would be wise to alert the formal leader to this.

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