

**Desert Southwest Conference**  
**The United Methodist Church**  
**Safe Sanctuaries Guidelines for Conference-Sponsored Meetings and Events**  
*Approved by Covenant Council 3-8-08*

As Christians and United Methodists, we are concerned for the care and well-being of the children and youth in our care. We sponsor summer camps, weekend retreats, and youth events for the children and youth in our Conference. We also invite youth to join us in planning and visioning for the important ministries of the Church. It is critical that we model best practices for the care and protection of these children and youth in our meetings and events. In order to do so, we will operate with the following guidelines for their health and safety while participating in programs and meetings of the Desert Southwest Conference of the United Methodist Church.

The goal of these guidelines is threefold: first, to prevent abuse from happening to the children and youth in our care; second, to prevent false allegations of abuse against individuals and the church; third, to enable staff and volunteers to recognize and report suspected abuse.

There is no one thing that we can do to prevent the abuse of the children and youth in our care. A multi-pronged approach that includes annual training and continual practice will provide the best results.

**1. Group of Three Rule**

A child or youth should not be alone with another unrelated adult or child or youth at any time for any reason. Everything should be done in groups of at least three: at least two adults and a young person, or two young people and an adult. The ideal to strive for is that at least two unrelated adults be with children or youth at all times.

Rationale: Should an adult desire to do harm to a child, it is much more difficult to do so with another witness present. The purpose of a second unrelated adult is to provide a second adult who is not in a position to be intimidated by the first.

A secondary rationale for the Group of Three Rule is to prevent false allegations of abuse. A child or youth seeking revenge for discipline, or perhaps simply seeking attention could accuse an adult or another participant of abuse. With no witness, it is one person's word against another's.

Implications: Counseling situations should be managed in a manner that provides privacy of conversation but, if at all possible, visual contact with others. An office with a window into other populated office areas is one option; sitting in an outside area at the edge of a field or building where you may be seen but not heard is another option. At the very least, a door should be left ajar where a yell or struggle could be heard by others. The wise leader will ask another person to stay in visual range to ensure the safety of all involved. Churches should take these issues into account when planning new buildings.

At camps or youth events, when restroom buildings are separate from cabins, plans should be made for two persons to accompany any trips to the restrooms. Having separate shower times for youth and adults is advisable, with an adult available outside the restroom door to hear any disturbance. Camp and event nurses are in vulnerable positions when a participant needs to remain at the nurse's station. They should strategize with other volunteers to have a second person nearby when individual campers are in the nurse's station. Volunteers and staff need to be alert to their situation at all times so that they're not inadvertently left alone with a participant. Child on child abuse is also possible, so again, participants should be in groups of at least three at all times.

Youth leaders, teachers and clergy should be careful not to be in a vehicle alone with a youth. Any volunteers transporting youth should arrange their trips so that the first they pick up and the last they drop off are two youth rather than one. At meetings, plans should be made to prevent one youth from being alone with an adult as parents are picking up or dropping off youth. If it is impossible for a second adult to be present, perhaps another youth and their ride can wait until the last arrives. If this is not possible, the adult should invite the youth to wait with them outside the building where they are at least visible to the public.

## **2. Background Checks**

Annual background checks should be performed on all staff and volunteers that have contact with children and youth at Conference Sponsored Meetings and Events. An unrelated Conference Staff Person should perform the background check on the person who performs the bulk of the checks. The minimum check is of the National Sex Offender Database, available at [www.nsopr.gov](http://www.nsopr.gov). Driver's license checks should be made of adults transporting children and youth on behalf of the Conference; this excludes parents driving their own children and youth to and from meetings or events. Staff and volunteers may be asked not to drive or volunteer with children's and youth events if undesirable results appear on these checks. National Criminal File checks should be performed annually on paid staff who work with children and youth. These checks may be performed at [www.screennow.com](http://www.screennow.com), through their affiliation with Church Mutual. Background check forms will be made available on the Conference website and will be mailed to all adult volunteers prior to meetings and events.

Rationale: Someone who has been convicted of a sexual offense against children, youth or adults has no place as a volunteer at church events. Further, we desire to not place our children and youth at undue risk by placing them in a vehicle with a driver with recent serious violations on their record. The very act of being asked for a background check may deter a potential abuser from volunteering, or from acting on their desires. Finally, we need to know that the staff that work with our children day in and day out are without a recent criminal background.

Implications: Additional staff time will be required to run checks on all volunteers and to maintain those records. A system will need to be set up to ensure that checks are performed annually and that problems are reviewed and resolved quickly.

Anyone convicted of child or sexual abuse will be denied the opportunity to work with our children and youth.

DUIs or other serious violations happening within the last decade would be cause to restrict someone from driving children and youth. Likewise, a pattern of multiple continued smaller violations would also be cause for restriction. Lesser issues will be at the discretion of the person performing the checks, in consultation with their superior. The seriousness of these issues could be a consideration in denying a person the opportunity to volunteer.

Privacy of information will need to be at the forefront of those performing the checks. Records should be kept in a secure location, and the person performing the checks will need to protect the confidentiality of those being checked.

## **3. Appropriate Age Difference Between Leaders and Participants**

Leaders of children and youth (teachers, camp counselors, youth workers) should be at least four years older than the participants that are under their immediate supervision.

Rationale: Leaders whose age is within four years of the participants may not exercise appropriate boundaries in their relationships with those in their care. They may not have developed the level of judgement needed to be placed in responsible situations with children and youth. Finally, they may not command the respect of those they are entrusted to supervise.

Implications: Conference leadership should work to provide younger volunteers the opportunity to volunteer in situations where this age difference can be maintained.

#### **4. Appropriate Age Range Among Participants**

Events should not be planned that include only youth and young adults as participants.

Rationale: While little developmental difference may be observed between a 17 year old and a 19 year old, there is in the United States a vast legal difference. An adult in an intimate relationship with a minor could be charged with child abuse or rape. There is a further discomfort in U.S. culture with high school youth building relationships with legal adults, even college students.

Implications: Recent high school graduates may desire to continue “reliving” their high school youth or camp experiences. The church may be called to help some of these young adults move on to new areas of involvement.

Young adult event participants—some of whom may be out of school and in professional positions—should not be expected to abide by the same rules and curfews as youth participants. It behooves us to honor these young adults by treating them as such. Avoiding events that create these situations will be to everyone's benefit.

Some meetings and events attended by youth such as Annual Conference will be multi-generational and among unscreened adults. Flexibility and intentionality will be required to enable the youth to participate fully in these events while maintaining safe boundaries for their time at the event.

#### **5. Appropriate Written and Electronic Communication Between Youth and Adults**

Written and electronic communications between adults and children and youth should be as open and public as possible. Persons wishing to post information on the internet may do so only with permission of the sponsoring organization.

Rationale: Private conversation between a youth and adult, whether written, texted, e-mailed, phoned, or otherwise sent could signify or be construed as an inappropriate relationship between the adult and the young person. Staff and volunteers may take appropriate photographs and movies of children and youth, but do not have legal authority to post those on-line. Finally, webpages, blogs, social networking sites, etc about the camp or event that are not maintained by the sponsoring organization are beyond the Church's control and could confer false information.

Implications: Adults needing to communicate by phone with children or youth about a meeting or similar issue should try to talk to the parents or guardians either at the beginning or end of the phone call; likewise, they should copy electronic communications such as e-mails to the parents. A good strategy is to include several issues in a single message, and copy both youth and adults on the message. Adults should avoid private communication with individual children and youth where they can't be observed by others (see counseling suggestions in group of three rule).

Conference permission forms request permission to use photos of the participants in printed and electronic materials. This does not confer permission to individuals to post pictures on their own websites, myspace pages, etc. Persons that set up pages about camps or events, while usually well meaning, have posted information that is beyond the control of the sponsoring organization. These postings may or may not represent the organization in the best light. Participants, volunteers and staff should covenant to not post information about the camp or event on-line without the express permission of the sponsoring organization.

Volunteers and staff should be aware of what their own “web presence” is. Were an on-line search for their name done by a child or youth, would anything—photo or written word—come up that they

would be embarrassed to have a young person see? Are there links from pages they operate that lead to material that is inappropriate for children and youth? Again, we can ask volunteers and staff to covenant to maintain an appropriate web presence.

## **6. Reporting Suspected or Known Child Abuse or Neglect**

We are both morally and legally responsible to report actions that surround suspected or known child abuse.

When we suspect that a child or youth in our care has been subjected to abuse or neglect in their home, we should notify Children's Services. In Arizona, report suspected abuse 24 hours a day at 1-888-SOS-CHILD (1-888-767-2445). In Nevada, report suspected abuse 24 hours a day at 1-702-399-0081.

When it is alleged that a child or youth in our care has been subjected to abuse by someone in the church or Conference event setting, three contacts should be made immediately. The first is local law enforcement authorities; the second is the Superintendent of the district that the incident occurred in; and the third is the Conference Communications Director, who will activate the Conference Crisis Communications Team.

Rationale: Our fundamental goal is the protection and well being of the children and youth in our care. Abuse or neglect cannot remain a secret, nor can it be tolerated—if it is, then we are helping to perpetuate it in this and possibly other children or youth. We are not to be concerned about “our getting someone else in trouble”. We are not responsible for the actions of others outside of our realm of supervision. We are however responsible both morally and legally to promptly report actions that surround suspected child abuse.

Implications: Staff and volunteers will need to be trained and resourced in recognizing and reporting signs of suspected child abuse and neglect. Health and registration forms used at camps and other Conference events will provide helpful information to state agencies or law enforcement. Once reported, trained professionals from state agencies or law enforcement will conduct interviews to determine if abuse actually has or has not occurred, and will determine further steps to be taken.

A person making a good-faith report cannot be sued for doing so, and their identity will be kept confidential by those receiving the report. Likewise, we will need a system of recordkeeping and covenants to maintain confidentiality of all parties involved.

If abuse has occurred while a child or youth is in our care, providing the Superintendent and Director of Communications with notification—along with local law enforcement authorities—will ensure appropriate communications among church officials and between church officials and media representatives.