

Children and Youth Protection Policy

Hope Presbyterian Church, Austin TX

Revised September 2023

Rationale

A Vision for Children and the Church Adopted by the 205th General Assembly, 1993.

Because we affirm that all children are a gift of God, created by God and created good;

all children are a gift to the whole of the human community;

all children have a real faith, and gifts for ministry;

all children have the right to be children;

and all children are not just tomorrow, they are today.

Because we believe that all children depend upon adults for safety and security in a world that does not always value children;

all children are affected first and most deeply by those things that work against health and wholeness;

where there is disease, children sicken and die;

where there is homelessness, children sleep on the streets and in other dangerous places;

where there is war, children are frightened and without a safe place;

where their air and water are polluted, children feel the effect in their bodies and in their futures;

where there is shame, children's spirits are wounded.

Therefore we hope for a world where all children can find a safe place;

where all ages, races, genders, creeds, and abilities are recognized, valued, and celebrated;

where all adults hear the voices of children and speak with as well as for them;

where all children have "first call" on the world's resources and first place in the minds and hearts of the world's adults.

Because Jesus welcomed children and encouraged us to welcome them in his name;

Jesus lifted up a child as an example of what the realm of God is like;

Therefore, we hope for a church where we take seriously our baptismal vow to nurture all children committed to our care;

where we bring good news to all those places where children are in need;

where adults and children alike share in ministry.

We covenant to act so that this vision may be made real for all children,

now and in times to come

Definitions and Persons Covered

For purposes of this policy, the term “**minor**” includes all persons under the age of eighteen (18) years. The term “**child**” generally applies to minors from birth until 5th grade. The term “**youth**” generally applies to minors in grades 6-12. The term “**worker**” includes both paid (“staff” and “employee”) and unpaid persons (“volunteer”) who work with minors in any capacity including but not limited to overnight activities, counseling, or one-on-one interaction. The term “**child abuse**” is any intentional action (or lack of action) that endangers or harms a minor’s physical, psychological or emotional health and development.

Persons covered in this policy include:

1. All children and youth participating in HPC programming
2. All staff, full-time and part-time leading HPC programming
3. Volunteers for children and youth programming

Policy Purpose

Hope Presbyterian Church (HPC) is committed to providing a church environment that is a safe place for children and youth and that will protect them from any abuse when they are involved in church-related activities. HPC adopts these policies and procedures not only to maximize safety and prevent child abuse from occurring within its church community, but also to guide and protect volunteer and staff workers from unwarranted allegations of child abuse.

To expand on the definition above, child abuse is act committed by a parent, caregiver, or person in a position of trust which is not accidental and which harms or threatens harm to a child’s physical or mental health or welfare. Types of abuse may include physical abuse, including physical injury or threat of injury; physical neglect, such as failure to provide necessary care to a child; sexual abuse; mental abuse or neglect; emotional abuse; and spiritual abuse. Child abuse includes, but is not limited to:

1. **Neglect** – Intentionally failing to provide for the basic needs of a minor is a form of abuse. Denial of food, water, cleanliness, clothing, medical care, and sleep are not appropriate means of discipline.
2. **Physical Abuse** – Any physical force applied by an adult or older youth in a position of care or authority to a child, youth, or vulnerable adult. Physical force (hitting, spanking, shaking, shoving, etc.) is not to be used by adults in our programs.
3. **Sexual Abuse** – Any sexual contact or sexual interaction between a child (under the age of eighteen years) and an adult; any use of a child for the sexual stimulation of an adult, a third person, or the child; any risqué jokes, innuendo, unacceptable visual contact, unwelcome casual touch, unwelcome and inappropriate hugs and kisses, and sexually suggestive pictures between an adult and a child, as deemed inappropriate by any reasonable adult. Even if a child, youth, or vulnerable adult, out of ignorance, innocence, or fear does not resist, it is still abuse. Unemancipated persons under the age of 18 years old, vulnerable adults, or those under the influence of drugs or alcohol are unable to give consent.
4. **Emotional Abuse** – Inappropriately belittling, hateful, or angry words and/or actions directed toward a child, youth, or vulnerable adult. Discipline by humiliation or shame is also emotional abuse.

5. **Spiritual Abuse** – Using religious references, emotional manipulation, shame, or extreme guilt to motivate a child into a particular action, behavior, or belief.

The provisions of this Policy shall be reviewed periodically by the HPC Personnel Commission on behalf of the HPC Session. The Personnel Commission shall seek the advisement of the Christian Education Commission as needed and shall recommend any changes to the Session for approval.

Policy Guidelines

1. Eligibility

HPC staff and volunteers designated to have a leadership responsibility for children or youth must be 18 years of age. Volunteers must be members of HPC, or have regularly attended HPC, for six months before working with youth or children (this six-month requirement does not apply to paid staff or volunteers involved in activities in which their own children are present). The Christian Education Commission or its designee shall have the authority to waive eligibility requirements where appropriate. Teenagers over the age of 14 years old may volunteer to provide care for children in a supervised capacity. At least one adult must be present at all times when a teenager is serving as a volunteer.

2. Disqualifications

Candidates for employment or volunteer service who have a past conviction of or pending proceeding addressing an allegation of child abuse or neglect cannot work or volunteer with children and youth at HPC. In addition, candidates who have any past felony conviction, or any misdemeanor conviction related to domestic abuse, family violence, or child abuse, cannot work or volunteer with children and youth at HPC. If an applicant or potential volunteer disputes information that appears in their background check, they may appeal through the Texas Department of Public Safety.

3. Employee and Volunteer Screening

Employees – Applicants for full-time or part-time paid employment at HPC will be required to provide, complete or undergo the following:

- a. A specific statement that the individual meets the requirements in the eligibility and disqualifications statements as mentioned above.
- b. A specific statement acknowledging receipt and understanding of this policy as well as a commitment to compliance with its terms.
- c. A reference check covering, where possible, the two immediate past employers, and/or personal references unrelated to the applicant if no information can be obtained from past employers.
- d. Prior to hiring an applicant, HPC will obtain a background check and national sex offender registry search for that individual, to be valid for a period of three years, at which time the checks will be repeated. Each employee shall be required to execute any documents requested for such purpose. Any individual who has lived outside Texas in the last five years may be subject to additional checks.
- e. Each new employee will be provided orientation and training on child abuse, including its recognition and prevention, to be valid for a period of three years, at which time the orientation and training shall be repeated.

Volunteers – Volunteers working with youth or children of the church in any volunteer ministry, will be required to provide, complete or undergo the following:

- a. A specific statement that the individual meets the requirements in the eligibility and disqualifications statements as mentioned above.
- b. A specific statement acknowledging receipt and understanding of this policy as well as a commitment to compliance with its terms.
- c. Prior to authorizing volunteer service, HPC will obtain a background check and national sex offender registry search for that individual, to be valid for a period of three years, at which time the checks will be repeated. Each volunteer shall be required to execute any documents requested for such purpose. Any individual who has lived outside Texas in the last five years may be subject to additional checks.
- d. Each new volunteer will be provided orientation and training on child abuse, including its recognition and prevention, to be valid for a period of three years, at which time the orientation and training shall be repeated. HPC Children and Youth Protection Training opportunities shall be offered annually.

General Policies

1. Supervision

While supervising children and youth participating in HPC programs, staff and volunteers should know where participants are at all times.

- a. Whenever possible, any adult who is present in a church sponsored activity for children or youth should be accompanied by another adult. HPC employees and volunteers should not, during an HPC program, be alone with a single child where they cannot be observed by others.
- b. To avoid situations where an individual is alone in a room with children, all children's and youth activities should be supervised by at least two adult leaders. Whenever possible, these adults should be unrelated. The presence of two adult leaders is to protect children and youth against situations in which abuse might occur, and to protect leaders against false allegations of abuse or neglect. It is also acceptable to have one adult leader with two, preferably unrelated, children or youth. This principle of supervision is commonly referred to in training as the "Rule of Three."
- c. Classrooms, childcare rooms, and any area in which programs for children or youth are taking place may be visited without prior notice by church staff, parents, or other volunteer church workers. Except in cases of a security emergency or lockdown, no windows may ever be totally blocked preventing visual observation into the classroom.
- d. In the event two leaders cannot be present in the room, such that one leader is alone in a room with one or more children or youth, a door or half-door from the room must be left open. The leader should not position himself or herself in the room such that other adults passing in the hallway cannot see him or her.
- e. Furthermore, at any counseling session with children or youth, the door or half-door of the room used must remain open for the entire session. The session should be conducted at a time when others are nearby, even if they are not within listening distance.

- f. Each classroom for children and youth should ideally have a door with an observation window or a half-door, such that the upper half may be kept open. If it does not, and two leaders are not present in the room, then the door must remain open at all times.
- g. In the event an unavoidable one-on-one child/youth to adult scenario arises – i.e. unexpected transportation needs – parental permission shall be obtained whenever possible, and the staff or volunteer shall report the occurrence immediately to another HPC employee or adult volunteer. Abuse thrives in secrecy and cultivating a culture of transparent accountability and communication benefits all parties.

2. Ratios

The required adult to child/youth ratio for chaperones for any ministry with children or youth shall be 1:6. Gender balance shall be preferred in all arenas and required in the case of offsite and/or overnight events. Any ministry program, event, or activity may be cancelled or postponed in the event the required ratio or gender balance cannot be secured.

3. Restrooms

Whenever possible, staff and volunteers will make sure any restroom used is unoccupied before allowing children and youth to enter the restroom. Whenever possible, children will be sent in pairs and with an employee or volunteer, and the employee or volunteer will stand in the doorway of the restroom while children are using the restroom. Employees and volunteers shall strongly encourage parents to take children to the restroom whenever possible. Every effort will be made to ensure a gender-neutral restroom is available and reasonably proximate at all events. In the event a gender-neutral restroom is unavailable, gendered restrooms may be designated as single-occupant use. All minors and adults will change clothing in private restroom stalls.

4. Medical

Each child, youth, adult volunteer, and staff must submit a completed medical/insurance form. Each minor's forms must have a parent or guardian's signature. Whenever possible, all activities with children and youth shall have a staff or volunteer with current-certification first aid/CPR training. First Aid supplies shall be available, and all volunteers will be informed of their location and shall have access to information concerning specific medical conditions and concerns of participants. A written report shall be completed in the case of any accident, medical emergency or injury. See the Offsite Policies: Medical section below for further guidance.

5. Nursery

Specific policies for staff and operation of the HPC nursery are available in the **HPC Nursery Childcare Policies**.

Offsite Policies

1. **Parental/Guardian Consent** - Children and youth must obtain parental or guardian permission for involvement in church sponsored activities or programs that involve travel away from the church's physical facilities.
2. **Travel Arrangements** – Travel arrangements for off-campus events shall be coordinated through the church.

3. **Driver Eligibility** – All drivers must provide a valid driver’s license and must be free of any DWI or DUI convictions during the previous ten years.
4. **Driving Behavior** – The above supervision policies apply during vehicle travel unless parental permission is obtained prior to the trip. When several vehicles are taken for an event, if two adults are not available for every vehicle, vehicles must keep in sight at regular intervals. Seat belts shall always be worn by all passengers.
5. **Rooming** - Except in cases of bunkhouse-style group housing, adults should not share rooms with children or youth, unless all parties in the room are related (parent/child), or unless written permission has been granted prior to the event by a parent or guardian. Whenever possible, adults’ rooms shall be next to children or youth rooms and children or youth rooms may be checked at any time of day. Children and youth shall not share beds with anyone who is not a parent, guardian, or family member. Every effort will be made to provide gender-neutral rooming and changing facilities when requested. Adults and minors will be expected to change clothing in private restroom stalls. Adults and minors are not permitted to be nude in the presence of other persons.
6. **Medical** - Group leaders should have a copy of all medical forms for overnight or off-site events. These forms will be kept on the event site for the duration of the event. In the event that a minor is injured during an HPC event or activity, the following steps should be followed:
 - For minor injuries, scrapes, and bruises, workers will provide first aid (Band-Aids, etc.) as appropriate and will notify the minor’s parent or guardian of the injury at the time the minor is picked up from our care. A parent should be consulted to receive consent prior to the administration of any over-the-counter medications to a minor.
 - For injuries requiring medical treatment beyond simple first aid, or in the event an HPC worker administers any emergency medication (Epi-Pen, etc.), the parent and/or guardian will immediately be contacted in addition to the event leadership. If warranted by circumstances, an ambulance will be called.
 - Once the minor has received appropriate medical attention, an incident report will be completed in the case of injuries requiring treatment by a medical professional. The incident report will be turned into the Personnel Commission or their designee and kept on file for a minimum period of three years.

Electronic & Social Media Policies

1. **Initiating Contact** – No adult covered by this policy shall initiate a relationship with HPC children or youth via social media or electronic communication. Staff and volunteers may, at their discretion, accept invitations – “friend requests” or similar – from HPC children and youth, for the purposes of effective and faithful ministry in compliance with the terms and spirit of this policy.
2. **Full Records** – No adult covered by this policy shall communicate electronically with any HPC children or youth via any technology that does not maintain full and accessible records of all communication. Full records shall be kept of every communication between adults covered by this policy and any HPC children or youth. Any adult covered by this policy who chooses to communicate electronically with any HPC children or youth shall accept that, in the event of a concern about violations of this policy, requests for full records of the communication in question may be made and comprehensive access must be provided. HPC adult volunteers

or staff will always have the option to opt out of electronic and social media communication with minors.

3. **Groups** – Private social media groups, e.g. the official HPC Facebook groups or group text message threads, shall fully comply with the supervision procedures outline above: namely, that each group should include the presence of at least two active HPC staff or volunteers with children and youth, each of which shall maintain all relevant administrative and moderation privileges.
4. **Content Expectations** – Any adult covered by this policy who engages in an online relationship with HPC children or youth shall use all applicable privacy settings to shield children or youth from any age-inappropriate content that may exist within the adult’s social media profile or presence. HPC staff and volunteers managing social media groups involving children or youth shall also take every possible measure to remove inappropriate content from the group’s online forums, feeds, or threads.
5. **Ending Contact** – Former HPC employees or former HPC volunteers with children and youth shall not be eligible for administrative privileges on electronic platforms or for account access in any way that would allow them to communicate on behalf of HPC or its programs.

Prohibited Acts

The following acts are prohibited and will not be tolerated during any in-person or online HPC activity or program. Any observations or personal knowledge of such violations must be reported using the procedures outlined in the section on **Reporting** below.

1. Any display or demonstration of sexual activity, abuse, insinuation of abuse, or evidence of abusive conduct toward a child or youth;
2. Sexual advances or sexual activity of any kind between any adult and a child or youth;
3. Infliction of physically abusive behavior or bodily injury to a child or youth;
4. Physical neglect of a child, children or youth, including failure to provide adequate supervision in relation to activities of HPC. (*Adequate supervision means the type of supervision a reasonable person would provide in the same or similar situation*).
5. Any physical touch in ways that make children or youth feel uncomfortable or disregards their right to decline touch.
6. Discipline of children by use of physical punishment, or by failing to provide the necessities of care. Physical restraint is to be used only in situations necessary to protect the child, other children, or staff from harm.
7. Causing mental or emotional injury to a child, children or youth.
8. Profanity, inappropriate jokes and media, sharing intimate details of one’s personal life, and any kind of harassment in the presence of children, youth, or parents.
9. Possessing obscene or pornographic materials while at a HPC activity for children or youth.
10. Possessing, consuming, or being under the influence of any illegal drugs or alcohol while at a HPC activity for children or youth.
11. Possessing or using concealed weapons or firearms while at a HPC activity for children or youth.
12. Smoking or use of tobacco while at a HPC activity for children or youth.

13. Dressing inappropriately while at a HPC activity for children or youth. Inappropriate dress refers to articles of clothing that are deemed unsafe or unfitting for the activity or setting, or that violate any of the above prohibited acts.
14. The release of children or youth to anyone other than the parent, authorized guardian, or other individual authorized by the parent or guardian.

Consequences

Reporting

1. **Reporting to Civil Authorities** – Any individual governed by this policy who observes or becomes aware of any alleged or potential incidents of criminal child abuse must, in accordance with Section 261.101 of the Texas Family Code, report the matter to law enforcement or to the Department of Family and Protective Services. In addition, G-4.0302 of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order stipulates that any ordained officer of the church or certified Christian educator employed by the church must report to civil authorities even with reasonable belief about future harm or abuse.
2. **Reporting to Church Leadership** – Any individual governed by this policy who observes or becomes aware of any alleged or potential violation of this policy must, as soon as possible, report the matter to *two of the following*: a) any member of the pastoral staff; b) the Clerk of Session; c) the Chair of the Personnel Commission; d) the Chair of the Christian Education Commission, each of whom shall, as soon as possible, report the matter to the Senior Pastor and the Personnel Commission. In the event the report concerns the Senior Pastor and/or a member of the Personnel Commission, the individual governed by this policy may contact the Stated Clerk of Mission Presbytery.
3. **Investigation** – Upon receipt of any report of alleged or potential violation of this policy, the Senior Pastor and Personnel Commission shall ensure that an appropriate investigation is commenced, that the investigation complies with all relevant Texas laws, and full cooperation is afforded to law enforcement.
4. **Confidentiality** – All HPC investigations shall be conducted in as confidential a manner as is compatible with a thorough investigation of the report or allegation.
5. **Parental Notification** – If an incident has occurred on church property or during a church-sponsored event, the parents of any minor involved in any allegation of abuse shall be immediately notified.
6. **Potential Responses** – Upon any report of potential or alleged child abuse by an employee or volunteer of HPC, any individual accused of such conduct may be temporarily relieved of any duties involving youth or children pending an appropriate investigation.

Additional Considerations

Outside Groups

Given the nature of the outside groups that use HPC facilities, HPC will not perform background checks, seek personal and professional references, review employment records, or obtain civil and criminal records for such groups.

Self-Harm

In the event a minor informs an adult worker of suicidal ideation or the immanent intent to commit self-harm, the adult worker shall immediately:

- Ensure the safety and adult supervision of the child.
- Call 911 and stay with the child until help arrives. Emergency mental health resource officers may be appropriate if the circumstances warrant law enforcement assistance.
- Once help arrives, notify the parent or guardian of the minor. A member of the pastoral staff should also be notified as expediently as possible.
- An incident report will be completed by the reporting individual and kept on file by the Personnel Commission or their designee for a minimum period of three years.

Adult staff and volunteers should be aware of and trained to recognize behavioral changes and patterns that might suggest suicidal ideation or self-harming behaviors in a minor. Adult workers are encouraged to respond to any minor-disclosed information about suicidal curiosity or ideation or self-harming behaviors as being kept “private” by the adult, but not kept “secret” or “confidential”. Adult workers should refer any concerns regarding the mental or behavioral health of a minor the minor’s parent or guardian as soon as possible, as well as to another adult HPC staff or volunteer in the event the concern arises on an offsite event. Adult workers should also maintain an environment that minimizes opportunity for self-harming behaviors, including limiting or supervising access to prescription and/or over-the-counter medication, weapons or cutting utensils of any kind, pointed objects like pin-back buttons, or materials that could be used to asphyxiate (plastic bags, rope, etc). Jokes concerning suicide or self-harm are considered inappropriate are prohibited in the presence of minors.

Bullying

HPC staff and volunteers shall monitor all programs for children and youth for signs of bullying or peer-on-peer abuse. Bullying and peer-on-peer abuse shall not be tolerated at HPC activities for children and youth. Staff and volunteers shall make every effort to address and correct such behavior with the child or youth, and with the parents of the child or youth if necessary, as soon as possible.

Such behavior can take many forms:

1. **Verbal** – Name-calling, taunting, shaming, or other similar behavior, as well as verballing encouraging a peer to engage in self-harming or suicidal behaviors. Verbal abuse may also take the form of language meant to belittle or exclude along the lines of race, gender, nationality, age, ability, sexual orientation, intellect, culture, neurodivergence, or body type.
2. **Social** – Spreading rumors; destroying or manipulating friendships; excluding or ostracizing others.
3. **Physical** – Hitting, shoving, kicking, using physical coercion, intimidation through gestures.
4. **Criminal** – Assault, sexual aggression or violence, stalking, trespassing, theft.
5. **Cyberbullying** – Using digital technology such as social media, chat, cell phones, etc., to engage in any of the above.

