

Abuse Prevention Policy

The top priority of First Presbyterian Church for all children¹, youth², adults and vulnerable adults³, whether our own members, regular attendees, or guests, is *safety*. As “everyone is a child of God and deserves to be treated that way”, this emphasis on safety is right and appropriate. All people deserve to learn about God and to come to know God in ways that are safe to them as a whole and complete person. Not only that, but so too do the wonderful staff and volunteers who serve us all deserve to be safe as they strive in their work to be above reproach in all of their activities.

Section I: Children and Youth

All people who work with children and youth, regardless of their area of ministry, shall adhere to the following policies. Failure to do so may result in dismissal from your ministry position.

1. Abuse⁴ of any kind towards children, youth or workers is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated.
2. Worker approval and identification. All workers must:
 - a. Give their consent for First Presbyterian Church to conduct a background check and further, to keep said background check on file in the church office.
 - b. Report people wandering around, or suspicious activity to the person in charge of the activity that you are volunteering for.
3. Restroom procedures:
 - a. Workers may never be in a restroom alone with a child with the door closed.
 - b. Diapers are only to be changed in the presence of other workers.
 - c. Children should have as much privacy as possible. Enter a bathroom only when absolutely necessary to assist the child. Keep the door open.
 - d. For children in grades 1 - 5:
 - i. Send children to the restroom one at a time. Have one adult accompany the child as far as able while maintaining line of sight both the bathroom and the classroom at the same time.

¹ A child is any person aged 0 - 12 years.

² A youth is any person aged 13 - 17 years.

³ A vulnerable adult is any person aged 18 or over who “has a substantial mental or functional impairment or for whom a guardian or conservator has been appointed under the Nebraska Probate Code”. - *Nebraska Revised Statute 28-371*

⁴ According to both the WHO (World Health Organization) and the Child Welfare Department of the United States Federal Government, abuse can take many forms. Physical abuse (hitting, beating, shaking), sexual abuse (sexual contact or exposure to sexual acts or materials), emotional or psychological abuse (threatening, insulting, ridiculing, confining) or neglect. For more information, start your research here with the WHO (http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/child/Child_maltreatment_infographic_EN.pdf?ua=1), or here with childwelfare.gov (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/define.pdf>)

- e. For children Kindergarten and younger:
 - i. Open the bathroom door and let the child in.
 - ii. Kick down the door stop so that the bathroom door is propped slightly open (this ensures that you can hear what is going on and know when the child is finished).
 - iii. Stand outside the bathroom door, in view of the classroom if possible.
 - iv. If the child needs help, enter the bathroom, with the door propped open.
 - v. Siblings may go in the bathroom together at the worker's discretion.
 - f. Youth grades 6 - 12 shall be released to use the restroom one person at a time. One worker should do his/her very best to maintain line of sight both with classroom and the student using the restroom. Though no youth should ever be accompanied to the restroom by a worker, line of sight should be maintained if at all possible.
4. Classroom procedures:
- a. Physical contact with children and youth should be minimal and only in the presence of other adults. Appropriate touching should be limited handshakes, "high fives," brief "side" hugs or a brief touch on the shoulder.
 - b. At least two workers shall be present at all times. No child or youth should be alone with a worker. If a child or youth arrives before other members of your team arrive, prop the door open or move to a more open, publicly visible location.
 - c. Window blinds are to be kept open at all times unless it is necessary to darken the room for proper showing of videos or projected audio visual equipment.
 - d. Lap sitting is not appropriate for any children Kindergarten or older. Workers may not have preschool children sit on their lap while the room is darkened or when other workers are not present.
5. Approved Activities
- a. Activities or outings outside of regularly scheduled church activities must be pre-approved by the pastor.
 - b. Workers are never to pick up a child or youth from home or anywhere else, nor are they to take a child or youth home or anywhere else without another adult accompanying them. Such transportation should also take place with children, youth and adults of the same gender. Child and youth pick up/drop off may also occur if the third item of the *Parent Release Form* is completed and signed by a parent or legal guardian and the worker transporting the student is carrying a copy of said release form on their person during transport.
6. Mandated Reporting
- a. As an organization working regularly with children and youth, pursuant to Nebraska State Law, Chapter 28, Section 711, First Presbyterian Church workers

shall report suspected abuse via the Child Abuse/Neglect Hotline at 1-800-652-1999.

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Section II: Vulnerable Adults

1. Abuse⁵ of any kind towards vulnerable adults is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated.
2. Further defined:
 - a. Any adult at or older than the age designated as an elder by applicable state law;
 - b. Any adult who is infirm or diminished in capacity due to age, illness, or disability;
 - c. Any adult who is ministered to in their home
 - d. Any adult who is wholly or partially dependent upon one or more other persons for emotional, psychological, or physical care or support, such dependency may be temporary as in the case of an accident, illness, or birth of a child; and
 - e. Any adult who by virtue of a crisis, experiences vulnerability leading to dependency on another or lacks agency in a pastoral relationship as in the wake of the death of a family member or job loss.
3. To create a safe space, it is necessary to anticipate and avoid circumstances that could result in exposure of vulnerable adults to undue influence or exploitation. On-site and off-site settings for ministry with vulnerable adults and pastoral relationships and conversations should:
 - a. Be in places where casual monitoring by others is convenient; and
 - b. Convey safety and comfort.
4. Behavioral Standards for Ministry with Vulnerable Adults - All who work with vulnerable adults are expected to model the patterns of healthy relationships. To this end, lay, and ordained ministers working with vulnerable adults shall:
 - a. Take care not to unduly influence a person to whom they minister;
 - b. Accept only token gifts from those to whom they minister.
 - c. Decline to accept loans of any kind from those to whom they minister;
 - d. Decline to agree to be named as a beneficiary or to act as an administrator or executor in a will of anyone to whom they minister; and
 - e. Inform the pastor or Deacon Chairperson of anything that causes concern for the safety or well-being of those to whom they minister.

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5. The “Do’s” of Ministry to Vulnerable Adults
 - a. Have ongoing spiritual practices, which might include daily prayer, regular participation in corporate worship, and Bible study;
 - b. Spend time with and listen to vulnerable adults, and advocate for their ministry within the Body of Christ;
 - c. Offer appropriate physical expressions of affection, as long as they are welcomed by the recipient. These may include:
 - i. brief hugs;
 - ii. pats on the shoulder or back;
 - iii. handshakes;
 - iv. holding hands during prayer; and
 - d. Maintain healthy boundaries when sharing personal information.
6. The “Don’ts” of Ministry to Vulnerable Adults
 - a. Provide vulnerable adults with alcohol, marijuana, illegal drugs, cigarettes, e-cigarettes, vapes, or pornography;
 - b. Arrive under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs, or misuse of legal drugs when they are responsible for, or ministering to, a vulnerable adult;
 - c. Consume alcohol or illegal drugs or misuse legal drugs when they are responsible for, or ministering to, a vulnerable adult;
 - d. Engage in illegal behavior or permit others to engage in illegal behavior; or
 - e. Engage in any sexual, romantic, illicit, or secretive relationship or conduct with any vulnerable adult.
7. Visits to Private Residences - The safety of all persons and healthy boundaries are essential when visiting a vulnerable adult in a private home.
 - a. Avoid situations that might compromise privacy; common examples include:
 - i. Visiting behind closed bedroom doors;
 - ii. Sitting on the bed of the person being visited; or
 - iii. Visiting a person while they are not fully clothed.
 - b. The best practice is to visit in teams of two or more. If it is not possible for another adult minister to be present, a member of the vulnerable adult’s household should be present. If neither is possible, documentation of the time, duration of visit, general matters discussed, and any pastoral concerns shall be provided to the Pastor or the Deacon Chairperson as soon as possible after the visit.
8. Visits to Residential Facilities - The safety of all persons and healthy boundaries are also essential when visiting a vulnerable adult in a Residential Facility. Best practices include
 - a. Facility staff should be informed of the visitor’s presence;
 - b. If a visit takes place out of sight of staff, they should be notified in advance and informed when such meeting is concluded;
 - c. The door to a resident’s private room must remain open during visits;

- d. Visitors should be mindful that LGBTQ+ residents may not be safe to express their sexual identity or orientation, as staff members may not yet have been trained; and
 - e. In the event of uncertainty about application of this policy, the visitor is encouraged to contact their Pastor with the relevant queries.
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Section III: Spiritual Abuse

“The wound of spiritual abuse is the inability to access and appreciate the Self.”⁶

Spiritual abuse of any kind towards any person is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated.

Warning signs of spiritual abuse include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Ridiculing or insulting one's religious or spiritual beliefs
2. Preventing one from practicing one's religious or spiritual beliefs
3. Using one's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate or shame someone else
4. Forcing the children to be raised in a faith that the other partner has not agreed to
5. Using religious texts or beliefs to minimize or rationalize abusive behaviors (such as physical, financial, emotional or sexual abuse/marital rape)

Though the American Psychological Association has yet to officially recognize spiritual abuse as a form of abuse, other public interest groups and licensed, private practitioners⁷ have already begun to identify, treat and help people with recovery from trauma related to spiritual abuse. This includes the National Domestic Violence Hotline⁸, hereafter referred to as the NDVH.

The NDVH states that “most examples of spiritual abuse refer to a church elder or faith leader inflicting abuse on congregation members, often by creating a toxic culture within the church or group by shaming or controlling members using the power of their position”.

While public interest groups are still identifying spiritual abuse, they are actively working towards prevention and plans of action if spiritual abuse is suspected. If spiritual abuse is suspected the following steps shall be followed:

1. reaching out to a trusted member of your spiritual/religious community for support
2. exploring options for practicing your faith/religion in a safe way
3. creating an emotional safety plan

Original policy approved and adopted as “*Child and Youth Abuse Prevention Policy*” by
Session, September 5, 2018

⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/traversing-the-inner-terrain/201604/therapy-and-spiritual-abuse>

⁷ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/traversing-the-inner-terrain/201905/when-is-it-spiritual-abuse>

⁸ <https://www.thehotline.org/2015/11/12/what-is-spiritual-abuse/>