

Safety Policy for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kern County

Preventing and Reporting Child Abuse and Other Inappropriate Conduct Directed Toward Children

The purpose of involving children in our church is to enrich their lives by introducing them to religious ideas and principles, and to the idea of church as community. While it is uncommon in church programs, child abuse is a possibility. We can take positive steps to reduce the likelihood of child abuse occurring, and we can be prepared to respond to incidents or allegations concerning child abuse. Toward this end, the Religious Education Committee has developed and adopted this policy, with the approval of the Board of Trustees.

Underlying Principles For This Policy

Unitarian Universalists have a covenant with one another, a voluntary and unconditional agreement, to act in ways that express the values of our Unitarian Universalist Principles.

We, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kern County, believe that our commitment is:

- to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- to justice and compassion in human relations, spiritual growth, and the use of the democratic process within our congregations;
- to create a safe environment that protects children and adults from harm, and promotes their spiritual growth.

By adopting this policy, we accept the responsibility to educate ourselves about child abuse, and to take the steps that are necessary to assure this policy's successful implementation. All personal information on volunteer teachers, and all background checks, will be kept confidential.

The members of the Religious Education Committee take responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of the children and young people of this congregation through the implementation of this Safety Policy. Therefore, the names and phone numbers of committee members will be conspicuously posted and available to all members and friends of the congregation.

**Code of Ethics
for All Who Work with
Children and Youth**

Adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1986

All paid and volunteer staff whose duties and responsibilities are with the youth or children of the UUFKC will have read, understood and signed this Code of Ethics.

Adults and older youth who are in leadership roles are in a position of stewardship, and play a key role in fostering spiritual development of both individuals and the community. It is, therefore, especially important that those in leadership positions be well qualified to provide the special nurture, care and support that will enable children and youth to develop a positive sense of self and a spirit of independence and responsibility.

The relationship between young people and their leaders must be one of mutual respect, if this positive potential is to be realized. Among the most important areas of growth are those of self-worth, and the development of a healthy identity as a sexual being. Adults play a key role in assisting children and youth in these areas of growth. Wisdom dictates, and research shows, that children, youth and adults suffer damaging effects when children and youth leaders become sexually involved with young persons in their care.

Therefore, I will not engage in sexual, seductive or erotic behavior with children and youth. I will not sexually harass, or engage in any behavior with youth that constitutes verbal, emotional or physical abuse.

I will not be under the influence of illegal drugs, alcohol, or any other drug that would impair my judgment or ability to function effectively while in a leadership role with children or youth.

I have read and understand the above code of ethics for leaders of children and youth. I have read the rules and guidelines outlined in the Religious Education Safety Policy, and I am in agreement with their spirit and purpose.

Signed _____ Date _____

(a copy of the above statement will be kept on file)

Prevention Through Screening and Supervision of Adults Working with Children and Youth

All new Religious Education (RE) teachers and other adults working with children and youth, who apply for such position after the adoption of this policy:

- a) will have been a congregant for at least six months.
- b) will have completed a screening application approved by the Religious Education Committee before assuming their duties.
 - Screening includes being interviewed by the Director of Religious Education (DRE) and one member of the RE Committee, or the DRE and the minister.
- c) will be asked for two references that will be kept on file (one from previous church if applicable).
- d) will have read, understood and signed the “Code of Ethics”.

All current RE teachers and adults working with children and youths will be asked to voluntarily provide two references to be placed on file, and to sign the “Code of Ethics” found in the Safety Policy. All RE volunteers shall review this policy, as well as information on sexual abuse and prevention, every year.

Confidential criminal background checks may be conducted, at the discretion of the DRE and/or the RE Committee, for teachers and other adult volunteers working with the children and youth. All background check information will be given to, and kept on file by the DRE. Information may be shared with the Minister and the RE Committee, but will otherwise be kept confidential.

Individuals who have been convicted of, are under current indictment for, or self disclose any act of sexual misconduct involving a child, or of child abuse, are precluded from participation in the RE program, and from contact with other children or youth during church activities.

At least two adults should be present in the Activity Building when children are in classes on Sunday mornings, and on every outing that is church-related. Exceptions to this guideline require written permission from parents.

If it is determined by the RE Committee and the Board of Trustees that a potential volunteer should have restricted access to children, he or she shall be requested to sign and abide by a limited access agreement with the Board.

Building Safety

A first aid kit and fire extinguisher must be readily available in the Activity Building, and the RE Committee must conduct a Sunday morning fire drill annually. No guns or concealed weapons are allowed on church property except in the possession of an officer of the law.

Reporting and Response

Situations of suspected child abuse are seldom simple and straightforward. Religious leaders should be guided by a commitment to the overriding priority of protecting the children. They should also be sensitive to the harm that can be done by false or mistaken accusations.

Anyone who becomes aware of child sexual abuse charges made against an employee, volunteer, member, or attendee of the church, should notify at least one of the following: the minister; the DRE; the President of the Board.

If the DRE or the minister has a suspicion that a child has been abused, either while in the church program or at other times, then he or she shall report the incident to Child Protective Services. In California, mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect are, “Teachers...employed by any public or private school; supervisors of child welfare...Administrators and employees of private youth organizations...Administrators or employees of private organizations whose duties require direct contact and supervision of children...[and a] clergy member.

The phone number of Child Protective Services is 631-6011

Circumstances for reporting are, “When they have knowledge of or observe a child in their professional capacities or within the scope of their employment, whom they know or reasonably suspect has been the victim of child abuse.”

Reporting Within the Church

In addition, if any Religious Education teacher, youth advisor, or any member of the congregation, believes abuse has occurred to a child who attends the RE program or Youth Group events; or has concerns about inappropriate behavior by teachers, childcare workers, other adults or youth in the church community; that individual should report his or her concerns to:

- 1) The minister or the DRE
- 2) Any member of the Religious Education Committee.

When an allegation of child abuse occurring during a church program is reported, the responsible person receiving the allegation should take the necessary steps to:

- 1) Abide by California law on reporting child abuse;
- 2) Take appropriate action to assure protection of the children in the church, and;
- 3) Convene, as quickly as reasonably possible, a meeting of the RE Committee to discuss and carry out any necessary action to assure the safety of the children of this congregation.

Response Plan

The Response Team will consist of the Minister and the DRE, as long as they were not involved in the alleged abuse. The Response Team's purpose is to determine what action to take to protect children and members of the congregation. If the incident or allegation involves a staff person or a volunteer teacher, then that staff person or volunteer teacher will be temporarily suspended from any responsibilities with children or youth at the Fellowship.

The Response Team does not have the legal authority, or the expertise to determine guilt or innocence. It is designed instead to protect the members of the congregation, and to ensure that the victim and the accused are treated with dignity and respect.

The minister, President of the Board, or Director of Religious Education shall carefully document the handling of the incident, and report the incident immediately, as appropriate, to the child's parents, and the proper civil authorities.

The President of the Board of Trustees shall report to the full board in a closed meeting at the earliest appropriate time.

The President of the Board of Trustees, or a majority of Board members, shall designate the minister and the RE Committee to address the incident within the congregation. While civil authorities are investigating the reported incident, the RE Committee shall determine the appropriate actions to be taken regarding the accused (e.g. the accused may have restricted access to children, be requested to sign a limited access agreement with the Board, or may not be allowed to have any further contact with children).

The RE Committee should call on or make referrals to whatever professional resources they deem appropriate, both within the church and outside the church.

Decisions about whom to inform about the incident (parents, teachers, the board, the congregation, the child or children in question, the alleged perpetrator) and the information to be provided should be made in a careful, but timely manner by the RE Committee. The decision should be made based upon the individual situation (e.g., severity and credibility of allegation; does the threat to the safety of the children still exist).

The District Executive of the Pacific Southwest District shall be made aware of any action taken concerning a child-abuse incident, the nature of the issue, and whether a report was made to CPS.

Since these matters are sensitive, it is important that all persons involved, including the reporting person and the accused, maintain the level of confidentiality recommended by the RE Committee. All reports to the RE Committee will be considered confidential. In cases when the reporting person and/or child or youth victim has reason to fear retaliation or recrimination, the strict confidentiality of the reporting person and/or child or youth victim will be maintained at his or her request, except when the RE Committee determines that CPS must be informed.

Except when this request for strict confidentiality is made, a full disclosure of the details of the suspected abuse of concern will be made to the accused at the appropriate time.

The protection from false or mistaken allegations of adults who teach in the RE Program or otherwise interact with children at church is also an important goal of this policy. We should be sensitive to the disruption and damage a false accusation may cause to both the adults and the children involved. This is true even when the accusation is one due to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what seems a child's straight-forward report of an event.

If the RE Committee determines that an accusation has been made with malice, or for any other reason believes that a report has not been made in good faith, the confidentiality of the reporting person will not be protected, except in the case of a minor. The RE Committee may determine that a false accusation by a child or youth requires further consideration.