



CHILD PROTECTION POLICY & PROCEDURES

APRIL 2024

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OVERVIEW

At Houston Northwest Church (HNW) we are deeply committed to honoring Jesus in every aspect of our mission. Jesus places children in a special position of honor due to their simple and authentic faith.

At Houston Northwest Church, we are deeply committed to honoring Jesus in every aspect of our mission. Jesus places children in a special position of honor due to their simple and authentic faith. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus encourages us to model our faith after the children. "He called a little child to Him, and placed the child among them. And He said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'" (Matthew 18:2-5) For us to welcome children then is for us to welcome Jesus Himself.

Jesus also issues a stern warning for not protecting these especially vulnerable young souls. "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." (Matthew 18:6)

Sadly, children are not always protected. Some estimates state that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men were sexually abused before the age of eighteen. Sixty-seven percent of all sexual abuse reported by law enforcement in the United States is perpetrated against children. We at Houston Northwest Church believe Jesus would have us create an environment that prioritizes the safety and protection of children and also seeks to bring redemption and reconciliation in the lives of all survivors of abuse.

This policy and practices guide represents the desire of Houston Northwest Church leadership to carry out the directive of Jesus to both welcome and protect children. We consider all those under age 18 to be vulnerable to abuse, so while some protection practices might vary by age, the policies are considered applicable to all minors. Also, since all of us are responsible for protecting children, we will make every effort to help all those who attend Houston Northwest Church be made aware and educated on the topic and have a shared sense of responsibility for identifying potential high-risk situations or policy violations, and for reporting to appropriate staff or the investigative authorities as directed by the policy.

Our goal is to be a church that leads in our proactive efforts to welcome and protect those whom Jesus said we should welcome and protect. Thank you for engaging in this important Kingdom work.

DEFINITIONS

DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE

SEXUAL ABUSE Sexual abuse is defined as the sexual exploitation of a child by an older person through rape, incest, fondling of the genitals, exhibitionism, or pornography. It may be done for the sexual gratification of the older person, out of a need for power, or for economic reasons (such as prostitution, etc.).

Sexual abuse according to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) includes:

- Sexual indecency, sexual assault, or aggravated sexual assault.
- Failing to make a reasonable effort to prevent sexual conduct to a child.
- Using the child for the creation of obscene or pornographic material.

Sexual abuse includes “contact behavior” and “non-contact behavior”. In addition to exposure to pornography, voyeurism and exhibitionism; non-contact behavior can include sexual communication by an adult to a minor who is intending to abuse, degrade, arouse, or gratify sexual desires.

PHYSICAL ABUSE is non-accidental injury, which may include beatings, violent shaking, human bites, strangulation, suffocation, poisoning, or burns. The results may be bruises and welts, broken bones, scars, permanent disfigurement, long-lasting psychological damage, serious internal injuries, brain damage, or death.

Physical abuse according to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services is defined as deliberate actions resulting in injuries to a child, genuine threats of such actions, or concerns about physical injuries of an unexplained or suspicious nature.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE is a pattern of behavior that attacks a child’s emotional development and a sense of self worth, such as constant criticizing, belittling, insulting, or manipulation.

PHYSICAL/EMOTIONAL NEGLECT is the failure to provide a child with basic needs, including food, clothing, education, shelter, and medical care. It also includes abandonment and inadequate supervision.

According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS),

- Neglectful supervision means improper supervision of a child left alone which could result in substantial harm.
- Medical neglect is the failure to seek, obtain, or administer medical treatment that could result in substantial harm.
- Physical neglect is the failure to provide a child with the necessary food, clothing, or shelter to maintain a healthy life. Leaving a child under the age of 15 without reasonable and necessary care by an adult may constitute child abandonment. The court must prove the adult did this knowingly.
- Abandonment occurs when a parent knowingly leaves a child without reasonable or necessary care, and without the intent to return.
- Refusal to accept parental responsibility includes the following acts or omissions: the failure by the person responsible for a child’s care, custody, or welfare to permit the child to return to the child’s home without arranging for the necessary care for the child after the child has been absent from the home for any reason, including having been in residential placement or having run away.

Houston Northwest Church takes all indicators and suspicions of child maltreatment seriously. We are also aware that children who are maltreated in one way are at an increased risk of maltreatment in other areas, therefore, when our church has an indication or report of a child being maltreated in one area, we will take steps to protect the child from known risk and be extra attentive to and supportive of the child.

INDICATORS & IMPACT

IDENTIFYING OFFENDERS

INDICATORS & IMPACT

The majority of children who are abused will be symptomatic at some point. Houston North-west Church is familiar with and will be attentive to potential indicators of childhood sexual and physical abuse. These can include physical indicators like stained underclothing, injuries to genital areas, pain while using the bathroom, itching, or swelling in genital areas. There are also emotional and behavioral indicators that would be otherwise atypical for children apart from some type of sexual abuse. Children and Student ministry leaders at Houston Northwest Church have regular opportunities to observe behavior and are often privy to details of the lives of those in their ministries. As such, they are in a unique position to detect child sexual and physical abuse and other forms of child maltreatment and will be attentive to these indicators.

There are longer-term impacts that result from abuse. Understanding how child sexual and physical abuse can traumatize a child and have lasting impact in the life of an adult survivor of abuse is a critical step in preventing abuse and responding compassionately. Not every child will display the impact of their maltreatment and not every adult will experience the long-term consequences of their traumatic childhood experience, but all are at increased risk. There is increasing evidence that there are real impacts on the emotional, physical, and spiritual health of people who suffer from abuse as children.

IDENTIFYING OFFENDERS

People who sexually abuse children use authority, trust, or physical force/threats to gain access and control over children. Offenders can include strangers, acquaintances, trusted friends, or family members. A child is three times more likely to be abused by a recognized and trusted adult than by a stranger. ² Most often, perpetrators gain access by building trust and then

“grooming” the victim and the victim’s caretakers before perpetrating the abuse. Grooming can include providing special gifts, attention, privileges, and affection. After gaining access, the abuser finds opportunities to isolate the victim and applies various means of control by leveraging a position of authority, physical force, or threats.

PROTECTIVE SAFEGUARDS

PROTECTIVE SAFEGUARDS

There are several measures that are taken by Houston Northwest Church with the goal of maximizing child protection and safety. The first measure is making every effort to identify potential perpetrators before they serve in any capacity at the church. This effort cannot be confined to criminal background checks since many perpetrators will have had no prior criminal record. Meanwhile, a thorough screening process can prove to be very beneficial.

SCREENING Houston Northwest Church screens all staff and volunteers who work with minors. Volunteers with minors will be required to attend Houston Northwest Church for at least six months and will be members or planning to become members. Screening procedures include:

- The completion of a written application.
- An in-person interview with the ministry leader or team member.
- Contact with at least two character references who provide affirmation of the person's capacity and trustworthiness with kids.
- A background check with the following:
 - Identity verification
 - Sex Offender Registry check
 - Global Watchlist Check
 - National Criminal Records Check
 - County Criminal Records Check
- Social Media Screening

If the screening process yields information that an individual abused or neglected a child in any way or has been convicted of a violent and/or sexual crime, that individual may not work with children in any capacity at any time. If through the screening process information is yielded indicating the person has been accused of or convicted of any other type of crime involving persons, Houston Northwest Church will contact its external certification specialist organization to assess the situation.

SAFE BEHAVIORS Upon successfully screening candidates, Houston Northwest Church is also committed to providing environments where safe behaviors are facilitated. Because most child abuse happens in isolated situations and because most adults seeking to harm a child prefer to do so in private, the following practices will apply to all settings involving minors at Houston Northwest Church:

- At least two unrelated adults will be present in environments when minors are present whether on the campus of Houston Northwest Church, or away from campus at a Houston Northwest Church sponsored event. (Any exceptions for Junior High or High School events must be pre-approved by a member of the Pastoral Executive team.)
- All interactions should be observable with clear line-of-sight visibility to the adult and child through windows in doors, open doors, public meeting places, etc.
- During restroom breaks, two leaders must be present and the door left open. If an adult needs to use the restroom, the room should be clear before the adult is allowed to go in-side.
- If a child requires a change of clothing, they must be changed by staff or paid childcare workers. Unpaid staff and volunteers are not allowed to change diapers or clothing.
- All interactions should be interruptible with open invitations to caregivers to visit the interaction and "interrupt" by dropping in unexpectedly during the activity or event.

PROTECTIVE SAFEGUARDS CONT.

PROTECTIVE SAFEGUARDS

SAFE TOUCH Respect, safety, and appropriate boundaries are the guiding principles for physical contact between volunteers and children. The guidelines below are intended to avoid contact that is or may appear threatening or inappropriate. Love and affection are part of church life and ministry. There are many ways to demonstrate affection while maintaining positive and safe boundaries.

- Brief hugs or side hugs
- Pats on the shoulder, back, or head
- Handshakes, high-fives, hand slapping, and fist bumps
- Verbal praise
- Touching hands, faces, shoulders, or arms of children (arms around shoulders)
- Holding hands while walking with small children
- Sitting beside small children
- Kneeling or bending down for hug with small children
- Holding hands during group prayer

Examples of negative and inappropriate forms of affection (many of these are behaviors that child predators use to groom children or can be in and of themselves, sexual abuse):

- Inappropriate or lengthy embraces or any form of unwanted affection
- Kisses
- Holding children over four years old on the lap
- Touching bottoms, chests, or genital areas other than for appropriate diapering or toileting needs
- Touching legs
- Wrestling or tickling or piggyback rides
- Any type of massage

SEXUAL LANGUAGE Houston Northwest Church recognizes that sexual language is more than mere inappropriate jokes. It is a serious boundary violation. As such, sexually suggestive language, racy jokes, sexual innuendos, or descriptions of sexual experiences or habits is prohibited, along with the use of sexually suggestive music and media.

EXTRA ATTENTION Staff and volunteers are prohibited from displaying favoritism toward a child by providing special gifts, favors, money, attention, or special acts of service not offered to other children.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS & SOCIAL MEDIA The policies that apply to personal interactions between adults and kids apply likewise online and via phones. Communications through apps, text, email, direct messages, or any other form of social media, should meet the best practice of having at least two adults included. Online interactions should not be secretive. One-on-one communications between adults and minors should be minimized and relate solely to communicating logistical details etc. Group texting, email, and group social media apps should be the preferred method of interaction.

TRANSPORTATION Adults should not transport individual minors alone, or be in a vehicle alone with a minor.

ONGOING PROTECTIVE
MEASURES

POLICY VIOLATIONS

ONGOING PROTECTIVE MEASURES

REGISTRATION, CHECK-IN, & CHECK-OUT

Houston Northwest Church requires that all children be registered in the church management system when they attend activities and events. This system allows parents to provide their key contact information and special instructions, allergies, etc. providing Houston Northwest Church the best opportunity to create a safe and secure environment.

Children 5th grade and under must be “checked-in” to all events of which they are registered. They will receive a name badge with a security code and the parent/guardian receives a coordinating sticker with the same code. When the children are picked up by the parent/guardian, they will display the matching sticker. If the parent pick up tag is lost, the parent/guardian must display their driver’s license. If the child’s tag is lost the child will identify their parent/guardian and the parent/guardian will provide their first and last name along with their driver’s license, or state issued ID.

All volunteers will also register and check-in with this system. This allows Houston Northwest Church to easily identify screened workers. Volunteers (for the 5th grade and under age group) are required to wear Houston Northwest Church Kids Team t-shirts.

FACILITY SECURITY AND STAFF

Houston Northwest Church makes a special effort to ensure our spaces for kids are safe and secure while also being an excellent environment for ministry. Clear visibility into each room is a high priority with windows in doors and the capacity to easily leave doors open. Effort is also made to provide all ministry to kids in sections of buildings that can be separately segregated and secured so that visitors cannot access the area without proper identification.

Security, both paid and volunteer, are stationed at kids ministry areas on Sunday mornings. They are charged with identifying any high-risk situations and responding accordingly. These can be volunteers and off-duty police officers who are trained to spot and respond to high-risk situations. Houston Northwest Church also uses security cameras to provide information on the source of any issues to the appropriate authorities should that situation present itself.

POLICY VIOLATIONS

Houston Northwest Church takes policy violations seriously. Any staff, volunteer, parent, or attendee who witness a violation is expected to respond. A bystander who witnesses a potential violation can redirect or remind the potential offender about the activity that may be in question. Clear violations of the policy must be reported to the appropriate Kids/Preschool/Student staff ministry leader. Reports can also be made to the Houston Northwest Church Minister of Operations. Houston Northwest Church staff will enforce the policy, document violation, and determine what other actions may be necessary as are required by law.

REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE

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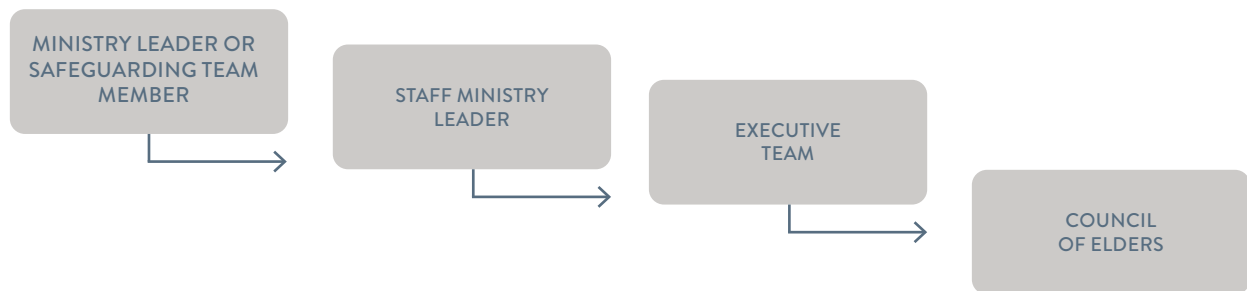
It is the responsibility of the entire church to serve as active observers and reporters of potential abuse. Texas law requires anyone who reasonably suspects a child is being abused, neglected, or exploited to report it to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. A person who reports abuse in good faith is immune from civil or criminal liability. Anyone who does not report suspected abuse can be charged with a misdemeanor or felony.

If you suspect a child has been abused, report to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services at 1-800-252-5400, or use the Texas Abuse Hotline website at www.txabusehotline.org. The DFPS representative will help determine if abuse has occurred and whether it should be investigated by the local authorities. If you need assistance reporting, immediately notify Houston Northwest Church staff for assistance. Do not interview the child regarding the suspected abuse as this could be considered leading the child and/or cause further trauma to the child. Do not discuss the suspected abuse with others. All information regarding the child should be kept confidential with DFPS authorities and the Houston Northwest Church staff member who may be assisting you.

REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE

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While it can be a difficult thing to do, we encourage congregants at HNW to report suspected inappropriate behavior. If that misconduct involves a person to whom the report is to be given, the reporter should report to the next higher level. If it involves someone on the Executive Team, please report directly to the Council of Elders. The current list of Elders can be found on the HNW website under “Meet the Team”. The following is a flow-chart to reference when determining to whom you should report:



IF ANYONE HAS KNOWLEDGE OF ANY POTENTIAL ABUSE OR HARASSMENT BY SOMEONE ON STAFF OR IN A VOLUNTEER ROLE, PLEASE REPORT THAT SITUATION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. THE INFORMATION WILL BE TREATED WITH GREAT DISCRETION, BUT THIS INFORMATION MAY IMPACT HNW'S ABILITY TO PROTECT OTHERS IN OUR COMMUNITY.

HNW has created a Safeguarding Team which consists of the Family Minister, the Director of Counseling, and three or more congregation members. The names of the Safeguarding Team will be available on the HNW website for reference; at anytime a Safeguarding Team member can receive an initial report and then take the report to the Executive Team. Once the report reaches the Executive Team, the initial reporter will be contacted and updated on the steps that have thus far been taken and the next steps to be taken. The Executive Team, in conjunction with the Elders, will investigate and determine an outcome based on our By-Laws, specifically Article XIV, Section 1. Discipline. This section states the following:

(a) It shall be the practice of this church to emphasize to its members that every reasonable measure will be taken to assist any troubled member. The Council of Elders, church staff, and or deacons are available for counsel and guidance. Should a member dishonor the name of our Lord Jesus Christ such that it negatively affects the welfare of the church, the Council of Elders will take every reasonable measure to resolve the problem in accordance with scripture (Matthew 18:15-17 and Galatians 6:1-2). The Council of Elders will also be responsible for any decision to exclude a member from fellowship and terminate membership.

If it is determined to be necessary for an outside, independent investigation to occur, the Council of Elders along with the Safeguarding Team, will consult with GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) to begin that process. Upon completion of an investigation, the independent investigating body will deliver to the Executive Team and Council of Elders a report that will consist of its investigative findings, analysis, and recommendations. Any personnel decision will be made in view of recommendations of the report, by the Executive Team and the Council of Elders, according to the values and employment practices of our organization. Those who use any position of power to abuse as defined by this policy shall never again serve in any formal role within our church.

HNW prohibits any form of retaliation against any individual or group who are involved in reporting concerns or providing potential evidence. Retaliation can take many forms, including, but not limited to, shunning, violence, threats or intimidation that would discourage some persons from engaging in activity required or encouraged by this policy. Actions in response to a good faith report or response under this policy are considered retaliatory if they could reasonably have an adverse effect on the wellbeing of an individual or if they impact their ability to fully participate in church activities, including compliance with this policy. Reports, concerns, or questions about realization should be immediately reported to the Safeguarding Team or Executive Team. All individuals and groups engaging in retaliation will be held accountable in accordance with the bylaws stated above.

HOUSTON NORTHWEST CHURCH

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