

HONORING THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Preventing and Reporting Child Abuse, Harassment, and Other Inappropriate Conduct Directed Toward Children and Youth

The purpose of involving children and youth in our Fellowship is to enrich their lives by introducing them to religious ideas and principles and to the idea of UUFA as community. While not a common event in Unitarian Universalist Religious Exploration programs, child abuse nevertheless occurs, and we can take positive steps that will reduce the likelihood of child abuse occurring and improve the effectiveness of our response to incidents or allegations concerning child abuse. Importantly, while the principal reason for implementing child abuse policies is to improve the safety of children, addressing child abuse openly in our congregations gives Unitarian Universalists an opportunity to extend compassion to the child victims and the adult survivors among us and to reinforce our commitment to honor the inherent worth and dignity of the children.

This policy is designed to

- ▶ improve the safety of children and youth in our programs by implementing preventive steps and by providing guidelines regarding appropriate behavior with the children and youth of our fellowship;
- ▶ provide guidance on how to respond effectively to incidents that may occur, whether during a UUFA activity or at other times; and
- ▶ through prevention steps, reduce the likelihood that allegations (true or false) will be made against staff and volunteer workers.

Underlying Principles for This Policy

Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith. Our covenant is not a creed. It does not dictate correct doctrine or belief. It does outline our relationship with one another. It is a voluntary and unconditional agreement to act in ways that express the values of our Unitarian Universalist Principles. The following is our statement of covenant with one another in the protection of our members and friends:

We, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, believe that our commitment to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity and compassion in human relations, spiritual growth, and the use of the democratic process within our congregation compels us to create a safe environment that protects children and adults from harm and promotes their spiritual growth.

In adopting this policy, we accept the responsibility to educate ourselves about child abuse and to take the steps that are necessary to assure the policy's successful implementation.

Prevention

It is ultimately the responsibility of the entire congregation, in partnership with parents, to create and maintain a safe environment that supports the growth and welfare of children and youth in our programs. However, this policy is devoted primarily to situations in which children and youth are in a supervised relationship with members other than their parents.

In an effort to protect our young people as well as our leaders, teachers and all other adults who work with children and youth, all adults working with children and youth will be required to sign the Code of Ethics before assuming child supervision roles. The policy also encourages other members and friends to read and sign the Code of Ethics found in the addenda to this policy.

What is Child Abuse?

The UUA defines child abuse as "an act committed by a parent, caregiver, or person in a position of trust that harms or threatens to harm a child's well-being or physical or mental health." Child abuse is also against the law.

There are four categories of child abuse according to UUA:

Physical Abuse: Deliberately inflicting bodily harm to a child or youth. Instances of child abuse include violent assault with hands, feet, a knife, or other implement or burns, fractures, and bruises resulting from being beaten, shaken, or thrown.

Sexual Abuse: Engaging in sexualized behavior, verbal or physical, with a child or youth; using a child for the sexual gratification of an adult or older child. Any time a child is used for the sexual stimulation of an adult or a significantly older child, abuse has occurred. The child is powerless either to consent to or resist such sexual acts. Sexual abuse can include fondling, sexual intercourse, forced participation in sexual acts, incest, and exploitation for the purpose of pornography or prostitution. Child sexual abuse is illegal regardless of whether the child "consents" or not. Consent is not an issue. The offender bears the entire responsibility for the abuse whatever form it takes.

Child and youth sexual abuse may be violent or non-violent. All child sexual abuse is an exploitation of a child's vulnerability and powerlessness in which the abuser is fully responsible for the actions. Child sexual abuse includes behaviors that involve touching and non-touching aspects.

- Types of abuse that involve touching include the following:
 - sexual fondling
 - oral, genital, and/or anal penetration
 - intercourse
 - forcible rape

- ▶ Types of abuse that do not involve touching include the following:
 - verbal comments such as statements intended to seduce children
 - pornographic videos
 - obscene phone calls
 - exhibitionism

Emotional Abuse: Emotional abuse may be very difficult to identify and document. Emotional abuse deeply affects a child's self-esteem by subjecting a child to verbal assault or emotional cruelty. It can include close confinement, inadequate nurturance, extreme discipline, or deliberately permitting destructive behaviors such as drug or alcohol abuse.

Neglect: Children have basic physical, nutritional, and environmental needs that must be supplied. Chronic withholding of food, clothing, medication, and proper living quarters, as well as abandonment, are all acts of neglect. Neglect can include physical, emotional, or educational neglect through such actions as inadequate supervision, health hazards in the home, refusing to seek treatment for illnesses, providing inadequate emotional nurturance, and deliberately permitting chronic truancy.

Prevention through Training and Education

Greater understanding of the complexities of sexuality and abuse will help us to avoid situations that could lead to abuse or false accusations. The Board of Trustees and RE committee will see to the implementation of the following education program.

- ▶ For our children and youth, the RE Committee will provide age-appropriate information about development and sexuality. Our children must be empowered to protect themselves and report abuse.
- ▶ For RE teachers and other volunteers working with children and youth, the RE Committee and the Safe Congregation Panel will provide annual training and written information designed to prevent child abuse.
- ▶ For all employees, the Board and the Safe Congregation Panel will provide training and written information regarding this policy and child abuse prevention when any employee is hired.
- ▶ For the entire congregation, the Board will provide information regarding this policy on our UUFA website (www.uuathensga.org), in workshops, Adult RE classes, and/or written materials.
- ▶ For new members of UUFA, the Membership Committee will provide a copy of this policy to be included in all new-member packets.

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

The following guidelines will be put in place:

All RE teachers and other adults working with children and youth:

- ▶ will have been a congregant for at least one year or have references from other UU churches that include the minister or RE director.
- ▶ will have completed a Board-approved screening application and have been interviewed before assuming their duties. Two references will be requested and kept on file for new RE teachers and other adults working with children and youth.
- ▶ will have attended at least one training session on child abuse provided by the RE Committee or the Safe Congregation Panel.
- ▶ will have read, understood and signed the "Code of Ethics."
- ▶ will have successfully completed a required background check with the help of the Congregational Administrator.
- ▶ will be 25 years old or older when working with middle-school and high-school age youth
- ▶ will be vaccinated against Covid 19.

The Safe Congregation Panel will work with the RE Committee in developing training and screening materials.

Confidential criminal background checks will be conducted for all employees prior to hiring or signing of any contract and for teachers and other adult volunteers working with the children and youth. In the case of employees, information will be shared with the Personnel Committee and Board as appropriate.

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 other child or youth Fellowship activities.

In addition, this policy requires congregants who have been convicted of, are under current indictment for, or have been involved in any act of sexual misconduct involving a child or of child abuse to make themselves known to the Minister, DRE, or any other member of the Safe Congregation Panel. Other members or friends of the congregation, including the Minister and DRE, who become aware of such information, should report this information to a member of the Safe Congregation Panel who will then form a Response Team and decide how to handle the situation.

At least two unrelated adults should be present in each classroom including the nursery on Sunday mornings, and on every outing, overnight, and other Fellowship-related activity with groups of children, including the Children's and Youth Choir rehearsals and trips. Exceptions to this guideline (for example, to transport children from one location to another) require written permission from parents or guardians.

The RE Committee will also be responsible for developing and publicizing additional guidelines concerning other child safety issues such as

- ▶ supervision of and responsibility for children and youth before and after church events
- ▶ ratio of adults to children on field trips and overnights
- ▶ minimum age of advisors on field trips and overnights
- ▶ requirements for transporting children (insurance, minimum age of driver, etc.)
- ▶ bullying in any of its forms including all the above-mentioned forms of abuse

Response Team

In response to a specific situation, the person who receives the initial complaint in consultation with the Minister and DRE will form a Response Team. The Response Team will consist of people not involved in the incident and will include the Minister (ex-officio), the DRE (ex-officio), and three individuals from the Safe Congregation Panel, one of whom is a member of the RE Committee if possible (if the incident occurred within the RE program). If the incident or allegation involves a staff person, then that staff person will be removed from the Response Team and the Board will be immediately notified verbally followed by an email notification.

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

The team responding to the allegation should keep the following response guidelines in mind:

Safety of the Children and Youth - The safety of the children and youth should be of primary importance. Reasonable and timely actions should be taken to ensure their safety based upon the credibility and severity of the allegation and other pertinent factors. All allegations will be taken seriously.

State Law - A copy of Georgia state law on child abuse should be kept in the child abuse policy notebook (maintained in the DRE's office) and should be referenced when an incident is reported. Appropriate and timely reporting will be made to the Division of Family & Children Services (DFCS).

Professional Resources - The Response Team should call on or make referrals to whatever professional resources they deem appropriate, both within and outside UUFA.

Whom to Inform - 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 content of the information will be provided in a

careful but timely manner by the Response Team. The decision will be made based upon the individual situation (e.g., severity and credibility of allegation; existence of threat to the safety of the children still existing).

Notification of Board and Region Executive - If any action is taken or recommended by the Response Team, the President of the Board and the Executive of the UUA Southern Region will be notified 1) that a Response Team has been convened; 2) what of the nature of the issue is ; and 3) whether a report has been or will be made to DFCS. The President will report to the full board in executive session at the earliest appropriate time.

Confidentiality - 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 Response Team.

In order to ensure the safety of our children and youth, which is our highest priority, we must encourage the responsible reporting of all concerns or suspicions of child abuse. To this end, all reports to the Safe Congregation Panel will be considered confidential. In cases when the reporting person and/or child or youth victim have reason to fear retaliation or recrimination, the strict confidentiality of the reporting person and/or child or youth victim will be maintained at their request. An exception would exist when the Response Team determines that DFCS must be informed. A full disclosure of the details of the suspected abuse or concern will be made to the accused at the appropriate time unless a request for "strict confidentiality" is made.

In this context, "confidential" means that the identity of the child victim and/or reporting person, the details of the allegation or concern, and any other identifying information will be kept among the members of the Response Team and the accused. This information will not be disseminated to the congregation. "Strict confidentiality" means that this information will not be shared with the accused.

The reporting person must meet in person with the Response Team to give a full report of their concern. In order for the Response Team to respond appropriately and fairly, all members of the Response Team must be present for all initial interviews. In addition, the Response Team must make every effort to attend all meetings to obtain information related to any concerns brought forth.

In cases not referred to DFCS, when "strict confidentiality" requirements preclude informing an RE teacher or youth leader about the nature of any allegations against them and the decision has been made that they need to be removed from interaction with children and youth, then every effort will be made to use a process of informing the individual that does not reference "child abuse" or this child abuse policy as the reason for removal. Also, if it is appropriate to consider actions other than removal from teaching, those options will be fully explored.

False Accusations - The protection from false or mistaken allegations of adults who teach in the RE program or otherwise interact with children and youth is also an important goal of this policy. A key way to prevent false or mistaken allegations is to abide by the prevention guidelines outlined in the Prevention portion of this policy. All involved should be sensitive to the disruption and damage a false accusation may cause to both the adults and the children involved. This potential for disruption and damage is true even when the accusation is one due to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what seems a child's straightforward report of an event.

If the Response Team 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 Response Team may determine that a false accusation by a child or youth requires further consideration.

Leave of Absence and Restrictions with Children

In order to protect the children and youth in our programs from potential risk and to protect the accused from further suspicion, decisions about removing the alleged perpetrator from interacting with children in the RE or other programs will be made by the Response Team. A decision should be made and action taken in a timely manner based on the possible threat to the children or youth, the credibility and seriousness of the allegation, and other factors that may relate to the situation. Actions other than removal from teaching will be given full consideration depending upon the situation. Alternative actions might include additional training, review of the policy, or changing classrooms.

Even if an allegation is not reported to the Division of Family and Children's Services (DFCS), the adult against whom the allegations are made may be asked to refrain from teaching or otherwise interacting with the child or children in question for the adult's own protection.

If a report is made to DFCS, this leave will be mandatory.

The Response Team may also determine, even without an accusation of abuse being made, that they have reason(s) for concern that a volunteer's contact with children or youth in our congregation potentially places both the volunteer and the children at risk of incident or accusation. For this reason, the Response Team is authorized to restrict an individual from teaching in the RE program or otherwise volunteering, chaperoning, or attending events for children and youth.

If disputes arise out of the actions taken by the DRE, the Minister, or the Response Team, the matter may be taken to the Board. However, the DRE and the RE Committee (together) retain the independent right and responsibility to screen and authorize volunteers for teaching in the RE program while the DRE and the Response Team will make final decisions about removing a teacher or otherwise restricting an individual's contact with children and youth at UUFA events.

Other Inappropriate Behavior

Some incidents or allegations in the RE or other children or youth programs may involve behavior that is not clearly child abuse but may be in other ways deemed inappropriate by a parent, by the DRE, or by the RE Committee, or any other individual. In such cases, a Response Team may be called together to review the situation and decide what action to take.

Responsibilities of the Board

The Board of Trustees will make the final determination of any additional consequences appropriate to the violation of this policy including, but not limited to, termination of a staff person (except for the Minister) and any additional action in the case of volunteers beyond that for which the Response Team is authorized.

Violation of this policy by the Minister constitutes good cause for discipline under the terms of the minister's contract.

The Board shall also inform the following of any determination of serious violations by the minister of this policy:

- the UUA Southern Region Executive
- the Director of the Department of Ministry of the UUA
- the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA
- the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association

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 and youth. They should also be sensitive to the harm that can be done by false or mistaken accusations.

► If an individual connected with UUFA has a suspicion that a child has been abused, either while in the RE program or at other times, the person with the suspicion should report the incident to State authorities. In Georgia "mandated reporters" include physicians, nurses, and hospital personnel; school and daycare personnel; social workers and counselors; and dentists. A mandated reporter is required to report suspected abuse or neglect to the Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS).

The Georgia Department of Human Resources
Clarke County Division of Family and Children's Services (DFCS)
284 North Ave.
Athens, GA 30603-1887
(706) 227-7021

The current number will be posted in the DRE's office.

► Reporting within the Fellowship

In addition, if the person with the concern believes the abuse occurred during a UUFA program, the individual should report concerns to the Minister, or the DRE, or any other member of the Safe Congregation Panel.

When an allegation of child abuse occurring during a program is reported to the Minister, DRE, or other Safe Congregation Panel member, the responsible person receiving the allegation should take the necessary steps to

- abide by Georgia law on reporting child abuse
- take appropriate action to assure protection of the children and youth
- convene a meeting of a Response Team

Safe Congregation Panel

The Board will appoint, with input from the Minister, DRE, and RE Chair, a Safe Congregation Panel of three to five responsible and knowledgeable people who could be called upon to form a Response Team and who will be available to hear confidentially concerns about child abuse.

The Safe Congregation Panel will be composed of adult members who reflect diversity of all kinds. -These people will be qualified by their (1) professional or volunteer experience in working with children and/or child abuse issues or through other special training such as the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence workshops; (2) understanding of this policy and other UUA "Safe Congregation" material; and (3) knowledge about available resources and reporting procedures for children and youth, including applicable Georgia state laws.

The DRE or RE Chairperson will maintain an up-to-date list of the names and contact information of all members of the Safe Congregation Panel and will ensure that this list is available to all members and friends of the congregation.

The Safe Congregation Panel will also be delegated such duties as arranging training for the congregation, development of RE teacher training, and screening material.

The Safe Congregation Panel will review this policy (Honoring the Children) annually and report and recommend changes at the beginning of the fiscal year.

Addenda

UUFA Youth and Adult Leaders Code of Ethics (adapted from [UUA Youth and Adult Leaders Code of Ethics 2019](#))

Adults and youth 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 leaders 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.

Leaders shall be informed of the code of ethics and agree to it before assuming their role. In cases of violation of this code, the Response Team may remove or restrict, temporarily or permanently, the leader from the leadership role and/or from UUFA event participation.

As either an adult or youth leader, I agree to the following:

- Serve as a role model to other youth and adults in my program including modeling affirmative consent.
- Respect any information that must be kept in confidence. I understand that as a youth, this information need not be held secret from my parents. As a leader, I understand I have the freedom to seek the counsel and support of my local religious professional.
- Report to UUFA Staff any unsafe behavior, threats or thoughts of harm to self or others, violations of UUFA behavioral expectations, poor adult boundaries, and any possible child abuse or other ways youth are in danger including substance abuse and suicidal thoughts.
- Communicate with UUFA staff about anything that threatens the well-being of any program or community
- Engage in conflict and disagreement directly, creatively, and honestly while holding others with dignity and compassion. Listen to others with openness and a willingness to receive feedback. Seek mediation when needed.
- Remain an active participant and in covenant in a UUFA.
- Engage in the emotional and physical self-care, ongoing training, and spiritual development needed to bring my best self to my community.
- Respect the full range of human difference including race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender/gender expression, socioeconomic status, physical and

mental ability, theology/belief, and primary language among my community and seek to build a community inclusive of all.

As a youth leader I agree to the following:

- Refrain from engaging in any form of sexual, seductive, or erotic conduct with other youth at events and; outside events, to be conscious of my power as a youth leader when sexually or romantically interested in a peer I met through UUFA youth events.
- Empower other youth as part of my leadership.
- Be attentive to ways current or potential youth leaders' behavior may be damaging to the trust the community puts in them and seek both youth and adult assistance.
- Where I am older than other youth, recognize the greater influence my age gives me and the greater responsibility I have to maintain healthy relationships with younger youth. This recognition includes keeping appropriate emotional, sexual, and physical boundaries with youth who are still minors after I bridge.
- Seek the assistance of other adults in leadership or UUFA staff when I have discomfort with any adult, especially one in leadership.
- Not drive other youth to events.

As an adult leader I agree to the following:

- Refrain from all behaviors at youth events, with youth from youth events, and in view of youth online, both verbal and physical, that are in any way erotic, seductive, or sexual in nature.
- Consciously engage with youth in ways that seek to meet their needs rather than mine.
- Refrain from any behavior that takes advantage of youth and adult attendees.
- Understand that it is primarily my responsibility to maintain appropriate boundaries with youth and youth leaders and to cultivate an atmosphere of health and trust with them.

Agreement

Adults and youth in leadership positions who work with youth under the aegis of the UUFA are responsible not only to the youth but also to the UUFA as well. Remember: you are acting as a representative of UUFA

I have read this form in its entirety, and I understand the ethical responsibilities of both youth and adults in leadership. I commit to following this code of ethics in my own actions and to support my co-leaders, both youth and adults, in living in covenant with each other, UUFA,, parents, and our youth community.

name

signature

date

UUA Resources

Safety for Religious Education and Children:
<https://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/safety-for-re>

14 Recommended Practices for Safety in Youth Ministry: <https://www.uua.org/safe/youth>

[Appendix.](#)