

Guidelines for activities with children and young people

This document is provided to assist local churches as they make decisions about specific situations related to ministry with children and young people. In most instances, there are many variables to be considered and it would be inappropriate to formulate a single rule for application across our movement.

Please take the time to consider the underlying principles and consider the guidelines in light of those principles. Your church may choose to have a defined policy about some or all of the matters considered in these guidelines.

Principles

Risk management

It is not possible to eliminate all risk from activities. However, we have a responsibility to be aware of possible risks and to take appropriate action in response. This is what risk assessment involves. Identify possible risks and consider how likely they are, how serious they are and how difficult they are to avoid. For example, a risk of minor injury or inconvenience does not require as much precautionary action as a risk of serious injury.

Never alone

As a general rule, Church staff and volunteers should never be alone in private (outside of line of sight of another person) with any child or young person unless they are family members. This protects the child or young person from risk of harm, and it also protects the leader. This rule is applicable for Church programs and social contact outside of Church programs. Exception may be made for family or domestic arrangements which are distinct from any role at the Church, such as babysitting, if this is authorised by the parent or guardian responsible.

Accountability

Procedures and systems help staff and volunteers to avoid difficult situations with children and young people. This protects the children and young people and also protects the leaders. When making decisions about activities involving children and young people it is important to maintain accountability, this often takes place through visibility (for example clear panels in doors) and communication (for example documented reporting procedures). Documenting any potential incident as soon as possible provides both accountability and protection for those involved.

Awareness

Although your church will need to have procedures in place, it is important for everyone involved in ministry with children or young people to maintain an awareness of potential risks and issues. Ministry with children and young people involves building relationships of trust, but staff and volunteers should also be aware of the potential for healthy relationships to be misunderstood as an inappropriate grooming relationship. Similarly, staff and volunteers should remain alert to potentially dangerous grooming behaviour by any other staff or volunteer.

Particular issues

Attendance, permission and roll keeping

The two main principles to be worked out are firstly, how you will get permission from parents or carers for children/young people to take part in programs and secondly how you will record who was present (including leaders) at an activity.

Permission could be gained by a registration process at the beginning of each year or when a child/young person joins the program and updated as needed. Additional permission can be requested for specific events. Alternatively, you could ask parents to sign their children into the program each week.

Attendance could be recorded by parents/ carers signing children/young people into an activity or program or where permission has already been given by the marking of a role by program leaders. The leaders who were present at an activity also need to be recorded. Some larger churches have the parents record that the child has arrived at the church service and then when the kid's program begins the children are gathered in the foyer and a role marked before they walk together to their program space.

Both permission/ registration forms and attendance records for every activity/event need to be held on file for at least 45 years.

It is also important to make clear to everyone (children, parents and leaders) the process for children re-joining parents/ carers. (Eg all children are returned to the auditorium at the end of the service, parents come and collect their children, parents need to sign their children out.) This procedure may vary according to the ages of the children. It is important to use a sign-in/ sign out process where there are legal orders around custody of children.

Leader / participant ratios

When determining how many leaders are required for an activity, you should begin by considering how many leaders are needed to build relationship and provide good discipling of children/young people. Once you have considered those factors, you can then go on to consider whether there is an adequate number of leaders to provide supervision and protect children/young people from harm. The exact number of leaders will depend on your setting. How old are the children/young people? What size is the group? What activities are part of the program? What is the layout of your space?

Enough leaders are needed to make sure a space is safe for both the leaders and the children/young people. As a general guideline, you will need a minimum of two fully screened and trained leaders on-site and participating in all programs. If you have more than 16 participants, you should have additional leaders to provide a minimum ratio of 1:8 (one leader for every eight participants). This is a starting point, you will definitely need to adapt this ratio to your specific context. You will need more leaders the younger the children are or if there are children with additional needs or if you are doing a lot of activities outside. For older teens, you may need less leaders depending on the activity/program.

There are other questions to ask as well, like 'how well do we know these children?', 'How familiar are the children with the space and the leaders?' For example a weekly kids club compared with a holiday kids club. For Sunday programs, where is the

room for the children's program in relation to where the adults are listening to the sermon? If one leader gets hurt and the other leader has to go for help, who will supervise the children? You may find you need a lot more than one leader per eight children.

These leadership ratios do not prevent breaking up into smaller discussion groups with one leader or assistant leader in each group, provided there are enough responsible people (who have been screened and trained) in the room to look out for each other, the leaders and the children/young people.

Junior leaders, those who are under 18 years old, can be a wonderful and key part of the team! Junior leaders can take responsibility for many facets of the program - opening the Bible with the kids, planning activities, and leading small groups. However, typically, leaders under 18 will be assistants and not count towards the ratio of leaders to participants. You may decide that a particular 16 or 17-year old has outstanding maturity and is able to take on full leadership responsibilities. In such instances, the individual should be screened and trained (including Creating Safe Spaces training) as though they were an adult volunteer (see the *Procedure for Staff and Volunteers*). Even if they are fully screened and trained, leaders aged 16 or 17 should not lead groups of their own peer group and there should always be at least one adult (over 18 years) leader involved in any program or activity.

Driving

Licences and Drivers

Your church should consider following a consistent policy regarding who may provide transport for church activities. You may wish to institute a 'No P Platers' policy or you may wish to require specific parental consent for travel with young and or P Plate drivers.

You should also be aware of the relevant restrictions on P Plate drivers in the ACT.

Time alone in cars

No staff member or volunteer should be in a car alone with a child or young person (unless they are family members). Exception may be made for family or domestic arrangements which are distinct from any role at the Church, such as babysitting, if this is authorised by the parent or guardian responsible.

If there are extraordinary circumstances where no one else is available, and the child or young person may be at greater risk of harm if they were not transported in the car, then the time spent alone in the car should be minimized as far as possible and some additional measures may be taken, for example

- the staff member or volunteer receives express permission from the child's parent or carer for the specific occasion;
- a phone call is placed to another leader and maintained throughout the journey (where legal to do so)

If it has been necessary for a staff member or volunteer to spend time alone in a car with a child or young person then the situation and the circumstances giving rise to the situation should be recorded and the Safe Church Team and/or Ministry Leader should be notified.

Overnight activities

Where there are activities involving overnight accommodation, consideration should be given to some of the additional risk factors involved, including

- transport arrangements
- sleeping arrangements
- bathroom configuration
- safety and instruction on activities
- third parties involved
- physical safety of external locations

Decisions regarding these issues will depend on various contextual factors such as the physical location and facilities of the campsite. It is important that a thorough risk assessment, including consideration of the items listed, is conducted and recorded. The list of activities, leaders and sleeping arrangements should also be recorded. These records should be stored, along with permission and attendance records for the event, for a minimum of 45 years.

Social contact

In person communication outside Church programs

Fruitful Christian ministry with children and young people involves healthy, appropriate relationships. This can at times involve contacting them outside of Church programs and can include meeting in person. However, it is important that relationships between staff/volunteers and children/young people are transparent, and that parents, families and program leaders are appropriately informed and have given permission for this contact.

Staff and volunteers, when meeting with a child or young person, should:

- have parental or guardian consent, where practicable;
- meet with them in a public place (for example, a café) in line of sight of other people;
- not have children or young people alone in your home, or visit children or young people alone in their home when no other adult is present; and
- make a record of the time, location, duration and circumstances of any face to face meetings with any child or young person.

Telephone and online communication outside Church programs

For many Church programs, telephone and online communication are a useful tool for building community and pastoral care and support. However, telephone and online communication may be used by those seeking to harm children, young people and vulnerable people. Telephone and online communication may be used to test or step over relational boundaries. We need to be mindful of the positional power dynamic that exists between staff and volunteers and the children and young people under their care.

Contact with all children and young people

- where possible and practical, parents will be informed of any possible telephone or online communication with children and young people;
- staff and volunteer leaders must not engage in any telephone or online communication that:
 - constitutes unlawful discrimination;
 - is harassing, threatening or derogatory;
 - is obscene, sexually explicit or pornographic;
 - is inappropriately personal or intimate;
 - attempts to hide the identity of the sender or represent the sender as someone else; or
 - is defamatory.

Contact with primary-aged children

- *Telephone contact:* staff and volunteers should first contact parents and then, if appropriate, speak with the child. If the child answers the phone the staff member or volunteer should ask to speak to the parent first and explain to the parent why they are calling. Staff and volunteers should never call a primary-aged child on their mobile phone (unless there is a serious emergency relating to the safety and wellbeing of the child).
- *SMS (or other messaging service) contact:* must be limited to conveying information about Church programs.
- *Online contact:* must be limited to conveying information about Church programs. Staff and volunteers should never communicate directly (privately or one-or-one) with primary-aged children on a social networking site.
- *Email contact:* must be limited to conveying information about Church programs. More significant conversations should be held in person.
- *In-person contact outside of programs:* It is never appropriate to meet primary-aged children socially without written or verbal permission from their parents or carer. It is also important to ensure that a leader is never alone with a child (see the principles above).

Contact with children in Years 7 and 8

- *Phone contact:* staff and volunteers should first contact the parents or carer of the child and then, if appropriate, speak with the child. If the child answers the phone the staff member or volunteer should ask to speak to the parent first and explain to the parent why they are calling. Staff and volunteers should never call a child in Year 7 to 8 on their mobile phone (unless there is a serious emergency relating to the safety and wellbeing of the child).
- *Email contact:* should be limited to conveying information about Church programs and basic encouragement. More significant conversations should be held in person.
- *In person contact outside of programs:* It is never appropriate to meet children in Years 7 & 8 socially without written or verbal permission from the parents and discussing it with your ministry supervisor first.
- Private video calls (skype/facetime) are not appropriate for children in years 7 & 8.
- *SMS (or other messaging service) contact:* must be limited to conveying information about Church programs.
- *Online contact:* Caution must be used when participating with children on social networking sites. You must maintain transparency and be accountable for what you say. You must also take care with the message you intend to communicate through both the words and images you use as it may be perceived differently by those who view it. Staff and volunteers should consider limiting social media contact with children in years 7 & 8, however, if social media contact is made with children in years 7 & 8 the following guidelines are recommended:
 - Limit contact to group discussions that can be read by others.
 - Consider gender dynamics. For example, you should never have a group discussion where the group of students are all of the opposite gender (for example a male leader should not have an online chat with four of the year 8 girls).
 - The history of the chat should be kept. Staff and volunteers should not communicate using social media which cannot be retained.
 - Consider privacy settings which prevent personal contacts from seeing or interacting with child contacts connected to your ministry.

- Ensure any text is beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued.
- Ensure all photos are beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued.
- Private contact or conversations with children in years 7 & 8 should be limited to conveying information about Church programs and basic encouragement.

Contact with young people in years 9-12

- *Phone contact:* Phone contact is permissible.
- *SMS (or other messaging service) contact:* is permissible and can include conveying information about Church programs and encouragement (e.g. praying for you this week). Messages should be retained for accountability.
- *Email:* can include logistics and private conversations. If possible, more significant conversations should be held in person. Messages should be retained for accountability.
- *In person contact outside of programs:* Leaders may meet with same gender students or in mixed groups in public places (eg/ café). Parents and the relevant ministry leader should be informed of this meeting occurring ahead of time.
- Private video calls (skype/facetime) are not appropriate, however, group video calls may be appropriate in some circumstances (eg small group bible study context).
- *Online contact:* Caution must be used when participating with young people on social networking sites. You must maintain transparency and be accountable for what you say. You must also take care with the message you intend to communicate through both the words and images you use as it may be perceived differently by those who view it.:

If social media contact is made with young people in years 9 – 12 the following guidelines are recommended:

- Ideally, communicate through group discussions that can be read by multiple other people.
- Consider gender dynamics. For example, you should never have a group discussion where the group of students are all of the opposite gender (for example a male leader should not have an online chat with four of the year 8 girls).
- The history of any chat should be kept. Staff and volunteers should not communicate using social media which cannot be retained.
- Consider privacy settings which prevent personal contacts from seeing or interacting with child contacts connected to your ministry.
- Ensure any text is beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued.
- Ensure all photos are beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued.