

Mills River Presbyterian Church Child Protection Policy

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Introduction and Purpose

As people who seek to live the commandment to “let the children come” (Matthew 19:14), the members of Mills River Presbyterian Church take seriously the importance of providing a safe and nurturing environment for all children and youth participating in the activities and programs of MRPC.

With the establishment of this Child-Youth Protection Policy, Mills River Presbyterian Church is setting an example and taking a stand against the potential of any child abuse, neglect, and exploitation that breaks the relationships and trust to which our Church is committed.

The Child-Youth Protection Policy is intended to protect the children in our Church community, the adult volunteers and employees who work with them, and the Church itself.

The Policy establishes standards and procedures for:

- Supervision of and interaction with children and youth
- Screening and training volunteers and staff
- Reporting of and responding to suspicious or inappropriate activity

This Policy seeks to be practical and reasonable – relying upon sound judgement and good sense – while at the same time ensuring that necessary safeguards are in place to protect our children and youth.

Scope and Applicability

The Child-Youth Protection Policy applies to all Mills River Presbyterian Church staff and any Church member or non-member volunteer working with children or youth.

Covered activities and programs – both on and off church premises – include but are not limited to: Sunday School classes, Youth fellowship programs, nursery, Vacation Bible School, children and youth choirs, church-sponsored retreats and mission trips, and confirmation mentoring.

Guidelines for Interacting with Children and Youth

Code of Conduct

Mills River Presbyterian Church expects that all staff and volunteers with children and youth will exemplify Christ's love of children in all that they do and will offer a healthy and positive Christian role model. MRPC employees and volunteers:

1. Will support and promote spiritual and emotional growth and development in their interactions with children and youth.
2. Will provide proper supervision and exercise sound judgment in maintaining a safe environment at all times.
3. Will observe the Two-Adult Policy as documented in the Child-Youth Protection Policy and will avoid one-on-one situations with a child or youth except in emergency or pre-approved situations.
4. Will respect the rights of children and youth not to be touched in ways that make them feel uncomfortable and will discourage children from touching one another in an inappropriate manner.
5. Will be alert to possible signs of abuse to children participating in church programs and immediately report any suspicions to the staff person responsible for the program.
6. Will not verbally, emotionally, physically, or sexually abuse children.

7. Will not discipline children by use of physical punishment or by failing to provide the necessities of care.
8. Will use physical restraint only when necessary to protect the child or others from harm and will report circumstances to the child's parent or guardian or the staff person responsible for the program.
9. Will release children only to adults authorized by the child's parent or guardian.
10. Will not possess or use illegal drugs or alcohol or smoke or use tobacco during church programs for children and youth.
11. Will not supervise children or youth in the event judgment and ability is impaired by legally prescribed medication.
12. Will not engage in profanity, inappropriate language or jokes, or any kind of harassment in the presence of children, youth, or parents.
13. Will not share inappropriate details of their personal life or ask children or youth to share inappropriate details through written, verbal, or electronic communication.
14. Will not date youth program participants.
15. Will give gifts only on a group basis or for specific occasions (e.g., baptism, confirmation, birthday, graduation). Giving gifts to individual children or youth should be done only with the knowledge and permission of parents.

Two-Adult Policy

At least two adults, as defined below, should supervise all church-sponsored programs and activities involving children and youth whether on or off campus. Adults should make every reasonable effort to remain in sight of one another at all times except in emergency situations and when circumstances demand otherwise.

One adult in any program for children and youth at Mills River Presbyterian must be at least 21 years of age and at least five years older than the oldest program participant. The second adult present in these situations may be 18 years old and a high school graduate. In any one-on-one situation outlined in this policy, the adult must be at least 21 years old.

High school youth who are 15 years old or older may function as in the role of the second adult provided they have been through a child safety training designed for high school youth by the staff person responsible for the program. This training should educate them on child abuse prevention and reporting procedures, as well as any other information necessary for their particular leadership role.

Adults should make every reasonable effort to avoid being in a one-child, one-adult situation. When one-on-one interactions between children and youth and employee/volunteers are necessary (e.g. in emergency situations or occasions of pastoral care or mentoring as described under Specific Situations below), care must be taken to conduct the meeting in an environment that provides visibility by other adults.

Another adult must have knowledge of the employee/volunteer's whereabouts and with whom they are meeting.

With youth in Sunday School, two adults should be present whenever possible. However, one adult may teach 6th grade or above as long as there is more than one youth present in the class. If only one youth is present, the class should combine with another group.

Specific Situations

Transportation

Adult leaders should make every reasonable effort to avoid being alone in a vehicle with a child or youth. However, it is permissible for one adult driver to transport several children and youth in a vehicle in a convoy of vehicles traveling to or from an event.

If it is necessary for a child to get home after an event and circumstances dictate that a volunteer, staff member, or intern take the child home, an effort should be made to contact the family and inform them of the situation before transporting the child. If the parents cannot be reached, another adult should be made aware of the transportation plans and should be contacted once the child is safely home.

Pastoral Care and Mentoring

Sound discretion should be exercised by adult staff and volunteers in one-on-one pastoral care or mentoring situations with children or youth. To avoid the appearance of impropriety, such meetings may take place privately but with others nearby and not isolated from view.

Examples include meeting in a public place, meeting with an open or cracked door, or meeting in a room or office with a clear glass window in the door. Under no circumstances should a door be locked when one adult and one child or youth are alone.

Bathroom Guidelines

Infants and Toddlers

- Diaper changing must always take place in line of sight of another adult.

Kindergarten and Younger

- No child should be sent to the restroom alone.
- When a group of children goes to the restroom together, one adult will escort the children and wait outside.
- If only one child needs to go to the restroom, one adult caregiver may escort the child to the restroom after informing another adult. The caregiver will wait outside the door and escort the child back to the group. The adult will call the child's name if he or she is taking longer than seems necessary.

- Generally, an adult should not be alone with a child in a restroom. If, however, this is not possible because a child needs assistance, the caregiver should inform another adult of the assistance needed and provided.
- An adult should never go into a stall with a child and shut the door.
- In any circumstances where the bathroom is isolated from the group, when reasonable and practical two adults should escort a child to the restroom.

Elementary School Children

- When a child in this age group needs to use the restroom, an adult should monitor their whereabouts.
- If the restroom is isolated from the group, two same sex children may be sent inside together.

Overnight Trips

On overnight trips with children or youth, reasonable boundaries should be in place to respect the privacy of each person. Males and females should sleep in separate rooms. An adult may sleep in a room with two or more youth of the same sex. An adult should never share a bed with a youth or sleep alone in a room with only one youth.

Under no circumstances can one adult alone take or accompany children or youth on an overnight outing. In addition, two adults who are married to each other should not be the only adult chaperones on any overnight trip.

Social Media Policy

Communicating with Children and Youth

- **Privacy Settings.** Set stringent privacy settings on any social networking profile if you are an adult ministering to children and youth.
- **Youth Leaders, Teachers and Advisors.** Grant the appropriate staff person full access to your profile and correspondence if you accept friend requests from minors or youth associated with our community of faith. It is recommended that adults allow friend and follow requests to come from youth not from them to a youth.
- **Abuse and Neglect.** Remember material on any site (church-affiliated or not) that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited should be immediately reported to the clergy and/or Department of Social Services (DSS).
- **Two-Adult Policy.** Any and all private communications between a child/youth and adult must include two adults, preferably one being a church staff member.
- **Group Page.** Keep in mind that the best way to communicate is through a group page set up by the church. Tie events to the group page.
- **Limit Commentary on Pictures.** If you are an adult, limit comments to just one or two photographs on a child/youth's page. Otherwise it can be perceived as intrusive and make the child/youth feel uncomfortable.

Groups on Social Networking Sites

- Be sure each group has at least two unrelated adult administrators as well as at least two youth participants.
- **Closed Verses Hidden.** Choose closed, not “hidden” groups, for youth.
- Report any material on any site (whether affiliated with the church or not) that raises suspicion that a child has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited to the clergy or the Department of Social Services. If material is on a church-affiliated site, that material should be documented for church records and then removed from the site after consultation with DSS or the police.
- **Inappropriate Behavior.** Address any content that depicts inappropriate behavior during a church-sponsored event or activity with fellow youth leaders and parents.
- **Open to Parents.** Open social networking groups for youth to current parents.
- **Former Youth Workers.** Remove former adult leaders from administrative functions of social media sites once they depart from their position as youth ministry staff or youth leader.

Screening and Education for Volunteers and Staff

Volunteers and staff will be screened and educated as described below. Results of background checks and self-disclosure statements will be kept strictly confidential.

General Volunteers include individuals volunteering in situations where there will be two or more adults present in the company of children, such as Sunday School Teachers, Vacation Bible School, nursery volunteers and others. All general volunteers:

- Will undergo a background check provided by MRPC and will be checked to ensure that he/she is not listed on the sex offender registry. A background check will be given every two years.
- Will complete a Child Protection training and educational event arranged by the Christian Education Committee within 3 months of beginning to work with children or youth. Parents of high school-age volunteers should provide written permission for the young person to attend the training as well as written acknowledgement that their child has never been arrested.
- Will acknowledge in writing that they have reviewed, understand, and will comply with the Child and Youth Protection Policy and will verify that they have never been the subject of a formal complaint to governmental authorities such as the police or the Department of Family and Child Services or convicted of a crime against children or a violent crime. The supervising staff person will use his or her best judgment in determining how disclosed information will affect the person’s ability to volunteer.

Overnight and One-on-One Volunteers include individuals volunteering in a position that may include the following situations: any overnight activity with children (e.g., chaperoning camping trips, ski trips, conferences or retreats) and any potential one-on-one activities with a child (e.g., counseling, tutoring, mentoring). All overnight and one-on-one volunteers:

- Will have been a member of MRPC for at least 6 months before volunteering with children and youth. Exceptions will be granted only by the approval of the Christian Education Committee.
- Will complete a Child Protection training and educational event arranged by the Christian Education Committee within 3 months of beginning to work with children or youth.
- Will acknowledge in writing that they have reviewed, understand, and will comply with the Child and Youth Protection Policy and will verify that they have never been the subject of a formal complaint to governmental authorities such as the police or the Department of Family and Child Services or convicted of a crime against children or a violent crime.
- Will agree to a national criminal records check and any other background checks that are deemed necessary by the church. Background check information will be reviewed by the direct supervisor and a file maintained in the church office. The supervising staff person will use his or her best judgment in determining how disclosed information will affect the person's ability to volunteer.
- Will provide a copy of a valid driver's license.

Staff and Interns includes all current and prospective employees. All interns and paid employees of the Church:

- Will complete a written application and provide personal references.
- Will complete an in-person interview during which the potential staff member will be asked to provide background information and references.
- Will complete a Child Protection training and educational event arranged by the Christian Education Committee within 3 months of employment (parents of high school-age volunteers should provide written permission for the young person to attend the training as well as written acknowledgement that their child has never been arrested).
- Will acknowledge in writing that they have reviewed, understand, and will comply with the Child and Youth Protection Policy and will verify that they have never been the subject of a formal complaint to governmental authorities such as the police or the Department of Family and Child Services or convicted of a crime against children or a violent crime.
- Will agree to a national criminal records check and any other background checks that are deemed necessary by the church. Background check information will be reviewed by the direct supervisor and a file maintained in the church office. The supervising staff person will use his or her best judgment in determining how results of background checks will affect the applicant's employment.
- Will provide a copy of a valid driver's license.

Reporting and Responding

Allegations

Every employee and volunteer of Mills River Presbyterian Church is expected to report any situation that presents a suspicion that child abuse may have occurred. Such report shall be made within 24 hours to the appropriate staff person, who will report to the

Pastor. If the allegation is against the Pastor, a report should be made to the clerk of session. They will make sure that policy is followed as outlined in this document.

In the event of an allegation of child abuse, the following procedures shall be followed at Mills River Presbyterian Church:

- Every allegation of abuse shall be taken seriously. Adequate care, respect, and confidentiality shall be offered to alleged victims and perpetrators until the allegation is substantiated or cleared.
- The Pastor should report allegations of child abuse to the police department that has jurisdiction and to Henderson County Child Protective Services as required or necessary. If the allegation involves a report of abuse by a church employee or volunteer or on church property, the Pastor should make a report to the church's liability insurance provider and may wish to consult with an attorney.
- If a report is made, parents will be notified unless parents are the alleged abuser or it would pose a risk to the child to inform the parent. Staff members will use their best judgment in revealing the identity of the alleged abuser to parents.
- Written documentation relating to the matter shall be kept in a confidential file.
- The protection of the child is of primary importance. The Pastor will use their best judgment in terminating or suspending accused staff members and in the separating of alleged victim and alleged abuser.
- All church employees and volunteers will refer any inquiries regarding the situation to the Pastor. The Pastor, or their designee, shall be the only person authorized to release any information regarding an allegation except where the law requires others to release information, such as to a protective services investigator or a police officer.

Concerns

From time to time, concerns arise regarding the conduct of our children, youth, and adults at MRPC that are not clearly abuse related issues but impinge upon child and youth protection and safety and may require attention and review. Sometimes patterns and trends of a questionable nature may be noticed.

Examples of such concerns might include inappropriate behavior by leaders or participants, unsafe swimming conduct, inappropriate language, dress or leadership, or failure to follow church policy.

All adults, youth and children are encouraged to report any issues as soon as possible to the responsible staff person or Head of Staff as soon as possible. Such notification may be oral.

All concerns reported shall be documented and addressed to ensure the safety and well-being of the children and youth. A file of documented concerns shall be maintained by the Pastor or their designee and shall be reviewed at least annually by the Pastor.

Addressing Members Who Are Known Offenders

Mills River Presbyterian Church seeks to embody the love of Christ to all. In addition to requiring us to ensure the safety and nurture of all children and youth, this love requires us to be a place of redemption and grace. Therefore, if a staff member is made aware that a member or visitor is a convicted offender, the Pastor should be notified. The Pastor, in conversation with Session, should use his or her best judgment in counseling the offender and setting appropriate expectations on that person's life in the community. The Pastor, in conversation with Session, should also use their judgment in advising other staff members of the offender's presence in the church.

Mills River Presbyterian Church Child-Youth Protection Policy

Acceptance and Affirmation

I have reviewed, understand and will comply with the Child-Youth protection Policy of Mills River Presbyterian Church _____ (initial)

I have never been the subject of a formal complain to governmental authorities such as the police or the Department of Family and Child Services or convicted of a crime against children or violent crime _____ (initial)

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____