



*Faith Communities Keeping
Children & Youth Safe*

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Child Protection and Abuse Response Policy

Mountain States Mennonite Conference

Review every two years; next review July 2020.

Introduction

Each child is a special gift from God. We acknowledge the high value that Jesus placed on children during His earthly ministry. We seek to make all our church activities and facilities safe, especially for children. It is our responsibility as adults to do all we can to protect children.

Sadly, child abuse is prevalent. It is hurting children, families, and societies everywhere. Mountain States Mennonite Conference (Conference) has congregations and holds events in Colorado and New Mexico. Although our policy is motivated by the commitment to protect children, legal standards are also important. As a context for legal standards for child protection, citations for state laws regarding child protection and other resources can be found at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/>. This web page allows searches for locating definitions of different categories of abuse in state statutes.

- Colorado statutes define child abuse and neglect in Colo. Rev. Stat. Title 19 Section 1, including definitions of physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse / exploitation, emotional abuse, and abandonment, and defines standards for reporting.
- New Mexico statutes define child abuse and neglect in N.M. Stat. Ann. Title 32A Section 4, including definitions of abused child, physical abuse, neglected child, sexual abuse, and abandonment, and define standards for reporting.

Child abuse prevention within our church community

We must be prepared in both knowledge and practice to prevent all types of child abuse and neglect and to strengthen families. This policy applies to all persons in Conference leadership positions. We commit to:

1. Raise awareness and Conference expectations
 - a. Provide materials related to the training topics described in the next section to all Conference leaders at least once per year. This includes the Leadership Board, the Conference Minister (or conference minister team), the Ministerial Council, and any conference youth council or committee with responsibility for programming involving children.

- b. Conference expects that Conference leaders who are also teachers and leaders of children in their congregations will obtain the training described in the next section at the congregational level.
 - c. Conference expects to publish at least one article per year on topics related to the training described in the next section in the Conference newsletter.
 - d. Conference expects that all congregations in the Conference and all ministries related to the Conference (whether formally part of the Conference structure or not) adopt a child protection policy at least as broad as the sample short form provided on the Dove's Nest web site at <https://dovesnest.net/policies>.
 - e. Conference expects that any congregation in the Conference that has a covenant or limited access agreement restricting the participation of an individual in the congregation because of a conviction, pending charge of a child sexual offense, or otherwise will inform Conference through the Conference Minister of such covenant and that the congregation will make the agreement and restrictions applicable to Conference events.
 - f. Conference will provide resources on Healthy Boundary Training for credentialed leaders in the Conference on the Conference web site and will include a segment on child safety as part of the refresher for credentialed persons.
2. Offer trainings for all Conference staff involved with youth ministry or ministry to children. Annually, training and materials will be offered to all adults in Conference leadership roles related to children. Training may be specific to child abuse or may be on a related topic such as child and youth safety, child development, healthy family relationships, technology/social media, or any protective or risk factor for abuse. Conference will provide information and training on mandatory reporting requirements.
 3. Take reasonable steps to make facilities used by our Conference safe for children. This includes locations where Conference annual assemblies and other Conference events involving families or children are held.
 - a. Consider the safety of children in selecting venues for Conference events.
 - b. Ensure that there are windows in all doors where children or youth ministry is conducted.
 - c. A fully stocked first-aid kit will be available at the Conference assembly location
 - d. In the event that the Conference identifies an office for Conference activities, this policy will apply to and be revised as necessary for specific application to such facility.
 4. Provide safe and adequate supervision to children.
 - a. Follow the rule of having two adults present at overnight activities involving children and when activities are being conducted in homes or other private locations.
 - b. Conference will avoid situations where a child is alone with one adult who is not the child's parent or guardian.

- c. A youth (eighteen years or younger) should never teach, care for, or conduct activities for children alone without a supervising adult available.
 - d. A parent must always be notified ahead of time and give consent for his or her child to be transported away from facilities where the Conference event is held.
 - e. No physical discipline (hitting, slapping) may be used. When a child misbehaves, an adult may use redirection and/or verbal means to guide the child's behavior. If this does not work, the child shall be taken to his or her parent for further action.
5. Attend to related personnel issues.
- a. The chair and members of any committee appointed or that assumes responsibility for planning a Conference event that may involve children or families with children will be presented a copy of the Conference's child protection and abuse response policy and asked to acknowledge that he or she has read and will abide by the policy.
 - b. Before each Conference event, the committee planning the event is responsible to ensure that each teacher, supervisor, and other persons involved with children's activities will be presented a copy of this Child Protection and Abuse Response Policy and asked to acknowledge that he or she has read and will abide by the Policy.
 - c. A background check, including child abuse and sex offender registries and criminal history, will be conducted on final candidates for all Conference staff positions involving children before hiring. These background checks must be conducted in all the states the individual has lived in the previous twenty years.
 - d. Congregations are expected to coordinate with the Conference Minister Team in the process of hiring any pastor. This hiring process follow the MC USA guidelines, uses the Ministerial Leadership Inquiry (MLI) form, requires references, and requires that a background check be conducted.
 - e. Individuals must have regular involvement in the Conference for at least six months before being allowed to be in a conference staff position as a teacher or leader of children or youth.
6. Deal appropriately with offenders and allegations of abuse.
- a. If a child/youth discloses abuse or neglect to you or you have a suspicion, believe the child/youth and make a report immediately to Child Protective Services (1-800-4ACHILD) or the police. Remember: you don't have to have evidence or proof. Do not do the investigation yourself—or anything that resembles that. Cooperate with professionals who conduct the investigation.
 - b. Follow these steps:
 - After reporting, notify the pastor and/or child protection team.
 - Immediately attend to the victim and his or her family's safety and needs through church leadership *and* an outside agency, like a child advocacy center. Keep the victim's needs at the center of any process.

- Immediately relieve the alleged offender from all responsibilities involving contact with children until the conclusion of the investigation.
 - Consider the likelihood that there is more than one individual harmed.
 - Within 48 hours, notify all parents whose children may have encountered the alleged offender. Let them know that allegations have been made and reported.
 - Keep victims and offenders separated during the investigation. Support child victims in engaging in age-appropriate activities. If offenders are adolescents, find alternate activities for them.
 - Inform area Conference leadership or the equivalent.
 - After the investigation, follow all legal implications for the offender. Inform the entire church. Secrecy not only makes children unsafe, it also does not help offenders.
 - Even if the abuse is not confirmed, attend to the dynamics that prompted the allegations and carefully consider the degree to which victims and offenders need to remain separated.
 - Make pastoral care available to all involved. Important: prioritize the needs of the victim over the offender.
 - Communities themselves need healing from crisis. This can happen through informational meetings with time for Q&A, circle gatherings to hear harms and feelings, and formulation of a task force to do problem-solving for the future.
- c. Any individual who is a registered sex offender, or is known to have been convicted or has a pending charge of a child sexual offense, must not be allowed any unsupervised contact with children and may not be involved in children's or youth ministry (formal or informal).

This policy will be implemented and facilitated by the Conference Moderator and the Conference Minister (or Conference Minister Team Coordinator), who will ensure that the coordinator of any committee planning a Conference event is aware of this Policy and of their responsibilities under this Policy.

Adopted by the MSMC Leadership Board July 23, 2018