**Safe Congregations Policy**

**United Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

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This policy will apply to all United Unitarian Universalist Congregation programs, services, activities and events, including all Religious Education and Youth Programs, youth/adult activities, events for which child care is provided, field trips and conferences.

I. DEFINITIONS

“Abuse” is an injury of a child by an adult or older child that might not be intentional, but is not accidental. It is usually classified as physical abuse, emotional abuse or sexual abuse. Harm caused by withholding life’s necessities – food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education – is called “neglect.” A “Child” is a person under the age of 18 years.

A “Group” is defined as those children or youth under the age of 18 who have been assigned to a nursery, preschool, RE class or any planned, organized program or activity.

“Mandatory reporters” are persons who are under a legal duty to report abuse to designated civil authorities. At United UUC, our minister and DRE are mandatory reporters who must report to the Department of Children and Family (DCF) whenever there is “reasonable cause” to believe that a child may have been abused. (Wisconsin Legislature s.48.981 (2))

“Safe Congregation Committee” is the established body within UNITED that is entrusted with the implementation of this policy. It is attached administratively to the UNITED Board.

“Supervision” is defined as the reasonable exercise of thoughtful action and responsibility by adults working with an assigned group, realizing that what constitutes appropriate supervision will vary with the ages of those in the group and the context of the activity.

“Workers” are persons who are engaged with UNITED children and youth, whether they are paid or unpaid, permanently assigned or occasional.

II. SCREENING AND SELECTION OF WORKERS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Those who provide direct care or supervision for children at UNITED must meet the following criteria:

* Those working with middle school children and younger should be at least 18 years of age, unless approved by the DRE.
* Those working with high school youth should be at least 21 years of age, unless approved by the DRE.
* All workers must complete the Application Form, must consent to such reference and/or background checks as UNITED, in its discretion, deems necessary, and must agree to be bound by the Code of Conduct set forth in this booklet. It is assumed that any person applying to work with UNITED children or youth, in any capacity, has given UNITED consent to do a criminal background check as it deems necessary.
* All workers must be trained by the Safe Congregation Committee in the issues presented in this booklet prior to being assigned duties with any group or program.

III. SUPERVISION GUIDELINES AND POLICIES

All workers are subject to the supervision and evaluation of the DRE and operate under the authority of the UNITED RE Committee. All workers are required to comply with the following policies to ensure a safe and secure environment for our children and youth:

* Whenever feasible, each group should have at least two workers present at all times with at least one worker being an adult. For infants and toddlers, the desirable ratio is one worker for each three children. The DRE shall determine the appropriate level of supervision for each group and activity, and may make exceptions to this rule on a case-by-case basis.
* The window coverings will be open and/or the door to any classroom must remain open at all times.
* The DRE and/or designee shall circulate in the RE classroom area and monitor classroom activities randomly during regular RE classes.
* When taking children to the restroom, the worker should stay out of the restroom until the child is finished. Children need as much privacy as possible when using bathroom facilities and workers are to enter and assist only when necessary.
* If an adult (other than a parent or guardian) has a private on-site, one-on-one meeting with a child, the DRE should be immediately notified of the meeting and its purpose. Such meetings are strongly discouraged and must be conducted in a room with a window or open door.
* No private off-site meetings are allowed other than with a parent or guardian without prior parent arrangement approved by the DRE.
* All outings must be pre-approved by the DRE. Participating children must have a signed permission slip from parent or guardian.
* All drivers shall be a minimum age of 21 and a maximum age of 65 or are approved by the DRE. All drivers must submit a current, valid driver’s license and proof of insurance before being assigned driving responsibilities.
* Drivers are to have two or more children in the car when transporting children/youth to and from activities. The only exception is when the driver is transporting a child with prior written parent arrangement and notification of the DRE.
* NOTE: Mentors and other adults who are recruited and approved by the DRE for the express purpose of establishing supportive relationships with a specific child are exempt from prohibitions against private meetings and car rides with that child. Outings with that child are deemed to be pre-approved.
* Children second grade and younger must be picked up by a parent or guardian unless prior arrangements have been made with the DRE.
* Should disruptive behavior arise, there must be two adults present during all disciplinary meetings between the worker and the child involved. The parents shall be informed of any such meeting and its contents as soon as possible.
* Corporal punishment or abusive language may not be used under any circumstances. This includes behavior that constitutes verbal, emotional or physical abuse and behavior or language that is threatening or demeaning.
* Behavior must both *be* and *appear to be* above reproach. Period.

IV. MAINTAINING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

A. Friendships

UNITED seeks to create an environment in which children can explore the spiritual and religious nature of their lives. We actively encourage mentoring relationships between youngsters and adults with specific programs, and know that when these relationships are genuine and healthy, they can be transformative for both the adult and the child involved.

Workers are expected to nurture the child’s physical, emotional and spiritual growth by treating him/her with kindness, trust, respect and good humor. Interactions must be genuine and not manipulative of the child’s needs or vulnerabilities. They must always be engaged in with the best interests of the child as the foremost goal.

Although we hope that children and adults will have genuine fondness for one another, any adult who looks to a child for peer-to-peer friendship is not sufficiently mature to be in a position of responsibility over them. Friendship is reciprocal, where neither person has more responsibility for the health of the friendship than the other. This is antithetical to the healthy adult/youth relationship, where the adult assumes responsibility for maintaining appropriate boundaries in order to maintain an atmosphere of health and trust.

The age of the child makes no difference in this matter. A teen-aged child is no more responsible to maintain healthy boundaries than is a three-year old. In fact, teens may have more confusion about appropriate boundaries and should be treated appropriately.

B. Physical Affection

Physical expressions of affection such as hugs are acceptable, but it is best to allow the child to initiate the contact, and the adult must be sensitive not to allow them to become too frequent or prolonged.

C. Sexualized Behavior

It is *never* appropriate to engage in any manner of sexualized behavior with a child. This refers not only to explicitly sexual behavior, but to sexually provocative, seductive or erotic behavior or language as well. It is inappropriate to tell jokes with sexual content, connotations, or “double entendres”.

D. Tobacco, Drugs and Alcohol

Children should be prohibited from using tobacco, drugs or alcohol, and should be barred from exhibiting illegal behavior while engaged in congregation -sanctioned activities. Workers should at all times be aware that their own behavior is a powerful statement to children as to what is acceptable and responsible use of these agents. Therefore, any such use by adults while acting in a supervisory capacity should be legal, moderate and discreet.

E. Confidentiality v. Secrets

If a child discloses incidents of abuse or neglect, the worker should listen carefully to the report but ask limited questions. Should the disclosure raise a suspicion that abuse has occurred or that the child is in imminent danger, the worker should report it immediately to the minister or DRE.

While you can assure a child that you will respect the information and use it confidentially, never give the child the impression that you will keep secrets.

*Confidentiality is not secret keeping.*

V. REPORTING AND RESPONSE PROCEDURES

UNITED has established a Safe Congregation Committee that will be responsible for helping the minister or DRE with questions relating to abuse reporting.

If a worker has reason to believe that abuse has occurred during an UNITED program or event, the adult must immediately report it to the minister or DRE. If the worker ascertains that the child is in a situation of imminent risk, he/she (or another responsible person) should immediately remove the abusive adult or vulnerable child from the situation and take steps necessary to protect the child.

The minister or DRE will alert the Facilitator of the Congregational Board that an abuse situation has been reported, and shall report it to DCFS and the Congregation’s insurer as the matter requires. Otherwise, the matter is to remain confidential. Release of information could interfere with successful prosecution of the offender, could result in unwarranted damage to the reputation of the accused, or may endanger the child.

If the reported abuse involves an UNITED worker, the DRE should immediately relieve that person of further duties involving the supervision, care or teaching of children until the matter is resolved.

The DRE shall keep a written record of all suspected cases of abuse including who reported the incident, the investigation conducted, any findings and conclusions, and what action was taken.

Should the media contact UNITED about an alleged incident of abuse, the Facilitator of the Congregational Board shall represent the Congregation to the public. In general, while no identifying information should ever be disclosed, the Facilitator may disclose steps taken to prevent such incidents, investigate this incident, and to guard against abusive situations in the future.

VI. LIMITED ACCESS AGREEMENTS

It is expected that a member of the congregation or a potential member/participant with a history or active accusation of sexual misconduct/abuse/sexual offense, will make that history known to one of the Congregation ministers, who will follow the procedures below.

Any person accused of a sexual offense of any kind will be placed on a limited access agreement\* without prejudice. The Safe Congregations Committee will be convened within 10 days of such a person being made known to the minister, the DRE, or any member of the Safe Congregations Committee to develop the agreement (which may be subsequently revised upon more information). The limited access agreement will remain in effect until all charges are dropped or confirmed (in which case see below.) Persons will not continue to attend or participate in any programs or services of United UUC until a limited access agreement is drawn up.

Any person convicted of a sexual offense or a history of known sexual offenses will be placed on a limited access agreement without prejudice. The Safe Congregations Committee will be convened within 10 days of such a person being made known to the minister, the DRE, or any member of the Safe Congregations Committee to develop the agreement in consultation with the person’s parole officer and/or treatment provider if it is determined that they can safely participate in the adult life of the congregation.

Any person accused, convicted, or with a history of known sex offenses who will not sign the Limited Access Agreement will be denied access to any programs or services at United UUC.

For further procedures on responding to a person accused, convicted, or with a history of known sex offenses, United UUC will follow the procedures outlined in Balancing Acts.

\*The template for a limited access agreement can be found at <http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/balancingacts/index.shtml> These procedures will be posted on the United UUC web site, conveyed at the annual meeting, be reviewed annually with all RE volunteers, be reviewed annually by the Safe Congregations Committee, presented in the annual report to the congregation, including notice of the number of persons currently attending who have signed a Limited Access Agreement.

VII. DISTRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR POLICY

The United Unitarian Universalist Congregation strives to be an inclusive community, affirming our congregants’ varied beliefs, opinions, and life experiences. Right relations with a broad range of individuals and openness to their diverse perspectives are highly valued by our congregation and are reflected in our Mission and in our association’s principles. We encourage and promote the free and respectful exchange of opinions among all our members and friends. Constructive engagement is a hallmark of a healthy and vibrant community, and we strive to create a safe and welcoming environment in which we can share ideas, viewpoints, and beliefs in a caring way.

We affirm that all people should be treated with consideration and respect. Ensuring the safety and well-being of the congregation as a whole – both physical and emotional – must take priority over the privileges and inclusion of any particular individual. Disruptive behavior by an individual or group compromises our ability to fulfill our ministry and undermines our sense of community, and it does not need to be tolerated by any organization, committee, or group. Real or perceived threats to the physical, emotional, and/or psychological well-being of individuals must be addressed promptly and firmly.

Disruptive behavior is defined as that which:

1. Raises concerns for the physical, emotional or psychological safety or well-being of adults and/or children
2. Disrupts or interferes with congregational activity.
3. Negatively impacts the congregation’s ability to live our mission.
4. Diminishes the appeal of the congregation to both potential future and existing members.
5. Displays intolerant, unwelcoming, or prejudicial behavior toward any group or individual.

To the degree that disruptive behavior compromises the health and/or safety of this congregation, we may find it necessary to take action to ensure the safety and well-being of our community. Therefore the Congregational Board has developed guidelines for addressing disruptive behavior.

The following shall be the policy of the United Unitarian Universalist Congregation in dealing with these situations involving disruptive behavior:

* If an immediate response is required, action will be taken by the Minister, if available, and/or the leader of the group/activity involved. This may include asking the offending person(s) to leave, or suspending the meeting or activity until such time as it may be safely resumed. If further assistance is required, the Police Department may be called.   
    
  Anytime an action of this type is taken without the Minister present, the Minister must be notified, and a follow-up communication describing the offense and the response should be written and distributed to the Minister and President of the Congregational Board. The Minister and/or Congregational Board will then write a letter to the offending party that reviews the situation, explains why the behavior was found to be disruptive, and outlines expectations and consequences regarding future behaviors.
* Situations not requiring immediate response should be referred to the minister and the Congregational Board. The Board will be responsible for investigating and mediating the situation, engaging the involved parties, and making recommendations for further action, if necessary. The Congregational Board must take into consideration the following situations:
  + DANGEROUSNESS - Is the individual the source of a threat or perceived threat to persons or property?
  + DISRUPTIVENESS - How much interference with congregation functions is taking place?
  + OFFENSIVENESS - How likely is it that prospective or existing members will be driven away?
  + CAUSES - Why is the disruption occurring? Is it a conflict between the individual and others in the congregation? Is it due to a professionally diagnosed condition of mental illness?
  + HISTORY - What is the frequency and degree of disruption caused in the past?
  + PROBABILITY OF CHANGE - How likely is it that the problem behavior will diminish in the future?

After careful investigation, the Congregational Board can resolve the issue in one of several ways. The Congregational Board will respond on a case-by-case basis, and may request consultation with an outside mediator, should circumstances warrant it. After appropriate investigation the Minister and the Congregational Board may recommend one of the following responses:

1. Take no action, finding the issue to be already resolved or not of consequence.
2. Require behavioral changes, outlined in a written, individualized covenant of right behavior that articulates clear expectations and consequences if those expectations are not met.
3. The offending party may be temporarily or permanently excluded from the congregation premises and all congregation activities, with their membership revoked. However, this extreme measure can only be carried out with approval of both the Minister and majority of the Congregational Board. The offending party shall be provided the opportunity to address both prior to the taking of such a vote. A Board vote to suspend or expel will be held in Executive Session and shall not be open to the public. A confidential record of the complaint and the action taken will be maintained by the office; periodic review of the file will be undertaken by the Minister and staff. If suspension or expulsion is agreed upon, the Minister and Congregational Board will send a letter to the offending party explaining the action.   
     
   Procedure for Requesting Reinstatement: A person who had been expelled or whose membership has been terminated by the Board may, after two years, request reinstatement by the Board of Trustees. The Board, after careful review of the circumstances of termination, must approve reinstatement by a majority vote and concurrence of the Minister.
4. If the Congregational Board’s decision is to exclude the individual(s) for a period of time or permanently, they may also take other steps deemed necessary or appropriate. These steps may include, but are not be limited to, acquiring a no trespass order, a restraining order, or other cooperative arrangements with the Police Department.

VIII. AWARENESS AND IMPLEMENTATION

The UNITED Congregational Board approved this policy on Sep. 22, 2015. It is to be communicated to the congregation and implemented as follows:

1. A copy of the *Policy* will be mailed to anyone identified by the DRE as being within its definition of “worker.” All new and existing workers will be required to sign a form indicating that they have read the Policy and agree to be bound by it.
2. A copy of the *Policy* will be distributed to the parents of all children currently enrolled in the RE program, and thereafter a copy shall be provided to the parents of children enrolling for the first time.
3. References to the *Policy* will be a standard part of every application interview and training of new workers. “Occasional” workers will be required to read the Policy and sign a form agreeing to be bound by it before being assigned duties of any sort involving children.
4. Mandatory teacher training on the *Policy* and on child sexual abuse awareness and prevention will be conducted annually.
5. At least one time each year, the DRE will compare a current list of approved workers with lists generated by municipal, county and/or state units of government underthe Wisconsin Sex Offender Registry.Criminal background checks will be made for all new and existing workers, as the DRE, in consultation with the Safe Congregation Committee, deems necessary and appropriate.
6. The DRE shall store all application forms, signed consents and background check reports in a locked file in the RE office.
7. The Safe Congregation Committee will include information about the *Policy* and its implementation as part of its annual report to the UNITED Congregational Board.