

Urbandale United Church of Christ

Safety in Our Children's Ministries

An important mission of the Urbandale United Church of Christ congregation is to provide a safe haven for all. Trust, mutual respect, hope, and kindness guide our practices in building support and care for everyone in our church and community. Our safety policies seek to foster accountability, responsibility, and healing within our ministries.

Child Safety Team Recommendations, p. 2

Welcome Volunteers! Thank you for making a commitment to care for Urbandale UCC kids. Sunday School teachers and child care providers are very special people in our children's lives. Abuse and harassment are not permitted within Urbandale UCC ministries, and furthermore, we care about children's well-being when they are away from church, too. You have a very important role in making Urbandale UCC a safe place for children, and this packet will help you understand your safety responsibilities.

Abuse Prevention

Here's what Urbandale UCC is doing to keep kids safe on our campus.

Volunteer Recruiting and Training:

All volunteers who work with kids at Urbandale UCC must fill the following requirements:

- Have attended Urbandale UCC for at least 6 months prior to volunteering with children.
- Not appear as a registered sex offender on the official website.
- Not be alone with a child in the ministries of Urbandale UCC (unless the child is a member of their family or has been placed in their care by family members).
There should always be two adults in a classroom, but at moments when this is not possible, you should still avoid situations where you are alone with one child.
- Attend the training required of all child care and education volunteers and staff.
- Sign a covenant following this training that indicates that they understand and agree to follow abuse prevention and reporting rules.

Classroom Discipline:

As a Just Peace church, we strive to teach our children alternatives to violence. Recognizing that preventing conflict through capable classroom management is the key to a peaceful and fun learning and worship environment, all teachers and child care providers at Urbandale UCC will be expected to follow these practices to reduce conflict and correct behavior problems:

- a) At the beginning of a term, set clear expectations, and a class covenant or set of rules.
- b) Communicate with other teachers as resources on problem solving.
- c) Keep children active and focused, at a level appropriate for their development.
- d) If a conflict arises in which a child is very disruptive or harms another physically or emotionally, it is an opportunity to teach non-violent problem solving skills to children. Follow these guidelines, in this order, if possible:

- A) Say “no” to an inappropriate behavior, and redirect the child’s attention elsewhere.
- B) Try any of the following, depending on the situation:
 - recenter time (time out)
 - conflict mediation between two or more children
 - get the child involved in a different activity
 - peer mediation
- C) If none of the above techniques are effective, bring the child’s parent or guardian to help.
- D) If patterns of behavior problems develop, schedule a conference with parents and possibly a pastor to offer care to the child and develop plans to cope with issues at church.

If you feel too involved in a conflict with a child, it may be helpful to ask another adult to solve the problem in your place. It is important to notice if we are not treating a child fairly because of the way we feel at the moment.

Remember: It is never appropriate to use any kind of physical or emotional punishment, including humiliation, isolation (i.e. being sent away unsupervised), spanking, or depriving a child of food or exercise.

Registration and Parent’s Covenant:

Each child will be registered by filling out a form that includes emergency and health info. The parent(s) or guardian(s) must sign the bottom of the form, indicating that they understand their role in helping Sunday School succeed. As the teacher, you should be able to assume that a family member will be in the church building unless they let you know where else they could be reached (for example, by cell phone). This is not to inconvenience families, it is simply to ensure that if a child has a serious behavior issue or medical emergency, that you will be able to count on their help.

Parents will also designate who, if anyone else, may pick up their child from Sunday School. In classrooms 5th grade and under, we expect a designated person to pick up each child, and as the teacher, you should not permit the child to leave with someone who is not pre-approved by the parent. This is a new rule, and families will have to build a new habit of picking up their kids. But it is very important for children’s safety that we know where they are at all times.

Keep all your students’ forms in your class binder, and do not leave it lying around – it is your job to protect the child’s personal information, and a safe place to keep the binder during the week will be designated.

Personal Boundaries:

It is important to know your own boundaries, and practice voicing them aloud. Kids need affection, but it is also necessary to respect their personal space, and teach them how to respect yours. In general, never touch a child any place that would be covered by a bathing suit; ask if you may have a hug or high-five, or better yet, let the child initiate physical contact; avoid treating children differently by not always letting the same child sit on your lap, have piggy back rides, etc.

Abuse Reporting

Here's what to do if you become aware that a child might be abused.

As trustworthy adults, we are sometimes approached with children's stories of abuse. It is important that kids have safe adults to talk to. Here are some tips on how to have a safe conversation with a child:

- If you suspect that a child might have something difficult to tell you, find a safe place to talk. Since you should not be all alone with a child, you can find a place where you can be seen, but others cannot hear a confidential conversation. If possible, let another adult know that you are going to have a private conversation.
- Do not promise to keep a secret! Let the child know that while you honor their privacy, you don't keep secrets that might hurt somebody. It is their choice if they want to ask for help.
- Do not ask leading questions! Listen carefully to what the child says, and write it down as soon as you get the chance. But do not put words in their mouth. Your job is simply to listen, and then report if there is abuse.
- Continue to include the child, and treat them normally. If they have chosen to share information about abuse, they probably feel very vulnerable, and will look to you to ensure that they are safe at church.

Reporting Abuse:

a) If any adult witnesses abuse between children, she/he will first follow discipline procedures and if the harm continues, she/he will ask another adult or a pastor to help. Every effort will be made to prevent abuse between children using appropriate classroom management techniques.

b) If a volunteer witnesses, suspects, or is told of a child being abused at church by an adult, she/he will contact the Response Team, which will respond according to Response Team guidelines. The reporting adult or the Response Team should notify the pastors that the Safety Team has been convened, so that the pastors can be aware of the conflict occurring in the church system which may require care.

c) If a volunteer or staff member witnesses, suspects, or is told of a child being abused away from church (at home, school, or other location) she/he will contact the Response Team.

Mandatory Reporters: If a volunteer or staff member is a Mandatory Reporter in Iowa, she/he is an exception to the above policies. What is expected in this case is that she/he will directly report any abuse suspected, witnessed, or told to her/him, then notify the Response Team so that measures can be taken to prevent any further abuse in the church setting among those individuals.

Definitions:

Child abuse: incidents in which individuals cause injury, emotional damage, or threatened harm to a child. Abuse is what individuals do to a child.

Child neglect: the continued failure, refusal, or inability to provide a child with the things necessary to meet his/her needs and failing to provide a child with protection or care. Neglect is what an individual does not do for a child. Types of neglect are physical, emotional, or educational.

Physical abuse: any physical injury caused by other than accidental means.

Sexual abuse: includes sexual contact such as intentional touching of private parts, sexual intercourse, sexual exploitation of children (pornography), and prostitution.

Sexual harassment: repeated or coercive sexual advances toward another person contrary to his or her wishes. It includes unwelcome sexual advances, request or sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Signs and Symptoms of Abuse:

Be aware that if a child exhibits the following signs, they may be suffering abuse. Physical symptoms include unusual marks on the body, incongruent explanations of how injuries occurred, difficulty walking, moving, or sitting, complaints of pain or itching in private areas, bruising or bleeding. Behavioral symptoms include extreme fear or anger toward a specific individual, loss of trust with adults in general, increase in acting out or antisocial behavior, loss of self-esteem, self-isolation, age-inappropriate behavior, talk about sophisticated or bizarre sexual knowledge, cry with no apparent reason, depression, anorexia, or suicidal thoughts.

Follow your instinct, listen to your gut. If you see any of these patterns or signs, and suspect there may be a problem, please report it, and then keep it confidential. It's not always easy to do the right thing, but in the long run, you can really make a difference.

Please know that your work is very important in our children's lives, and that because of you, someone's life will be helped, even if you never know it. Modeling good boundaries, being a good listener, and creating a safe sanctuary for all people to be free is the work of Christ in our midst.

Have a great year!