BROOKSIDE
Muswellbrook Baptist Church

Guidelines for Activities with Children and Young People

Adopted by Safe Church Team on 11/2/2024

Principles

1. 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: identifying possible risks and considering how likely they are, how serious they are and what steps can reasonably be taken to mitigate or reduce them.

2. 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 personal private arrangements which are separate from any role or activity at the Church, such as babysitting, if this is authorised by the parent or guardian responsible.

This principle is not designed to limit one adult volunteer ministering with a group of children or young people where there are other adults present, and an appropriate risk management plan is in place.

3. Accountability

Procedures and systems help staff and volunteers to be above reproach and 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, including oversight processes, safe use of physical spaces (e.g., clear panels in doors) and transparent communication (e.g., accessible reporting procedures). Documenting any potential incident as soon as possible provides both accountability and protection for those involved.

4. Awareness

It is important for everyone involved in ministry with children or young people to maintain an awareness of potential risks and issues.

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Ministry with children and young people involves building relationships of trust, which is a positive and worthy aim. However, staff and volunteers should also be aware of the potential for healthy relationships to be misunderstood as an inappropriate grooming relationship. Following these principles and safeguarding guidelines will minimise the potential for misunderstanding. Similarly, staff and volunteers should remain alert to potentially dangerous grooming behaviour by any other staff or volunteer.

5. Gender

Church leaders will consider gender dynamics and role modelling in Church activities for children and young people. One-on-one discipleship or mentoring of children and young people will generally be undertaken by a leader of the same gender. If there is a single gendered small group in school years 7 to 12 (e.g., year 7-8 girls Bible study), the Church will usually have at least one leader of the group who is of the same gender as the members of the group.

Church leaders should seek to be welcoming and gracious where appropriate to any young people experiencing gender dysphoria.

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Particular issues

Attendance, permission and roll keeping

The two issues 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 obtained 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. Please see *Ministry Information Form*. Some churches may choose to allow young people over the age of 16 to register themselves without parental consent.

Attendance could be recorded by parents/ carers signing children/ young people into and out of an activity or program. Alternatively, where general permission has already been given, attendance can be recorded by the marking of a role by program leaders. The leaders who were present at an activity also need to be recorded.

Both permission/ registration forms and attendance records for ministry programs for children or young people need to be held on file (electronic or hard copy) for at least 45 years (or preferably 100 years).

It is also important to make clear to everyone (children, parents and leaders) the process for children re-joining parents/ carers at the conclusion of a children/youth program which runs concurrently with a church service.

Where legal orders around custody of children are in place the Church should take extra precaution to ensure children are only released to authorised people.

Leader / participant ratios

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

As a general guideline, the Church will need a minimum of two fully screened and trained leaders on-site and participating in all programs. If the ministry program has more than 16 participants, there should usually be additional leaders to provide a minimum ratio of 1:8 (one leader for every eight participants). This is a general guide and Church leaders will need to adapt this ratio to the specific context of each ministry program. Some ministry programs will need more leaders the younger the children are or if there are children with additional needs or if they are engaging in higher risk activities. Ministry programs for older teens may need less leaders depending on the activity.

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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 how will the other leader get help? You may find you need 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) within reasonable proximity on the premises 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 teenager aged under 18 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, teenage leaders aged under 18 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

The Church will consider having a consistent policy regarding who may provide transport for Church activities. Church leaders may wish to institute a ‘No P Platers’ policy or may wish to require specific parental consent for travel with young and or P Plate drivers. The Church leaders should communicate any such driving policy to relevant parents or carers.

Church leaders should also be aware of the relevant restrictions on P Plate in NSW drivers, such as:

- between 11PM and 5AM, P1 P Plate drivers under 25 years of age may not have more than one passenger under 21;
- restrictions on the cars they are legally allowed to drive; and
- P Plate drivers may not use mobile phones while driving, even if the phone is connected via Bluetooth or a hands-free device.

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 private arrangements, such as babysitting, which are separate from any role or program at the Church, 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 minimised as far as possible and some additional measures taken, for example:

- the child or young person rides in the back seat of the car;
- the staff member or volunteer receives express permission from the child's parent or carer for the specific occasion; and/or
- 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, including nighttime supervision;
- bathroom configuration;
- safety and instruction on activities;
- third parties involved; and
- 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 (or preferably 100 years).

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Social contact

In person communication outside Church programs and events

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 carer consent, where practicable;
- meet with them in a public place (for example, a café) in line of sight of other people;
- not have a child or young person alone in your home;
- not visit a child or young person 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, postal and online communication outside Church programs

For many Church programs, telephone, postal and online communication are useful tools for building community and pastoral care and support. However, telephone, postal and online communication may be used by those seeking to harm children, young people and vulnerable people. Telephone, postal and online communication may be used to test or step over relational boundaries. Church leaders 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 in our Church:

- where possible and practical, parents will be informed of any possible telephone, postal or online communication with children and young people;
- staff and volunteer leaders in our Church must not engage in any telephone, postal 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.

These guidelines for social contact are summarised in the table below in age-appropriate groupings.

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	Contact with Primary Aged Children (K-6)	Contact with Children in Years 7 and 8	Contact with Young People in Years 9 to 12
Telephone Contact	Staff and volunteers should first contact parents and then, with permission of the parents or carer, 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 years K to 8 on their mobile phone (unless there is a serious emergency relating to the safety and wellbeing of the child).		Is permissible. Ideally staff and volunteers should request permission from the parents or carer of the young person.
SMS Contact (or other messaging service e.g., Whatsapp)	Must be limited to conveying information about Church programs. Never message a child in years K to 8 privately or one-on-one.		Is permissible and should be limited to conveying information about Church programs and encouragement (e.g., praying for you this week). Ideally, this communication should be in a group chat with another leader. Messages should be retained for accountability.
Other Online Contact (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok)	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.	Caution must be used when participating with children and young people on social networking sites. Staff and volunteers must maintain transparency and be accountable for what they say. They must also take care with the message they intend to communicate through both the words and images they use as it may be perceived differently by those who view it. Staff and volunteers should consider limiting social media contact with children and young people in years 7 to 12, however, if social media contact is made with children in years 7 to 12 the following guidelines are recommended: • Limit contact to group discussions that can be read by others (including other staff and volunteers). • Consider gender dynamics. Staff and volunteers should be beyond reproach and consider societal expectations regarding online communication with a group of young people of the opposite gender. • The history of the chat should be kept for accountability. Staff and volunteers should not communicate using social media platforms that automatically erase messages. • Consider privacy settings which prevent personal contacts from seeing or interacting with child contacts connected to the ministry.	

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	Contact with Primary Aged Children (K-6)	Contact with Children in Years 7 and 8	Contact with Young People in Years 9 to 12
		• Staff and volunteers will ensure any text is beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued. • Staff and volunteers will 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.	
Videocalls (e.g., Facetime, Skype, Zoom, Teams)	One-on-one video calls are not appropriate, however, group video calls may be appropriate in some circumstances (e.g., small group bible study context). Staff and volunteers should be aware and retain control of group chat and screen sharing settings.		
Email or postal Contact	Email must be limited to conveying information about Church programs. Postal communication is permissible on an ad hoc basis for the purposes of encouragement. More significant conversations should be held in person.		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 Church programs and events	Leaders will only meet with students one-on-one in exceptional circumstances. Leaders will only meet with groups of children if it is for discipleship and ministry purposes. Meetings will always be with the permission of the parents or carer and ministry leader and will occur in a public place with appropriate visibility by other adults (e.g., café).	Leaders may meet with same gender students one-on-one or in mixed groups if it is for discipleship and ministry purposes. Leaders may also meet with different gender students in exceptional circumstances for discipleship and ministry purposes (e.g., preparation for baptism). Meetings will always be with the permission of the parents or carer and ministry leader and will occur in a public place with appropriate visibility by other adults (e.g., café).	Leaders may meet with same gender students one-on-one or in mixed groups. Leaders may also meet with different gender students in limited circumstances for discipleship and ministry purposes (e.g., preparation for baptism). Meetings will always be with the permission of the parents or carer and ministry leader and will occur in a public place with appropriate visibility by other adults (e.g., café).

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