**PURPOSE OF POLICY**

This policy is intended to protect children participating in events sponsored by Mountain Fellowship (MtnF). This policy applies to MtnF employees and volunteers, who have the responsibility of supervising the activities of minors age 18 and below. This policy does not constitute a contract between MtnF and its employees/volunteers or any other party. It is merely a statement of policy and general guideline which MtnF will seek to follow. MtnF makes no guarantee to any party that all aspects of this policy will be followed in any given situation. MtnF is not responsible for the individual acts of any employee/volunteer.

**DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Child:** The term “child” or “children” shall include all persons under the age of eighteen (18) years.

**Child abuse**: Any action (or lack of action), which endangers or harms a child’s physical or emotional health and development. Child abuse occurs in different ways and includes the following:

1. **Physical Abuse:** any physical injury to a minor, which is not accidental, such as beating, spanking, shaking, slapping, burns, or biting. Other forms of physical abuse include massages, kissing, or prolonged embracing.

Examples of permissible physical contact include handshakes, high fives, pats on the back, placing an arm around the shoulders, sitting beside minors, holding hands during prayer, or brief hugs within sight of others.

1. **Verbal & Emotional Abuse:** persistent or extreme thwarting of a child’s basic emotional need to feel safe and secure. Emotional abuse occurs in an environment of constant criticism, belittling, humiliation, or persistent teasing. Other forms of verbal and emotional abuse include language or comments that are threatening, sexual, personally intimate, related to body development, or crude, regardless of how the communication is conveyed (e.g. text messages, email, phone calls, social networking sites, etc.)

Employees/volunteers need to avoid developing close emotional relationships with minors of the opposite sex and exercise extreme caution in dealing with minors of the same sex. At no time shall any employee/volunteer pursue a dating relationship with a minor, and they should be sensitive to minors with “crushes.”

1. **Sexual abuse:** any sexual activity between a minor and an adult or between minors, including activities such as fondling, exhibitionism, intercourse, incest or exposure to pornographic material. Other forms of sexual abuse include obscene verbal comments, texts, emails, phone calls, or posts on social media. If employees/volunteers become aware of the existence of pornography in the hands of a minor, they should immediately report this to the Director of Children’s Ministry (Ministry Director) or to the Senior Pastor (Pastor).

**Employee:** Any individual who is paid by MtnF on a full or part-time basis, and is serving in any position involving the supervision or custody of minors.

**MtnF or Church:** Mountain Fellowship.

**Policy:** MtnF Child Protection Policy and Procedures

**Response Team:** A team of two active officers and one female church member that advise the Ministry Director and the Pastor if an alleged violation of the Policy is reported.

**Volunteer:** Any individual who is not paid by the church, and is serving in any position involving the supervision or custody of minors.

**EMPLOYEE/VOLUNTEER SELECTION AND SCREENING PROCESS**

MtnF believes that appropriate personal relationships between adult employees/volunteers and minors of the church foster the community of Christ. MtnF will seek to prevent the abuse of minors when they are participating in church programs. Preventive measures include employee/volunteer screening, training and supervision of all employees/volunteers and a commitment to eliminating opportunities for abuse within church programs. The employee/volunteer screening and selection process includes the following:

1. **Six-Month Rule:**

No applicant will be considered for any position involving contact with minors until they have been involved with MtnF for a minimum of (6) six months. The applicant must be able to demonstrate he/she has regularly attended and been involved in church activities for at least six months. This time of interaction between MtnF and the applicant allows for better evaluation of suitability of the applicant for working with minors. The Ministry Director, with the prior approval of the Pastor, reserves the right to grant exceptions to this policy which will be documented in the applicant’s file.

1. **Written application:**

All individuals seeking to work with minors must complete the following tasks:

1. Complete a confidential written application;
2. Read, be in agreement with, and sign the Policy;
3. Give written permission for a criminal background check;
4. Provide personal references as requested;
5. Be interviewed by the Ministry Director and/or a designated Screener.

Approval to work with minors must be granted by the Ministry Director. The application will be maintained in confidence on file at MtnF.

1. **Criminal background check:**

A criminal background check and child sex abuse registry check will be required for applicants 18 years of age and older. No one who has been convicted of a felony or any crime involving misconduct with children will be allowed to work with children. The Ministry Director and the Pastor will address with the applicant any questionable information revealed in the background check or sex abuse registry. Completing the application to work with children authorizes the church to conduct these checks. Background checks will be kept confidential in a locked file at MtnF with access afforded only to appropriate staff on a need-to- know basis. As long as the employee/volunteer continues to work in the respective ministry, a background report will be re-checked every other year.

1. **Employees/Volunteers who are minors:**

Employees/volunteers, who are themselves under age 18, are a valuable resource in the care and nurture of our covenant children. The following guidelines apply to these employees/volunteers.

* Volunteers must be at least 14 years old; employees must be at least 16 years old.
* Minor employees/volunteers will be screened and trained as specified above with the exception of a required criminal records check.
* Applications submitted by a minor employee/volunteer must be signed by their parent/guardian where indicated.

**PROCEDURES AND SUPERVISORY REQUIREMENTS**

MtnF has a zero tolerance for abuse in its programs and ministry activities. It is the responsibility of every employee/volunteer in children and youth ministries to act in the best interest of all minors in every program. The following requirements shall be applicable to all employees/volunteers who have contact with minors participating in any program at MtnF.

1. **Safety of children**

It is the responsibility of employees/volunteers to promote the emotional and physical safety of minors giving regard to all factors and circumstances known to them. If in their opinion an unsafe condition exists, they shall immediately take appropriate precautions to protect all minors.

1. **Immunizations**

In order to prevent the spread of otherwise preventable and potentially dangerous diseases, the Church strongly encourages, but does not require, the parents of all children placed in a classroom or under the care of a worker to have their children immunized according to standard immunizations requirements for day care businesses licensed by the State of Tennessee and/or the requirements of the Tennessee Department of Public Education.

1. **Two worker rule**

A reasonable effort will be made to have two non-related employees/volunteers present in the room, or nearby, with minors during church activities. One-on-one contact between minors and employees/volunteers should be avoided. MtnF recognizes that there will be times when an unaccompanied employee/volunteer may be present with a group of minors or with a single minor. In those circumstances, (such as Sunday school or counseling) doors to the room will be open and windows uncovered or the activity will be conducted in a public space, in view of other adults or minors. Written parental consent should be obtained and on file in the Ministry Director’s office before the contact if possible; if not, a report of the meeting should be conveyed to the Ministry Director following the meeting. Meetings that regularly occur between one employee/volunteer and a group of minors or with a single minor (junior or senior high small groups; private music lessons, counseling, etc.) shall have written parental consent from each participant on file in the Ministry Director’s office before the meeting occurs. MtnF recognizes that a fundamental goal of the junior and senior high philosophy of ministry is to build relationships with students and families and to have regular, intentional contact with students. Meetings that spontaneously occur between one employee/volunteer and a group of minors or with a single minor are to be encouraged rather than thwarted by the scope of this policy. Therefore, employees/volunteers will be responsible to conduct these meetings in view of other adults and/or minors, to phone parents to receive verbal permission before the meeting occurs, and to file a report of the meeting with their supervisor following the meeting.

1. **Observation of children’s activities**

Activities for children should be scheduled in areas visible from adjoining areas. Such visibility will be maintained by leaving curtains and blinds open and, wherever possible, by leaving the door to the room open.

At no time will an adult meet alone with a child in any room where the door is closed or in an area where they cannot be seen. A clear, unobstructed glass window shall be installed in the doors or walls of all classrooms and offices typically occupied by children.

1. **Ratio of employee/volunteers to minors**

When supervising minors, it is required that a reasonable ratio of employees/volunteers to minors be maintained at all times. The supervisor overseeing the age group shall be primarily responsible for setting and maintaining a reasonable ratio of employees/volunteers to minors giving due regard to all factors present, including the number and age of the participants, the nature of the activities and the location where the activities are taking place.

1. **Overnight procedures**

Overnight activities will require a signed permission statement from the parent/guardian of the minors participating and must have a minimum of two employees/volunteers and maintain a ratio of not less than one employee/volunteer per nine (9) minors. An employee/volunteer may never sleep in the same bed with a minor. There must be both male and female employees/volunteers present at all co-ed overnights and at least two same-gender employees/volunteers on same- gender overnights.

1. **Release of claims**

Prior to any activity away from the church’s grounds, a Release of Claims must be signed by the child’s parent/guardian. Without the form signed and in the possession of the church, the child will not be allowed to participate in the away activity.

1. **No** **confidentiality**

Employees/volunteers can never promise confidentiality to a minor. Employees/volunteers must report to the Pastor if a minor discusses harming himself or others, committing a crime or being abused.

1. **Digital privacy**

Inappropriate use of cameras, imaging, or digital devices is prohibited. It is inappropriate to use any device capable of recording or transmitting visual images in areas where privacy is expected by participants. Posting ANY images on the internet is not allowed unless permission has been granted by the parents and approved by your supervisor.

1. **Hazing and bullying**

Physical hazing and initiations are prohibited. Verbal, physical, and cyber bullying are prohibited.

1. **Controlled substances**

The use of tobacco, alcohol, drugs and/or mind altering substances with minors is prohibited.

1. **Periodic training and review of policies & procedures**

The Ministry Director shall review this Policy with all employees/volunteers on an annual basis or when a change or addition is made to the policy. Each employee/volunteer shall acknowledge receipt of a written copy of the policy and of his/her participation in the annual training prior to the time they commence working with children and after each change to such policy. The signed acknowledgements shall be retained in the personnel file of the employee/volunteer.

**DISCIPLINE PROCEDURES**

No form of punishment that involves pain or physical discomfort may be used. Minors may be restrained if they are in danger of hurting themselves or others. Disruptive minors may be removed from the group to another part of the room.

**CONSEQUENCES FOR VIOLATING THE POLICY**

Any employee/volunteer accused of committing any act considered by this Policy to be harmful to a minor shall immediately be placed on leave until an official investigation by DCS or local law enforcement is completed. Following the official investigation by state and local authorities, any employee/volunteer found in violation of the Policy shall be prohibited from future participation in all MtnF ministries for minors. See the *Response Plan* section for further information on suspension and termination so as not to harm the reputation of the accused before DCS completes its investigation.

**REPORTING ALLEGED CHILD ABUSE**

**Reporting Obligation**

Tennessee state law mandates that anyone who has knowledge of or suspects abuse or neglect of a child must report it. The law makes no distinction between professional and non-professionals on the issue of reporting. Employees/Volunteers involved in MtnF ministries to minors must be aware of their individual responsibility to report any good faith suspicion or belief that a minor is or has been physically or sexually abused, physically or emotionally neglected, exposed to any form of violence or threat, exposed to any form of sexual exploitation including the possession, manufacture, or distribution of child pornography, online solicitation, enticement or showing of obscene material.

**Employees** who fail to report a prohibited act witnessed or suspected by them are violating this Policy and are subject to termination of employment.

**Volunteers** who fail to report a prohibited act witnessed or suspected by them may be restricted from participation in activities involving minors.

**Minors**, whether employees or volunteers, are exempt from this reporting requirement but are strongly encouraged to do so.

**To Whom To Report**

Nothing in this policy negates the right or responsibility of MtnF employees/volunteers (Reporter) to report suspicions of abuse to the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services (DCS) or the appropriate local law enforcement agency.

1. **Report Incident To TN Department of Children’s Services or Law Enforcement Agency**

A Reporter may report to an immediate supervisor or the Pastor and allow the supervisor to make the appropriate report to DCS or a law enforcement agency. The supervisor who receives the initial allegation from a worker will promptly inform church leadership of the suspected child abuse and promptly report the allegation to the Tennessee Department of Children Services Child Abuse Hotline.

The Reporter should confirm that the supervisor has reported the matter to DCS or law enforcement and do so him- or herself should he or she have any doubt as to whether the matter has been reported.

Contact information:

* TN Department of Children’s Services (DCS) Child Abuse Hotline: 1-877-542-2873. Someone is available 24/7. Resources regarding reporting information: <http://www.state.tn.us/youth/dcsguide/policies/chap14/14.1.pdf>
* The Hamilton County Sherriff’s Department (423) 209-7000

1. **Report Incident To Church Leadership**

An employee/volunteer (Reporter) is required to promptly report an incident to their immediate supervisor, and the supervisor will promptly notify the Pastor. If the supervisor is the person against whom an allegation is being made (the Respondent), the employee/volunteer shall promptly report the incident directly to the Pastor. If the Pastor is the Respondent, the employee/volunteer shall promptly report the incident to a member of the Session. The Reporter will be asked to fill out a MtnF Report of Child Abuse form, which is available from a supervisor and attached to this policy.

No employee/volunteer shall attempt to conduct a detailed investigation either through examination or interview of the child, the accused person or a witness. It is acceptable for the church staff supervisor receiving the report to obtain a reasonable amount of information about the incident to have cause to believe a child has been abused or neglected. In depth interviews of the child, the accused or a witness shall be conducted only by authorized officials of DCS or the local law enforcement agency to whom the suspected crime has been reported or, when appropriate, by the church’s legal counsel.

Any supervisory staff receiving an initial report of suspected prohibited behavior shall make sure the report is promptly made to a member of the Session or to the Pastor.

**RESPONSE PLAN**

In the event that an incident of child abuse or neglect is alleged to have occurred on the premises of MtnF or during a sponsored program or activity, the following procedure shall be implemented:

1. The Supervisor who receives the report will notify the Pastor and the Response Team consisting of two current officers and one female member at large.
2. The Supervisor who receives the report and Pastor in consultation with the Response Team will designate a person to notify the parent or guardian of the minor unless the parent or guardian is the person responsible for the abuse or neglect.
3. **Suspension of duties**

If the Respondent is an employee/volunteer, then the Respondent will immediately be placed on leave pending an investigation. For Employees, the outcome of the investigation will determine whether the leave is paid or unpaid. Removal from duty should occur in such a way that the accused person is not immediately deemed guilty. If the allegation is determined to be unsubstantiated, the employee/volunteer can be returned to their prior position.

The Response Team will keep the Session informed of the DCS investigation so that the Session can make decisions regarding continuation of employment and compensation.

1. MtnF will comply with the state’s requirements regarding mandatory reporting of abuse as the law then exists.
2. MtnF’s attorney and insurance company will be notified.
3. If the alleged abuse involves an ordained pastor at MtnF, the Tennessee Valley Presbytery will be notified and the Stated Clerk’s office made aware of the situation.
4. **Investigation by DCS and local authorities**

MtnF will cooperate fully with any investigation of the incident by DCS or local authorities.

1. **Liaison with the Community**

The Response Team will select one person to act as the official spokesperson for MtnF, who will be available to the media to answer questions and to interpret the child protection policy. The use of a prepared statement with the advice of legal counsel shall be the means by which the child protection policy will be described to the public. The church should emphasize to the public its position on child abuse, its concern for the victim, and the extensive steps being taken to address the safety of all children.

1. **Confidentiality**

All reports of child abuse or neglect shall be held in absolute confidence. No person shall communicate any information concerning the alleged event to any person except as necessary to cooperate with an official investigation. Any breach of this confidentiality by a MtnF employee/volunteer may be cause for immediate dismissal. The Pastor or the Response Team, in consultation with the state or local agency official conducting the investigation, may authorize limited additional disclosure if necessary to protect other minors from harm in the near future, particularly where the person responsible for the abuse cannot be identified. But in no case shall the identity of the victim or the accused person be disclosed except as required by law. Any person who is found guilty of the alleged abuse or misconduct will be removed from their position with minors.

1. **Ministerial Care**

The church staff shall encourage and assist the child and the parents in securing appropriate counseling, care and support. In the event the abuse or neglect involves a member or employee of the church, the staff shall encourage and assist the individual in securing appropriate care and support including third-party counseling.

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| --- | --- |
| Name of minor | Date of Report |
| Address/city/state/zip | Date of Birth of Minor or approximation |
| Phone of minor | Race |
| Name of parent/guardian of minor |  |

**INCIDENT INFORMATION**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Date of Incident  Time of Incident | Location of Incident |
| Parties Involved | Additional Witnesses with Contact Info. |
| Where did it occur? | |
| What is the physical evidence of abuse? If possible, this evidence should be preserved and turned in with this report. | |
| Name of alleged perpetrator including, name, address, phone and date of birth. | |
| Describe the incident? | |

**REPORTER INFORMATION**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Name of minor | Date of Report |
| Address/city/state/zip | Date of Birth of Minor or approximation |
| Phone of minor | Race |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Reporter’s name | Reporter’s position |
| Reporter’s signature | |
| Name/position of individual receiving this report | |