

Policy for the Protection of Children, Junior Youth, and Youth

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, revised January 2017

OBJECTIVE

American Bahá'í communities, at whatever stage of development, vigilantly provide a safe, protective environment for all who participate in Bahá'í-sponsored gatherings and activities. The aim of this document is to set forth policies to protect minors at Bahá'í-sponsored activities from any form of endangerment or harm.

The following procedures and policies apply to all situations in which the Bahá'í community undertakes to educate, care for, or supervise those who have not reached the age of majority¹, including, but not limited to:

- local ongoing Bahá'í activities,
- Bahá'í education classes and activities at permanent and seasonal schools,
- special activities which include an excursion and/or overnight arrangements, and
- activities connected with conferences, conventions, summer camps and other events.

REQUIREMENTS FOR ALL BAHÁ'Í ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN, JUNIOR YOUTH, AND YOUTH

It is imperative that all Bahá'í institutions, agencies, groups, and individuals that organize Bahá'í activities and events involving minors comply with the following guidelines.

The guiding principle of these policies is that all Bahá'í activities involving children, junior youth and youth are:

- institutionally sponsored,
- appropriately supervised, and
- held in a safe environment.

Institutional Sponsorship and Responsibilities

For reasons of liability, all ongoing educational programs for minors fall under the auspices of the Regional Training Institute Board, except for those held at a local Bahá'í center and those specifically sponsored by a Local Spiritual Assembly. Educational programs for minors that take place in those regions without Regional Training Institute Boards fall under the auspices of those Regional Bahá'í Councils. Those held at a seasonal or national school are sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly through its Office of Education and Schools.

¹ In most states, the age of majority is attained on the eighteenth birthday. In a few states, it is attained on the nineteenth birthday and in a few other states it occurs when the individual graduates from secondary school (high school). Sponsoring institutions must become familiar with their respective state laws regarding the age of majority. Of course, Bahá'í institutions should protect those who have attained the age of majority as well, but vigilance is especially important with those who have not.

For all Bahá'í activities involving minors under the care of either a Local Spiritual Assembly or an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly, sponsorship implies that the institution or agency:

- is aware of the activity and has noted it in its official minutes/records;
- has confirmed that it is appropriately supervised;
- has ensured that those conducting the activity have a means of requesting assistance and guidance from it, as needed;
- and has ensured that it is being held in a safe environment.

The sponsoring institution will note in its minutes the name of the activity, where it is being held, the frequency of the meeting and/or dates of the activity, and the individuals who are primarily responsible for leading the activity.

All institutions responsible for the promotion, establishment, and oversight of the education and activities of children, junior youth, and youth ensure that the policies of the National Spiritual Assembly set forth in this document are carried out.

Holding Activities for Children and Youth

Before any adult or youth over the age of fifteen is allowed to serve with minors, they must be verified through the regional training institute or, in the case of national or seasonal schools, through the Office of Education and Schools. This requirement also includes those who serve in a support role, such as drivers and those responsible for hospitality. This step is never to be postponed or omitted for the sake of expediency, even when the individuals are well known to the sponsoring institution.

Each activity should have at least one designated individual over the age of majority who can serve as the liaison to the sponsoring institution and can be immediately contacted should the need arise.

Activities for minors held at Bahá'í-owned facilities are to always have someone over the age of 21 on the premises. The institution that owns the facility should check with its insurance carrier in this regard to insure that the level of supervision is in compliance with the insurance policy.

Working with children and youth on behalf of the Bahá'í community is a privilege. It is within the discretion of the National Spiritual Assembly or the sponsoring institution to withhold the privilege of serving with minors at Bahá'í-sponsored activities from any individual, and to release any individual from serving with minors at any time to protect the minors and the community.

Human Resources

All Bahá'í activities and classes for minors must be supervised and carried out by individuals who have been verified through the regional training institute or, in the case of national or seasonal schools, through the Office of Education and Schools, prior to their service.

All individuals wishing to serve with minors need to complete a background check through Verified Volunteers, which includes a search for criminal records for all aliases and addresses of the previous seven years and a search of the National and State Sex Offender Registries.

Anyone who provides transportation for children and youth activities as part of their service must, in addition to a background check, complete a motor vehicle records (MVR) check prior to their service.

Individuals under the age of 18 are not to transport minors as part of their prescribed service. Some states have limitations in this area. Be sure to review the state laws.

The sponsoring institution or agency must inform those who wish to serve with minors in any capacity that prior to service they are required to complete a background check. It is highly recommended that the sponsoring agency make this known to anyone undertaking the study of Books 3 and 5 of the main sequence of institute courses.

Those who continue to work with minors must be re-verified for service with minors every two years from their previous eligibility date.

If the believer is a member of a Bahá'í community outside of the United States, the regional training institute will contact the Regional Bahá'í Council Liaison at the Bahá'í National Center to confirm his or her Bahá'í status.

If the regional training institute has any questions about the membership status of any individual during the clearance process, it should contact the Regional Bahá'í Council or, if necessary, the Regional Bahá'í Council Liaison at rbcliaison@usbnc.org.

Any individual who is not verified to serve with minors should be lovingly encouraged to consider other paths of service appropriate to his or her limitations/restrictions. It is important for the institution, in conveying such information, to be very mindful of the language it uses so as not to bring harm to that soul.

All institutions and agencies of the Faith who sponsor activities for minors have a responsibility to become familiar with the local and state laws related to the protection of minors and to comply accordingly.

The regional training institutes and Local Spiritual Assemblies will remain in close contact to make sure all pertinent parties are aware of individuals who have been verified for service and those who are not verified. Contact information of individuals used in Verified Volunteers to produce the background check is confidential and is to be used only for the purpose for which it was provided by the individual, which is to complete the background check.

Believers with Bahá'í Membership Restrictions

Please contact the Regional Bahá'í Council Liaison regarding individuals with limitations or restrictions on their Bahá'í status for guidance on how they may serve.

Ratio of Children to those Adults and Youth Facilitating an Activity for Minors

All Bahá'í activities for minors are facilitated at all times by teams of at least two adults or youth who have been approved in advance for that service. All activities should have at least one adult who has been cleared through the regional training institute and who is available to ensure the safety of the minors, should this be necessary; it is not required for the adult to be physically present during the activity.

Ensuring a Safe Environment

It is important that prior to the start of any activity for minors, the supervising adults or youth inspect locations where the activity is to be held, as well as any equipment to be used, and then

strive to mitigate any potential or obvious hazards.

Organizers are expected to comply with any additional requirements related to the care of minors stipulated either by law, the facility rental contract, or an insurance policy, such as ratios of adults to minors, equipment requirements, and the like.

Bahá'í institutions responsible for the management of a Bahá'í center or other Bahá'í-owned facility must be thoroughly acquainted with the safety requirements of their insurance carrier as well as local safety ordinances in their locality.

Written permission from a parent or guardian for each minor must be obtained prior to undertaking physical activities that could pose serious risks of injury, such as swimming, horseback riding, hiking, and so on.

Transportation

When a Bahá'í event involves the transportation of minors from one location to another, written permission from the parents/guardian of each minor is required and the parents/guardian should be informed of the details of the transportation arrangements.

When transportation of minors is being provided for an activity, the sponsoring institution or agency should ensure that the drivers have been verified through the regional training institute and have a current driver's license and auto insurance. Vehicles used for transporting minors should be in good repair, including properly installed and functioning seat belts for each passenger.

Photography

Photographs, videos, or any form of reproducing images of minors taken during Bahá'í events should not be posted in social media or any publication without the express consent of the parent or guardian.

RESPONDING TO INCIDENTS

In cases of accidental harm to anyone participating in a Bahá'í activity or during any other emergency situation, those responsible for the activity shall promptly seek appropriate assistance as necessary, while ensuring that in the process no minor under the age of 15 is left unsupervised.

Cases of Abuse or Deliberate Harm to a Minor at a Bahá'í-Sponsored Activity, Event, or Bahá'í Facility

It is the responsibility of all Bahá'í institutions and agencies which sponsor or supervise activities for minors to be informed of the state statutory requirements regarding mandatory reporting of abuse of a minor. Bahá'í institutions and agencies are expected to routinely inquire as to changes in the law.

Refer to applicable state statutes and report procedures:

https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/.

When Incidents of Violent or Abusive Behavior Occur during a Bahá'í-Sponsored Activity:

- The alleged perpetrator(s) will be requested to remain at a location away from the other participants until the situation can be investigated and resolved. If the alleged perpetrator is a minor, at least one parent/guardian will be asked to stay with him or her. If the parents or a guardian are not available, they will be contacted immediately.
- Should the individual(s) under investigation express a desire to leave the site of the activity, no attempt should be made to prevent him or her unless he or she is under 18 years of age and unaccompanied by a parent or guardian or unless a law enforcement officer has directed that the person remain at the location. If an adult accused of inappropriate behavior insists on leaving a location, the institution should attempt to obtain contact information from that person in a manner that is not accusatory or in any way suggests that a determination has been made with respect to the allegations.
- When the situation warrants it, those conducting the activity should exercise reasonable care to prevent further endangerment to anyone by contacting local law enforcement authorities for assistance.
- If the incident directly involved any person under the age of 18, the parent(s)/guardian will be notified as soon as possible and a written record will be made of the notification.
- Civil authorities will be notified in accordance with state law as necessary. If the victim is a minor, the mandatory-reporting statutes of the state are to be complied with when applicable.
- The Secretariat of the National Spiritual Assembly shall be notified as soon as possible if the matter is deemed serious enough to contact either law enforcement or child protection agencies or if anyone involved requires serious medical treatment at a hospital. Those managing an activity under the sponsorship of a Local Spiritual Assembly should notify that Assembly's Secretary rather than the National Assembly's Secretariat.
- Individuals should not respond to media inquiries unless otherwise directed by the National Spiritual Assembly or its authorized representatives.

Investigating a Violent Incident or Alleged Abuse

If the alleged victim is a child, do not attempt to interrogate the child beyond listening to the child's initial report. However, do inquire to find out who the child has already informed, and assure the child that he or she did the right thing to bring the matter to the attention of an adult.

Those responsible for conducting or supervising the activity should not seek to document eye-witness accounts of the incident unless asked to do so by the Office of Community Administration, the General Counsel of the National Spiritual Assembly, or a Local Spiritual Assembly, who will in turn contact the National Spiritual Assembly. It is particularly important to refrain from taking statements if law enforcement or child protection agencies have been notified.

Once law enforcement officers or other government agencies have completed their investigation, or in cases where law enforcement or government agencies were not notified, the sponsoring Bahá'í institution or agency is responsible for collecting all pertinent facts regarding any violent or abusive incident. If it determines that further action might be warranted, it should contact the Office of Community Administration.

It is the responsibility of the sponsoring institution or agency to ensure that those individuals required by law to submit a report to government child protection agencies carry out that legal responsibility.

Confidentiality

Maintaining confidentiality is an important element of all phases of inquiry. Information is shared only with those who need to know the facts or other information about the incident in order to avoid the spread of gossip and to prevent altering behavior toward those involved in the matter in question.

Aside from the reporting procedures outlined above, the agencies and institutions at all levels must hold all allegations and investigations in strict confidence.

DEFINITIONS

The definitions listed below are intended to assist Bahá'í communities to have a more comprehensive understanding of inappropriate behaviors towards and abuse of children. It should be borne in mind that the following list is not exhaustive.

- **Abuse** is any form of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.
- **Physical abuse** is non-accidental physical injury or other acts that have the potential to cause physical harm. It also includes inappropriate restraint or imprisonment, such as locking a minor in a place where he cannot get access to necessary facilities or get out in an emergency. Endangerment, such as knowingly leaving a minor alone in an unsafe place or with unsafe people, is another variation of physical abuse. Caring for a minor while mentally impaired due to the use of alcohol, illegal drugs, or medication constitutes another form of endangerment.
- **Sexual abuse** is any form of sexual behavior with a minor.² Sexual abuse includes any activity by anyone, whether an adult or child, which is sexual in nature, whether permitted or

² The statutory age of consent for sexual acts varies by state but is usually lower than the age of majority.

unpermitted, including, but not limited to: sexual assault, sexual battery, sexual relations, sexual acts, sexual activity, sexual handling, sexual massage, sexual exploitation, sexual exhibition, photographic, video or other reproduction of sexual activity, sexual stimulation, fondling, intimacy, exposure of sexual organs, lewd or lascivious behavior or indecent exposure, fornication, undue familiarity, or unauthorized touching.

- **Emotional, mental, and verbal abuse** is causing psychological or emotional harm to a minor or coercing the behavior of a minor. This abuse can be conveyed through diverse forms of interaction such as speech, the Internet, telephones, and social media and includes hazing and bullying.
- **Neglect** is a failure to provide the basic health, educational, and safety needs of a minor required for his proper development.

REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS WITHIN THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

When Bahá'í institutions or agencies become aware that an enrolled member of the Bahá'í community or an individual participating in Bahá'í community life is a registered sex offender, it is incumbent upon those institutions and agencies to become familiar with the state laws and local ordinances regarding registered sex offenders and to carefully comply with them. For example, some localities or states do not allow registered sex offenders to come within a certain distance of a location where activities for children are being held. Local police or a child protection agency can furnish relevant requirements regarding restrictions placed upon registered sex offenders. Note that many local governments have ordinances regarding registered sex offenders in addition to restrictions that are a matter of state law.

If the registered sex offender is an enrolled believer who is not listed as “restricted from unsupervised contact with children and youth” in the national membership database (UnityWeb/eMembership), please notify the Office of Community Administration as soon as possible. That office can answer other questions related to registered sex offenders as well.

CONCLUSION

We hold dear to our hearts the safety of the children on whose shoulders the future of our Faith rests. These guidelines are here to protect and guard them from the vicissitudes of the society in which we currently live. Remember these words from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

These children must be reared with infinite, loving care, and tenderly fostered in the embraces of mercy, so that they may taste the spiritual honey-sweetness of God’s love; that they may become like unto candles shedding their beams across this darksome world, and may clearly perceive what blazing crowns of glory the Most Great Name, the Ancient Beauty, hath set on the brows of His beloved, what bounties He hath bestowed on the hearts of those He holdeth dear, what a love He hath cast into the breasts of humankind, and what treasures of friendship He hath made to appear amongst all men.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 20

For any questions regarding this document, please contact the Volunteer Services Coordinator at volunteerservices@usbnc.org.