



St. Elmo Presbyterian Church

Child Protection Policy

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these... And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.”

Mark 10:14, 16

“Now it is required that those who have been given trust must prove faithful.”

1 Corinthians 4:2

PURPOSE OF POLICY

Believing that children are our sacred trust from a loving God, we should joyfully answer the call to provide a nurturing Christian environment that will encourage our children's faith. To that end, St. Elmo Presbyterian Church (SEPC) and its members are committed to the safety, welfare, and protection of all children, youth, and volunteers participating in the programs and activities of the church.

SEPC has established this policy and its procedures to provide the security and welfare of the children and to outline expectations of staff and volunteers. This policy is also intended to be a source of information for parents as to what the church policies are, so that parents can freely choose to participate in various programs. Despite our best efforts, we cannot guarantee that no harm will befall a child; however, it is our sincere hope that adherence to this policy will minimize the risk of any type of abuse.

**This policy has been approved by the head pastor and session and will be implemented through his leadership and delegation to the paid staff and/or Christian Education Ministry Group. 3/13/2025*

1. DEFINITION OF TERMS

- A. **Child abuse** shall be defined as any action (or lack of action, i.e. neglect) which endangers or harms a child's physical, psychological & emotional, or spiritual health and development. Child abuse occurs in different ways and includes the following:
- **Physical abuse:** Any physical injury to a minor which is not accidental, such as beating, shaking, burning, or biting. Some examples of evidence of physical abuse may include scars, bruises, wounds, etc.
 - **Emotional abuse:** Emotional injury occurs when the minor is not nurtured or provided with love and security, such as an environment of constant criticism, belittling, shaming, or persistent teasing.
 - **Sexual abuse:** Any sexual activity between a minor and an adult or between minors, including activities such as fondling, exhibitionism, intercourse, incest, pornography. Other examples of sexual abuse can include, but are not limited to: (1) verbal comments; (2) exposure to pornographic materials; (3) obscene phone calls; (4) allowing minors to witness sexual activity; (5) any other form of sexual exploitation.
 - **Spiritual abuse:** Abuse administered under the guise of religion. Spiritual abuse may include misuse of religion for selfish, secular, or ideological ends. Examples of spiritual abuse include but are not limited to: (1) Use of religious ideology, precepts, tradition, or sacred texts to harm a child; (2) compelling a child to engage in religious acts against his or her will; (3) abuse that occurs in a religious context; (4) abuse perpetuated by a religious leader; (5) invocation of divine authority to manipulate a child into meeting the needs of the abuser.
 - **Grooming:** The process of securing the trust of a minor and his/her parents to ultimately hinder them from reporting inappropriate behavior before it leads to abuse. This process generally takes place over a longer period of time. Trust of the potential offender is gained by providing a variety of services and gifts, including but not limited to attention, affection, kindness, privileges, recognition, alcohol, drugs, money, and pornography.
- B. **Child/Youth/Minor** shall be defined as any individual age 18 and under.
- C. **Employee/Staff** shall be defined as any individual who is paid by SEPC on a full or part-time basis and is serving in any position involving the supervision or custody of minors.
- D. **Supervisor/Director** shall be defined as any Employee/Staff with direct oversight of a ministry to minors, including but not limited to the Head Pastor, the Director of Youth and Children, and the Nursery Director.
- E. **Volunteer** shall be defined as any individual who is not paid by the church and is serving in any position involving the supervision or custody of minors.

2. SELECTION AND SCREENING PROCESS

SEPC believes that appropriate personal relationships between adult staff/volunteers and minors of the church foster the community of Christ. SEPC will seek to prevent the abuse of children when they are participating in church programs. Preventive measures include criteria, screening, training of all staff/volunteers, and a commitment to eliminating opportunities for abuse within church programs.

A. Criteria

- **Membership:** Ordinarily, all staff and volunteers working with minors will be members or associate members of SEPC.
- Exceptions may include (1) those who are members in good standing in another PCA church, (2) those who have been observed for a six-month period and are approved by the Head Pastor or Youth & Children's Director, or (3) those approved by the session.

B. Screening.

- **Staff:** All staff must undergo a screening which consists of (1) a background check, (2) the completion of a confidential written application including questions regarding child abuse, (3) a check with personal/professional references, and (4) a follow up by the supervising staff or elder.
- **Volunteers:** All volunteers must undergo a screening, which consists of (1) a background check, (2) a brief volunteer application, and (3) a follow-up by a supervising staff or elder.

C. Training.

- All members and regular attenders who work with children will be required to attend one training session with a supervisor prior to working with children. They will be asked to read this policy and sign it when applying for service.
- Instruction and review of the SEPC child protection policy is expected annually and prior to significant ministry events with minors (VBS, chaperoned events, etc.).

3. 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 this employee/volunteer:

- Volunteers must be at least 12 years old; employees must be at least 14 years old.
- Minor employees/volunteers will be screened and receive age-appropriate training 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/legal guardian where indicated.
- Volunteers who are minors will serve in non-primary roles and will have direct supervision by at least one adult volunteer/employee.

4. SUPERVISORY REQUIREMENTS

SEPC has 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 apply to all employees/volunteers who have contact with minors participating in any program at SEPC.

- A. **Safety of children:** It is the responsibility of employees/volunteers to promote the emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual 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.
- B. **Two-deep leadership:** A reasonable effort should be made to have two non-related employees/volunteers present in all classrooms with minors during church activities. In the event

that an employee/volunteer is alone with a group of children, efforts should be made to increase supervision, such as extra check-ins by a ministry supervisor, classroom doors propped open, or the activity moved to a more public space in view of others.

SEPC recognizes that a fundamental goal of the youth and family ministry philosophy is to build relationships with students and families and to have regular, intentional contact with students. Meetings that occur between one employee/volunteer and a group of minors (Bible studies, recreation, etc.) are to be encouraged rather than thwarted by the scope of this policy. To protect both minors and staff/volunteers, we have the following guidelines for conducting group meetings:

- Meetings should be in view of other adults and/or minors.
- Meetings should have prior permission from a parent or legal guardian.
- Meetings should be reported to the supervisor in an appropriate and timely manner.

C. One-on-One policies:

Children's Ministry Policy: One-on-one relational ministry between nursery/elementary-aged minors and employees/volunteers should be avoided. SEPC recognizes that there will be times when an unaccompanied employee/volunteer may be present with a single, elementary-aged minor while on the SEPC premises. In those circumstances (such as the last child picked up from an event, or a student who can't find their parents), the employee/volunteer should make an effort to find an additional adult to assist or move to an observable location (e.g., fellowship hall, foyer, hallway, etc.).

Youth Ministry Policy: One-on-one meetings are an important and vital aspect of youth ministry. However, these are also the situations where minors are most vulnerable to abuse. To protect both minors and staff/volunteers, we have the following guidelines for conducting one-on-one meetings:

- Meetings should be in a visible, public place.
- Meetings should have prior permission from a parent or legal guardian.
- Meetings should be reported to the supervisor with the following information: when and where the meeting takes place, how long the meeting should last, who is at the meeting, and the purpose of the meeting.
- One-on-one meetings with an employee/volunteer and a minor of the opposite gender should be infrequent and can proceed only after all of the previous guidelines have been completed with special care. In no circumstances may the employee/volunteer be alone in a vehicle with a minor of the opposite gender (see Transportation Policies below).
- Spontaneous meetings between an employee/volunteer and one minor can proceed only after the regular one-on-one guidelines listed above have been completed.

Special Needs Policies: In caring for children/students with special needs, it is often optimal to have one-on-one interaction within the structure of typical ministry activities. The program director should have written parental consent for each participant on file before the meeting occurs. All one-on-one interactions should be observable and interruptible, and in accordance with all the procedures in this policy.

- D. Open Door Policy:** Classroom windows must be unobstructed at all times, and parents are welcome to observe any activity with their children. Classroom doors should remain open unless there is a window in the door. Doors should never be locked while people are inside the room.
- E. Ratio of employees/volunteers to minors:** When supervising minors, it is required that an age-appropriate 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.

- F. **Overnight procedures:** Overnight activities must require prior written or verbal permission from the parent/guardian(s) of the youth participating and must have a minimum of two employees/volunteers, keeping an appropriate ratio of employees/volunteers to minors. There must be both male and female employees/volunteers present at all co-ed overnight events and at least two same-gender employees/volunteers on same-gender overnight events. An employee/volunteer may never sleep in the same bed with a youth.
- G. **No confidentiality:** Employees/volunteers can never promise confidentiality to a minor. Employees/volunteers must report to the Director of Youth & Children Ministries or the Head Pastor if a minor discusses harming himself or others, committing a crime, or being abused.
- H. **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 a parent or legal guardian and approved by the supervisor.
- I. **Hazing and bullying:** Physical hazing and initiations are prohibited. Verbal, physical, and cyberbullying are prohibited.
- J. **Controlled substances:** The use of tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and/or mind-altering substances with minors is prohibited.

5. PHYSICAL/NON-PHYSICAL CONTACT

Permissible Contact

- Limited physical contact with minors, such as a pat on the back or on the head, or a handshake, is permissible. Brief hugs are permissible within sight of others. Employees/volunteers must avoid any prolonged hugs and must stop a hug immediately upon request of the minor. Touching hands, faces, shoulders and arms, placing an arm around the shoulders, sitting beside minors, holding hands during prayer, high fives and hand slapping can all be appropriate unless a minor expresses that touch is unwanted.
- Child-driven interactions are acceptable in view of others; for example, if a child approaches an employee/volunteer to give a hug, they don't have to turn the child away.
- Employees/volunteers should make every effort to ensure that interactions with a child are observable and interruptible.

Prohibited Contact

- **Sexual abuse:** Any physical contact between an employee/volunteer and a minor that would provide, or is intended to provide, any form of sexual gratification.
- **Physical contact:** Any physical contact between an employee/volunteer and a minor that includes giving massages, kissing, prolonged embracing, and so forth.
- **Physical abuse:** striking, spanking, shaking, slapping, or other violent behaviors towards a minor.
- **Pornography:** Showing minors images that are pornographic is prohibited. Accidental viewing of pornography when in the presence of minors should be reported to the supervisor immediately. If employees/volunteers become aware of the existence of child pornography in the hands of a minor, they should immediately report this to their supervisor.
- **Verbal/mental abuse:** Language that is humiliating, degrading, threatening, sexual, or personally

intimate, related to body development or physique, or crude, regardless of how the communication was conveyed (e.g., text messages, phone calls, social media, email, etc.).

- Dating: At no time shall any employee/volunteer pursue a dating relationship with a minor and should be sensitive to minors with “crushes.”

Reporting

- All employees/volunteers are to be responsible to immediately discuss with their supervisor any signs of possible violations of the above and/or victimization.

6. DISCIPLINE PROCEDURES

Part of shepherding the children that God has placed in our ministry involves discipline. Inevitably, situations will arise that require disciplinary action. Expectations and consequences for poor behavior should be communicated to both parents and minors, making sure to follow through with appropriate discipline, as laid out below.

A basic, three-step discipline system is in place for all SEPC ministry to minors departments:

1. Minors will be given an age-appropriate, verbal warning and opportunity to change behavior. This may include requiring the minor(s) to clean up messes.
2. If negative behavior continues, a supervisor or program director will be engaged in further conversation and a challenge to comply. This may include a period of time-out, cleaning up messes, and/or immediate removal from the situation and placed under adult supervision.
3. Failure to comply results in adding a parent/legal guardian to both the conversation and the disciplinary action. This may include the requirement of a parent/legal guardian’s attendance at future events, barring that minor from attendance for a set time, or other appropriate consequences.

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.

The minor or legal guardian will be responsible to compensate for any damage to the church or personal property by the minor who is deemed at fault. In the event that disruptive behavior results in immediate removal of the minor from an event, trip, or retreat, this will be done at the expense and responsibility of the legal guardian.

7. TRANSPORTATION PROCEDURES

- Drivers must be licensed and have proof of insurance with limits that meet or exceed the requirements of the state in which the vehicle is licensed.
- Drivers should adhere to all traffic laws, including, but not limited to, speed limits, hands-free laws, seatbelt laws, etc.
- Drivers are never to be alone in a vehicle with a minor of the opposite gender.
- Youth ministry employees/volunteers are allowed to have a student of the same gender in their car for various ministry purposes. The policies for one-on-one contact ministry apply to these situations (see One-on-One policies above).

8. RESTROOM POLICY

The following policies are in place during SEPC ministry to minors' programs and activities:

- With nursery-aged children, the child's parents or trained nursery workers should complete diaper changing, with a second adult present in the classroom.
- Young children should be escorted to the bathroom, but may be allowed to use the restroom alone. The adult should check to be sure the restroom is empty and then wait outside the stall and assist as needed. If a child requires assistance, the worker should prop open the bathroom door and leave the stall door open as they assist the child.
- Students in the Youth Ministry should avoid having a phone out in a shared restroom. The camera should never be turned on in a restroom.
- Employees/volunteers should never have a phone out in a shared restroom.

SEPC is not responsible for minors in the restroom while they are not under the specific care of an SEPC ministry to minors program or activity (i.e., allowed to use the restroom unattended during worship service, fellowship meals, etc.) Adults should avoid being alone in a restroom with a minor who is not under their care. If an unattended minor enters the restroom, an adult should exit as soon as possible.

9. CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLATION OF CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

Any employee/volunteer accused of committing a prohibited act or any act considered by SEPC to be harmful to a minor may be immediately suspended from participation in any SEPC ministry for minors. Any employee/volunteer found in violation of the SEPC Child Protection Policy may be prohibited from future participation as an employee/volunteer in all SEPC ministries for minors. If the person is an employee, such conduct may also result in termination of employment from SEPC.

10. DOCUMENTING A CONCERN

Violations of any of these policies and procedures which do not constitute abuse should be reported to a direct supervisor to be recorded appropriately. Cumulative concerns may result in suspension from the SEPC ministry to minors. As with reporting abuse, specific details or proof are not necessary; any person feeling uncomfortable or uneasy about actions or attitudes of any volunteer/employee with minors should bring it to the attention of the appropriate supervisor.

11. 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 professionals and non-professionals on the issue of reporting. Employees/volunteers involved in SEPC 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. Failure to report a prohibited act to the designated person is a violation of this policy and

grounds for an employee's termination of employment. Volunteers who fail to report a prohibited act witnessed or

suspected by them may be restricted from participation in any activity involving minors. Minors, whether employees or volunteers, are exempt from this reporting requirement, but are encouraged to report concerns or violations to a supervisor.

To whom to report and how:

- An employee/volunteer should first report suspicions of abuse directly to one of the following departments:
 - The TN Department of Children's Services (DCS): 1-877-237-0004
 - The main page for Reporting Abuse can be found and the following address: <https://www.tn.gov/dcs/program-areas/child-safety/reporting/child-abuse.html>
 - Reports may be made using the online form at <https://apps.tn.gov/carat/>
 - The Hamilton County job and family services department: 1-423-241-5437
 - Hamilton County Sheriff or chief law enforcement officer: 423-209-7000
- An employee/volunteer is also required to report an incident to an immediate supervisor or the Head Pastor as soon as possible after the incident. The reporter will be asked to fill out a *SEPC Report of Child Abuse* form, which is available from the supervisor and attached to this policy.
- If not initially reported to the Head Pastor, the immediate supervisor will immediately report to the Head Pastor, who will coordinate the investigation and communication process.

12. RESPONSE PLAN

In the event that an incident of child abuse or neglect is alleged to have occurred on the premises of SEPC or during a sponsored program or activity, the following procedure shall be implemented by the Head Pastor or Youth and Children Director, unless he is alleged to be involved.

- The parent or guardian of the minor will be notified, unless the parent or guardian is the alleged perpetrator.
- The employee/volunteer alleged to be the perpetrator of the abuse or misconduct will immediately be placed on leave from working with minors pending an investigation.
- SEPC will comply with the state's requirements regarding mandatory reporting of abuse as the law then exists.
- SEPC's attorney and insurance company will be notified.
- If the alleged abuse involves an ordained pastor at SEPC, the Tennessee Valley Presbytery will be notified, and the Stated Clerk's office made aware of the situation.
- SEPC will cooperate fully with any investigation of the incident by state or local authorities.
- In conjunction with the Head Pastor, one person will be selected to act as the official spokesperson for SEPC, 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.
- SEPC's goal is to protect the dignity of those involved in an incident while facilitating necessary and appropriate discussion for the safe resolution for all concerned. All reports of child abuse or neglect shall be held in appropriate confidence. No person shall communicate any information concerning the alleged event to any person except as necessary to cooperate with an official investigation. Breach of this confidentiality by a SEPC employee/volunteer may be cause for immediate dismissal. The Head Pastor, in consultation with the 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.

Volunteer Application

Have you ever been accused, investigated, or convicted of any form of child abuse, neglect, or misconduct? If yes, please explain.

Have you ever been disciplined or dismissed from a position involving children or youth? If yes, please explain.

Is there anything in your history that would affect your ability to work appropriately with children? If yes, please explain.

Please provide the names and contact information for two non-family references, preferably one from within the church.

Child Protection Policy Acknowledgement and Release Statement

I have read the St. Elmo Presbyterian Church Child Protection Policy and accept it.

The information contained in this form is correct to the best of my knowledge, and I give my authorization to SEPC to submit a Criminal Background Check on my behalf. I authorize the release of any information that pertains to any records of convictions contained in any police department or law enforcement files maintained on me. I hereby release all such law enforcement agencies from any and all liability resulting from such disclosure.

I agree to be bound by the policies of SEPC on behalf of the church. I acknowledge that these policies do not constitute a contract between the church and myself, and that SEPC is not responsible for the individual acts of any worker.

I, _____ (print name), accept the responsibility to nurture the Christian faith and well-being of the children and youth of SEPC, and to care for them as Christ cares for me.

Signed _____ Date: _____

For Staff/Employees

**ST. ELMO PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
APPLICATION FOR WORK WITH CHILDREN**

This Application is a confidential, mandatory part of a process to help the church provide a safe, nurturing environment for our children and youth. Persons responsible for the supervision and care of our children are in a special position of trust and confidence.

Personal Information

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone # (H): _____ (W): _____

Church or Youth Work Experience

Names and addresses of churches attended on a regular basis during the last five years:

All previous church and non-church work involving young people (name, address, type of work performed, dates):

Any talents, training, education, etc. that have prepared you to work with young people:

Personal References

Please furnish personal references, including previous churches where you have served.

Name: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

Name: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

Name: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

Screening Questions

Have you ever been convicted of or pleaded guilty to a felony or misdemeanor? If yes, please explain

Have you ever committed or been convicted of sexual or physical abuse on a child? If yes, please explain.

Is there anything in your history that would affect your ability to appropriately work with children? _____

Have you ever been accused or convicted of child abuse, or a crime involving actual or attempted sexual molestation of a minor? If yes, please explain. _____

Have any complaints or allegations of misconduct involving children ever been made against you? If yes, please explain. _____

I understand that St. Elmo Presbyterian Church may contact the churches and references I have provided as part of SEPC's consideration of this application. I hereby release from any liability any person or organization that provides information.

I certify that the information I have provided is true and correct. If it is found that the answers given are untrue, I understand that it may be cause for dismissal.

Applicant's Signature: _____

Date: _____