

Ablaze for Life
Safe Environment Program

MISSION STATEMENT

As Christian adults, we have a moral and legal responsibility and are entrusted by God with the spiritual, emotional and physical well-being of minors and vulnerable adults. As they participate in activities within or sponsored by ABLAZE FOR LIFE, it is our responsibility and commitment to provide an environment which is safe and nurturing.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the serious nature of child abuse and sexual misconduct, it is important that volunteers and all employees of ABLAZE FOR LIFE be informed about our policy on the prevention of any such abuse and about the procedures that are followed when reports of child abuse or sexual misconduct are received.

PURPOSE

ABLAZE FOR LIFE has a Safe Environment Program (SEP) to:

1. Provide a safe and secure environment for minors and vulnerable adults in the activities conducted by the organization
2. Assist ABLAZE FOR LIFE in evaluating a person's suitability to work with minors or vulnerable adults.
3. Satisfy the concerns of clients and staff members.
4. Provide a system to respond to victims and their families, as well as the accused.
5. Protect against the possibility of false accusations against employees and volunteers.
6. Reduce the risk exposure of the organization.

DEFINITIONS (For the purposes of this statement only)

1. Sexual Abuse means: An unlawful form of sexual misconduct, whether it involves a minor or a vulnerable adult. Sexual abuse of a minor includes sexual molestation or sexual exploitation and other behavior by which an adult uses a minor as an object of sexual gratification. Sexual abuse has been defined by different civil authorities in various ways. This policy adopts the definition provided in Texas civil law.
2. Sexual Misconduct means:

- a. Sexual contact between an adult and a minor (“minor” as defined by the laws of the State of Texas).
- b. Sexual Harassment as defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.
3. Minor means: Any person who has not reached his/her 18th birthday.
4. Child Abuse means: Any form of infliction of injury to the detriment to a child’s well being, physical, mental, moral, or emotional.
5. Vulnerable Adult means: Any adult that is physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired, whether temporary or long-term, or that is disabled, or that is otherwise unable to function in one or more ways that results in an impaired ability to respond as a typical adult is expected to function.
6. Vendor means: Any person or entity paid by ABLAZE FOR LIFE to do a specific job or duty.
7. Volunteer means: Any person engaged in or involved in an ABLAZE FOR LIFE activity, and who is not an employee or a vendor.
8. Safe Environment Manager (SEM) means: the individual who oversees the SEP.

In order to attain these goals all employees and volunteers of any ministry run under the care of ABLAZE FOR LIFE shall have the following:

1. Criminal Background Check. The Safe Environment Manager (SEM) shall have or cause to have a criminal background check on all employees and volunteers who work with minors and vulnerable adults. All criminal background checks must be updated every two (2) years through an ABLAZE FOR LIFE approved vendor.
2. Training Procedures. The SEM shall have or cause to have all employees and volunteers who work with minors and vulnerable adults complete a Safe Environment Training (SET) which shall consist of a training video or equivalent teaching with open discussion and dialogue. Training is to occur at least once every year.
3. Registration. The SEM shall maintain and oversee a system of registering all employees and volunteers whom are required to have a criminal background check and SET. All information obtained shall be held in the strictest confidence and only used by the appropriate ABLAZE FOR LIFE leadership relative to our Safe Environment certification process.

If a volunteer or staff member is holding a valid Safe Environment status of “Cleared” through another entity, they might meet the requirements of this screening process. The screening process of the other entity will be reviewed by the SEM and Executive Director in order for them to be approved as a valid screener. A list of valid screeners and their approval dates will be kept by the SEM.

SUPERVISION PROCEDURES

1. Have adequate number of screened and trained adults present at events involving minors and vulnerable adults. Screened and trained adult supervision should increase in the proportion to the risk of the activity.
 2. Monitor facilities during activities.
 3. In the absence of written consent, release children only to parent or guardian.
 4. Obtain written parental permission, including a signed medical treatment form.
 5. Use only qualified drivers, who have passed all state requirements and who have a safe driving record, to drive any vehicle used during an activity to transport unrelated minors or vulnerable adults.
- Any vehicle used for transportation shall have current safety inspection and registration and be covered by minimum state liability insurance.

BEHAVIORAL GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH MINORS

All employees and volunteers of ABLAZE FOR LIFE shall observe the following guidelines for dealing with minors other than their immediate family.

1. Do not provide minors with alcoholic beverage, tobacco, drugs or anything that is prohibited by law.
2. Do not serve as a chaperone for activities that conflict with curfew laws pertaining to minors.
3. Touching should be age appropriate and based on the need of the minor and not on the need of the adult. Avoid physical contact when alone with a minor. If a minor initiates physical contact, an appropriate, limited response is proper.
4. Do not engage in the physical discipline of a minor.
5. Do not be alone with a minor in a residence, sleeping facility, locker room, rest room, dressing facility, or other closed room or isolated area that is inappropriate to a ministry relationship.
6. If the situation is such that adult supervisors must stay overnight with a group of minors, they must
 - a. Have separate rooms from minors or
 - b. There must be at least two adult supervisors and the adult supervisors must sleep in their own separate beds/cots.

7. Topics, vocabulary, recordings, films, games, computer software or any other form of personal interaction or entertainment that could not be used in the presence of parents should not be used with minors. Sexually explicit or pornographic material is never appropriate.
8. Do not administer medication of any kind without written parental permission.
9. If you recognize inappropriate personal or physical attraction developing between yourself and a minor, maintain clear professional boundaries between yourself and the minor or refer the minor to another adult supervisor.
10. If one-on-one care of a minor should be necessary, avoid meeting in isolated environments. Schedule meetings at times and use locations that create accountability. Limit both the length and number of sessions, and make appropriate referrals. Notify parents of the meetings.
11. Do not take photographs of minors while they are unclothed or dressing (e.g., in a locker room or bathing facility).
12. If you observe anyone (adult or minor) abusing a minor, take appropriate steps to immediately intervene and to provide a safe environment for the minor. Report the misconduct (see Reporting Procedures).
13. If you are accused of engaging in inappropriate conduct, immediately notify ABLAZE FOR LIFE leadership.
14. Having two or more screened and cleared adults present will reduce the probability of false accusations.

DISQUALIFYING OFFENSES

No person may serve with minors and vulnerable adults if he or she has ever been convicted of any disqualifying offense, been on probation or received deferred adjudication for any disqualifying offense, or has presently pending any criminal charges for any disqualifying offense until a determination of guilt or innocence is made, including any person who is presently on deferred adjudication. Disqualifying offenses are:

1. A felony or misdemeanor classified as an offense against the person or family or involves an offense against the person or family. Examples: Offenses against a person include, but are not limited to, murder, assault, sexual assault, and abandoning or endangering a child or vulnerable adult. Offenses against the family include, but are not limited to bigamy, incest, and interference with child custody, enticing a child, and harboring a runaway child.
2. A felony or misdemeanor classified as an offense against public order, safety, or indecency. Examples: Offenses against public order or indecency include, but are not limited to prostitution, obscenity, sexual performance by a child, possession or promotion of child pornography, and disorderly conduct.

3. A felony violation of any law intended to control the possession or distribution of any substance included as a controlled substance in the Texas Controlled Substance Act.

REPORTING PROCEDURES

It is mandatory to report any violation as listed in this SEP to the appropriate ABLAZE FOR LIFE leadership. It is the policy of ABLAZE FOR LIFE not only to fulfill the reporting law but to cooperate fully with the investigating civil authorities.

Individuals must report incidents of abuse or suspicions of sexual misconduct or sexual harassment. Situations involving abuse of minors must be reported to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services at 1-800-252-5400 or in emergency to the appropriate police authority, usually by calling 911. Note that a report to ABLAZE FOR LIFE leadership does not relieve the individual from reporting abuse as required by the Texas State Law. The Texas law is very specific on reporting suspected abuse: § 261.101. Persons required to report and timelines to report in the Texas Family Code states: a) A person having cause to believe that a child's physical or mental health or welfare has been or may be adversely affected by abuse or neglect by any person shall immediately make a report. b) If a professional has cause to believe that a child has been or may be abused or neglected, the professional shall make a report not later than the 48th hour after the professional first suspects that the child has been or may be abused or neglected. A professional may not delegate to or rely on another person to make the report. In this subsection "professional" means an individual who is licensed or certified by the state or who is an employee of a facility licensed, certified, or operated by the state and who, in the normal course of official duties or duties for which a license or certification is required, has direct contact with children. The term includes teachers, nurses, doctors, and day-care employees. §261.106. Immunities, states: a) A person acting in good faith who reports or assists in the investigation of a report of alleged abuse or who testifies or otherwise participates in a judicial proceeding arising from a report petition or investigation of alleged child abuse or neglect is immune from civil or criminal liability

THE APPEAL PROCESS

Any person who is accused of improper conduct under the definitions of the ABLAZE FOR LIFE SEP shall have the right of appeal to the ABLAZE FOR LIFE leadership. In the event that such report is obtained by the results of a background check, said individual, upon providing a written request, shall be granted a second criminal background check. If any person is verbally accused of improper conduct under the definitions of the ABLAZE FOR LIFE SEP they shall have the right to appeal to the ABLAZE FOR LIFE leadership in a confidential meeting.