

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

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, revised January 2023

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 venues.

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 principles 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

For reasons of liability, all ongoing educational programs for minors fall under the auspices of the Regional Training Institute Boards, unless it is more reasonable for a Local Spiritual Assembly to sponsor the activity due to proximity and/or the activity is hosted at its local Bahá'í center. Educational programs for minors that take place in regions without Regional Training Institute Boards fall under the auspices of those Regional Bahá'í Councils. Those held at a

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.

seasonal or national school are sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly through its Office of Education and Schools.

For all Bahá'í activities involving minors sponsored by an institution or agency of the Faith, sponsorship implies that it:

- is aware of the activity and is tracking it in its official documentation.
- 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.
- has ensured that it is being held in a safe environment.

The sponsoring institution will document 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 will ensure that the policy of the National Spiritual Assembly, as set forth in this document, is adhered to.

APPROPRIATE SUPERVISION OF BAHÁ'Í ACTIVITIES FOR MINORS

1. Preparing Volunteers for Service

a) Overview of Service

- i) 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.
- ii) Adults and youth who are responsible for activities for minors are required to abide by the high moral standards of the Bahá'í Faith. While involved in activities, volunteers should observe the following:
 - (1) Dress moderately – refrain from wearing revealing or tight clothing or any clothing with derogatory messages on them.
 - (2) Be clearheaded - no smoking, vaping, drinking alcohol or taking drugs other than those prescribed by a physician, during any activity.
 - (3) Use appropriate language - no cursing or abusive language should be used by anyone serving or participating in a Bahá'í activity.

b) Clearance

- i) Individuals Responsible for the Well-Being of Minors during Bahá'í Activities
 - (1) Before any adult or youth over the age of fifteen is allowed to serve with minors, they must be cleared through the Regional Clearance Process. 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.

- (a) As part of the clearance process, those aged 18 or over must complete a criminal background check.
 - (i) Once a youth turns 18 and wants to continue to serve, they will be asked to complete a criminal background check to be able to continue to serve.
 - ii) An individual's eligibility to serve will be shared with sponsoring institutions, such as the regional training institute and the Local Spiritual Assembly.
 - iii) The information contained in the background check report is held confidentially with the Office of Human Resources at the Bahá'í National Center, and every individual has access to their own completed background check report through the background check providers website.
 - (1) All individuals may appeal the decision by the institution by contacting the national Volunteer Services Coordinator.
 - iv) All those transporting minors on behalf of a sponsored activity, in addition to getting a background check, must also complete a Motor Vehicle Records check and be approved to drive.
 - (1) Drivers must be 18 years of age or older to transport minors on behalf of a sponsored activity or 19 years of age as required for age of majority in that state.
 - (2) All drivers must have a current driver's license issued by a state within the United States, and auto insurance.
 - v) Those who continue to work with minors must be re-verified for service with minors every two years from their previous eligibility date.
- c) Accompaniment
- i) Each individual serving should be closely accompanied by the sponsoring institution to ensure she/he has the necessary support and guidance for providing an activity that upholds the standards of the Faith.
 - ii) The regional training institutes and Local Spiritual Assemblies will remain in close contact to make sure all those serving are appropriately trained and cleared.

2. Attentive Supervision

- a) Ratio of Cleared Adults to Minors
 - i) Bahá'í activities for minors are facilitated at all times by teams of at least two cleared adults or youth over the age of 15. All activities should have at least one cleared adult serving as the activity's liaison to the sponsoring institution and who is available to ensure the safety of the minors. They are not required to be in the same

room/space during the entirety of the activity if they are not one of the active facilitators.

(1) Rule of Three - On the rare occasion, when it is not possible for two cleared individuals to accompany minors, then the rule of three should be applied: at least three individuals will be present, with at least one being a cleared adult. The adult-to-minor ratio will never be one-to-one behind closed doors or out of the line of sight of another adult.

ii) There must be two cleared individuals in the vehicle when transporting minors on behalf of an activity. The driver must be at least 18 years of age.

b) Permission Slips

i) For a regular, ongoing Bahá'í activity, the parent/guardian of each minor will receive an explanation of the activity their child is participating in and must give written permission for their child to participate.

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

iii) Written permission from a parent/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.

c) Social Media

i) Texting, Emailing, & Phone Calls - No text, email or phone call will be solely between a non-related adult and a minor without a parent's/guardian's permission. Group texts and/or emails are encouraged for conveying information about activity plans. Phone calls should be made to the responsible adult of the minor and the minor, not solely with the minor.

ii) 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/guardian.

d) Overnight Arrangements

i) Bahá'í overnight arrangements for minors are supervised at all times by teams of at least two cleared adults, including host families, when using private homes for sleeping quarters.

ii) There should be separate sleeping quarters for males and females that limits access between groups during the night, and at least two cleared adults of the same gender with each group.

- (1) Sleeping accommodations at Bahá'í activities are to be based on gender. However, there may be occasions when a youth or junior youth identifies as the opposite of the gender they were born with. Some may have started transitioning from one gender to the other, others may just emotionally identify with the opposite gender. A participant who is transgender and can provide legal and medical verification of such can be housed with the gender they identify with. If such proof is not available, then separate accommodations either on- or off-site must be made. Please contact the Office of Community Administration at the Bahá'í National Center (community@usbnc.org; 847.733.3485) if there are additional questions or concerns.

ENSURING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

1. Homes and Buildings

- a) 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.

2. Vehicles

- a) Vehicles used for transporting minors should be in good repair and regularly maintained.
- b) The vehicle must have properly installed and functioning seat belts for each passenger, and all passengers must wear seat belts while the vehicle is in motion.
- c) When driving minors, the driver will not use hand-held devices while the car is in motion and will observe all traffic laws, including maintaining the appropriate speed.

3. Camps

- a) Each camp should develop its camp policy and an orientation for all campers on how to keep safe during the activity.

4. Bahá'í Centers and Institute Houses

- a) All responsible institutions need to have guidelines concerning the proper use of its property and an orientation for those who live and/or serve in the house or Bahá'í Center.
- b) 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.
- c) When activities for minors are being held at Bahá'í-owned facilities, someone over the age of 21 must be on the premises. The institution that owns the facility should check with its insurance carrier in this regard to ensure that the level of supervision is in compliance with the insurance policy.

TRAINING

1. Protection Policy

- a) Every individual serving should be aware of this policy and their responsibility in upholding the requirements of this policy. Every two years, every individual continuing to serve with minors should retake training related to this policy.

2. Local and State Laws

- a) 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. State specific information may be located here: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/>
 - i) Some states and local governments may require those serving with minors to have training in child abuse and neglect identification and reporting. Sponsoring institutions need to be aware of these requirements and take the necessary actions to comply.

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 OR BAHÁ'Í FACILITY

1. Mandatory Reporters

- a) 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/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/>

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

- a) 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.
 - i) If the alleged perpetrator is a minor, at least one parent/guardian will be asked to stay with him or her. If the parent/guardian is not available, they will be contacted immediately.

- b) 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/guardian or unless a law enforcement officer has directed that the person remain at the location.
 - i) 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.
- c) 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.
- d) If the incident directly involves any person under the age of 18, the parent/guardian will be notified as soon as possible, and a written record will be made of the notification.
- e) 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.
- f) Those managing an activity must immediately contact either the Regional Bahá'í Council secretary or the secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly 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 agencies will contact the Office of Community Administration at the Bahá'í National Center (community@usbnc.org; 847.733.3485) for further guidance.
- g) Individuals should not respond to media inquiries unless otherwise directed by the National Spiritual Assembly or its authorized representatives.

3. Investigating a Violent Incident or Alleged Abuse Reported after Occurrence

- a) If a minor reports that an incident took place previously at a sponsored event or in another location, 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. **You are required to report the child's allegations to the proper authorities before taking any other actions.**
- b) Once law enforcement officers or other government agencies have completed their investigation, 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 at the Bahá'í National Center (community@usbnc.org; 847.733.3485).

- c) 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.

4. Confidentiality

- a) 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. Sexual abuse includes any activity by anyone, whether an adult or child, which is sexual in nature, whether permitted or 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/her 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.

- a) Local police or a child protection agency can furnish relevant requirements regarding restrictions placed upon registered sex offenders.
- b) 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.

- a) The Office of Community Administration at the Bahá'í National Center (community@usbnc.org; 847.733.3485) 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

Please contact your Regional Bahá'í Council or the national Volunteer Services Coordinator at the Bahá'í National Center (volunteerservices@usbnc.org) with any questions regarding this policy.