

**FIRST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF HOUSTON  
SAFE CONGREGATION POLICY**

Preamble: We, the congregation of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston (“FUUCH”), wish to be a welcoming and inclusive congregation that is a safe and life-affirming place for the people who trust FUUCH as their congregational home. We respect the worth and dignity of every individual. It is ultimately the responsibility of the entire congregation, not just those in leadership positions, or formally signed members, but all community participants, to create and maintain a climate that supports the growth and welfare of everyone in the congregation.

Therefore, we covenant to develop policies and practices that

- Promote safety in all areas of congregational life: physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual, and spiritual.
- Provide training and guidelines for handling unsafe situations and
- Establish a plan for addressing these issues of safety.

We covenant to educate ourselves and our children to issues of safety and to learn ways that will help us to offer compassionate and skillful responses to all those at risk or in crisis. Finally, we covenant to address whatever problems arise with courage, equity, compassion and the thoughtful application of our Unitarian Universalist values.

**Section I: CHILDREN (anyone under the age of 18 years)**

1. SCREENING AND SELECTION OF PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH CHILDREN

a. Those who provide direct care or supervision for children (“workers”) at FUUCH must meet the following criteria:

- i. Unpaid workers (“volunteers”) must be active participants at FUUCH as a church member or friend for at least six months.
- ii. Those working with children junior high school and younger must be at least 18 years of age. Workers below the age of 18 must be approved by the Director of Religious Education (“DRE”).
- iii. Those working with high school groups must be at least 21 years of age. Workers below the age of 21 must be approved by the DRE.
- iv. All workers must consent to such reference and/or background checks as FUUCH, in its sole discretion, deems necessary and must agree to be bound by the Code of Ethics (see Appendix). The DRE and minister will be responsible for determining disqualification based on background or reference checks. This information will be kept confidential.
- v. All workers must be trained as prescribed by the DRE.

2. SUPERVISION GUIDELINES AND POLICIES

a. All workers are subject to the supervision and evaluation of the DRE.

- b. All workers are required to comply with the following policies to ensure a safe and secure environment for our children while participating in FUUCH activities:
  - i. Each group should have at least two workers present at all times with at least one worker being an adult. For infants and toddlers the desirable ratio is one worker for each three children. The DRE shall determine the appropriate level of supervision for each group and activity, and may make exceptions to this rule on a case-by-case basis.
  - ii. Visibility into classrooms must be maintained at all times.
  - iii. The DRE and/or designee shall circulate in the RE classroom area and monitor classroom activities randomly during regular RE classes.
  - iv. No private off-site meetings are allowed, other than with a parent or guardian, without prior parent arrangement and approval by the DRE.
  - v. All outings must be pre-approved by the DRE. Participating children must have a signed permission slip from parent or guardian.
  - vi. All drivers shall be a minimum age of 21. All drivers must have a current, valid driver's license and proof of insurance before being assigned driving responsibilities.
  - vii. Drivers should have two or more children in the car when transporting children to and from activities. The only exception is when the driver is transporting a child with prior parent arrangement and notification of the DRE.
  - viii. If disciplinary issues arise, there should be two adults present during all disciplinary meetings between the worker and the child involved. The parents shall be informed of any such meeting and its contents as soon as possible.
  - ix. Corporal punishment or abusive language may not be used under any circumstance. This includes behavior that constitutes verbal, emotional or physical abuse, and behavior or language that is threatening or demeaning.
  - x. Behavior must both *be* and *appear to be* above reproach.

### 3. MAINTAINING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

- a. Friendships. We actively encourage mentoring relationships between children and adults. Although we hope that children and adults will have genuine fondness for one another, any adult who looks to a child for peer-to-peer friendship should not be in a position of responsibility over them. Friendship is reciprocal, where neither person has more responsibility for the health of the friendship than the other. This is antithetical to the healthy adult/child relationship where the adult assumes responsibility for maintaining appropriate boundaries in

order to maintain an atmosphere of health and trust. The age of the child makes no difference in this matter. A teen-aged child is no more responsible to maintain healthy boundaries than is a three year old. In fact, teens may have more confusion about appropriate boundaries and should be treated appropriately.

- b. Physical Affection. Physical expressions of affection such as hugs are acceptable but it is best to allow the child to initiate the contact and the adult must be sensitive not to allow them to become too frequent or prolonged.
- c. Sexualized Behavior. It is never appropriate to engage in any manner of sexualized behavior with a child. This refers not only to explicitly sexual behavior, but to sexually provocative, seductive or erotic behavior or language as well. It is inappropriate to tell jokes with sexual content, connotations, or “double entendres”.
- d. Tobacco, Drugs and Alcohol. Children should be prohibited from using tobacco, drugs or alcohol, and should be barred from exhibiting illegal behavior while engaged in church-sanctioned activities. Workers should at all times be aware that their own behavior is a powerful statement to children. Adults, while actively supervising children at a church-sponsored event or gathering, will not consume alcohol or illegal drugs, or use tobacco products.
- e. Confidentiality vs. Secrets. If a child discloses incidents of abuse or neglect or is exhibiting self-destructive tendencies, the worker should report it immediately to the minister or DRE. Workers will cooperate with any subsequent investigation. Adults should never give children the impression that they will keep secrets for them or promise to keep such information confidential.

#### 4. REPORTING AND RESPONSE PROCEDURES

- a. If a worker has reason to believe that abuse has occurred during an FUUCH program or event, the adult must immediately report it to the minister or DRE. If the worker ascertains that the child is in a situation of imminent risk, he/she (or another responsible person) should immediately remove the abusive adult or vulnerable child from the situation and take steps necessary to protect the child.
- b. The minister or DRE will alert the President of the Board of Trustees (the “President”) that an abuse situation has been reported, and shall report it as required by law and to the church’s insurer as the matter requires. Otherwise, the matter is to remain confidential. Release of information could interfere with successful prosecution of the offender, could result in unwarranted damage to the reputation of the accused, or may endanger the child.
- c. If the reported abuse involves an FUUCH worker, the DRE should immediately relieve that person of further duties involving the supervision, care or teaching of children until the matter is resolved.
- d. Should the media contact FUUCH about an alleged incident of abuse,

the President shall represent the Church to the public. In general, while no identifying information should ever be disclosed, the President may disclose steps taken to prevent such incidents, investigate this incident, and to guard against abusive situations in the future.

5. IMPLEMENTATION AND SUPPORT OF THIS POLICY

- a. Procedures will be developed and training will be provided as necessary to support this policy.
- b. It will be the goal of FUUCH to teach the Our Whole Lives Curriculum to all age groups

## Appendix

### **First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston Code of Ethics for Adults Working with Children**

Adults who are in leadership roles are in a position of stewardship and play a key role in fostering the spiritual development of both individuals and community. It is, therefore, especially important that those in leadership positions be well qualified to provide the special nurture, care and support that will enable children to develop a positive sense of self and a spirit of independence and responsibility. The relationship between young people and their leaders must be one of mutual respect if the positive potential of their relationship is to be realized.

There are no more important areas of growth than those of self-worth and the development of a healthy identity as a sexual being. Adults play a key role in assisting children in these areas of growth. Wisdom dictates that children and adults suffer damaging effects when leaders become sexually involved with young persons in their care. Leaders must be careful to protect the children they work with and to protect themselves and their church.

Therefore, we will refrain from engaging in sexual, seductive or erotic behavior with children. Neither shall we harass nor engage in behavior with children which constitutes verbal, emotional or physical abuse.

Leaders will refrain from being under the influence of illegal drugs, alcohol or any other drugs which would impair their judgment or ability to function effectively in a leadership role with children.

Leaders will be informed of this Code of Ethics and agree to it before assuming their roles. In cases of any violation of this code, appropriate action will be taken.

I hereby agree to abide by this Code of Ethics.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Note: This Code of Ethics has been adapted from The Code of Ethics for Persons Working with Children and Youth in UUA Sponsored Programs and Events adopted by the UUA in 1986.

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**Section II: VULNERABLE ADULTS (those who are 18 years or older who are in need of community care services by reasons of mental health or other disability, age or illness and are unable to take care of themselves, or unable to protect themselves against significant harm or exploitation.)**

- 1) SCREENING AND SELECTION OF PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH VULNERABLE ADULTS
  - a) Those who provide direct care or supervision for vulnerable adults (“workers”) at FUUCH must meet the following criteria:
    - i) Unpaid workers (“volunteers”) must be active participants at FUUCH as a church member or friend for at least six months.
    - ii) Those working with vulnerable adults must be at least 18 years of age. Workers below the age of 18 must be approved by the Safety Officer. The Safety Officer will be selected by the Senior Minister.
    - iii) All workers must consent to such reference and/or background checks as FUUCH, in its sole discretion, deems necessary and must agree to be bound by the Code of Ethics for People Working with Vulnerable Adults (see Appendix). The Safety Officer and Senior Minister will be responsible for determining disqualification based on background or reference checks. This information will be kept confidential.
    - iv) All workers must be trained as prescribed by the Safety Officer.
- 2) SUPERVISION GUIDELINES AND POLICIES
  - a) Annually, leaders of groups working with vulnerable adults will contact the vulnerable adults to obtain feedback on the performance of the volunteer and effectiveness of the program.
  - b) Groups working with vulnerable adults will have regular meetings to share ideas, conduct training, and conduct other group business. “Regular meeting” frequency will be determined by the group according to their needs but in any case will not be less than one time per year.
  - c) All drivers transporting vulnerable adults shall be a minimum age of 21. All drivers must have a current, valid driver’s license and proof of insurance before being assigned driving responsibilities. Drivers may be asked to provide proof of valid license and insurance, and such proof may be photocopied.
  - d) Abuse will not be tolerated under any circumstance. This includes behavior that constitutes verbal, emotional or physical abuse, and behavior or language that is threatening or demeaning.
  - e) Behavior must both *be* and *appear to be* above reproach.
  - f) Workers must follow the processes and procedures provided by the group sponsoring their activities. Such processes and procedures will be shared with regular participants prior to their beginning their volunteer activities. It is understood that there may be urgent need for temporary or one time volunteers. These individuals may volunteer, but only on a

- very limited basis before receiving the appropriate guiding information.
- g) All workers must agree to participate in any required training provided for the group.

3) MAINTAINING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

- a) All groups working with vulnerable adults must have processes and procedures that adequately address the following areas in which healthy boundaries must be maintained. Each group will have a staff member assigned to oversee and confirm at least annually that such policies and processes are in place.
  - i) Physical
  - ii) Gifts
  - iii) Confidentiality and Secrets
  - iv) Expectations
  - v) Psychological and Emotional
  - vi) Legal
  - vii) Financial

4) REPORTING AND RESPONSE PROCEDURES

- a) If any member of the congregation has reason to believe that abuse or neglect has occurred or is occurring the individual must immediately consult with the Senior Minister or Safety Officer and report it to the appropriate authority as required by law. (See appendix B)
- b) If anyone in the congregation receives a report that a worker has abused a care partner, the report must be relayed to the Senior Minister or Safety Officer immediately. The worker must be relieved of duty until an investigation can be completed and the issue resolved. All workers must agree to cooperate with and participate in any investigations.
- c) The Senior Minister or Safety Officer will alert the President of the Board of Trustees (the "President") that an abuse situation has been reported, and shall report it as required by law and to the church's insurer as the matter requires. Otherwise, the matter is to remain confidential. Release of information could interfere with successful prosecution of the offender, could result in unwarranted damage to the reputation of the accused, or may endanger the vulnerable adult.
- d) Should the media contact FUUCH about an alleged incident of abuse, the Board President shall represent the Church to the public. In general, while no identifying information should ever be disclosed, the President may disclose steps taken to prevent such incidents, investigate this incident, and to guard against abusive situations in the future.

5) IMPLEMENTATION AND SUPPORT OF THIS POLICY

- a) Procedures will be developed and training will be provided as necessary to support this policy. Group leaders will be responsible for conducting training and the Safety Officer will be available to provide guidance or assistance.

## **Appendix A**

### **First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston Code of Ethics for Adults Working with Vulnerable adults**

Individuals who are working with vulnerable adults need to be well qualified to provide special nurture, care and support. The relationship between these individuals and the vulnerable adult must be one of mutual respect. Workers must be careful to protect the vulnerable adults they work with and to protect themselves and their church.

Therefore, in working with vulnerable adults, I will not engage in verbal, emotional, sexual or physical abuse.

I will refrain from being under the influence of illegal drugs, alcohol or any other drugs which would impair my judgment or ability to function effectively while working with vulnerable adults.

I agree that FUUCH may conduct a background and/or reference check on me and will provide the information necessary to accomplish this task.

I have read this Code of Ethics and agree to abide by it before assuming my role. I understand that in case of any violation of this code, appropriate action will be taken.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

The Texas code that requires reporting of abuse or neglect of vulnerable adults is found in the following:

HUMAN RESOURCES CODE

TITLE 2. DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES AND DEPARTMENT OF PROTECTIVE AND REGULATORY SERVICES

SUBTITLE D. DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES; CHILD WELFARE AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES

CHAPTER 48. INVESTIGATIONS AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES FOR ELDERLY AND DISABLED PERSONS

From the DFPS website:

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) offers a central location to report:

child abuse and neglect,

elderly or adults with disabilities abuse, neglect, or exploitation,

abuse of children in licensed child-care facilities or treatment centers for the entire State of Texas,

abuse of clients served by the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) or Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services (DADS) employees in State Hospitals or State Schools.

The law requires any person who believes that a child, or person 65 years or older, or an adult with disabilities is being abused, neglected, or exploited to report the circumstances to DFPS. A person making a report is immune from civil or criminal liability provided they make the report in good faith, and the name of the person making the report is kept confidential. Any person suspecting abuse and not reporting it can be held liable for a Class B misdemeanor. Time frames for investigating reports are based on severity of allegations. Reporting suspected child abuse makes it possible for a family to get help.

### **Agency Jurisdictions and Other Hotline Numbers**

#### **Adult Protective Services (APS) Facility Investigations**

APS investigates allegations of abuse, neglect, and exploitation in facilities that care for adults including: private homes, adult foster homes (with 3 or fewer consumers), unlicensed room and board, state facilities and community centers that provide mental health and mental retardation services, home health agency staff, exploitation in nursing homes when the alleged perpetrator is someone outside the facility.

Abuse Hotline for APS Facility Investigations:

1-800-647-7418