

Guidelines for The Protection Of Minors and the Prevention of Abuse

Theological premise

Jesus announced the Kingdom of God and the abundance of true life for all the people (John 10,10). In word and deed He stands on the side of those excluded from the fullness of life. In a famous speech to His disciples (Matthew 18, 1-4) He stated His solidarity to children, the boys and girls, who at the time had no rights but were the property of the father of the family. The society of the time saw children as things while Jesus considered them as people, as subjects with the right to self-determination. Jesus used especially strong images and words to condemn each and any action which led to children being violated or exploited, and encouraged His disciples to shield them from anyone threatening them or who intended to abuse them.

Today, our aim must be for children entrusted to us to enjoy the fullness of life, its greatness, and this means undertaking a commitment so that the Church is a haven and help for those who cannot defend themselves and lack the means to require respect for their dignity, their physical and mental integrity.

Method and Context: Note

Given the many activities involving children under age as part of the life of local churches or diaconal institutions, the Waldensian Board (General Board of the Church) and Synodal Commission for Diaconia (CSD) felt it necessary to develop the tools and means that make our places safe and protected, somewhere children and youngsters can find ways to express themselves freely, where their dignity, their timing and their specific individuality are respected, preventing inadequate and abusive behaviour and learning how to identify and manage any signs of suffering or unease correctly. Our decision has been to start with mere guidelines appealing to each person's responsibility without avoiding a more prescriptive side of the matter.

Although the present document is very brief, its intention is to focus on a very important and topical subject, encouraging everyone to consider the matter, to be developed in specific moments of discussion and training.

A new pathway is being followed: it includes laying out other procedures/guidelines for recruitment & selection; responsible use of photos, videos and social media; confidential meetings; management of report, cautionary and disciplinary procedures and injunctions. The attempt is also to try and avoid over-prevention and sex phobia messages. One must consider the rights of all the people involved in any situation where inappropriate behaviour is suspected by adults under whose responsibility the children are, albeit avoiding hasty actions and summary trials. In the case of conflicting interests, we believe the need to defend minors has to be prioritized and we have to be committed in the fight against every form of tolerance, not covering up behaviour that could put minors at risk or damage their welfare and dignity.

Psychological and relational features.

In the commitment for prevention and taking action in cases of possible abuse in institutional contexts where adults hold the educational and teaching responsibility of children and adolescents more attention and awareness is needed on several inherent issues which are often disregarded. Such issues are important in understanding behaviour which can be more or less unconsciously enacted, such as the perception of one's body, the sexual side and asymmetry.

The relationship with an adult who has an educational role is privileged in all institutional contexts and, for this reason, adults must be able to understand and self-analyse their actions, bearing in mind the key role they have in guaranteeing safety and quality development of minors in their care.

Asymmetry is a specific facet of any educational relationship, unlike any other informal relationship of friendship and love: it is key to the adults' role in upbringing and education.

Minors often idealise adults who then become the target of their attentions and emotions which include the sphere of the body: an adult may in turn respond to these emotional attentions by doing something, like embracing or caressing, which could be inappropriate or ambivalent and possibly lead to the loss of asymmetry.

The denial or the lack of understanding of the above described issues lead to the so called 'blind spots' that make it impossible to maintain the right distance and lead to the behaviour being otherwise interpreted.

Some of the above mentioned facets of emotions and feelings are often denied because they are considered troublesome, although they are precisely what requires constant monitoring and ongoing training to avoid the risk of shifting to dangerous behaviour.

Abuse and mistreatment are traumatic events which interrupt the normal flow of life and creates a 'before and after' in the victims' timeline which is frozen and nothing can be like it was before.

The main objective in every context of intervention is to guarantee the safety and the conditions for the best development of the people who have been entrusted to adults. To reach this aim, the programme must be developed in the framework of a given context and method, where the staff involved are acquainted with procedures, actions and practices in the various institutional contexts.

Basic training and supervision must be considered as key tools and skills for prevention, enabling staff to better understand the emotional echoes of educational work so that emotions can be processed in terms of teaching and to develop responsibility and awareness.

Target group

While being aware of the various roles and responsibilities, the present simple guidelines are suggested for professional staff of the Diaconia and other institutions as well as for volunteers and all those who may perform services involving minors as part of a ministry in the Church (on local and temporary basis ministries or ordained pastors and deacons).

Protection target: the present document refers to the protection of minors

GUIDELINES

A behaviour oriented to the protection and respect of the dignity of the child and adolescent means:

- To use careful language, a tone of voice and a body language such as to respect the sensitivity of the other person;
- To openly take position against violent, discriminatory, racist, sexist and homophobic behaviour;
- To be aware that personal feelings and emotions, just as cultural factors and family education, can affect the desire of being close or distant in the adult-child relationship; this means physical proximity and distance should be managed with responsibility neither forcing nor over-reacting, referring to the needs expressed by the child;
- To respect any child's and any adolescent's need for modesty and reserve, not forcing them and avoiding ridicule linked to the management of intimacy and body;
- To hold conversations and discussions on sexuality only if initiated voluntarily by the minor and in any case without forcing;
- To organise activities so that others may openly observe what is happening with the minors in care;
- To manage any emergency 'first aid' or address small scale medical needs ensuring the presence of other adults;
- To always ask for and obtain consent before taking pictures or shooting videos and limiting their use to institutional sites and forms of communication in the respect of the provisions in the procedure called 'For a responsible use of photos, videos, the Internet and social media':
- To share or inform the people in charge of the facility, of the camp, the Pastor or the President of the Church Council of any doubts arising from the behaviour of the children or of the adults;
- In the event of illegal acts or actions taking place the legal representatives have the duty to report the event(s) to the courts.

There are other kinds of behaviour that must never occur, and namely:

- To administer corporal punishment;
- To act in a sexually 'seductive' manner even in jest;
- To ridicule minors or turn them into scapegoats;
- To allow violent and/or discriminatory activities or games such as bullying, initiation rites and the like among peers;
- To display any favouritism for one or a group of minors;
- To allow strangers access to areas where they may be alone with children. Occasional visitors must always be accompanied to the facility by known people;
- Invite minors alone to one's home;

- To establish any sentimental relation with minors: such relationships are inadmissible under any circumstance in the context of educational and care relations, even when the minors are close to becoming of age.

If the minor refers abuse or shows signs which lead to suspect it, both whether this is happening within the context of the service or in other contexts:

- Do not manage the case on one's own. Depending on the context, one of the following should be involved as soon as possible:
 - a) the head of the Centre/Institute: for both professional staff and voluntary members involved in institutes or other facilities;
 - b) The Pastor or the President of the Church Council: for people appointed for activities with minors within local churches;
 - c) the Moderator of the Waldensian Board: for Pastors and Deacons, in relation to situations involving other ministers or to doubts referring to responsibilities and limits linked to the exercise of one's ministry;
- To record any report of information in writing describing facts in an objective manner: for instance do not write 'the child shows signs of violence' but 'the child had two bruises on his/her left arm', do not write 'the child displayed signs of unease' but 'the child failed to utter a word all afternoon, from lunch time to when he/she left', sign and date it. Store the written report in a safe place;
- If the child asks for a confidential meeting NEVER promise it will be unconditionally reserved, but clarify there are dangerous situations in which case one has to involve other people that are better equipped to help people in difficulty;

In any case:

- Stay calm
- Listen to the child carefully
- Maintain eye contact
- Allow the child to speak but neither force nor suggest answers with leading questions
- Reassure the child where they feel a sense of guilt
- Confirm to the child that he/she has the right to speak up
- Promise the child that he/she will not be left alone