

TIPS FOR PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE WITHIN YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

The Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) supports young people and their families by providing a wide range of high-quality youth and community development programs. Youth-serving organizations play an important role in creating safe places for young people, often facilitating trusting relationships with peers and caring adults. Without strategies to protect young people, this dynamic can also open doors for sexually abusive behaviors, threatening their physical and emotional safety.

Child sexual abuse includes: any sexual act between an adult and a minor; or between two minors, when one exerts power over the other; forcing, coercing or persuading a child to engage in a sexual act; non-contact acts such as exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, voyeurism, and communicating in a sexual manner by phone or Internet.

Much of the information shared here is from *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations*, published by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CDC research estimates that approximately one in six boys and one in four girls are sexually abused before the age of 18. The purpose of this guide is to provide tips for DYCD-funded programs on preventing and responding to child sexual abuse in youth programs.

The most essential step to protect youth is to ensure full compliance with all required laws and regulations. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services outlines laws in New York State regarding child abuse and maltreatment, and child care program regulations, including required screenings, trainings, and mandated reporting. The NYPD and the District Attorneys' Offices are also resources on this topic.

BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS TO ADOPTING A SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION POLICY

BARRIER: Fear that people will think something is wrong within your organization.

SOLUTION: Emphasize that efforts to protect young people also protect staff and the organization.

BARRIER: The potential for increased reporting and disclosures of child sexual abuse in response to improved prevention and response strategies.

SOLUTION: Prevention strategies may uncover cases that are hidden – once uncovered, the number of cases may decrease.

BARRIER: Lack of buy-in from organizational staff and a general reluctance to talk about sex and child sexual abuse.

SOLUTION: Over time, perseverance and open communication should overcome this barrier and help keep youth safer.

Complete Required Background Checks.

You must complete required clearances and background checks. Be aware that criminal background checks will only identify offenders who have previously been reported.

Carefully Select and Screen Employees and

Volunteers. Educate applicants about your youth-protection policies. You may deter some people at risk of abusing youth from applying. Ask direct screening questions about behaviors that applicants think are okay to engage in with young people. Have new hires sign an agreement that defines appropriate versus inappropriate behaviors, including the consequences for engaging in inappropriate behaviors.

Provide Information about Child Sexual Abuse.

Beyond what is required by law, all employees/volunteers need to understand general information about child sexual abuse, including in multiple formats, such as printed materials, online, and staff message boards.

Empower Youth and Caregivers as Partners in the Prevention Process.

Explain to participants, and reinforce in writing, that policies, boundaries, and guidelines are staff's commitment to a healthy environment. For example, a youth orientation can include staff and participant roles, and define healthy relationships. Let youth know that no one has the right to force, trick, or coerce them into sexual situations and that offenders, not their victims, are responsible for their behavior.

EMPHASIZE PERSONAL BOUNDARIES FOR YOUTH WORKERS WHO ARE YOUNG ADULTS THEMSELVES.

- **Train young adult workers on how to approach situations with participants that are outside of program boundaries, and how to respond appropriately.** Young adult workers need opportunities to practice these skills. Training may include role-play, healthy adult-youth relationships, how to deal with a participant crush, social media guidelines, and bystander training.
- **Ensure young adult workers are knowledgeable of laws and policies relating to their behavior with participants, and the consequences of breaking those rules.**
- **Acknowledge the power differential between young adult workers and youth participants.** Train employees/volunteers to use their influence for positive youth development, not exploitation.
- **Monitor the behavior of young adult workers more closely.** Young adult workers may require more supervision because they are closer in age to participants, and unlikely to have previous infractions that would screen them out.

SET GUIDELINES ON INTERACTIONS.

Identify behaviors that fall into the categories of appropriate, inappropriate, and harmful, and spell them out in your code of conduct or ethics, including visual tools.

- **Implement a Community Agreement** on appropriate behaviors, in cooperation with students and staff. The Agreements can include how members of the group will be kept physically and emotionally safe, and how to respond if something happens to them, or someone else.

- **Have a policy to limit one-on-one interactions between youth and adults.** The goal is to prevent the isolation of one adult and one youth, a situation that elevates the risk for child sexual abuse.

- **Be alert to the risk of abusive interactions between youth.** Strategies that focus on the interactions between employees/volunteers and youth can be tailored to address interactions among youth.

- **Limit contact between employees/volunteers and youth to organization-sanctioned activities.**

IMPLEMENT AND ENFORCE SOCIAL MEDIA POLICIES.

- **Share and enforce the DYCD Social Media Policy guidelines for DYCD Providers.** Your own policies may go beyond DYCD’s policies.

- **Engage youth in a conversation about the policy, including the DYCD Social Media Do’s and Don’ts, so they can identify when a communication is not acceptable.**

ENSURE SAFE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS.

- **Operate in spaces that are open and visible** to multiple staff/volunteers, whenever possible and appropriate. Nurture an environment of openness that promotes safe environments for children/youth to learn, play and grow.

MONITOR BEHAVIOR AND RESPOND TO WHAT IS OBSERVED.

- **Create a climate that encourages people to report, question, and/or openly discuss** confusing or uncertain behaviors in the group.

- **Use multiple monitoring methods.** Develop a behavior monitoring protocol that may include formal supervision, evaluations, and regular and random observation, including of staff who are working off-site.

HAVE A WELL-DEFINED REPORTING STRUCTURE

Have a well-defined reporting structure so staff and participants know who to contact if they experience or observe potentially inappropriate or harmful behavior, including backups if the incident involves the direct-line authority.

IMPLEMENT A TRAINING PLAN.

- **Plan trainings to meet your safety goals.** Ensure training content is modeled by everyone, and is evident in performance measures, supervisors’ feedback, caregivers’ observations, and treatment of youth by your organization. Combine elements of your organization’s philosophy or mission with the child sexual abuse prevention training.

- **Include risk factors for sexual violence in training content,** such as rigid gender roles, sexism, homophobia, and community intolerance. Training can include how to address inappropriate language and behavior that contribute to sexual violence.

- **Incorporate Follow-Up Activities.** To uphold the policies, training plans should include booster sessions, additional professional development opportunities, and reflective practices to discuss application of the training content at the program.

Respond to Allegations and Suspicions of Child

Sexual Abuse. Ensure that reporting policies are consistent with current local and state law. Have guidelines about who, how, and when to report to authorities. Include instructions to respond to allegations of abuse by someone outside your organization.

Follow DYCD Incident Reporting Guidelines.

- **Alert your DYCD Program Manager** as soon as possible if abuse is suspected, without interfering with steps to ensure safety of youth.
- Describe in your communication any **temporary or permanent employment actions** against employees while allegations are pending.
- **Complete the DYCD Incident Reporting Form** as directed in the DYCD's Incident Reporting Policy.

Act on Infractions of Your Organization's Child

Sexual Abuse Prevention Policy. If an employee/volunteer has breached a policy, such as having contact with youth outside of your organization, your organization must take action, even when child sexual abuse is not suspected. This will help to ensure that policies are implemented equitably, and will communicate uniform standards.

Have Protocols in Place to Review Incidents.

Following the review, the organization may implement updated procedures, policies, or training designed to enhance the organization's response and/or prevent future incidents.

Following an Allegation, Consider Suspending or Terminating Employment, or Program Participation.

Consider suspending employment or participation immediately, following a report of child sexual abuse, or put the alleged offender on employment probation until the case or investigation is resolved.

Recognize the Tension Between Over-reacting and Under-reacting.

Developing policies before any inappropriate behavior occurs will promote reasonable expectations for responding. A flow chart to outline protocols may help staff proceed, so that over or under reacting is minimized.

Partner with Child Protective Services, Law Enforcement, and Child Advocacy Centers,

before any allegations arise, to form relationships for policy-development and response. When an incident occurs or is suspected, let child protective services, law enforcement, and child advocacy centers do the investigation.

Remember that an Allegation of Child Sexual Abuse Does Not Equate to Guilt.

However, once a suspicion or allegation has been communicated, following mandated reporting laws and organizational policies will protect youth under your care, as well as the organization.

Provide Support or Referrals for Participants and Their Families to Help Them Cope with Incidents of Sexual Abuse.

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. For more information: www.rainn.org.