

POLICY FOR SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN: SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

III. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU TELL THE LOCAL AUTHORITY?



(Picture © Bahá'í World Centre)

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Among the signs of moral downfall in the declining social order are the high incidence of violence within the family, the increase in degrading and cruel treatment of spouses and children, and the spread of sexual abuse. It is essential that the members of the [Bahá'í] community . . . take the utmost care not to be drawn into acceptance of such practices because of their prevalence. They must ever be mindful of their obligation to exemplify a new way of life distinguished by its respect for the dignity and rights of all people, by its exalted moral tone, and by its freedom from oppression and from all forms of abuse.¹

¹. Universal House of Justice, 24 January 1993, to an individual believer quoted in *Antidotes to Domestic Violence* by Dr Michael Penn, an article in *The Bahá'í World: 2003-2004* (2005: page 148).

What happens when you tell the Local Authority

1. Approaching the Local Authority

Local authorities are being urged by the Department of Health to promote a more positive image of the child protection system to encourage and enable people to gain access to the help and advice they need. Guidance to local authorities suggests that referral into the child protection system should follow an initial assessment by the Local Authority of the needs of the child and the family.

It may be clear from this assessment that many cases should not be treated as child protection ones, but that the local authority should consider what support can be provided to the family.

In the main CCPAS suggest contacting the Local Authority, who have the lead responsibility in most circumstances covered by this guidance. Perhaps you are not sure whether someone is being abused or at risk of being abused. CCPAS suggest the following:

- Ring the Local Authority (it is important to know the relevant numbers for your area).
- Ask if you could have an appointment to discuss with the duty social worker a child protection issue.
- Tell the social worker the situation without feeling you have at this stage to give names and addresses.
- Act in accordance with their advice - they may already have concerns of which you are not aware.

2. What happens after a referral is made

You should make a careful written note of what has been observed and any action taken, and this should be dated, signed and kept securely. We recommend that you confirm the referral in writing to the Local Authority Department within 48 hours.

The Local Authority will normally make enquiries of local agencies (health, school etc). As mentioned above, guidance to local authorities encourages them to provide help and support to a family as "a child in need" rather than mounting a formal child protection investigation wherever this is possible and, of course, appropriate. The government's guidance, *Working Together* (currently under review), expects there to be an early strategy discussion between statutory agencies to plan the child protection investigation, particularly where there is to be a joint investigation between Police and the local authority. This discussion (which may well be over the phone) may, depending on the concerns, decide on one of the following:

- * No further action.
- * Provide help to family as a "child in need" (Section 17 of the Children Act 1989).
- * Proceed with a formal child protection investigation (Section 47 of the Children Act 1989).

Strategy group discussions/ recommendations are based on the following principles:

- * The welfare of the child is the paramount consideration.
- * Any possible negative effects of intervention must be considered.
- * The wishes of the child and his/her parent(s), where known, must be given due consideration.
- * Due consideration must be given to the child's age, ethnic, cultural and religious background, and any impairment the child may have.
- * Wherever possible, and where the child's safety and welfare permit, voluntary interventions and services outside the formal child protection process are to be the preferred option.

You should check out with the Local Authority what your role would be during any investigations, eg will you be able to offer support to the individual or family (if desired). If the alleged perpetrator is a worker in your charge with children then you will need to follow the principles already described in Section 5 and

check out with the Local Authority and the Police the stage at which you should suspend the person concerned from activities within the church.

3. Initial Child Protection Conference

Following enquiries, there will be a further discussion and, if appropriate, a child protection conference will be convened. The conference brings together the family and professionals providing them with an opportunity to exchange information and plan together. (The conference is not a forum for a formal discussion of the person who has abused the child. That would be a matter for the Courts).

It may be helpful at this stage for you to provide a written report on the background to the suspicion/allegation and on the family background in preparation for attendance at an initial Child Protection Conference. You may be invited to attend this meeting, either to contribute to the meeting or as a support to the parent. It will be important to clarify from the outset the precise role. For example, in some circumstances two workers might be used - one to provide the information because of the Faith's involvement with the family, and the other to act as a support to the parent.

Generally the conference will be chaired by a member of staff from the the Local Authority Department. with representatives from the local authority and other appropriate professionals. eg NSPCC. police, teachers, health visitor, GP; probation officer and voluntary organisations.

The role of the conference is to share information and make recommendations as to the nature of future plans to protect the child. including whether or not to place the child on the Child Protection Register. For children placed on the Register, there has to be a child protection plan which is regularly reviewed. Generally this is at intervals of no longer than six months, when there will be a review conference to decide whether or not registration should continue. There will be a written plan which should be given to the parents.

If you are sent a copy of the minutes, the accuracy should be checked and the Chair of the conference informed immediately if any errors or amendments are required. The record is otherwise assumed to be agreed. Minutes must, if retained, be kept securely and confidentiality preserved. Minutes must not be passed on to anyone else or copied. If dissatisfied with the outcome of the conference, you should consult with the chair of the meeting.