

POLICY FOR SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN: SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

I. RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE



(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).

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the UK

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Response to Allegations of Abuse

Child Protection Guidance for those representing the Bahá'í Faith in an official capacity

Introduction

Such people include Auxiliary Board Members, Bahá'í Council members, National Committee members, Community and Residential school staff, and Local Spiritual Assembly members. This list is not exhaustive. If you are in any doubt whether this guidance applies to you please contact the National Office.

Abuse is not easy to define. Supplementary policy **II. Definitions and Signs of Abuse** gives the definitions under law as outlined in the guidance formulated by the **Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS)**, from whose documentation we have drawn most of the following guidelines. It also includes identifying signs of abuse.

How to Respond to a Child Wanting to Talk about Abuse

There are certain overarching points to make about how to respond to a child who is disclosing abuse before we describe the more technical aspects. Please read them carefully. Do not assume such a situation will never happen to you. It is not easy to give precise guidance, but the following will almost certainly help:

GENERAL POINTS

Show acceptance of what the child says (however unlikely the story may sound).

Keep calm.

Look at the child directly.

Be honest.

Tell the child you will need to let someone else know - don't promise confidentiality. This is extremely important.

Even when a child has broken a rule, they are not to blame for the abuse.

Be aware that the child may have been threatened or bribed not to tell.

Never push for information. If the child decides not to tell you after all, then accept that and let them know that you are always ready to listen.

HELPFUL THINGS YOU MAY SAY OR SHOW

"I believe you." (Or showing acceptance of what the child says).

"Thank you for telling me," "It's not your fault," and/or "I will help you."

DON'T SAY

"Why didn't you tell anyone before?"

"I can't believe it!" or "Are you sure this is true?"

"Why? How? When? Who? Where?"

Never make false promises and never make statements such as "I am shocked. Don't tell anyone else."

CONCLUDING

Again reassure the child that they were right to tell you and show acceptance.

Let the child know what you are going to do next and that you will let them know what happens (you might have to consider referring to the Local Authority or the Police to prevent a child or young person returning home if you consider them to be seriously at risk of further abuse).

Contact an agency such as CCPAS on 0303 003 11 11 (Option 2) for advice or go directly to the Local Authority/ Police/NSPCC. You may wish to contact the National Spiritual Assembly but please remember that *the institutions of the Faith do not have a role in the investigation of such allegations.*

Consider your own feelings and seek pastoral support if needed.

Make notes as soon as possible (preferably within one hour of the child talking to you), writing down exactly what the child said and when s/he said it, what you said in reply and what was happening immediately beforehand (eg a description of the activity). Record dates and times of these events and when you made the record. Keep all hand written notes, even if subsequently typed. Such records should be kept safely for an indefinite period.

How Those Representing the Bahá'í Faith Should Respond to Reports of Abuse

1. PREPARATION

When a child wants to talk about abuse, it is important for the worker to listen carefully to what the child says without prompting or using leading questions. Studying the previous section will help. It is important to follow the guidance as closely as possible for the sake of the child, for your own protection, for the protection of the Faith and in order not to void insurance cover. **Appendix E** gives a partial summary but should be used as a reminder of this guidance, not as a substitute for reading it.

2. RESPONDING TO CONCERNS

CCPAS advice is as follows:

- (i) Where a child has a physical injury or symptom of neglect:
 - a. Contact the Local Authority directly (See Supplementary policy **III. What happens when you tell the Local Authority?**) for a more detailed discussion of what this may involve and its long term implications) where there are serious concerns regarding the child or the parents, or where a child is afraid to return home. Do not tell the parents in such circumstances.
 - b. In some situations where the concerns are not as great it may be appropriate to speak with the parent and suggest, for example, that medical help/attention is needed for the child. The doctor will then initiate further action, if necessary. With a small child you could suggest a chat with the health visitor. Alternatively, encourage the parent to seek help from the the Local Authority Department. With older young people it will be important to take their wishes into account in regard to speaking with parents. Often the agencies of the Faith can provide invaluable help to a family where there are signs of poor parenting resulting from ignorance.
 - c. If a parent is unwilling to seek help, then offer to accompany them. If they still fail to acknowledge the need for medical attention you may need to seek help yourself, eg via the Local Authority.
 - d. Where emergency medical attention is necessary it should be sought immediately, informing the doctor of any suspicions you may have.
- (ii) Where there are allegations/concerns of sexual abuse:
 - a. **DO NOT** tell the parents. You must put the child's welfare first. Parents could be involved and allegations of sexual abuse are usually denied and often difficult to prove. (See also point 5 below).
 - b. Contact the Local Authority. **DO NOT** try to investigate the matter yourself. Your job is to relay information in order for the Local Authority and the Police, working together, to interview parties and undertake investigations under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, where this is necessary.
 - c. Contact the police directly in order to facilitate a medical examination by a police surgeon in the case of very severe sexual assault (such as rape) which you believe has occurred over the last few hours and you have not been able to get an immediate response from the Local Authority. The police might then arrange for a medical examination by a designated police surgeon. This could provide evidence which could be used in any criminal prosecution.

(Older young people are able to decline such an examination if they are felt to be of sufficient age and understanding). Do not tamper with any evidence, such as stained clothing.

- d. Keep information on a 'need to know basis' so that any alleged perpetrator is not 'tipped off.' The child or young person also has a right for their privacy to be respected as much as is possible.

3. REFERRALS AND THIRD PARTY ALLEGATIONS

Where allegations are made by a third party, your role is to elicit as much information as possible from the referrer. Unless the person wishes to remain anonymous this should include the referrer's details (name, address, telephone number) and as much factual detail as possible about the child and family concerned (names of family members, addresses, name/date of birth of subject, child's ethnic origin etc). Information as to the cause of concern or nature of the injuries/observations should be included.

It would be advisable for you to inform the referrer that information relating to any child at risk, or potentially at risk, will be shared with the child protection co-ordinator and may result in referral to the the Local Authority, and in this event they may wish to interview the referrer (if known) as part of their investigations.

4. ALLEGATIONS BY ADULTS ABUSED AS CHILDREN

If allegations are made by adults (i.e. people over the age of sixteen) about past abuse as a child, it is for the victim to decide whether or not to report the matter to the local authority or the police. The only exception is where there is a possibility that the alleged perpetrator still has close contact with children. In such circumstances, we advise that the allegations should be reported to the child protection authorities (police/the local authority/NSPCC) so that children who may be at risk now can be protected. Sexual abuse of children is often addictive behaviour and perpetrators can continue to abuse for many years.

5. WHY YOU SHOULD NOT SPEAK TO THE PARENT OR ALLEGED ABUSER

A child might make an allegation naming someone as the abuser. That might be the absolute truth; it could be that a child feels safer to name someone else because they are being told not to tell, or the child is presenting the situation in a confused way. If a parent knew about the allegation and they were innocent, they might go and confront this alleged abuser and ruin a Police or the Local Authority investigation. They might also, in their anger, take physical action against him/her which would not be very helpful either! The alleged abuser (if guilty) might try to silence the child with bribery or threats. He could remove any incriminating material books, videos, photos, computer files. If innocent, he cannot show by shock, horror, surprise, that he is.

6. WHAT IF YOU HAVE A SUPERVISORY ROLE IN RELATION TO THE ALLEGED ABUSER?

If the alleged perpetrator has a role at your instigation among children within the Faith for whom you are responsible, or has other contact with children, speak to the Local Authority and the police before taking any action such as suspension during an enquiry. It will be necessary to supervise the worker as closely as possible without raising suspicion during the very short period between the matter coming to your attention and the authorities being informed. Any suspension which follows is a necessary but neutral act - if the allegations are true it is vital to protect children from further abuse or from being influenced in any way by the alleged perpetrator.

7. WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP

All of us will often experience difficulty in making appropriate judgements. The National Spiritual Assembly must emphasise that it sees no role for the Bahá'í institutions in investigation allegations or complaints of abuse. These must be dealt with by the professionals. You must turn to bodies such as the Local Authority directly. However you should report to the National Spiritual Assembly that you have done so.

The Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (as from 2018 known as 'Thirtyone:eight') is an independent organisation with no denominational allegiance, though it encourages people to work through agreed procedures wherever possible. The National Spiritual Assembly finds its guidance and resources very useful.

CCPAS is available to any of us who are seeking advice on how to handle such disclosures. They are also available to provide follow-up support at each stage in the process and always confirm their advice in writing.

The institutions of the Faith have, of course, a definite pastoral role in the ongoing support of victims of abuse.