

Guidelines for the avoidance of unnecessary contact and unfounded allegations

Introduction

Working with and pastoring young people brings demands and challenges. There are also great rewards, not least of which are the good personal relationships which help the growth and development of those young people. In a very small number of cases, things can go wrong. Allegations against children's pastors and leaders are very rare, but the damage to all concerned is so great that all adults should be aware of the issues and think carefully about their conduct so that misinterpretations can be minimised. It is not possible to prescribe courses of action for every circumstance but children's pastors and leaders should observe these guidelines in the conduct of their work with young people.

The guidelines have been written to assist all adults who, in the course of their work, might be required to come into contact with young people or vulnerable adults.

Private meetings with young people

Leaders and children's pastors should be aware of the dangers which may arise from private interviews with children and young people. It is recognised that there will be occasions when confidential interviews must take place but, where possible, such interviews should be conducted in a room with visual access, or with the door open, or in a room or area which is likely to be frequented by other people. Where possible another child or another adult should be present or nearby during the interview.

Caring for young people with particular problems

Children's pastors or leaders who have to administer first aid should ensure wherever possible that other children or another adult are present if they are in any doubt as to whether necessary physical contact could be misconstrued.

Another adult or older child should accompany children's pastors who have to help children with toileting difficulties. It is accepted that there may be some situations where young people may present particular problems for children's pastors and what is acceptable contact will therefore be dependent upon what is reasonable in all the circumstances. The child's parent will be called out of the service on a Sunday morning to assist whenever necessary.

Where physical contact may be acceptable and/or necessary

There may be occasions where a distressed child needs comfort and reassurance such as a caring parent would give. Children's pastors should exercise caution in such cases to ensure that what is, and what is seen to be by others present, normal and natural does not constitute unnecessary and unjustified contact, particularly with the same child over a period of time. Where a children's pastor has a particular concern about the need to provide this type of care and reassurance he or she should seek the advice of their team leader or the children's pastor.

Where it is necessary for a children's pastor to restrain a child physically to prevent him or her from inflicting injury to others or to prevent self-injury, only the minimum force necessary may be used and any action taken must be solely to restrain the child. Where a children's pastor has taken action to restrain a child he or she should discuss the matter as soon as possible with his/her team leader and children's pastor and the parents will be informed.

Gratuitous physical contact with young people

Any form of physical punishment of young people is unlawful, as is any form of physical response to misbehaviour unless it is by way of reasonable restraint. It is particularly important that children's pastors understand this, both to protect their own position and the position of the church.

Where conversations of a sensitive nature may be appropriate

Children's pastors play a pastoral role with the children and in order to fulfil that role effectively there will be occasions where conversations will cover particularly sensitive matters. Children's pastors must in these circumstances use their discretion to ensure that, for example, any probing for details cannot be construed as unjustified intrusion.

Children may approach children's pastors from time to time for advice. They may also appear distressed and children's pastors may feel the need to ask if all is well. In such cases children's pastors must judge whether it is appropriate for them to offer a listening ear and prayerful advice or whether to refer the child to the Team Leader who will then talk with parents where necessary.

Inappropriate comments and discussions with young people

As with physical contact, comments by children's pastors to young people individually or in groups can be misconstrued. As a general principle, therefore, children's pastors must not make unnecessary comments to and/or about young people that could be construed to have a sexual connotation. It is also unacceptable for children's pastors to introduce or to encourage debate amongst young people, which could be construed as having a sexual connotation that is unnecessary given the circumstances. There will be times however, when it is important to address such issues with young people in the context of biblical teaching. At the same time it is recognised that a topic raised by a child is best addressed rather than ignored. Systematic use of insensitive, disparaging or sarcastic comments is also unacceptable.

Choice and use of teaching materials

When using teaching materials of a particularly sensitive nature, children's pastors should be aware of the danger that their selection could be misinterpreted and may be criticised after the event.

General relationships and attitudes

Children's pastors should ensure that their relationships with young people are appropriate to the age and gender of the people concerned, taking particular care that their conduct is not such as to give rise to comment or speculation. Attitudes, demeanour and language all require care and thought, particularly when children's pastors of either sex are dealing with adolescent boys and girls.

Trips and activities away from the normal church setting

Children's pastors should be particularly careful when supervising pupils in a residential setting such as a camp or extended visit away from home. The standard of behaviour expected of children's pastors will be no different from the behaviour expected within a church setting.

Reporting incidents

Any concern about a child and all incidents resulting in injury to children will be reported to parents and recorded in writing with copies held by the Children's Leader.

Following any incident where a children's pastor feels that his or her actions or comments have been, or may be, misconstrued he or she should discuss the matter with the Children's Leader or another leader. Where it is agreed with the Children's Leader the children's pastor should provide a written report of the incident. It is especially important to speak with the Children's Leader in cases where a children's pastor has been obliged to restrain a young person physically and where a complaint has been made whether by the person concerned or by somebody else.

Conclusion

It would be impossible and inappropriate to lay hard and fast rules to cover all the circumstances in which children's pastors relate to young people and where opportunities for their conduct to be misconstrued might occur. In all circumstances, sensible judgement will need to be exercised. For the vast majority of children's pastors the above guidelines will serve only to confirm what has always been their practice. If children's pastors have any doubts about the advice contained in this document they should consult Children's Leader and discuss it with them.