



&



Policies and Procedures Handbook

Dear Children's Volunteer or Staff Member,

At The Gathering Church, we take our responsibility to care for children very seriously. These guidelines are intended to facilitate a safe and nurturing environment in which children can grow in relationship with Jesus.

The pages of this handbook provide a general overview of procedures and guidelines for The Gathering Church volunteers and staff members. Our policies are intended to create a safe environment for children. The following procedures have been adopted and will be strictly enforced. Any additional or specific instructions will be posted, made available to caregivers, and be made in accordance with this document.

After you have carefully read this policy manual, please sign and return the agreement form located on the last page.

Sincerely,

Mikah Alge
associate pastor

The Gathering Church Policies & Procedures for Children's Ministries

Contents:

● Overview of Safety System	4
● Child Safety Policy	5
● Reporting Abuse or Suspicions of Abuse	6
● Safety Committee	8
● Children's Ministries Staff Monitoring Plan	9
● Child Safety Measures	10
● Disciplinary Policies	11
● Restroom Policies	13
● Medication	15
● Transportation	15
● Verbal Interaction with Children	15
● One-to-One Interaction with Children	15
● Physical Contact	16
● Intoxicants	16
● Tobacco Use	17
● Sexually Oriented Conversations	17
● Sexually Oriented Materials	17
● Nudity	17
● Parental Involvement	17

Overview of the The Gathering Church Safety System

Because we love children and desire to protect them, The Gathering Church requires all staff members and volunteers working with children or students (and other vulnerable populations) to complete **FOUR SAFETY STEPS** before ministry work or volunteer placements begin.

STEP ONE: Sexual Abuse Awareness Training

The Gathering Church policies and procedures require that staff members and volunteers avoid abusive behavior of any kind. Staff members and volunteers are required to report any policy violations to a supervisor or a member of the The Gathering Church Safety Committee. Staff members and volunteers should have a basic understanding of the characteristics of sexual abusers and their behaviors in 'grooming' a child for sexual abuse. *Grooming is the process used by an abuser to select a child, win the child's trust (and the trust of the child's parent or 'gatekeeper'), manipulate the child into sexual activity and keep the child from disclosing the abuse.*

To equip The Gathering Church staff members and volunteers with information necessary to recognize abuser characteristics and grooming behavior, The Gathering Church requires all staff members and volunteers to complete MinistrySafe's Sexual Abuse Awareness Training (live or online at www.MinistrySafe.com). This training will be renewed every two years. This can be done online from home or at one of our annual churchwide training days.

STEP TWO: Screening Process

Staff members and volunteers are required to complete the The Gathering Church Screening Process, which requires a staff member or volunteer to:

- complete an Employment Application (employees only)
- complete the Safety Application (employees and volunteers)
- complete an interview (employees and volunteers)
- provide references to be checked (employees and volunteers)

*A volunteer must attend The Gathering Church for six months before being eligible to serve in volunteer positions providing access to children, students or vulnerable populations.

STEP THREE: Policies & Procedures

Staff members and volunteers are required to review the policies contained in this manual and sign the last page indicating that he or she has read and understood the material, and agrees to comply with policy requirements.

STEP FOUR: Criminal Background Check

The Gathering Church requires that all staff members and volunteers working or volunteering in children's or student activities or programming undergo a criminal background check. Depending upon position, differing levels or intensity of background check may be required. Individuals who have committed sexually-oriented or sex-related crimes may not serve in any area providing services to children or minors. In addition, certain other past criminal acts *may* preclude an applicant from serving minors.

Child Safety Policy

ABUSE TOLERANCE

The Gathering Church has a **zero tolerance for abuse** in ministry programs and ministry activities. It is the responsibility of every staff member and volunteer at The Gathering Church to act in the best interest of all children in every program.

In the event that staff or volunteers observe any inappropriate behaviors (i.e. policy violations, neglectful supervision, poor role-modeling, etc.) or suspected abuse (physical, emotional, or sexual) it is their responsibility to immediately report their observations to Jon Henson, lead pastor; or Hannah Kitchens, family pastor.

REPORTING SUSPICIOUS OR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS

The Gathering Church is committed to providing a safe, secure environment for children and their families. To this end, any report of inappropriate behaviors or suspicions of abuse will be taken seriously and will be reported, in accordance with this policy and state law, to the The Gathering Church Leadership Team, and the Police Department, Child Protective Services, or other appropriate agency.

An element of the safe environment referenced above includes the fostering of a culture of reporting relevant information to a supervisor or a member of the The Gathering Church Safety Committee. Because sexual abusers 'groom' children for abuse, it is possible a staff member or volunteer may witness behavior intended to 'groom' a child for sexual abuse. Staff members and volunteers are asked to report 'grooming' behavior, any policy violations, or any suspicious behaviors to a supervisor or a member of the The Gathering Church Safety Committee.

ENFORCEMENT OF POLICIES

The Gathering Church staff members and volunteers who supervise other staff members or volunteers are charged with the diligent enforcement of all The Gathering Church policies. Violations of these policies are grounds for immediate dismissal, disciplinary action, or reassignment from a position in Children's Ministries – for both volunteers and staff members. Final decisions related to policy violations will be the responsibility of the lead pastor, associate pastor, and Leadership Team.

Reporting Abuse or Suspicions of Abuse

REPORTING VIOLATION OF POLICY

In order to maintain a safe environment for our children, The Gathering Church staff members and volunteers must be aware of their individual responsibility to report any questionable circumstance, observation, act, omission, or situation that is a violation of these policies. All questions or concerns related to inappropriate, suspicious, or suspected grooming behavior should be directed to an immediate supervisor in the ministry area, the family pastor, the lead pastor, or the associate pastor.

CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLATION

Any person accused of committing a prohibited act or any act considered by the church to be harmful to a child will be immediately suspended from participation in The Gathering Church Children's and Youth Ministries. This suspension will continue during any investigation by law enforcement or Child Protective agencies.

Any person found to have committed a prohibited act should be prohibited from future participation as a staff member or volunteer in all activities and programming that involves children, students or vulnerable populations at The Gathering Church. If the person is a staff member or employee, such conduct may also result in termination of employment from The Gathering Church.

Failure to report a prohibited act to the designated person is a violation of this policy and grounds for termination (employee) or removal (volunteer). Volunteers who fail to report a prohibited act may be restricted from participation in any activities involving children, students or vulnerable populations at The Gathering Church.

REPORTING ABUSE OR SUSPICIONS OF ABUSE

The Gathering Church is committed to providing a safe, secure environment for children and their families. To this end, any report of inappropriate behavior or suspicions of abuse or neglect will be taken seriously and will be reported, in accordance with this policy and state law, to Child Protective Services or criminal law enforcement.

Because sexual abusers 'groom' children for abuse, it is possible that a staff member or volunteer may witness behavior intended to groom a child for sexual abuse. Please report 'grooming' behavior, policy violations, or any suspicious behaviors to an immediate supervisor, such that the church may take appropriate action to safeguard children in the program.

REPORTING ALLEGATIONS OR SUSPICIONS OF ABUSE TO LAW ENFORCEMENT

We report all suspected or alleged abuse or neglect of children to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TDFPS)

Abuse Hotline: 1-800-252-5400

Because many adults are unfamiliar with Texas reporting requirements and may be fearful of the process, The Gathering Church utilizes a 'tandem or dual report' model, where permitted. A 'dual report' occurs when a The Gathering Church supervisor reports the suspicion or allegation *together* with the individual who saw, heard or received information causing him or her to suspect abuse or neglect.

THIS PRACTICE IS NOT REQUIRED, OR INTENDED TO INHIBIT ANY STAFF MEMBER OR VOLUNTEER FROM REPORTING TO LAW ENFORCEMENT, CPS OR THE ABUSE HOTLINE *DIRECTLY*. Instead, it is meant to facilitate reporting, protect children and support individuals who may not feel able or willing to report alone.

NO PERMISSION IS NEEDED from The Gathering Church before reporting to law enforcement personnel or the Child Abuse Hotline.

While not required by state law, please report all suspicions of child abuse or neglect (or any inappropriate or 'grooming' behaviors of a colleague or coworker) to an immediate supervisor or a member of the The Gathering Church Leadership Team. This request is intended to assist the church in properly protecting children involved in The Gathering Church programs.

When in doubt, report.

Note: In the state of Texas all adults are mandatory reporters.

Safety Committee

For now, this is the responsibility of the Leadership Team and may change in the future.

SAFETY COMMITTEE

Recognizing the importance of providing and maintaining a safe environment for children, The Gathering Church will appoint and maintain a Safety Committee, which will meet once each quarter.

The purpose of the Safety Committee is to enable The Gathering Church Children's Ministries to carry out appropriate ministry activities while safeguarding program participants against emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

COMPOSITION

The Safety Committee will be comprised of the following members:

- the lead pastor
- the associate pastor
- the family pastor

RESPONSIBILITIES

The Safety Committee will be charged with the following duties:

1. Applying existing The Gathering Church policies and procedures related to children's safety and risk management issues.
2. Monitoring all Children's Ministries programs for ongoing compliance with safety policies.
3. Making recommendations to the The Gathering Church Leadership Team regarding safety issues.

Children's Ministry Staff Monitoring Plan

BUILDING SAFETY

Every ministry supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the ministry program area is monitored during programming serving children. This includes unobserved monitoring of staff members, volunteers and children. No child will ever be left unattended in a ministry area or on a playground during regular programming, classes or activities.

SUPERVISION

Only parents (dropping off children), screened ministry volunteers, church staff members, and children are allowed in areas where ministry to children is occurring. All other adults should be asked for identification and immediately escorted out of the area. If questions or concerns arise related to any person in the area, a ministry supervisor or security officer (if present) should be notified immediately.

Two trained, screened adults should supervise children at all times.

Avoid being alone with an individual child in any room or during any ministry program. If one supervising adult must leave a group of children, another volunteer or employee must be notified so that the *Two Adult Rule* can be followed.

If two individuals serving in a room are related to one another, a third unrelated volunteer or staff member must be present.

If an unusual circumstance occurs and you find yourself alone with a single child, take the child to a room or building occupied by others, or to a location easily observed by others. (Example: if a child is the last in a class to be picked up by a parent, move to an adjoining room where other staff members or volunteers are present.)

If you need to talk with a child alone, do it in the hallway or a highly visible area, or have another leader with you.

After every ministry event, ensure that every room, area and restroom is checked prior to leaving.

PLAYGROUNDS

On the playground, remember to circulate, watching children during play periods, giving particular attention to areas not easily seen from all viewpoints. (Example: under slides, in corners, behind structures).

Any two children together in an unseen or less easily viewed area should be redirected to another (more open) area of the playground.

Child Safety Measures

WORKER TO CHILD RATIOS

The Gathering Church is committed to providing adequate supervision in all Children's Ministries programs. Accordingly, the following worker to child ratios will be observed:

Program	Workers	Children
Nursery	2	8
Preschool, 2 & 3 years old	2	12
Preschool, 4 & 5 years old	2	18
Elementary	2	20
VBS	2	20

If a worker is 'out of ratio' it is his or her responsibility to immediately notify the family pastor. Pastors will make diligent efforts to find substitute workers to immediately bring worker to children ratios into compliance with Church policy.

CHECK-IN

Upon check-in, each child will receive a nametag and their parent or guardian will be given a claim tag. Volunteers must check each claim tag before releasing a child at pick up, even if they know the family.

If a claim tag is lost, send the parent or guardian to the family pastor or the associate pastor, where proper identification must be shown to a staff member before the child is released. (Have the child stay in the classroom; the parent may pick up the child once cleared).

RELEASE OF CHILDREN

At any time that a child has been entrusted to The Gathering Church staff members or volunteers, the Church incurs responsibility for the safety and well-being of the child. Staff members and volunteers must act to ensure the appropriate supervision and safety of children in their charge.

Children's Ministries staff members or volunteers are responsible for releasing children in their care only to parents, legal guardians, or other persons designated by parents or legal guardians at the close of services or activities.

It is presumed a person who drops off a child or student has authority to pick up the child.

In the event that staff members or volunteers are uncertain of the propriety of releasing a child, they should immediately locate or contact the family pastor before releasing the child.

Disciplinary Policies

DISCIPLINE

It is The Gathering Church's policy that staff members and volunteers are prohibited from using physical discipline in any manner for behavioral management of children. **No form of physical discipline is acceptable.** This prohibition includes spanking, slapping, pinching, hitting, or any other physical force as retaliation or correction for inappropriate behaviors by children. When a child is misbehaving, follow these steps:

1. Go to the child and calmly ask him or her to stop the behavior. (Most children respond immediately and correct the behavior.) Give a warning and remind the child of class expectations, and redirect to a positive behavior. Do this individually when possible, try not to single out a specific child in a large group setting.

**When working with younger children, some physical redirection may be necessary: for example, removing a toy from the hands of a child who is hitting another.*

2. If the child repeats the action, guide them to a quiet place – separate from the other children – for a short but designated period of time. Stay within sight of others, and avoid being alone (or unseen) with the child. This time of separation should be age appropriate (1 minute for a 1-year old, 2 minutes for a 2-year old, etc.)

Provide the child with a simple, understandable reason for the separation, and a clear explanation of your expectations.

("Terry, you didn't stop hitting Kelly when I asked you to, so it was necessary for me to separate you from the group.")

3. After a 3rd time, refer to a staff member. A staff member may inform a parent or guardian, who may be asked to become involved in redirecting misbehavior.

Uncontrollable or unusual behavior should be reported to the ministry supervisor.

NEVER...

- Never yell at a child.
- Never grab a child.
- Never threaten a child.
- Never hit a child.
- Never confront a parent in front of others.
- Never openly humiliate a child in front of the class.

BULLYING

Verbal, physical or emotional bullying is not acceptable in The Gathering Church ministry programs. Bullying is defined as an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behavior that intends to

cause physical, social and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power, or perceived power, over one or more persons who feel unable to stop it from happening. ([NCAB](#)) At the first sign of bullying in any form, act decisively, and inform your ministry supervisor. There is no “harmless put-down” where bullying is concerned.

1. *First Offense*: Issue a warning to the child and a general reminder to the group that this kind of interaction is wrong. Try not to embarrass or chastise.
2. *Second Offense*: Pull the offending child(ren) from the group (in a seen or supervised location) and discuss the inappropriate interaction or behavior. Set clear parameters and behavioral goals. Let the child know that the next step is communication with a pastor and the child’s parents. Notify an immediate supervisor of ANY signs of bullying or verbal abuse.

Privately, but with another adult present, confirm that a child who was the target of the bullying behaviors is not in danger of continued harassment and is physically and emotionally stable. DO NOT SINGLE A CHILD OUT IN FRONT OF THE GROUP ... be discreet.

3. *Third Offense*: Send the child to a pastor or ministry supervisor for a phone call (or communication onsite) with his or her parent(s) and possible removal from the activity or event.

Restroom Policies

DO NOT USE OR OCCUPY a bathroom in use by children. Adults should use a restroom separate and apart from restrooms used by children during weekend services or when there are children present. **[Unless not possible given physical plant/facility limitations.]** No volunteer OF ANY AGE should enter or occupy a bathroom while children are using it. When no child is present, adults (and young volunteers) are allowed in a bathroom (one at a time) so long as there is another adult at the doorway keeping any child from entering. Only adult females may change diapers and must do so on diaper changer stations within plain view of other volunteers.

Maybe where we add a scheduled bathroom break after drop off but before GatheringKids are in the hallway

NURSERY CHILDREN

Because nursery children may require complete assistance with their bathroom activities, all staff members and volunteers will observe the following policies:

Diapering

- Only female nursery workers or the child's parent or legal guardian will undertake the diapering of children of either sex.
- Changing of diapers should be done in plain sight of other nursery workers.
- Children will never be left unattended on changing tables.
- Any special instructions given by parents leaving children in nursery will be recorded on the registration cards ("Seth Adams has a medicine in the bag for rash.")
- Children should be re-diapered and re-clothed immediately upon the completion of changing their soiled diaper.
- Children should be changed on changing stations only.

Toilet training

- No child will be forced to toilet train.
- Only female nursery workers or the child's parent or legal guardian will participate in toilet training efforts with children of either sex.
- When children are taken into bathrooms the door will be left partially open.
- Young children will never be left unattended in bathrooms.
- Parents should be consulted on each child's progress in the toilet training process before leaving the child with volunteers or staff members. Any special instructions given by parents leaving children in the nursery will be recorded on the registration card ("Georgia can use the toilet, but she needs to be reminded – ask her if she needs to go.")
- Children should be assisted in straightening their clothing before returning to the room with other children.

- “Accidents” should be handled by reassuring the child and completing the changing of diapers or underwear and clothing. Extra clothing and diapers are available from The Gathering Church in the children’s area, if the parent has not furnished a clothing change.

GRADES 1-6

If you must go into the restroom to check on an individual child, seek out another worker to accompany you. If another worker is not available, go to the exterior bathroom door, knock, and ask if the child needs assistance. Do not enter the restroom.

If a child requires immediate assistance, leave the exterior bathroom door open when entering the bathroom area and try to verbally assist the child in completing his or her toileting activities, while the child remains behind the door of the bathroom stall. Any assistance with the straightening or fastening of garments should be done in the presence of another staff member or volunteer.

If restroom use is required:

- Only *adult* female workers will assist children in the restroom, unless a parent is assisting their own child.
- Only one child in the restroom at a time, in a single toilet facility.
- When a worker is assisting a child, the door must not be locked, and must remain ajar. In general, children should receive the minimum amount of assistance needed based upon their individual capabilities. Encourage children to do all they can for themselves.
- All students in grades 1-3 must be accompanied to the restroom by a female leader. 4th and 5th grade students may go to KIDS ONLY restrooms alone with a bathroom pass from their room.
- Be aware if a student repeatedly asks to use the restroom and stays there for unusual periods of time. Report this behavior to a supervisor if it occurs.
- A single staff member or volunteer should never take a lone child to the restroom.

SPECIAL NEEDS

Parents will offer instruction to staff members or volunteers to change the diapers of individuals with special needs. After the age of 4, parents or legal guardians will change the diapers of all individuals with special needs. If someone with special needs requires assistance using the restroom, a special needs volunteer may assist them in the restroom.

Medication

Do not administer medication of any kind to any child while serving in ministry programs, including 'over the counter' drugs.

Transportation

Staff members and volunteers may from time to time be in a position to provide transportation for children. The following guidelines should be strictly observed when workers are involved in the transportation of children:

- Children should be transported directly to their destination. Unauthorized stops to a non-public place should be avoided. Staff members and volunteers should avoid transportation circumstances that leave only one child in transport.
- Staff members and volunteers should avoid physical contact with children while in vehicles.
- No cell phones may be utilized by the driver while driving The Gathering Church vans, or vehicles owned or rented by The Gathering Church, unless in an emergency.
- No drivers under age 25 may drive The Gathering Church owned or rented vehicles.

Verbal Interactions with Children

Verbal interactions between staff members or volunteers and children should be positive and uplifting. The Gathering Church staff members and volunteers should strive to keep verbal interactions encouraging, constructive, and mindful of their mission of aiding parents in the spiritual growth and development of children.

To this end, staff members and volunteers should not talk to children in a way that is or could be construed by any reasonable observer as harsh, threatening, intimidating, shaming, derogatory, demeaning, or humiliating. In addition, staff members and volunteers are expected to refrain from swearing in the presence of children.

One-to-One Interactions with Children

Staff members and volunteers should never conduct one-to-one, unobserved meetings or interaction with children while participating in The Gathering Church Children's Ministry program. Another adult who has completed the The Gathering Church application and screening process should always be present.

Physical Contact

The Gathering Church is committed to protecting children in its care. To this end, The Gathering Church has implemented a 'physical contact policy' which promotes a positive, nurturing environment for our Children's Ministries while protecting children. The following guidelines are to be carefully followed by anyone working in Children's Ministries programs:

- Side hugging, pats on the back and other forms of appropriate physical affection between staff members or volunteers and children are important for children's development, and are generally suitable in the church setting.
- Inappropriate touching and inappropriate displays of affection are forbidden. Any inappropriate physical contact, touching or displays of affection should be immediately reported to an immediate supervisor, the family pastor, the lead pastor, or the associate pastor. Inappropriate areas include the parts of the body that are normally covered by sleeveless shirts and knee-length shorts.
 - Inappropriate contact includes, but is not limited to: holding or sitting a child on your lap once children are able to walk, tickling, wrestling, kissing, touching the buttocks or genitals for reasons other than diaper or emergency clothing changes, piggy-backs or horse-rides, or rubbing underneath clothing
- Physical contact should be for the benefit of the child, and never be based upon the emotional needs of a staff member or volunteer.
- Physical contact and affection should be given only in observable places or when in the presence of other children or children's staff members and volunteers. It is much less likely that touch will be inappropriate or misinterpreted when physical contact is open to observation.
- Physical contact in any form should not give even the appearance of wrongdoing. The personal behavior of staff members or volunteers in Children's Ministries must foster trust at all times. Personal conduct must be above reproach.
- Do not force physical contact, touch or affection on a reluctant child. A child's preference not to be touched must be respected.
- Children's staff members and volunteers are responsible for protecting children under their supervision from inappropriate or unwanted touch by others.
- Any inappropriate behavior or suspected abuse by a staff member or volunteer must be reported immediately to an immediate supervisor, the family pastor, the lead pastor, or the associate pastor.

Intoxicants

Staff members and volunteers are prohibited from the use, possession, or being under the influence of alcohol or any illegal drugs while in any The Gathering Church facility, while traveling with children, or while working with or supervising children.

Tobacco Use

The Gathering Church requires staff members and volunteers to abstain from the use or possession of tobacco products in church facilities, while in the presence of children or their parents, or during The Gathering Church activities or programs. The Gathering Church is a tobacco-free facility.

Sexually Oriented Conversations

Staff members and volunteers are prohibited from engaging in any sexually oriented conversations with children, and are not permitted to discuss any inappropriate or explicit information about their own personal relationships, dating or sexual activities with any child in the program.

Sexually Oriented Material

Staff members and volunteers in Children's Ministries at The Gathering Church are prohibited from possessing any sexually oriented materials (magazines, cards, images, videos, films, etc.) on church property or in the presence of children.

Nudity

Staff members and volunteers in The Gathering Church's Children's Ministries should never be nude in the presence of children in their care. In the event there is a situation that may call for or contemplate the possibility of nudity (i.e. changing clothes during a pool party, weekend or overnight retreat, etc.), staff member/volunteer will submit a plan to the family pastor and associate pastor concerning arrangements for showering or changing clothes.

Parental Involvement

PARENTAL CONTACT

Parents who leave a child in the care of The Gathering Church staff members and volunteers during church services or activities will be contacted if their child becomes ill, injured, or has a severe disciplinary problem while participating in Children's Ministries programs.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parents are encouraged to visit any and all services and programs in which their child is involved at The Gathering Church. Parents have an open invitation to observe all programs and activities in which their child is involved. However, parents who desire to participate in or have continuous, ongoing contact with their children's programs at The Gathering Church will be required to complete the The Gathering Church volunteer application and screening process.

Policies and Procedures

Statement of Acknowledgement and Agreement

This page is to be signed, detached, and delivered to the Family Pastor.

I have received and read a copy of The Gathering Church's Children's Ministries Policies and Procedures and understand the importance of the material in the manual. I agree to abide by these guidelines while serving or working at The Gathering Church.

I understand the manual may be modified, and that any guideline may be amended, revised, or eliminated by The Gathering Church.

I have reviewed the duties listed in my ministry position description, and I agree to fulfill these duties. I understand I may choose to end my employment or voluntary service at The Gathering Church at any time (If possible, I will provide two weeks' notice to my supervisor).

I acknowledge and understand that the materials and guidelines contained in this handbook in no way express or imply a contractual employment relationship between me and The Gathering Church. If applying as a volunteer, I acknowledge and agree that I will receive no monetary compensation for hours worked.

I understand it is my responsibility to review new guidelines which may be created and distributed.

I acknowledge receipt of The Gathering Church policies and procedures manual.

Staff Member or Volunteer's name (please print)

Staff Member or Volunteer's signature

Date: _____