



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
— OF FRIENDS —
QUAKERS

In this document you will find steps that your meeting or Friends community can take as you begin to cultivate and implement strategies for child safety. As your meeting or community plans for how to respond to a concern that a child may have been sexually abused we hope that this document is useful.

A Resource for Local Meetings on Responding to Allegations of Sexual Abuse

Understanding the impact of allegations of abuse on the community:

An allegation that someone in a Friends community has been sexually or otherwise abused is devastating. It generates anger, shock, disbelief, confusion, abhorrence, silence, and paralysis. Often the meeting is at risk for extreme avoidance of the issue or acting as if nothing has happened, or for precipitous action.

When there has been an allegation of abuse or neglect, the pain and feeling of crisis can create the potential for a rush to action. This may end up being precipitous and hurtful. At other times the crisis may feel so overwhelming that it creates a climate of inaction. We have found that when Friends response is guided by a consciousness of God's presence, they are more apt to be centered, and find ways forward that lead to healing. During painful times Friends need to sit with the pain and confusion. In our experience it is very often the case that discernment and appropriate action come most quickly when we invite them to come in God's time; as we hold out for unity with God by frequently asking for worship in the moment and allowing it enough time. Perhaps if your meeting is going through this type of turmoil you might consider scheduling additional periods of worship. When it comes to instances of abuse and neglect there is a high risk of inadvertent re-victimization, mistakes, shame, role confusion, and power imbalance. Often there is increased isolation, poor boundaries, silence, inadvertent and purposeful collusion, forgetting about or repetition of the problem. Frequently someone responsible for misconduct reacts with outrage and blames the victim. However when people are mistakenly accused they may react in the same way. We need all the Divine help we can get when it comes to these issues. In regard to serious crises, the community should be prepared for a journey that may take years.

It is also vital to remember that if a report to authorities is warranted, Friends must not delay in this.

Preventative measures: Steps your meeting can take prior to any allegations:

1. Develop and communicate a written plan before there is any allegation.

Once you have developed a plan for how you will respond, communicate that plan to the entire community. Communicate it regularly to parents, care providers, youth leaders, volunteers, clerks and appropriate committees. It may be helpful to have as part of the plan an incident report form for use should there be an allegation of abuse and neglect. You may also consider developing a response checklist to help keep track of steps that

need to be taken by those who will be responding to any concern that is raised. Contacting and following up with the perpetrator of abuse is generally beyond the scope of the work that the Yearly Meeting youth programs staff are asked to do, however when developing a plan for your meeting, knowing how you will respond to a perpetrator or alleged perpetrator if that person is a member of your worshipping community is of vital importance.

2. Be sure that any incident form or response checklists are easily available ahead of time to anyone who might need them.

3. Identify who should respond to allegations.

Consider creating a Response Committee, comprised of members of the community who want to support the meeting community in being a safer environment for children, and who deal well with, and are prepared to deal with difficult issues. When responding to allegations of abuse many feelings arise including fear, shock, denial, anger, distrust, miscommunication, and paralysis. Selecting Friends who operate well in these circumstances is an important part of how we can make our meeting communities more resilient should a situation arise. If at all possible it is important that more than one person holds responsibility for this work within the meeting. No matter who your meeting decides is responsible, make sure that all people involved are aware of their roles and responsibilities, and that the community knows who those people are, and how they plan to respond should the need arise. We recommend that the Friends who agree to hold this responsibility meet at least twice a year to check in on the health of the meeting in this regard, and present a report to the meeting for business once a year on their work, including any activities, changes or suggestions for the meeting.

It is also important to consider how you might ask the community as a whole to respond, or to think through what healthy ways your meeting might think of to come together in a time of crisis such as this.

4. Gather and Disseminate Appropriate Information

- This includes understanding state *laws regarding mandatory reporting* (these can be found on the NEYM website) for your state, knowing what needs to be documented, and having the appropriate level of training or someone to advise you on when you may need to connect with external agencies (including counseling).
- It is likely that the level of care needed for either the person who has been abused or for the perpetrator is beyond the scope of the meetings work. To that end, ensure that those who have agreed to take on the responsibility for responding to allegations *know of counselors and/or agencies that can support all parties involved in any allegations*. This includes the alleged victim, alleged perpetrator and their family or friends.
- know about the insurance coverage of the meeting including the name and telephone number of of the person to contact.

5. If possible, identify people in the community outside of the meeting who you can consult with.
- It may be helpful to find someone who specializes in abuse and neglect, from outside the meeting community. The clerk and any other Friends who have accepted the responsibility for this work should know how to contact this person quickly.
 - Your meeting may also want to have the name of an attorney who agrees to be available to consult should the need arise. For instance, the attorney could consult about how to proceed and the risk of lawsuits. Sometimes when there is an allegation there are threats of a lawsuit. It is helpful to review this concern ahead of time because such threats can frighten and paralyze us when they occur in the middle of a crisis. Being able to realistically respond and/or seek timely advice in response to such a threat can be enormously helpful.

6. Remember that you are part of a network of Friends.

While the details of this specific instance belong only to your meeting, there are others who may have experienced this in the past, or who are willing to listen, be present, and support you should this unspeakable circumstance arise in your meeting. Consider what Friends from your Quarter might offer support, or if you would benefit from the prayers and connection or advice and support from a member of the Yearly Meeting staff, whose job it is to support local meetings like yours. The [Yearly Meeting secretary](#), the [Religious Education and Outreach Coordinator](#), the coordinators of the [Young Friends](#), [Junior Yearly Meeting](#) and [Junior High Yearly Meeting](#) programs, the [clerk of Ministry and Counsel](#), the [clerk of the Permanent Board](#), and the [presiding clerk](#) of the Yearly Meeting are all people who care deeply about the health and wellbeing of the meetings in New England and who have accepted responsibility for nurturing the spiritual health of Friends (including children) throughout our Yearly Meeting.

7. Consider as a meeting what types of training or education is appropriate. Some topics you might consider learning more about together include: sexual abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, and neglect. The more people who are educated, the better prepared your meeting is likely to be if something should occur.

Note: if there are particular topics that you feel your meeting might be able to be a resource for, or if there is a particular Friend in your meeting willing to offer trainings on a particular area of expertise related to one of these topics please contact Beth Collea (Wellesley, MA) the Religious Education and Outreach Coordinator, or the clerk of Youth Ministries Committee so that we might find a way to fully benefit from the rich resources among us. Similarly, if there is a topic of particular interest that your meeting would like to see offered as a workshop supported by the Yearly Meeting please contact Beth Collea (Wellesley, MA) the Religious Education and Outreach Coordinator, or the [clerk of Youth Ministries Committee](#) so that we can look into ways of more fully serving local meetings in this regard.

At the Time of an Allegation:

1. At the time of the allegation, the youth workers need to **contact the appropriate people within the community**. This may include some or all of the following: A Response Committee (if the meeting has one), the clerk, appropriate youth staff and/or coordinators, attorney, consultant, insurance.
2. The Friends who have taken on the specific responsibility for responding to these allegations (potentially a Response Committee) should do all they can to **ensure that any child and/or alleged victim is safe and separated from the alleged perpetrator**. There should be immediate contact with parents or caretakers, as long as it is safe for the child to make such contact. (See number 5 below).
3. When an allegation is made it is important to **document what is happening as it unfolds**. Those who have agreed to be responsible for the work of child safety need to ensure that an incident report is completed, either by the youth worker, or another member of the meeting who has the information needed to complete the form. The documentation should be written with the knowledge that it may be read by the affected parties at a later time. Taking the time to document the events can be an opportunity for calming down painful reactions and inviting discernment. This is often an opportunity for worship.
4. **Report to the appropriate state agency**. *This should occur within 24 hours of the allegation.* Document when and to whom the report is made. Make a note of whether or not there will be notification of the results of the report, and write down information about the timeline, including a description of what the state will do.
5. The Friends who have taken on the specific responsibility for responding to these allegations (potentially a Response Committee) should do all they can to **ensure the continued safety of the child**. This may involve communication with the alleged perpetrator. This can be a complex thing to navigate.

If the alleged perpetrator is a member of the community, that person should be separated from any contact with the child during meeting activities. The Friends carrying the work of responding to child safety violations (potentially a Response Committee) should review what steps need to be taken in order for this to happen. Some questions they might ask include:

- Is the child involved in activities at which an alleged perpetrator might be present-- (including first day school, excursions, social hours, worship)?
- Who will ask the alleged perpetrator to abstain from such activities?
- How will these Friends respond in a way that makes this boundary clear if the alleged perpetrator refuses? What follow up will be needed to help enforce this boundary?
- Who will help support members of the community who are close with the alleged perpetrator and may have a hard time accepting this boundary?

If the alleged perpetrator of abuse or neglect is a family member, other safe family members need to be contacted. The Friends carrying the work of responding to child safety violations (potentially a Response Committee) need a plan for how to identify and communicate with safe family members. Such planning and outreach may need to be done with the input from a state social service agency. That agency will often have specific recommendations and requests about how much to share. Those responding to the allegations need to know how to access after-hours emergency and hotline resources, in the event that the concern arises after hours, or on a weekend. A state by state resource list can be found [here](#).

6. The Friends who have taken on the specific responsibility for responding to these allegations (potentially a Response Committee) should do all they can to **exhibit patience with the process and be available to support members of the community.** It is often the case that anger and confusion surface on the part of many people during this stage. It is vital that those responding to the allegations remember that this is normal. It is usually not possible to know all that has happened right away. Accurate information may be slow in coming. At the same time upset parties will want clear and immediate information and decisions.

Note: At such times, the education, communication, and reports about safety issues that have occurred during the months and years before the event can make a huge difference.

7. The Friends who have taken on the specific responsibility for responding to these allegations (potentially a Response Committee) should do all they can to **balance the immediate actions needed to make things safe with confidentiality for all parties.** Information should be shared only with those who need to know in order to support the child.

Sometimes, when family members hear about such events, the pain that they feel can be inadvertently communicated to the child. The Friends who have taken on the specific responsibility for responding to these allegations (potentially a Response Committee) should do all they can to **help parents find appropriate ways of processing the information before the parent talks at length with their child about details of any alleged event.** The best thing a parent can immediately do is to lovingly ensure that the child is safe. Those responding need to exercise great care in sharing the names of the involved parties. If a child has been victimized, the parents and family of that child have a right to exercise some control over how the information of the event is shared.

8. The Friends who have taken responsibility for responding to allegations may wish to **consult with experts about whether there is responsibility or ability to inform other communities about any allegations.** For instance there have been instances in which a religious body gives a good reference and the person later perpetrates in another community. The perpetrator then moves on to yet another community and repeatedly uses the first reference.

9. Those who have taken on the responsibility for responding to allegations are encouraged to **communicate and consult with Yearly Meeting staff and/or the clerk of Yearly Meeting Ministry and Counsel,** whose main role is to support local meetings. There is usually wisdom,

resources and history available from the organization of the Yearly Meeting that can help the community in discernment and worship.

10. Those who have taken on the responsibility for responding to allegations should immediately and regularly monitor against conflict of interest. **Spouses, close friends and family members should not be the ones responding to a situation.** If there is even the appearance of conflict of interest that Friend should be asked to step down from their service in this instance.

11. Within the first few days, those who have taken on the responsibility for responding to allegations should **plan how to communicate with the entire community about any confirmed incident or (when appropriate) any allegations.** We know that if the community discovers painful information haphazardly it can more deeply damage trust and safety in the community, and we strongly advise that some communication occur.

One suggestion for how this might happen is that those responding to the allegations write a letter. The letter should be carefully worded to be honest and forthright about what is and is not known. The letter should not share identifying or personal information about any of the parties involved. *It may very well generate pain and strong feelings in the community.* This does not mean that it is to be avoided. *Those reactions would probably occur anyway.*

12. Those responsible for responding to allegations (possibly a Response Committee) may want to consider whether they want to **plan community activities for communication and healing.** If the community knows about an incident of abuse, it is strongly recommended that a community meeting occur. It should be carefully planned with several trusted facilitators and input from people with expertise. Those planning the event might consider inviting facilitators from other meetings, the Yearly Meeting, or experts from outside the immediate community. The event may be marked by emotional turmoil, pain and hard questions. The event should be actively held in worship. Such events are often a first step toward healing. The facilitators should be clear about what they plan to share and what activities should occur.

One model used by some religious communities is described in a Methodist book titled *Safe Sanctuaries, Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church* by Joy Melton:

Begin in worship with the understanding that a statement of facts should be spoken. This statement should protect confidentiality but signal the determination of the meeting to address concerns. After 15 minutes of worship the group could then separate into small groups of 5 or 6 with a facilitator assigned to each group. Other facilitators would be available for extra support. Each group would encourage sharing with an effort to avoid judgment or debate. This small group sharing may take significant time. At a planned time the entire group would reunite for a time of worship and end at a scheduled time. Facilitators should plan to remain and be available for people's individual needs.

13. Those who have taken on responsibility for responding to allegations (possibly a Response Committee) should be sure to **follow-up with specific affected parties.** This might entail

visitation, worship, and clearness or support committees. Those responding should ensure that outreach occurs to all affected parties. Those responsible for the response should also make sure that there is a review a few months later. Questions to ask include:

- Is there growth and healing?
- What have we learned?
- What changes do we want to make?