



Risk Reduction Principles

In our efforts to ensure the safety of the children and youth we serve, we recognize both the importance of clear specific policies, and the reality that we cannot anticipate every possible dangerous situation, nor should our programs be guided by fear, and rigidity. The following risk reduction principles help guide our work, as we seek to be a faith community that is flexible and joy filled as well as prepared to respond in the event of an incident.

Different activities with youth and children bring different levels of risk related to sexual abuse. The higher the risk, the more that monitoring and safeguards are required. An overnight at Friends Camp with groups spread out over a campsite is inherently more prone to problems than a one hour large group program at a Meeting House. According to the level of risk, we adjust the level of supervision.

Three factors should be considered in assessing risk

1. isolation of the activity
2. accountability
3. power and control

The likelihood of abuse increases when there is isolation, low accountability, and an imbalance in power and control between adults and children, or among a group of children, the risk of abuse decreases when there is a high level of visibility, accountability, and when we pay attention to the balance of power between adults and children, and among groups of children.

Isolation

Most, but not all, sexual abuse occurs in isolated settings – risk increases as isolation increases. In general youth workers should avoid activities that present situations of increased isolation, for example having a single adult accompany a child far away from a group activity.

Youth workers should be aware of factors that increase risk, and program coordinators should take these factors into account when planning for and implementing programming, and should increase the number of adults to help decrease risk when the following factors exist:

- activities that occur overnight, in the evening, and on a weekend
- activities in a home or unfamiliar location
- activities with a single adult in a car with a child
- activities in naturally isolated locations in or near bathrooms, locker, or changing rooms

Youth workers should be aware of factors related to space that decrease risk, and program coordinators should take these factors into account when planning for and implementing programming. The following strategies decrease risk:

- Using rooms that are easily accessible, with windows and keeping doors open
- Making it clear to children and adults which rooms are “off limits”
- Communicating the plan for how space will be used

Accountability

The risk of sexual abuse of children always increases in settings without proper accountability. Accountability relates to the individuals involved and how the activity is managed. Accountability provides boundaries for safety for both the adults and children, and provides the groundwork for trust.

New England Yearly Meeting of Friends uses the following strategies to increase accountability of its youth workers.

- Screening of applicants seeking to work with youth
- Having a clear job description and code of conduct signed by youth workers
- Maintaining personnel files, with regular reviews of supervisory staff
- Offering and reviewing evaluation forms by program participants
- Collaboration between the staff, the presiding clerk, and various committees of the Yearly Meeting (including Youth Ministries, and Ministry and Counsel) to find ways to continue education for meetings, parents, youth workers, and children.
- Ensuring that parents know who is in charge of the program, and that they are encouraged to ask questions and solicit feedback.
- Having program Coordinators report regularly to their advisors, supervisors, and once a year to Annual Sessions.

Further, New England Yearly Meeting works to decrease the possibility of abuse by ensuring that during programs

- events are well-documented
- all boundaries, (physical, emotional, time, etc.) are openly stated
- parents are well-informed of program content, guidelines, behavior expectations and problems
- two or more unrelated adults are present at an activity, which increases supervision between caregivers and is a recommended standard for program planning.

Power and control

Children are vulnerable to abuse from sexual predators because there is an imbalance of power related to age, size, strength, control and authority. This is particularly problematic in settings where leaders or those in power have a spiritual authority.

Youth workers should be aware that there cannot be a balance of power between a child and adult, and should work to maintain a low-risk environment by being around other adults, and abiding by the policies designed to create a balance.

Youth workers should also be aware of the factors that create power imbalances and the coordinators should take these factors into account when designing and implementing programs. Particularly focusing on educating children around issues of power imbalances and the importance of clear boundaries. Factors that can create a power imbalance and an increased risk of abuse, and which are worth monitoring include the following:

- Relationships between children where the age range is wide, particularly when the difference is greater than four or five years.
 - For example: Two five year olds going to the bathroom together are safer than a thirteen year old accompanying a five year old.
- Relationships between youth of the same age but differences in size, gender, and/or social dynamics. Guarding against power imbalance requires monitoring on the part of youth workers, as well as regularly educating our youth about the issues of power and boundaries.

Advice related to power and control:

1. Having more than one unrelated adult at any activity reduces the possibility of the abuse of power.
2. Meetings should carefully consider where authority lies in their youth programs and activities. How is authority and power assigned?
3. People in positions of authority should be accountable to the community. There should be the opportunity for both regular review and open questioning about particular activities.
4. Where there are particular events or dynamics of concern, the community should have a process and be willing to address the concern.
5. Wide interest and involvement in events by members of the Faith community helps to provide a web of accountability and support. There should be an effort to recruit, screen, and train as large a body of volunteers as possible, and to involve other members in non-caretaking, but useful roles.
6. Meetings should work to understand issues of sexuality and self-care and assertiveness, and inform children of all ages, in developmentally appropriate ways, about these issues. This includes developing opportunities for interaction and listening to children.

It is inevitable that some situations will be riskier than others. As guardians of youth and children, we have a responsibility to constantly evaluate the safety of situations –where the risk increases, we must take responsibility for adjusting other factors to reduce the chance of possible abuse. While the decision to not set strict guidelines for every type of situation gives us flexibility, it also gives us an increased responsibility to actively monitor the situation. By keeping the factors that contribute to the possibility of sexual abuse before us, we can better judge whether we are providing adequately for the safety of those in our care.