

Policy Number: 05 Area: Health and Safety

Board Approval: December 17, 2024

Last Revision: 2017

Scheduled Review Date: 2027

Background and Purpose

The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto has a duty to protect the health and safety of people participating in all areas of congregational life whether within the premises of 473 Oakwood Avenue, at an off-site location, or on an online platform.

The purpose of this policy is to outline the board's commitment to health and safety protection, including providing a safe environment for children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Policy Statement

Our community's health and safety is a responsibility shared by all volunteers, members, friends, visitors, tenants, and staff. FirstU has a moral, legal, ethical and spiritual "Duty of Care" to provide a safe environment for children, youth and vulnerable adults.

The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto follows a policy of risk assessment and training and screening for positions, ministries and activities which place people in a position of trust such as, but not limited to, religious education teachers and youth advisors. This policy of risk mitigation is implemented through our Safe Steps Program.

Policy Description

1. This policy and procedures, and the accompanying guide **Creating A Safe Environment for All**, is designed to comply with all applicable legislation and regulations.
2. Our Safe Steps Program is meant to achieve three goals:
Goal 1: Provide a safe environment for children,youth, and vulnerable adults by preventing harm to those in our care;
Goal 2:Protect FirstU volunteers from false allegations; and
Goal 3: Declare and make clear there will be no tolerance for abuse, harassment or neglect of any member of the congregation.
3. The Safe Steps Program consists of the Safe Steps Policy and Procedures, and the accompanying guide Creating a Safe Environment for All. The procedures are outlined in Schedule A and are: Understanding the Safe Steps Policy; Screening and Checking References; Training; Creating a Safe Environment; and Reporting Abuse.
4. The Safe Steps Team provides oversight to the implementation of the Program. The Team is co-chaired by a board director and the Director of Lifespan Religious Education (DLRE). The Team is responsible for ensuring that the Safe Steps Policy and Procedures, and the guide Creating a Safe Environment for All are regularly reviewed and updated as appropriate.

5. The Safe Steps Team ensures an internal audit of the Safe Steps Program is performed every two years and a report is presented to the Board of Directors.
6. Volunteers interested in working directly with children, youth and/or vulnerable adults are required to follow the process established for their volunteer role, along with all the Safe Steps procedures.
7. Staff are required to follow the Safe Steps Policy and Procedures.
8. A volunteer applicant must have attended FirstU for a minimum of six months and be interviewed by the DLRE. The six-month attendance requirement may be waived, at the discretion of the DLRE in the case of a referral from a minister, religious educator, or similar congregational leader, from another Unitarian Congregation.
9. Screening, as per Safe Steps Procedures, and character reference checks are also completed for those with signing authority for the organization.
10. Procedures for social media use which addresses appropriate communication, content and confidentiality is in place.
11. The Safe Steps Team and the Director of Lifespan Religious Education are responsible for addressing non-compliance with the Safe Steps Policy and the Safe Step Procedures. If the DLRE is not able to achieve resolution, the Executive Committee will consider the DLRE's request to suspend the individual's participation until they achieve compliance.

Accountability

The Safe Steps Team is accountable to the Board for implementation of this policy.

Related documents and/or relevant legislation

- FirstU Safe Steps guide to Creating a Safe Environment for All
- FirstU Health and Safety Policy
- FirstU Health and Safety Procedures Manual
- FirstU Harassment, Sexual Harassment, & Violence Prevention Policy
- FirstU Congregational and Workplace Prevention Program for Harassment, Sexual Harassment, & Violence Prevention
- Child, Youth and Family Services Act (Ontario, 2017)

Schedule A: Safe Steps Procedures for Volunteers and Staff

Overview

The Safe Steps Procedures support the Safe Steps Policy approved by the Board of Directors, and apply to all volunteers and staff at FirstU.

See Schedule A for definitions.

The Procedures are:

1. Understanding the Safe Steps Board Policy
2. Screening and Checking References
3. Education and Training
4. Creating a Safe Environment
5. Reporting Abuse

1. Understanding the Safe Steps Board Policy

Volunteers and staff are expected to have read this policy which outlines the Board's commitment to protect children and youth in our care. Questions about this policy can be directed to DLRE@FirstUnitarianToronto.org

It's expected that volunteers and staff understand their responsibility to follow the policy and these procedures.

The Safe Steps Team and the Director of Lifespan Religious Education are responsible for escalation of instances of non-compliance with this policy, up to and including suspending the non-compliant person from active service in their role until they are in compliance.

2. Screening and Checking References

Volunteers interested in working with children, youth and/or vulnerable adults require a referral from the senior minister, a senior staff, or a leadership volunteer. A referral can only be made after the volunteer has attended FirstU for a minimum of six months. Note: This six month wait can be waived at the discretion of the DLRE if the individual joins FirstU from another UU congregation and is referred by the minister, religious educator, or similar congregational leader at the initial congregation.

All referrals must be endorsed by the Director of Lifespan Religious Education, and may include an interview.

All staff and volunteers for any position involving work with children, youth or vulnerable adults undergo a screening process. Our screening process includes the following:

- Criminal Records Check excluding checks related to the Mental Health Act but including Vulnerable Sector Verification (VSV) done every five years through the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC).
- Personal Reference Checks, three personal references are to be provided, of which two will be contacted. Eligible references do not include family members, spouses, or staff members at FirstU.
- A signed Employee/Volunteer Application indicating agreement with the Safe Steps policies and procedures

The screening results are confidential. Documentation is kept on file indefinitely for all workers, including original Criminal Record Checks.

If the police check does uncover something, a member of the Safe Steps Team and the DLRE will discuss the findings with the volunteer. The volunteer is not automatically disqualified from participating.

3. Education and Training

We provide initial training in Safe Steps procedures, along with annual refresher training, for all volunteers working with children, youth and vulnerable adults. This training includes a strong focus on understanding the Duty to Report actual or alleged incidents.

RE program representatives visit all classes at the start of the program year to remind children and youth of our routine safety practices.

4. Creating a Safe Environment

Volunteers are taught to minimize risk by reducing the risk factor and avoiding physical situations that are unsafe or uncertain. They are taught how to create physical situations that are safe.

To provide a safe environment for children and youth in religious education programming, the following steps are taken. Operational details are available in the accompanying guide *Creating A Safe Environment for All*.

Adult Roles

- The DLRE or a designate regularly circulates the hallways and visits classrooms.
- A mentor does not meet alone with a youth. Mentors (at least two) only meet with youth in public places, easily accessible by public transit.
- Volunteers are not allowed to be alone in vehicles with children.
- Children in grade three and under are released only to parents/guardians from their classroom.

Room Set-Up

- Windows in all classroom doors ensure each class is visible.
- For doors that do not have windows, we maintain an “open door” approach and/or doors are closed only if two adults are present and a closed door is required to reduce sound traveling.

Children, Youth, and Parents

- All children use the buddy system or are accompanied by an adult if they leave the classroom.
- Children are encouraged to use the single stall or accessible washrooms.
- Written parental/guardian permission is required for any offsite travel or overnight activities.

5. Reporting Possible Abuse

A Child

Child abuse, according to the Child, Youth and Family Services Act (2017), is physical and/or emotional, and includes neglect.

Any adult in a position of responsibility for a child — including volunteers — is obligated to report suspected cases of abuse, including neglect, to the authorities.

Reports are to be made to the police or the Toronto Children's Aid Society. The case will be investigated. The name of the person who reports suspected abuse remains confidential — adults investigated for possible child abuse will not know who reported them.

In cases of suspected or alleged child abuse, including neglect, FirstU follows these steps:

1. We immediately complete an incident reporting form;
2. We fulfill statutory reporting obligations to the Toronto Children's Aid Society or the Toronto police;
3. Without admitting legal liability or making public statements prior to obtaining legal counsel, we assure a compassionate response to the alleged victim and their family;
4. We maintain confidentiality for the alleged victim and alleged perpetrator;
5. We immediately suspend the alleged perpetrator pending outcome of investigation; and
6. We consult with a lawyer and report the incident to our insurance company.

A Vulnerable Adult

A suspected abuse of a vulnerable adult will be investigated and may need to be substantiated. The procedures outlined in the Harassment, Sexual Harassment, & Violence Prevention Policy must be followed.

Schedule B: Definitions

Child Abuse

Abuse can be of a sexual, physical and/or emotional nature; in the context of child abuse it includes neglect due to actions or omissions by a caregiver. The use of corporal punishment is considered as abuse in our congregation.

The Child, Youth and Family Services Act (2017) specifies several types of harm that constitute abuse, including:

- **Physical Harm or Risk of Physical Harm:** Caused by the caregiver's actions or failure to adequately care for or supervise the child.
- **Emotional Harm or Risk of Emotional Harm:** Includes severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, self-destructive behavior, or delayed development, resulting from the caregiver's actions or neglect.
- **Sexual Abuse or Exploitation:** Engaging in or allowing any form of sexual activity with a child.
- **Child Neglect** Neglect occurs when insufficient care is taken to provide for a child's needs.

Harassment

Harassment is repeated unwanted, unwarranted behaviour in which the person making the approach should know not to continue, usually (but not always) because the person has been told to stop the unwarranted behaviour.

Harassment is illegal. Common types of harassment include: Sexual, physical and / or emotional (bullying, threatening) harassment; financial harassment, which may fall along a spectrum of asking / begging for money for coffee or a meal to repeatedly asking or demanding larger sums of money; and domestic abuse and elder abuse.

Improper Discipline

Discipline should always be done in a manner that shows respect for the child. Physical force, berating or belittling are all improper means for discipline.

Inappropriate Behaviour and Inappropriate Touching

It's inappropriate for adults (volunteers and/or staff members) working with children, youth, or vulnerable adults to:

- Make any sort of remark, comment or joke to/ regarding a child/youth/vulnerable adult that is in any way suggestive, explicit, or overly personal;
- Engage in any sort of physical contact with a child/youth/vulnerable adult that makes the child/youth/vulnerable adult feel uncomfortable or that violates reasonable boundaries;
- Offer any "special" treatment that falls outside the normal course of responsibilities, or that may (or may appear to) place a child/youth/vulnerable adult in any sort of risk of exploitation.

Vulnerable people

- Children and adolescents – minors up to and including 18 years of age
- Vulnerable adults – adults of any age who have difficulty protecting themselves from harm temporarily or permanently and are at risk because of age, or disability, or circumstances such as emotional distress or uncertainty.