

HICKORY WITHE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (HWPC) CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION POLICY

The purpose of implementation of a Child Abuse Prevention program at Hickory Withe Presbyterian Church (HWPC) is to provide a safe, secure environment for the teaching and care of children and youth and specifically to protect them from child abuse.

HWPC is establishing and implementing practices (1) to educate parents, families and other person(s) involved or interested in the church's children and youth programs/activities in the appropriate steps to prevent, identify, and stop child abuse, (2) to screen all persons involved with HWPC's children and youth programs/activities, (3) to supervise the children and youth programs and activities for acceptable practices and conduct, and (4) to provide for reporting unacceptable conduct, including child abuse, investigating any such conduct and taking appropriate action to protect the children and youth at HWPC.

If there is a basis for believing child abuse has occurred or may occur, HWPC will report concerns to the State of Tennessee or appropriate local authorities.

HWPC will also take steps to prevent and/or stop any such concerns of child abuse.

Definition of Child Abuse: Child abuse can consist of any one or more of the following: neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and/or child sexual abuse.

- **Neglect** means the failure to supply a child with adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, supervision or healthcare.
- **Emotional abuse** typically consists of a pattern of behavior that can seriously interfere with a child's positive emotional development.
- **Physical abuse** consists of harm or a threat of harm to a child's physical health or welfare arising from the infliction of physical harm or pain.
- **Child sexual abuse** "is the exploitation or coercion of a child to perform or otherwise engage in sexual activity. It can be committed by an adult, an adolescent or another child. It includes touching and non-touching offenses."¹

Definition of a minor: For the purposes of Tennessee mandatory reporting, a minor is an individual under 18 years of age.

¹ *Child Abuse Is Never a Child's Fault, a Prevention and Intervention Guide for Professionals*, p. 3 (Memphis Child Advocacy Center 2006).

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Reporting Procedures:

1. Everyone in Tennessee is a mandated reporter under state law. Any person with reasonable cause to believe a child is being abused or neglected must, under the law, immediately report to the Tennessee Department of Children's Services or to local law enforcement. The reporter can remain anonymous.
2. Call 911 if the situation is a life threatening emergency.
3. In other cases, a report of child abuse or child sexual abuse must be made immediately to one of the following four authorities:
 - a. The Tennessee Department of Children's Services (reports can be made by calling the Central Intake Child Abuse Hotline at 1-877-237-0004);
 - b. The sheriff of the county where the child resides;
 - c. The chief law enforcement official of the city where the child resides; or
 - d. A judge having juvenile jurisdiction over the child.
4. Criminal Penalties for failure to report any person who knowingly fails to make a report of child abuse as required by Tennessee law commits a Class A misdemeanor. Any person who knowingly and willfully fails to report known or suspected child sexual abuse, or who knowingly and willfully prevents another person from doing so, commits a Class A misdemeanor.
5. In addition, anyone who has information that reasonably indicates that a child has suffered child abuse based on the information available at that time should report this immediately to the Pastor and/or at least one elder. If the pastor is not available, it should be reported to two elders. Reports will be taken seriously, and church staff will take appropriate action in accordance with the laws of the state of Tennessee, HWPC Policy/Guidelines, and the advice of the church insurance company's legal counsel.
6. Immediate response to disclosure:
 - Disclosure of sexual abuse means that a child has chosen you as the person he or she trusts enough to tell. Disclosure is a test of strength for families and communities.

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- Tips for when a child discloses²
 - i. *Be supportive* - Much of the pain for children is bearing sexual abuse alone and in secret. When sexual abuse occurs, children take on more burden than they can possibly be responsible. They often feel ashamed, guilty, frightened, and powerless. All of this has to be undone. While this takes time, the support you give sets the stage for their healing process and their wellbeing over time. Assure the child by saying, "We will get the support we need to get through this."
 - ii. *Encourage the child* - Encourage the child to speak to you openly. Encourage the child by telling him or her that it takes a lot of courage to speak up and that you are very proud of him or her for telling you.
 - iii. *Listen calmly and don't overreact* - Don't rush to "get to the bottom of it." Don't ask leading questions about the details as these can come across as judgment and confuse the child's memory of events. Ask only open-ended questions like "What happened next? Or "It's okay to tell me more, you can tell me whatever you want."
 - iv. Say, "I believe you. What happened is not your fault."
 - v. Praise the child for his or her courage and thank them for telling you.
 - vi. Tell the child we will get the support we need.

7. Tips for mandated reporters³

- Do not investigate on your own. Especially do not investigate physical signs.
- Report the concern according to the guidelines of HWPC.
- Do not ask the child leading questions or try to draw out information. Asking too many questions about abuse may cause distress in the child, and can interfere with prosecution of the alleged offender.
- Sometimes the professionals may not be able to gather enough evidence to act on your report. Your report may become a part of a series of reports that can lead to action, later.
- It is best not to contact parents before making the report, especially if a parent or household member is the suspected abuser. This could put the child in further risk or lead to the destruction of evidence.
- You can ask to be told the outcome of your report and what actions are being taken.
- If you are not satisfied, you can ask to speak to a supervisor at child protective services or law enforcement.
- If you obtain additional information later, you can ask that it be added to your report.

Approved: 9/2018

² Darkness to Light's Stewards of Children

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