Uniting Church in Australia

National Child Safe Policy Framework

2019

National
Safe Church Unit

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Foreword

In the almost two years since the conclusion of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, we can now reflect on its momentous impact on society, institutions and the lives and safety of children. We have seen changes in policy and practice, increased understanding, attention and vigilance in the safety of children and investment in training, setting and maintaining standards, managing risk and the embedding of reporting and accountability for the safety of children.

The Uniting Church in Australia has embraced all it has learned, with its schools, councils and agencies all committed to individual and collective responsibility for the safety of children.

We are committed not only to righting the wrongs of the past, but to reconciliation and the rebuilding of trust with the community.

This Framework and its implementation tools have been a cornerstone of that commitment, documenting the Uniting Church's commitment to child safety and providing a foundation for development of good policy and practice across the life of the Church. The Framework has been reviewed and refreshed periodically as the learnings of the Royal Commission and their adoption into recommendations and action have evolved.

This third edition of the Framework will support the Church to move beyond compliance to vigilantly embedding a culture of safety.

The Church's ongoing commitment to the safety of children is embodied in the establishment of the National Safe Church Unit (the NSCU) in 2019 to support and guide the Church to stay focused on this critical work. The NSCU is available to support the Church in all its contexts to understand, interpret and enable implementation of this Framework.

We will be unfailing in our commitment to child safety, be ever vigilant and never forget.

Purpose

This document provides a framework from which child safe policies within Uniting Church entities are to be developed. It is the third iteration of the Framework and builds on the work of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse on child safe organisations.

The Framework wholeheartedly adopts the **National Principles for Child Safe Organisations** into the life of the Church and is aimed at supporting the Church to move from compliance to a fully embedded culture of safety.

For this Policy Framework to be effective it requires awareness and knowledge at all levels, from Boards through to volunteers and congregational members. It requires a commitment to shared personal responsibility to ensure children are protected.

What we believe

The Uniting Church in Australia (the Church) believes that all people, including children, are made in the image of God. As a Christian community we believe that God reaches out to us in love and acceptance, and that our relationships with each other should express love, care and respect (*Safe Place Position Statement developed by the UCA Commission on Women and Men in 1997*). Central to living out the gospel is to love God and to love others. As a community of faith, we are committed to providing safe environments for all people including children, so that they may live life in all its fullness. We also acknowledge the rights of children as detailed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (*United Nations, 1990, Article 49*) that States shall protect children from physical or mental harm and neglect, including sexual abuse and exploitation.

Children are gifts of God to be received, welcomed and to be cared for responsibly and justly. The Gospel also directs us to listen to and learn from children. In *On the Way Together* (1998) it is affirmed that "children in the Uniting Church in Australia are nurtured in Christian faith and discipleship, experiencing relationships which promote trust, cooperation, honesty, positive valuing of persons, responsibility and Christian service." It adds that the Church "affirms the value and the rights of children as human beings as it listens to, guides, protects, advocates for, and empowers children within its own communities and the wider community."

Unfortunately, not all children are protected from harm. Abuse occurs across all areas of society. Some adults will look to find opportunities to groom children by forming special relationships, which may become exploitative. Whilst children, parents and the Church should be aware of 'stranger danger', most people who sexually abuse children are known to the victim through family, friends, school, sports groups, church and other community activities.

The Uniting Church in Australia abhors the crime of child abuse. To know that innocent and trusting children have been preyed upon within the Church, which is devoted to the care, protection and wellbeing of the most vulnerable, is deeply distressing. We are committed to doing everything we can to achieve justice for those who have been abused and to create an environment where children are safe.

Some children in the care of the Church have been subjected to a variety of forms of abuse. Abuse can be perpetrated by an adult to a child or by children displaying harmful sexual behaviour. Abuse has occurred in agencies, schools, and congregations and during the conduct of associated activities.

In our Apology to the Forgotten Australians (2004) we stated:

> *On behalf of the Uniting Church and our agencies, we apologise unreservedly for any physical, psychological or social harm that might have occurred. We deeply regret that some children were let down while in the care of the Uniting Church and former Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches. The recent Senate Inquiry into children in Institutional Care highlighted a number of cases where children suffered at the hands of caregivers. The inquiry painted a disturbing picture of life for many young people who lived in institutional care. The Uniting Church through its agencies managed a number of these facilities and we accept that sadly some did not provide the love, nurturing and care that the children in them so rightly deserved. The*

Inquiry highlighted the flaws in institutional care models and the need to ensure they are never repeated.

The Uniting Church Values Statement issued by the Assembly Standing Committee (2013) affirms that:

> *We will not hide from the truth, however painful it may be, and we will seek, with compassion and humility, to address whatever issues and challenges may emerge for us. We will say "sorry" to anyone who was neglected and abused when in our care and, in consultation with those so affected, actively seek for ways to make amends for what happened in the past and identify how we can best offer support into the future.*

In response to the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse (2018), President Deirdre Palmer stated:

> *Our Church has some important commitments to live up to - to be a Church that listens to children and adults, to make our Church a safe place for all, and to take responsibility for the wrongs done in our name.*

The Church has strong theological foundations for its commitment not to tolerate child abuse and to address the injustice of this abuse. Acknowledgement of wrongs is captured in the Basis of Union, which states: *"The Uniting Church prays that through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life"* (Basis of Union, para.18).

Our values

The Uniting Church's values which apply to the care and protection of children include:

Compassion	We will deal with children compassionately and with an understanding of their vulnerabilities.
Respect	We respect the boundaries of professional relationships and respect the rights of every person to feel safe while in contact with our services.
Justice	We will seek justice for those who have been harmed.
Working together	We will work together to create a culture of individual and collective responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of children and to create friendly, welcoming spaces for children.
Leading through learning	We will be leaders by ensuring our governance embeds a culture of safety and undertaking a continuous improvement approach to the safety of children and to offering child friendly services.

Policy Statement

In policy, practice and making decisions which affect the safety of children, the Uniting Church in Australia will ensure child safety is its paramount consideration.

All children who are involved in any of the Uniting Church's activities, services, events or programs have a right to feel and be safe. The Church is committed to providing safe environments where children are cared for, respected, nurtured and sustained.

We will do all in our power to safeguard children from all forms of abuse.

Abuse thrives on secrecy. To prevent child abuse across the Church, we are committed to developing and maintaining an open and aware culture and to providing the appropriate leadership and governance to support this culture.

The Church commits itself to the creation and maintenance of a child safe culture to ensure the care, protection and safety of all children engaging with the Church in any of its entities.

The Church clearly affirms its commitment to upholding the law. This includes reporting abuse to the appropriate authorities.

The Uniting Church embraces the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations adopted by the Council of Australian Governments in 2019 (available at https://childsafe.humanrights.gov.au/).

The Preamble to the Principles states that a child safe organisation is one that:

> *…creates a culture, adopts strategies and takes action to promote child well-being and prevent harm to children and young people. A child safe organisation consciously and systematically:*
>
> - *creates an environment where children's safety and wellbeing is the center of thought, values and actions*
> - *places emphasis on genuine engagement with, and valuing of children*
> - *creates conditions that reduce the likelihood of harm to children and young people*
> - *creates conditions that increase the likelihood of identifying any harm*
> - *responds to any concerns, disclosures, allegations or suspicions*

The Uniting Church also embraces the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

How we use this framework

Scope

This Policy Framework applies to all entities and individuals associated with the Uniting Church in Australia who engage in child related services or activities. Entities of the Church include, but are not limited to: Congregations, Presbyteries, Synods, the Assembly, agencies, ministries, childcare services, out-of-home care services, family and community services, disability services, health services, camps and schools. It will be implemented by board/council members, employees, volunteers, children, parents, carers, presbytery members, church council members, elders, congregation members, people in the specified ministries of the Church, and any other person with responsibility for the care of children.

Supporting documents

The Church is guided in its operation by a set of policies in addition to this Framework, which include Persons of Concern policies, Professional Standards and Codes of Conduct for all staff, including Ministry agents and lay staff.

Implementation across the Church

Each Synod is required to develop suites of policies, practices, auditing programs and training modules regarding children and vulnerable adults in line with this Framework. In addition, some agencies and schools have mandated or legislated provisions under their accreditation and registration requirements. It is expected that clear linkages will be made between the Framework and these provisions.

The National Safe Church Unit will provide appropriate guidance and assistance and develop tools to support Synod and Church entities in implementing this Framework. The National Safe Church Unit will also conduct regular national audits of compliance and will regularly review and update this Framework as required.

Councils of the Church with oversight responsibilities should ensure that bodies within their oversight implement this Framework.

Principles for a Child Safe Uniting Church

1. Child safety and wellbeing is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture

The Uniting Church commits wholeheartedly and publicly to being a child safe organisation. This commitment will influence our decision-making and guide our practice. Children's voices will be listened to, and every adult who is working with children will be supported to act in the interests of children.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

1.1 In policy, practice and making decisions which affect the safety of children, the Uniting Church in Australia will ensure child safety is its paramount consideration.

1.2 Our leaders and our people will publicly commit to child safety, will model and champion child safe policies and practices and will make decisions that will support a child safe culture across our Church.

1.3 Our governance arrangements will facilitate the implementation of child safe policies and practices and will set clear accountabilities.

1.4 We will document the standards of behavior we expect from leaders, staff and volunteers and ensure our people accept individual and shared responsibility for the safety of children in contact with the Church.

1.5 We will work to understand our risk areas and develop strategies which aim to prevent and mitigate risks to children and young people.

1.6 We will support our people to understand their obligations for information sharing and record keeping.

2. Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously

The Uniting Church acknowledges children's rights and wants to ensure children know that they have a right to be and feel safe, and what to do about it if they don't. We know this means providing information to children and young people and their families in a way that is easily understood and accessible, taking into account their age, culture and the context of our contact with them.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

2.1 All Uniting Church entities will work to inform children, young people and their families with information about their rights, including to safety, information and participation.

2.2 In our interactions with and decision-making impacting on children and young people, we will recognise the importance of friendships and encourage support from peers in helping children feel safe and connected.

2.3 Where relevant to the setting or context, we will consider the need to ensure children have access to sexual abuse prevention information that is appropriate to the age and context.

2.4 We will ensure our staff and volunteers are familiar with the signs of abuse and grooming and are skilled to facilitate child-friendly ways for children to express their views and raise concerns.

3. Families and communities are informed and involved in promoting child safety and wellbeing

The Uniting Church acknowledges that families have the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children and that strong family, community and cultural connections create protective factors which can impact on a child's vulnerability to abuse. We will include families in our ways of working and make space for all people to voice concerns in relation to the safety of children.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

3.1 We will support the participation of families in decisions that affect their children, and recognise the need to facilitate culturally safe spaces and ways of working.

3.2 We will communicate openly with children and families about our child safe approach and make sure that information about it is accessible and available.

3.3 We will seek out input and feedback from children, families and communities as we develop and review our child safety policies and practices.

3.4 We will keep families and communities informed about our child safety approach, operations and governance.

4. Diversity is respected and equity is promoted

The Uniting Church wants to be a child safe organisation, but also a child friendly organisation, where we embrace and value diversity and provide safety for all people to realise their full potential, noting this is different for everyone. We commit to equitable treatment of all people regardless of age, abilities, gender or social, economic or cultural background.

We commit to the following principles:

4.1 The Uniting Church will promote inclusion of all children, considering the diversity of their circumstances.

4.2 We will ensure that children and young people have access to information, supports and complaints processes that are accessible, easy to understand and appropriate to age and culture of the child.

4.3 We will pay attention to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, children with a disability, children who have experienced trauma and other vulnerable children.

5. Our people are suitable for work with children and committed to values of child safety and wellbeing

Recruitment and screening of all people who work with children is a vital part of keeping children safe. We will be intentional with our people, exploring values, understanding motivations for working with children and ensuring ongoing training and supervision to maintain awareness and vigilance amongst our communities.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

5.1 We will ensure that recruitment, referee checking and screening processes for all our people include an emphasis on child safety and wellbeing.

5.2 All persons who need a working with children check will have a current check, including international criminal history checks where required.

5.3 Those working with children will receive an induction which emphasises child safe culture and sets out behavioural expectations in working with children, along with record keeping, information sharing and reporting obligations.

5.4 Ongoing staff support, supervision and people management will include a focus on child safety and wellbeing.

6. Child focused complaints processes

We acknowledge that to be effective, processes to raise concerns and complaints about the safety of children need to be known, simple and taken seriously. Uniting Church processes will prioritise the safety and wellbeing of children in the way we manage and respond to complaints and concerns.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

6.1 Each Uniting Church entity will have an accessible, child focused complaint handling policy which clearly outlines the roles and responsibility of leadership, staff and volunteers, approaches to dealing with different types of complaints, breaches of relevant policies - including codes of conduct – and obligations to protect and report.

6.2 Our complaint handling process will be culturally appropriate, clear and easily understood by children and young people, and all our people.

6.3 Complaints will be taken seriously and responded to promptly and thoroughly. Where a complaint of abuse of a child becomes known it will be immediately reported to the authorities, including police and other statutory authorities, and we will immediately take the appropriate steps to assess and minimise any further risk or harm.

6.4 The Uniting Church mandates any person who is aware of, or suspects child abuse or harm to make a report to the authorities, including police and other statutory authorities, and we will support relevant authorities' investigations into any concerns about children and/or allegations of abuse or harm towards children. While investigations are being conducted, we will ensure child protection measures continue to be in place. In consultation with police and other authorities, and subject to their approval, we will conduct our own inquiries in order to identify opportunities for child safe practice improvements.

6.5 We will meet reporting, privacy and employment law obligations.

7. Our people are provided with ongoing education and training on child safety

The Uniting Church commits to keeping child safety high on our agenda and will provide initial and ongoing education and training on child safety to those who work with children. We know that this is critical to ongoing maintenance of a child safe church and to our people maintaining contemporary knowledge which supports them to make good decisions, to maintain vigilance in recognizing the signs of abuse and to support children who have concerns.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

7.1 Our people will be trained and supported to effectively implement our child safety and wellbeing policies.

7.2 Our people will be given information to recognise indicators of child harm.

7.3 Our people will have information on how to respond effectively to disclosures or concerns of abuse by a child or another person.

7.4 Our people will be given information about how to build safe environments for children and young people, including environments which are safe for people of different cultures.

8. Physical and online environments promote safety

The Uniting Church acknowledges that physical environments and online behavior can impact on the safety of children. We will be intentional in our assessment of risks and take steps to mitigate risk as much as possible by considering physical environments, evaluating high risk activities and making online behavioural expectations of our people very clear.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

8.1 Our people will identify and mitigate risks in our online and physical environments while facilitating a child's right to privacy, access to information, social connections and learning opportunities.

8.2 Our people will understand their obligations in using our online environments.

8.3 Where activities involve children, we will assess risk from the type of activity, the physical environment and the organisational setting.

8.4 If outside parties are engaged to provide services to us (including temporary/agency staff, procurement), we will consider the child safety requirements in engaging outside parties.

9. Review and continuous improvement of policy, procedure and practice

The Uniting Church is committed to continuous improvement and will be intentional in its review of policy, procedure and practice. We will examine incidences and reports to identify systemic issues and take lessons from what we learn.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

9.1 We will monitor the implementation of our child safe policies and procedures and conduct regular reviews of our child safe practices.

9.2 We will critically review all incidents and reports to identify causes and trends, manage risks, identify systemic issues and improve our child safe policies and practices.

9.3 We will communicate with our people and communities on the findings of relevant reviews.

10. Policies and procedures document child safety

The Uniting Church acknowledges that it is not enough to have in principle commitment to child safety but that these commitments must be documented in policy and procedure so that there is clarity, accountability and shared understanding.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

10.1 Our policies and procedures will address all the child safe principles set out in this policy framework.

10.2 Our policies and procedures will be documented and easy to understand.

10.3 Development of policies and procedures will include stakeholder consultations.

10.4 Church leaders will champion and model compliance with policies and procedures.

10.5 Our people will be supported to understand and implement, and consistently apply policies and procedures.

Version control

Version No.	Written by	Approved by	Date Approved	Review Date
1	Royal Commission National Engagement and Response Task Group	Assembly Standing Committee	August 2015	August 2017
2	Royal Commission National Engagement and Response Task Group	Assembly Standing Committee	March 2017	March 2019
3	National Safe Church Unit	Assembly Standing Committee	November 2019	November 2021

Appendix 1

Definitions

'Child' refers to anyone under the age of 18 years.

'Abuse' refers to both adult to child abuse and child to child abuse. Abuse and neglect includes but is not limited to:

Physical abuse – when a person purposely injures or threatens to injure a child or young person.

Emotional abuse – an attack on a child or young person's self- esteem such as bullying, name calling, threatening, ridiculing, harassing, intimidating or isolating the child or young person.

Family violence – (for the purposes of this Framework) violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person that coerces or controls a member of the person's family (the family member), or causes the family member to be fearful; where a child sees or hears family violence or otherwise experiences the effects of family violence.

when a family member, partner or ex-partner attempts to physically or psychologically dominate another.

Sexual abuse – any sexual act or sexual threat imposed on a child.

Grooming – predatory conduct undertaken to prepare a child for sexual activity.

Neglect – where a child is harmed by the failure to provide the basic physical and emotional necessities.

'Staff and volunteers' or **'our people'** refers to all relevant (according to the context in which it appears) persons, and may include, but not be limited to, board/ council members, employees, volunteers, parents, carers, presbytery members, church council members, elders, congregation members, people in the specified ministries of the Church, and any other person with responsibility for the care of children.