

FRIENDSHIP MINISTRIES MODEL GUIDELINES FOR ABUSE PREVENTION

Introduction:

Friendship Ministries was created to allow youth and adults with intellectual disabilities to draw closer to God. The success of Friendship Groups depends on numerous dedicated volunteers and mentors who help persons with an intellectual disability develop a fuller understanding of God's love and grace.

The design of the program places people in one-to-one interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, it is in the context of close interpersonal relationships that persons with intellectual disabilities are often abused. Because of the potential risk of abuse in one-to-one relationships, Friendship Ministries has developed the following model guidelines for Friendship Groups with the goal of introducing practices and precautions that are designed to reduce the risk of abuse so that Friendship meetings and social events will be enjoyable and safe for everyone.

Important: These guidelines are a suggested *model* for abuse prevention and appropriate response. Friendship Ministries believes that the observance of these guidelines or similarly thoughtful and effective procedures is a necessary element of the conscientious care and instruction of persons with intellectual disabilities. However, Friendship Ministries has no authority or control over the management of individual Friendship Groups or the actions of their volunteers and mentors and does not accept liability for any improper or negligent act. Each Friendship Group must thus take responsibility for the safety and security of the youth and adults participating in its program, for the proper observance of state and provincial laws regarding abuse and reporting requirements, and for consultation with individual legal counsel.

Definitions:

Friend is a person participating in the Friendship Group.

Volunteer/Mentor is a person serving in the Friendship Group.

Abuse is harm or threatened harm to a friend committed by another person with real or apparent authority.

I. *Sexual abuse* is actual or threatened sexual exploitation of a friend, including but not limited to, sexual intimacy by a caregiver, supervisor, or one who maintains real or apparent authority over the other person or sexual intimacy by another friend.

II. *Physical abuse* is non-accidental physical injury, harm or threatened harm to a friend.

III. *Emotional abuse* is the use of words, silence, or non-verbal behavior to threaten, intimidate, belittle, or humiliate a friend or to improperly influence or control their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Emotional abuse is usually chronic and severe, and results in the person being helpless, dependent on the abuser, and having low self esteem.

IV. *Economic abuse* is the misuse or misappropriation of a friend's financial resources.

V. *Spiritual abuse* is the misuse of Scripture, church doctrine/practice, or spiritual authority to improperly influence or control the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of a friend. An example of spiritual abuse is forcing a friend to participate in an altar call.

General Model Guidelines for Friendship Groups:

Group Meetings

- A) If a friend and mentor meet alone in a classroom, keep the classroom room door open.
- B) If possible, have pairs of mentors/friends meet in adjacent rooms.
- C) If the meeting room is large enough, then more than one mentor/friend pair could meet at the same time.
- D) A volunteer could be assigned to monitor the rooms where mentor/friend pairs are meeting.
- E) If the classroom doors need to remain closed, each door should have a window with an unobstructed view of the room.

Bathroom Guidelines

- A) If necessary, friends should be assisted by someone of the same gender in such a manner as to ensure their privacy and safety. This may require more than one mentor.
- B) When friends routinely need assistance or need assistance with medical devices, caregivers should provide this assistance. Plans for assisting the friend should be made before attending the Friendship Group.

Physical and Verbal Contact

- A) Physical affection initiated by a volunteer or mentor should be limited to side-to-side hugs, pats on the back or forearm, touching the back of the hand and gently squeezing the hand.
- B) Both the friend and the volunteer/mentor can say "no" to physical affection and refrain from displays of affection. If a friend is unable to verbalize "no", notice carefully their body language and facial expression that may indicate discomfort with physical affection.
- C) It isn't appropriate to make lewd or suggestive comments to friends, or tell them dirty or off-color jokes. Details or discussions about one's intimate life shouldn't come up in a Friendship meeting.

Corrective Action

Consequences or corrections to attitude and/or behaviors are sometimes necessary in a Friendship meeting. If a mentor thinks a correction or consequence is needed, these guidelines may help. They are not intended to be progressive steps of correction.

- A) Give a verbal reminder to follow the rules, if appropriate
- B) Involve another mentor, guardian or caregiver
- C) Ask the friend to leave the room for a few minutes and take a time-out
- D) End the meeting
- E) Ask the friend not to come to the program for a period of time until an agreement can be reached about acceptable behavior
- F) If a situation arises away from the Friendship program, stay in a public setting because moving to a private or isolated setting may increase vulnerability for the mentor and the friend. Use a cell phone to seek assistance or to relay what is happening to someone else.
- G) If problems continue beyond minor correction, don't hesitate to share them with a parent, guardian, or caregiver and apprise them of how the situation has been handled.

Physical intervention including slapping, hitting, kicking, punching is not ever appropriate. Physical restraint may be necessary only to prevent harm or injury to the friend, mentor, or other persons nearby. Lashing out in anger or verbal abuse will likely cause more harm to the other person and to the relationship.

Off-Site or Home Visits:

What a blessing it can be when friends and mentors enjoy a friendship apart from the group meeting. Friendship Ministries recommends the following guidelines:

- A) Learn about the friend's interests and pursue those with him/her.
- B) Encourage one another to use spiritual gifts and seek opportunities to use them outside of the Friendship program.
- C) Involve family members in activities with a friend to increase the interaction and the fun.
- D) Check with a parent, guardian, or caregiver before making plans to socialize with a friend. Be sure to leave a phone number and/or the location of where the mentor and friend will be spending time. Let a parent, guardian, or caregiver know when the friend will be picked up and when he/she will be dropped off again.
- E) If a friend has come to visit, don't leave them to a stranger or family member to entertain. If your schedule doesn't permit a visit, re-schedule the visit.
- F) If the friend is living independently, a good rule to follow is leave a note explaining where the friend will be and with whom.

Transportation Guidelines:

- A) Anyone who transports a friend should have a valid driver's license and insurance on the vehicle and passengers
- B) Make sure there are seat belts for each passenger

- C) Carry a cell phone in case of medical emergency, accident or injury, vehicle breakdown, weather related problems, and to keep people informed of drop offs or pick ups
- D) Consider having two volunteers in the vehicle so the driver can keep his/her attention on the road

Supervision Policies:

- A) There needs to be adequate supervision before and after Friendship Group. A ratio of 1 volunteer or mentor to 3 friends is suggested.
- B) During study sessions, a ratio of 1:1 is preferred.
- C) For off-site activities, a ratio of 1:1 is preferred, depending on the activity and the location.

Before and after Friendship Group, volunteers and guardians/caregivers may be included in the ratio if they are supervising the friends.

Screening Guidelines:

Leaders and caregivers want to provide suitable volunteers and mentors to meet with and socialize with friends.

- A) Groups should initiate screening steps including an application, reference checks, criminal background checks and interview.
- B) When recruiting new or more volunteers, the leader should initiate some steps of screening including an application, reference checks, and interview.

Remember, an applicant is not guaranteed an opportunity to serve, so if the screeners don't feel comfortable, an applicant could be denied a volunteer position for any reason.

If leaders of a Friendship Program collect sensitive information about someone, they should store the information in a private and/or confidential manner. If possible, information should be stored in a locked cabinet.

If leaders obtain information about an applicant that indicates previous problems behaving appropriately with others, it is in the best interest of the Friendship Group and all the participants/volunteers to find someone else to fill that position.

Reporting Guidelines:

If a volunteer or mentor becomes aware of a possible or actual abuse situation, taking action is necessary to protect a friend.

By state and provincial law, some volunteers and mentors are mandatory reporters. Mandatory reporters, for example, are teachers, nurses, or group home operators. Mandatory reporters are required by law to report suspicions of child abuse or abuse against a vulnerable adult. Friendship Groups should support mandatory reporters when they need to report any reasonable suspicion of abuse.

In Canada, everyone is legally responsible to report suspicions of child abuse and abuse against a vulnerable adult. Friendship Groups should support those who are legally required to report.

For all others who serve in Friendship Groups, Friendship Groups should encourage them to consider it their duty to report a reasonable suspicion of abuse as well as a moral and ethical obligation to report abuse.

Although reporting suspected abuse could be upsetting, friends rely on volunteers and mentors who become aware of wrongdoing to take action to correct it. Since direct intervention could put both the alleged victim and the volunteer or mentor at risk, volunteers and mentors are asked to seek out the local resources best trained and qualified to intervene.

When the friend is a minor, usually under the age of 18 in most states and provinces, contact Children's Protective Services or Children's Aid Society. When the friend is an adult, usually 18 years of age or older in most states and provinces, Adult Protective Services should be contacted.

The person who witnesses abuse or hears directly from a friend about possible abuse is called the *first hand reporter*. This first hand reporter usually has anonymity if he/she reports abuse to proper officials. The first hand reporter should not look to pass off this important responsibility to someone else because anonymity may not be guaranteed under such circumstances.

Because abuse can include violent behavior and the abuser can be unpredictable, it would be wise for volunteers and mentors to refrain from intervening with any one accused of abuse--except in the case of stopping an abusive incident in their presence.

If a volunteer or mentor or friend shows signs of abusive behavior or demonstrates behaviors that are unacceptable towards participants, a group leader or other volunteers and mentors should ask that person to withdraw from this ministry. Furthermore, if a volunteer or mentor is asked to provide a reference for someone they witnessed or they were suspicious of engaging in unacceptable behavior, the wisest and safest thing to do would be not recommend that person. Inappropriate behavior by a friend may be unacceptable by a volunteer.

Since matters of spiritual abuse are not referred to civil authorities, they should be referred to church officials for follow up.

Retention/Response Guidelines:

Offender

- A). If ever a volunteer or mentor confesses to or is found guilty of abuse against a friend, he/she should be asked to leave the Friendship Group. If the matter has not been reported, that should be done also.

- B). If ever a volunteer or mentor is accused of abuse against a friend, a replacement should be sought until the allegations are either substantiated or discharged. If the allegations are unfounded, the formerly accused could be allowed back into the Friendship Group. However, if the allegations are substantiated, the accused should be asked to leave.
- C). Friendship Groups can protect their friends and their volunteers by not accepting as a volunteer or mentor someone who has confessed or been found guilty of harming a minor or vulnerable adult. The risk of re-offending is quite high.

Friend

- A). A friend abused or allegedly abused should be assisted to find an appropriate counseling agency or counselor trained in abuse dynamics and services to intellectually disabled persons.
- B). A friend abused or allegedly abused should be encouraged to cooperate with investigating authorities.