

Advocates for Autism – Child Protection Policy

Herein after referred to as "AFA"

Policy Statement

Our organization AFA cherishes all of the children in our care and is committed to a child centred approach to our work. We recognise this need and undertake to protect and provide a safe environment and experience where the welfare of the child/young person is paramount. We will adhere to the recommendations of the Children First Act 2015, which forms part of a suite of child protection legislation which includes the National Vetting Bureau Act 2012.

Policy Objectives:

- *To protect the children in our care and increase our awareness of the serious nature of child protection*
- *To provide and ensure children with the highest possible standard of protection in line with current legislation including Garda Vetting of employees*
- *To chart guidelines for members/volunteers in dealing with allegations or suspected child abuse, bullying, harassment etc*
- *To provide sufficient information to organizations/authorities and personnel to enable them to be alert and to be aware of what to do in situations where child abuse may be a concern or suspicion*

Guidelines:

1.0 Duties of AFA

1.1 The Committee of AFA shall nominate a First Designated Person (FDP) to be responsible for dealing with all concerns about the protection of children. His/her primary role is for reporting allegations or suspicions of child abuse to the Health Service Executives or Social Services and /or An Garda Siochana

1.2 Where the First Designated Person is unavailable, the Chairperson of the Committee shall nominate a senior member of the committee to assume this responsibility.

1.3 The First Designated Person should immediately inform the Committee that a report involving a child in the organisation has been submitted to the relevant health board.

1.3.1 The First Designated Person shall

- *Have a working knowledge of statutory guidelines*

- *Have a knowledge of categories and indicators of abuse (as outlined Appendix 1 Children First)(Physical,Emotional,Neglect,Sexual)*
- *Be Aware of local contacts and services in relation to child protection*
- *Communicate and liaise with parents/agencies as appropriate*
- *Be familiar with Standard reporting procedures and assist with the administration of issues of confidentiality, record keeping and data protection.*
- *Assist with the ongoing development and implementation of the organisation's Child Protection needs.*

2.0 Grounds for Concern

2.1 *The Health Board should always be notified where a person has a reasonable suspicion or reasonable grounds for concern that a child may have been or is being abused or at risk of abuse. The following examples should be noted as indicators ;(Children First 4.3.2 ACPC Regional Policy and Procedures Appendix 2)*

- Specific information from the child that he/she was abused.*
- An account by a person who saw the child being abused*
- Evidence, such as injury or behaviour, which is consistent with abuse and unlikely to be caused another way*
- An injury or behaviour which is consistent both with abuse and with an innocent explanation but where there are corroborative indicators supporting the concern that it is a case of abuse - e.g. a pattern of injuries, an implausible explanation, other indications of abuse, dysfunctional behaviour*
- Consistent evidence, over a period of time that a child is suffering from emotional or physical neglect.*

3.0 Handling disclosures from Children:

3.1 *An abused child is likely to be under severe emotional stress and a member /volunteer may be the only adult whom the child is prepared to trust. Great care should be taken not to damage that trust.*

3.2 *When information is offered in confidence, the member will need tact and sensitivity in responding to the disclosure. The member will need to reassure the child, while explaining the need for action and the possible outcomes, as well as informing the relevant authorities. It is important to tell the child that everything possible will be done to protect and support him/her, but not to give guarantees of secrecy.*

3.3 *While the basis for concern must be established as comprehensively as possible the following advice is offered to members to whom the child makes a disclosure of abuse:*

- *-Listen to the child*
- *-Do not ask leading questions nor make suggestions to the child*
- *-Offer reassurance but do not make promises*
- *-Do not stop a child recalling significant events*
- *-Do not over react*
- *-Explain that further help may have to be sought*
- *-Record the discussion accurately and retain the record*

3.4 *Points to be taken into Consideration:*

3.4.1 *It should be noted that the child has decided to tell about something very important and has taken a risk to do so. The experience of telling should be a positive one so that the child will not mind talking to those involved in the investigation.*

3.4.2 *The child should not be questioned unless the nature of what he/she is saying is unclear. Leading questions should be avoided, open non specific questions can be used i.e. Can you explain, or what do you mean by that. This information should then be reported to the Designated Person. The record of the discussion should be given and retained by the Designated Person.*

4.0 Reporting Child Abuse

4.1 *When child abuse is suspected, it is essential to have a record of all the information available. Observe and note dates, times, locations, and contexts in which the incident/s occurred or suspicion aroused, together with any other relevant information.*

4.2.1 *Signs of physical injury shall be described in detail and, if appropriate, sketched. Any comment by the child concerned, or by any other person, about how an injury occurred will be recorded, preferably quoting words actually used, as soon as possible after the comment has been made.*

4.2.2 *All records so created will be regarded as highly confidential and retained in a secure location by the First Designated Liaison person.*

4.2.3 *If there are reasonable grounds (See) for believing that the child has been abused or at risk , the First Designated Person will make a report to*

the statutory authorities, who have the statutory responsibility to investigate, assess and validate suspected or actual child abuse

- 4.2.4 *In cases of emergency where a child appears to be at immediate and serious risk and the First Designated Person is unable to contact a duty social worker, An Garda Síochána will be contacted. Under no circumstances shall a child be left in a dangerous situation pending intervention by the Statutory Authorities*
- 4.2.5 *A First Designated person reporting suspected or actual child abuse to the Statutory Authorities shall inform the family of their intention to make such a report unless in doing so would endanger the child or undermine an investigation*
- 4.2.6 *A report will be given by the first Designated Person to the Statutory Authorities in person or by phone and in writing without delay.*
- 4.2.7 *In the event of an emergency, or the non-availability of health board staff, the report shall be made to An Garda Síochána. This may be done at any Garda station.*
- 4.2.8 *AFA shall adopt the s best practice of reporting child abuse concerns by making direct contact with the relevant personnel and follow up in writing. The Chairperson of the AFA shall be informed at all stages.*
- 4.2.9 *In cases where there are no reasonable grounds for reporting a concern, the person/member who raised the concern shall be given a clear written statement by the First Designated person of the reasons why the organization is not taking any action. The member will be advised that if they remain concerned about the situation that, he/she is free to consult or report to the health board.
Any such report would be covered by the protection for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act, 1998. This provides immunity from civil liability to persons who report child abuse "reasonably and in good faith" to the Health Board Services or the Gardaí.*

5.0 Informal Consultation

- 5.1 *Persons unsure about whether or not certain behaviours are abusive and therefore reportable should contact the duty social worker or the Children's First Information and Advice Officer, Child and Family Agency where they will receive advice.*

6.0 Sources of Child Abuse

6.1 *It is important to realise that children may be subjected to abuse by parents/guardians or other family members, persons outside their family, other children, or those who have responsibility for their care for one reason or another for short /long periods of time*

6.2.1 Vulnerable Children

We, Advocates for Autism, recognize that children with disabilities may also be more at risk as the nature of their disability sometimes may limit communications and may depend more than most children on a variety of adults to meet their needs.

6.2.2 Peer Abuse

In some cases, child abuse the alleged perpetrator will also be a child and it is important that behavior of this nature is not ignored. Grounds for concern will exist in cases where there is an age difference and/or difference in power, status or intellect between the children involved. It is also important to distinguish between normal sexual behavior and abusive behavior.

7.0 Allegations of Abuse against Members/Volunteers of AFA

7.1 *The following agreed procedures shall be followed in cases of alleged child abuse against members/volunteers.*

Two Steps shall be taken

- 1. The Reporting Procedure as laid down under Reporting Child Abuse (4.0)*
- 2. The Procedure for dealing with Member/Volunteer*

7.2.1 Steps to be taken within AFA

Where reasonable grounds for concern exist

7.2.2 *Advice shall be sought from the local duty social worker or Child and Family Agency with regard to any action by AFA deemed necessary to protect the child/children at risk*

7.2.3 *The matter shall be reported to the local statutory authorities following standard reporting procedure.*

- 7.2.4 *In the event that the concern is connected to the actions of a member of AFA, the person involved will be asked to stand aside pending the outcome of any investigation by the Statutory Authorities. This Task will be undertaken by the Chairperson of AFA other than the Designated Person who will take responsibility for reporting.*
- 7.2.5 *When the member is being informed privately by the Chairperson, (a) the fact that an allegation has been made against him/her and (b) the nature of the allegation, he/she shall be afforded an opportunity to respond. His/her response shall be noted and passed to the Statutory Authorities.*
- 7.2.6 *All persons involved in the child protection process, shall be afforded appropriate respect, fairness, support and confidentiality at all stages of the procedure.*
- 7.2.7 *The committee of AFA shall seek legal advice where necessary as circumstances may vary from one case to another.*
- 7.2.8 *Once the criminal process is completed the committee will consider and examine whether there are grounds for disciplinary proceedings for misconduct. This examination is deemed necessary whether the alleged abuser has been prosecuted or has been found not guilty.*
- 7.2.9 *Having followed procedures and having satisfied itself that it has sufficient information to hand to make a determination in relation to the allegation; the committee reserves the right to take the necessary action it considers in respect of the member/volunteer.*

8.0 *Special Considerations*

- 8.1 *The following shall be considered*
- 8.1.1 *The safety of the child making the allegation and any others who are/may be at risk shall be ensured that this shall take precedence over any other consideration.*
- 8.1.2 *The member/volunteer who is the subject of the concern will be treated with respect and fairness.*

8.2.1 Confidentiality

- 8.2.1 *Confidentiality shall be maintained in respect of all issues and people involved in concerns about the welfare of a child.*
- 8.2.2 *Information shall be managed in a respectful, professional and purposeful manner.*
- 8.2.3 *It is AFA policy that the rights of both the child and the person about whom the complaint has been made shall be protected
However, AFA acknowledges*
- 8.2.4 *A guarantee of confidentiality or undertakings regarding secrecy cannot be given, as the welfare of the child will supersede all other considerations.*
- 8.2.5 *All information will be treated in a careful and sensitive manner and will only be discussed with those who need to know.*
- 8.2.6 *Information will be conveyed to parent/guardians of the child about whom there are concerns in a sensitive way.*
- 8.2.7 *Giving information to others on a "need to know "basis for the protection of a child is not a breach of confidentiality.*

9.0 Anonymous Complaints

- 9.1 *Anonymous complaints shall not be ignored, and any such complaints shall be brought to the attention of the Designated Person, who will handle in a confidential manner and in accordance with procedures previously outlined.*

10.0 Rumours

- 10.1 *Any rumours relating to inappropriate behavior circulating s be brought to the attention of the First Designated Person and will be investigated without delay.*
- 10.2.1 *If there is any doubt about the substance of a rumour advice will be sought from the relevant authority.*
- 10.2.2 *AFA encourages children/parents/members to report problems/concerns directly to the First Designated Person to ensure open trusting relationships and important issues are dealt with in a constructive manner.*

11.0 The First Designated Person for 2017

Contact Elaine O'Leary

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12.0 Timeframe for review:

The policy will be periodically reviewed in line with any changes in legislation AFA shall undertake to make any necessary amendments and revise this policy within the framework of the Children's First Act, 2015.

13.0 Responsibility for review:

13.1 The Chairperson and First Designated Person will undertake to carry out any reviews and refer to Committee for ratification.

13.2 Ratification and Communication:

13.21 This policy was ratified by the committee of AFA at its meeting in January 2016 and communicated to all members of Advocates for Autism and is available at all times for inspection by outside parties.

January 2017

AFA Committee