

SECTION 4: Ensuring Safe Physical Environments and Safe Technology

Executive Summary

When parents, grandparents and other caregivers entrust their children to an organization's care, they do so with the expectation that the organization will not only provide good quality services, but has also taken the necessary steps to ensure the child's physical safety and well-being. Of course, no organization can claim that its premises or programs are completely safe, and children and youth – especially younger children – are extremely vulnerable to the choices and judgements of the people taking care of them. But organizations can employ best practices strategies to look at all safety factors and areas of risk, including the physical and virtual spaces children inhabit, and work to strengthen the safety and security of those environments. The key strategies to employ, either on-site or off-site, are visibility, access, supervision/training and communication. Sample checklists YSOs can use to inventory their Safe Environment capabilities are included in the Resources section and in Appendix 10.

Programming for children and youth takes place in a wide range of settings over which organizations have varying degrees of control. Some YSOs operate in space that was designed specifically for the activities and services they offer to children, youth and families. In other cases, YSOs utilize space that was designed for entirely different purposes. In mentoring and relationship-oriented programs, there is no single identified space for the activities to take place – except perhaps in the mentor's home. Any of these can present significant challenges in offering safe places for children and youth. Policies and procedures to establish safe physical environments, including supervision of children and youth within those environments, should strive to meet best practice standards while recognizing and accounting for the limitations and realities of the settings.

From a physical perspective, the rule of thumb in protecting children is visibility. The greatest fear of those who would sexually abuse or victimize children is being discovered. In this section, YSOs are encouraged to take actions to design, build or adapt existing spaces to maximize visibility, and to minimize or eliminate space where children and youth cannot be seen. Multiple strategies, suggested practices and resources to help achieve these goals are presented for both on- and off-site, as well as overnight activities. It is also suggested that YSOs create a "safety committee" that periodically conducts site surveys noting potential problem areas and/or maintenance needs.

Complementing the physical aspects of safety are the procedural aspects of safety and security, and how access to the physical space – and thus to the children and youth – is granted and monitored. All adults who enter the space occupied by the YSO's children and youth should have a purpose for being in that space, and a role that is understood by all its occupants. There should be control over access points, and procedures for admitting individuals into the facility,

verifying their identity, signing them in and out of the space and badging or some other outward sign of who they are (Parent, Visitor, Contractor, etc.). Likewise, once inside the facility, the identity of supervisors, staff, and volunteers should be clear to all so that anyone will know whom to approach with a concern, question or emergency should the need arise.

Other strategies discussed are maintaining an updated list of the individuals who are authorized to pick up a child/youth from the facility, procedures for releasing a child/youth to their custody, and the steps to follow if their identity cannot be confirmed or they are not on the list. YSOs should also establish emergency procedures to follow if an unauthorized or unknown person gains access to the facility.

Along with site safety, visibility issues, physical access and security procedures, supervision is another critical aspect of creating and maintaining safe environments for children and youth. Simply stated, adequate supervision of children and youth depends on vigilance – no child or youth in a YSO's care should be anywhere – at any time – without the knowledge of, or without being under the direct supervision of a staff member or adult volunteer. Effective supervision always includes adult awareness of the child's/youth's whereabouts, having the child/youth within sight, and monitoring and/or participating in the child's/youth's activities and interactions. An efficient means for staff to communicate with one another is particularly important when the YSO's facilities are spread out in large spaces or are dispersed into separate rooms or multiple buildings.

Of course, the ability to accomplish and maintain this level of supervision will depend on the ratio of adults to children and youth established by the organization's leadership. Guidelines on the suggested ratios of adults to children/youth exist, but are not universal. Because there is no standard ratio for all situations, the Task Force encourages all YSOs to consider in their decision making process such variables as the age and development levels of the children and youth they serve (lower ages or development levels may necessitate fewer children/youth per supervisor); the age of volunteers (older teens who are not adults should always work in tandem with an adult supervisor); the risk associated with the activity; the location of the activity; and the ability to monitor and keep track of individual children/youth (on/off-site, classroom or park, etc.). Safety strategies for overnight trips are also addressed. Even with a satisfactory ratio of employees and volunteers to children and youth, training, monitoring and staff supervision will need to emphasize the need to keep attention and interactions focused on the children/youth and to avoid distractions like cell phones, checking email and personal conversations.

Also addressed in this section is the situation where YSOs are responsible for transporting children to and from regular YSO activities and special events. Of course, circumstances will differ depending on the size of the organization and the services it provides. Large YSOs may employ professional transportation companies to transport their students or clients on a daily

basis. Other organizations may purchase their own vehicle(s) and hire one or more drivers. Others, by the nature of their services (or size), may rely on supervisors, employees, volunteers or parents to transport children and youth in their personal vehicles. Each of these situations carries the potential for inappropriate contact with the children/youth being transported. Although some of the larger organizations (e.g., public schools) are subject to regulatory requirements for the screening and hiring of drivers, many YSOs are not. Strategies are offered to help maximize the safety of all involved.

Finally, the prolific use of the Internet and social media by children and youth presents a special set of challenges for YSOs. Cell/Smart phones, tablets and other mobile devices provide children and youth with immediate and constant access to the Internet as well as to a wide variety of methods, sites and apps to communicate with individuals and groups on a daily basis. This “virtual” or “cyber” (rather than physical) environment has become a primary source of information (and entertainment), and helps children and youth build skills in communication, collaboration, and research and information management – skills they will eventually need in their future education, employment and professional work.

However, as children and youth access and navigate this ever-evolving information landscape, these technologies can also be used to cause harm (cyber-bullying), access inappropriate or sexually explicit material and information (sexting, pornography), and in some cases, as a means by which offenders can engage and groom children and youth for eventual abuse (Also see section on Grooming above). Given this reality, and depending on the nature of the YSO’s services, the Task Force suggests that YSOs develop and adopt social media and “responsible use” policies that outline the acceptable and prohibited uses of cell phones and other devices for staff and volunteers to communicate with children and youth, and incorporate them into their safe environment policies, rules and regulations, and Codes of Conduct (Also see Code of Conduct section).

Key Findings and Recommendations

- There are both physical and procedural aspects of establishing safe environments for children and youth. Each is defined and explained.
- Physical aspects include strategies to ensure the visibility of children and youth in all spaces and at all times (clear sight lines, removal of obstructions, adequate lighting, mirrors and cameras, secure areas where a child could be isolated or entrapped, etc.).
- Procedural aspects include creating policies and practices for on and off-site supervision, staff-to-child ratios, use of toilet, shower and changing facilities, 1:1 interactions, etc.
- In some cases, YSO’s are subject to external safety requirements (e.g., those requiring licensure). Managers need to ensure awareness of and compliance with all local and state regulatory agencies.

- Minimum required safe environment standards are presented with a decision process to determine additional needs in the areas of visibility, access, supervision/training.
- Suggestions are also made for applying the above physical and procedural aspects of safety to off-site and overnight activities and accommodations.
- Guidelines for the safe transportation of children/youth (when necessary) are addressed.
- Establishing a staff/youth safety committee is also recommended. The committee can conduct periodic site surveys (See sample in Appendix 10) to point out safety “trouble spots” and areas in need of attention, and build a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.
- Guidelines are also provided on establishing social media policies to define appropriate levels of interaction between staff, volunteers and children/youth.

Recommended Implementation and Decision making Model

STEP 1: Determine if the Minimum Physical and Procedural Standards for a Safe Environment are Present.

- Minimum physical standards include:
 - Facilities designed or adapted to ensure clear sight lines
 - All children and youth can be seen
 - Unused areas/rooms secured and locked
 - Off-limits areas clearly marked
 - All areas well lit
 - Safety rules and regulations posted
- Minimum procedural standards include rules and regulations for using the space:
 - Child/youth entry and release procedures (Check-in/sign-in/sign-out)
 - Visitor entry policy and expectations while in facility
 - “No closed-door” policy
 - Rules about 1-on-1 meetings
 - Adequate staff-to-child/youth ratios for supervision, and a clear understanding of which adults are responsible for which children and youth
 - Procedures for bathroom use, and changing and shower facilities (if applicable)
 - Code of Conduct for employees/volunteers/children/youth (see Code of Conduct section)

STEP 2: Determine what additional activities, circumstances, risks or regulatory/licensing or accreditation requirements pertain to the YSO.

- Are there additional requirements established by local, state and national organizations/agencies?
- What size and how dispersed are the physical space(s) occupied by the YSO?

- What kind of control does the YSO have over the design, maintenance, utilization of, and access to the physical space it occupies?
- Is transportation to/from the YSO and/or to/from YSO activities one of the services the YSO provides?
- Are overnight activities, trips, competitions, exhibitions, etc. conducted by the YSO?
- Are 1-on-1 interactions between staff/volunteers and children/youth (mentoring, tutoring, counseling, etc.) a normal part of the services provided?
- Do the ages and circumstances (intellectual/physical disabilities or other limitations) of the children/youth being served, and the risk of the activity require modification of the staff and volunteer to child/youth ratio? How and when?
- By what means will staff and volunteers be able to communicate with one another – especially in emergency situations – if they are not co-located
- Is electronic communication between staff/volunteers and children/youth prohibited/necessary/allowed and under what circumstances?

STEP 3: Select and utilize additional safe environment measures as needed

- Understand and implement additional statutory and/or regulatory requirements.
- Additional staff will be required for supervision of multiple rooms, or space on multiple floors or in different buildings. A clear way to identify staff (badges, tee-shirts, caps) and an efficient means for staff to communicate with one another (walkie talkies, company cell phones, etc.) are important for larger spaces.
- If it is necessary for vendors and other service providers to enter the premises, procedures for entry, identification, badging, monitoring and notification to all staff should be employed. Children/youth also need to know that work areas are off-limits.
- Larger spaces may require surveillance cameras and mirrors to monitor adequately, and the designation of a single (possibly monitored) entry point to minimize/eliminate unauthorized entry by adults, and children/youth “wandering” through the building
- Spaces not owned by the YSO (and unable to be modified) or that are in buildings with public access, will need additional signage to steer children/youth away from areas that are off limits, accompaniment to toileting facilities (for younger children), and periodic security checks of any public spaces through which children/youth must pass.
- Mentoring and relationship-oriented programs that require 1-on-1 meetings off-site will require visiting/inspecting the mentor’s home and additional supervision and vigilance.
- Off-site activities will require policies and procedures about the use of YSO transportation (ensure parental consent), additional screening of drivers (Also see section on Screening and Hiring), policies about the use of personal vehicles to transport children and youth or, alternately, reliance on parents and other caregivers to transport their children to and from events.

- Overnight activities will require additional policies about room accommodations and sleeping arrangements, who is allowed in the rooms, who will check in on the children/youth and how often, etc.
- If necessary, the use of social media and electronic communication between YSO personnel and children/youth should be governed by a social media policy and outlined in the Code of Conduct (See sample policy in Appendix 9).¹
- It is important for YSO leaders to periodically (at least annually) update themselves and their staff on advances in social media technologies in order to evaluate and review how these safe environment protocols are working and whether/how they need to be revised in order to remain effective.

End of Executive Summary

¹ An online database of social media policies for various industries and organizations can be found at:
<http://socialmediagovernance.com/policies/#axzz1t9QE04Ym>