



Seventh-day
Adventist Church



South Pacific

Code of Conduct Frequently Asked Questions

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Why do Children and Vulnerable Persons receive special attention in the church?

God loves all of His created beings including those who are vulnerable because of the effects of sin on this world. God has a plan for the development of each of His created beings which may include a journey to healing from the trauma inflicted on them through the effects of sin. God would like His church to form a key part of this healing journey where relationships based on trust can be formed. A church community should be a safe place where members of the community can learn about God's love for them and start on the journey of becoming the people God intended them to be.

Those members of His church who have influence and power within this community have a sacred responsibility to protect the Vulnerable from any abuse of this trust.

Children are created by God to inherently trust those who are older than them. This means that even if they have not yet experienced trauma in this world they are especially vulnerable to persons who intend to abuse this trust. It is the church leadership's role to assist parents with sacred responsibility to protect their child from others who intend to or choose to use an opportunity to abuse.

The consequences of abusive conduct may cause serious trauma that permanently alters the trajectory of a person's life. Survivors may suffer from depression, substance abuse, inability to have meaningful relationships, inability to trust, inability to maintain employment and long-term loss of potential income. Many survivors have a permanently altered view of God, His love and are unable to trust persons in the church. These consequences have serious implications to the mission and aims of the Christian church.

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Why do Children and Vulnerable Persons need protection?

People are created in God's image. An important aspect of God's character is to engage in a relationship with His created beings. This is evident in the fact that He chose to take a huge risk in creating beings that were free to choose to commune with Him.

God's kingdom is about selfless service based on love to others. God invites the members of His community to live their lives selflessly. In this we commit to acting in the best interest of others and not to gratify our own desires or needs. This should be informed by God's principles as shown in Jesus' example while here on earth.

God created people with a built-in need to be part of a community. The cornerstone of community is relationships and a key element of relationships is trust. When an individual is vulnerable because of circumstance either because of trauma or age, their trust is easily abused by persons intending or choosing to use any opportunity to abuse.

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Why is a Code of Conduct important to the Church?

The SDA Church has a strong commitment to creating a safe environment in which persons can attain their God intended potential. Further, it is committed to the wider community's Ten Child Safe Standards, recommended by the Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse. As part of standard 1: Child safety is embedded in institutional leadership, governance and culture, the standard recommends that an organisation sets out clear behavioural standards towards children in a code of conduct that staff and volunteers are asked to comply with. This



should be no surprise for people living within a Christian context as it is no different from the Christian expectations that come from the model of conduct given to us by Jesus.

The Code of Conduct then outlines what kind of Christian community we intend to become and particularly what we collectively believe is conduct that creates and maintains a safe environment for all of us including our vulnerable people and children.

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Why does the Code of Conduct need signing?

One of the approaches would be to publish the Code of Conduct and assume everyone agrees with it. This approach however fails to get staff and volunteers to reflect on their practice when compared to that outlined in the Code of Conduct. Child and Vulnerable Person protection is of strategic importance in the church and hence a process of review and reflection of the model conduct enhances compliance. Further to this an acknowledgment of the existence of the Code of Conduct assist with accountability in managing issues where breaches are alleged.

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Some of the Code of Conduct items don't appear harmful! Why are they listed?

Some of the items found in the Code of Conduct are included to counter grooming behaviours. A Church faith community creates many opportunities for children to develop healthy, interactive relationships with adults. A positively engaged Christian Community around them helps children grow as individuals while nurturing their spiritual development. Trust forms an important part of this community. People with the intent to abuse will prey on this trust. Our church provides activities for children which can create opportunities for child sex offenders through grooming behaviours.

Grooming is where a person progressively manipulates a relationship with a child to cross the boundaries of what is understood as a normal adult child relationship into a more romantic and then sexualised relationship.

The groomer seeks:

1. unsupervised time alone with a child.
2. to create an understanding in a child that a "special" relationship exists with the child, one where secrets can be kept from primary care givers.
3. to desensitise the child to physical touch progressing beyond "accidental" sexualised touch.
4. to encourage the child to break the rules.
5. to desensitise the child to nakedness of the child or the perpetrator.
6. to develop and manipulate relationships with the significant adults of the child to thwart the effectiveness of any future disclosure of abuse so that they may continue the abuse and escape accountability for their actions.

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What happens if a person breaches the Code of Conduct?

As a Christian community, made up of individuals who have committed themselves as disciples of Christ, we should not be unaware of Christ's daily direction to us in our lives. This includes times



when the Holy Spirit draws to our attention conduct that may have hurt others. Sometimes this process is done through others who observe and have a concern about our conduct. Similarly, breaches of the Code of Conduct will be handled like any other complaints raised in the church or affiliated entity, informed by best practice approaches to addressing child and vulnerable person protection allegations. These include:

1. Alleged criminal conduct will be reported to authorities.
2. Alleged breaches will be investigated and if sustained may result in:
 - a. church disciplinary action and / or
 - b. further training and / or
 - c. closer supervision and / or
 - d. being required to sign or re-sign the Code of Conduct
3. Serious alleged breaches will be reported to AdSAFE, the church child and vulnerable person protection service, and may be independently investigated. If sustained, the person may no longer be able to work with children in the church and the result may be reported to the appropriate government working with children screening agency.

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How will Code of Conduct breaches be handled?

The following principles will be used in handling an alleged breach:

1. the breach will be considered as an allegation that needs investigation.
2. the alleged breach will be kept confidential.
3. all parties involved may have a support person accompany them to meetings.
4. the person subject of the allegation will be afforded procedural fairness including:
 - a. and unbiased decision maker.
 - b. knowing the detail of the alleged conduct.
 - c. being given time to prepare a response.
 - d. an opportunity to give a response before a decision is made.

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Why might the Church's Code of Conduct change over time?

One of the Ten Child Safe Standards adopted by the church is to regularly review and improve child safe practices. This is done by:

- a. working to better implement the child safe standards.
- b. implementing recommendations from public reviews into child and vulnerable person protection.
- c. implementing recommendations from internal investigations.

This will ensure the continuous improvement of the Church's Child and Vulnerable Person Protection Framework. These improvements may result in adjustments to the Code of Conduct from time to time.

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How often do I need to sign it?

It is best practice for employees and volunteers who make decisions about the church's services for children or those who work directly with children in these services to sign the Code of Conduct when they first commence the role and from then on, each time it changes.

When alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct are sustained the Church, in consultation with Adsafe, may require further training and the signing of a customised Code of Conduct.

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What is the Church leadership's responsibility relating to Child and Vulnerable Person protection and codes of conduct?

The wider church has placed a strong focus on Child and Vulnerable Person Protection. This is evident in the church manual where it states,

“There is no priority higher than protecting children, and other vulnerable people, within our care. This is something close to the heart of God (see Matthew 18:6), and cannot be done through wishful thinking or vague aspirations.” (Church Manual – 2016 edition, page 239)

Good governance dictates that matters that have the highest priority need to be imbedded within the community's culture and for this to happen must be modelled by the community's decision makers. The Code of Conduct is an expression of what behaviours are acceptable and what is not within the community. As such it is a vision of what the community wants to be. To bring about effective culture change the church leadership should:

1. commit to the Child and Vulnerable Person Protection Framework by adopting AdSAFE Policy, Guidelines and practices.
2. adopt the Code of Conduct as an expression of how the members of the community should conduct themselves.
3. actively model this conduct personally.
4. ensure that decisions made by the church leadership supports these priorities.
5. actively promote this conduct as “This is what is important to us!” or “The way we do things around here!”
6. actively respond to alleged breaches of these accepted standards of conduct.
7. respect confidentiality.

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I am under 18 years of age and have been asked to work with children. Do I need to sign the Staff Code of Conduct?

No. The Staff Code of Conduct is only for adults! The church may have adopted the optional Code of Conduct for the children in the church. If so the church may ask you to sign this document.

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What do I do if I see behaviour that puts members of the community at risk of harm?

Persons who have special roles within the community will have signed the Code of Conduct. If you have a concern that one of these persons may have breached the Code of Conduct you should raise the matter with the leader who handles complaints. This person will be listed on the “Reporting a Concern” poster display in the church. The poster will also give you information about how the matter would be handled.

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What if the concerning behaviour is done by a person who hasn't signed a Code of Conduct?

The Church Leadership may have adopted a General Code of Conduct for all members and attendees. This outlines Christian conduct that would ensure the safety of all in the community. While a church community would want to welcome all to its events this is not without condition. Persons whose behaviour is abusive or causes harm to others can be excluded from the community and its activities. This is the legal right of the owners of the property.

If you have a concern about the conduct of a person who just attends this should be raised with the leader who handles complaints. This person will be listed on the “Reporting a Concern” poster display in the church.

Serious harmful conduct may result in an immediate exclusion from the community and its events. Less serious conduct may result in a dialogue about the conduct and a requirement that the person sign a code of conduct. This person will then be held accountable to this commitment into the future.

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Matthew 18: 15-17 outlines privately raising concerns with a brother first! Why might this not be a valid strategy in Child and Vulnerable Person matters?

Child Sexual Abuse can represent serious lifelong trauma from which a person may never recover. Your concern may be a symptom of serious abuse that is taking place and could be criminal conduct. Discussing the matter first with the alleged perpetrator only provides an opportunity for this person to manage the situation. This could either be destroying evidence or threatening the victim or witnesses or both. It is acknowledged that perpetrators often “Groom” the community. It may be that in responding to you, you may also be groomed which would result in your ongoing silence.

The wider church is committed to justice outcomes for survivors of abuse. This could include criminal justice. For criminal justice to remain an option, certain principles of evidence gathering are essential. This process should be left to those who have expertise in the area.

Concerns about employees are governed by special protections found in employment law. For this reason, advice from agencies with expertise in this area must be sought and considered by the employer. For this reason, concerns about employees should be raised with either AdSAFE or a representative of the employer. The contact details for these agencies are also found on the “Reporting a concern” poster displayed in the church.

In handling alleged poor conduct, the church must balance the following competing needs:



1. The needs of the complainant to be heard and for confidentiality, justice, restitution and closure.
2. The needs of the wider community for the prosecution of the investigation to deliver a finding and for the timely implementation of the recommendations from the investigation.
3. The needs of the person subject of the allegation for procedural fairness, confidentiality and closure.

For these reasons your concern about Child and Vulnerable Person protection should be raised through the agreed channels. AdSAFE has established protocols for handling serious concerns which are approved by appropriate government agencies such as the police and child protection agencies.

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