



THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE



Your Guide to Working with Minors

What You Need to Know

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Introduction

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville serves more than 50,000 minors annually. University students, faculty, and staff interact with youth in many ways. You may be a coach, counselor, mentor, researcher, teacher, or volunteer. Perhaps you are with an outside group, such as a school or camp, that brings kids to UT.

Whatever your role, this guide will help you work effectively with youth. It offers good practices, describes the signs of child abuse and neglect, and explains your legal duty to make a report. Following this guide will help you protect youth and also protect yourself.

Tips for Working Effectively with Youth

Keep kids out of danger. The number one priority is to keep children and youth out of dangerous situations. Some dangers are obvious, such as crossing a busy street. Others are more subtle, such as the risk of heatstroke. Kids do not always have good judgment, and some typical adult activities are unsuitable for younger people. Climbing ladders is risky for youth, as is operating machinery. Kids don't know to take shelter in a thunderstorm. Part of your role in working with minors is to anticipate and avoid dangers.

If youth are engaged in laboratories or research activities, seek advice on appropriate training and protocols. Do not assume that minors are fully informed and competent. Refer to Safety Policy SA0550—Minors in Laboratories and Shops for more information. policy.tennessee.edu

Avoid being alone with a minor. One-on-one situations create the risk of child abuse. If you are teaching a child to read or to play a sport, stay in an open area with other people around. Do not be alone in an office or classroom with a single child. Remaining visible to other people protects the child and also protects you.

If you need to check on a minor in a private area such as a sleeping room, locker room, or bathroom, bring another adult along.

If you have an important reason to be alone with a child, such as for music lessons or individual counseling, discuss safeguards in advance with your director or supervisor.

Stay vigilant. If you are supervising kids, keep your attention on them. Avoid distractions, including personal electronics and conversations with other adults. The moment your attention wanders is the moment that a fight will start or a participant will slip away.

Steer clear of transportation complications. Watch for problems when parents pick up children. Know who is authorized, and not authorized, to pick up each child. Don't release a child to someone else. Unless you have written permission from a parent or guardian, do not transport a minor yourself. You can, of course, transport your own kids.

Avoid abuse. Don't engage in any abusive conduct toward a youth or in the presence of youth. Take special care not to touch minors inappropriately. Do not use corporal punishment or any discipline designed to humiliate a minor. Discuss questions and concerns with your director or supervisor.

Keep kids away from drugs, alcohol, and sexual materials. The University of Tennessee does not tolerate the use or possession of illicit drugs. Do not provide illicit drugs to minors or use drugs in the presence of minors. Drinking before age 21 is illegal, and youth should not possess or consume alcohol. Adults should not drink when they have responsibility for the well being of youth. Treat smoking the same way.

Can minors receive or use prescription drugs or over-the-counter medications? Consult your program director or supervisor about obtaining written parental permission.

Sexual topics are also off limits. Avoid risqué jokes, even if youth are telling them. Do not share sexual material with kids. If sexual content may be relevant to an academic course, counseling session, or other professional setting, follow professional norms. As always, discuss any issues with your director or supervisor.

Enjoy working with youth, within boundaries. Enjoy the opportunity to serve as a role model, teacher, and guide to minors. At the same time, maintain boundaries and take your responsibilities seriously. Treat youth with respect at all times. Avoid singling one child out from a group to become your special friend.

DO

- Maintain the highest standards of personal behavior when interacting with youth.
- Stay vigilant at all times when you are responsible for youth.
- Conduct necessary one-on-one interactions with minors in a public environment where you can be observed.
- Have another adult present when you are working with minors in an unsupervised setting.
- Follow the rule of three. Have two adults present with a single child.
- Listen to minors. Provide praise and positive reinforcement. If a minor expresses discomfort, tell your supervisor.
- Treat all minors in a group consistently and fairly, with respect and dignity.
- Be friendly with minors within the context of the formal program or activity, while observing appropriate boundaries.
- Maintain discipline. Challenge minors if they engage in inappropriate behavior, including inappropriate touch or language.
- Know who is authorized to pick up a child and bar others from doing so.
- Be aware of how your actions and intentions might be perceived or misinterpreted.
- Consult with other adult supervisors or colleagues when you feel uncertain about a situation.
- Enjoy the opportunity to serve as a role model, teacher, and guide to minors.

DON'T

- Don't spend significant time alone with one minor away from the group or interact with minors in private.
- Don't engage in inappropriate touching or have any physical contact with a minor in private locations.
- Don't use inappropriate language, tell risqué jokes, or make sexually suggestive comments around minors, even if minors themselves are doing so.
- Avoid driving alone with a single child. Don't drive any children in your private vehicle without written parental permission.
- Don't give personal gifts to, or do special favors for, a minor or do things that may be seen as favoring one minor over others.
- Don't engage in rough or suggestive games, including horseplay.
- Don't strike or hit a minor. Don't use corporal punishment or other punishment involving physical pain, discomfort, or humiliation.
- Don't share information with minors about your private life or have informal or purely social contact with minor program participants outside of program activities.
- Don't date or become romantically or sexually involved with a minor. Don't show pornography to minors or involve minors in pornographic activities.
- Don't provide alcohol, drugs, or tobacco to minors or use them around minors.
- Don't undress or shower around minors or sleep in the same room.
- Don't relate to minors as if they were peers, conduct private correspondence, or take on the role of confidant (outside of a professional counseling relationship).
- Don't tell a child "this is just between the two of us," or otherwise encourage a child to keep secrets from parents or guardians.

Signs of Child Abuse and Neglect

The Tennessee Department of Children's Services defines child abuse and neglect:

- Physical abuse: Non-accidental trauma or physical injury of a child, or failure to protect a child from harm.
- Neglect: Failure to provide for a child's physical survival needs to the extent that there is harm, or risk of harm, to the child's health or safety.
- Sexual abuse: When a child is involved in intentional sexual acts that produce sexual arousal and/or gratification for the perpetrator or sexual behaviors/situations in which there is a sexual component.
- Psychological harm: A repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered. May include both abusive acts against a child and failure to act.

The Department describes these possible indicators of abuse and neglect.

- The child has repeated injuries that are not properly treated or adequately explained.
- The child begins acting in unusual ways ranging from disruptive and aggressive to passive and withdrawn.
- The child acts as a parent toward his or her brothers and sisters or even toward his/her own parents.
- The child may have disturbed sleep (nightmares, bed wetting, fear of sleeping alone, and needing nightlight).
- The child loses his/her appetite, overeats, or may report being hungry.
- There is a sudden drop in school grades or participation in activities.
- The child may act in ways that are developmentally inappropriate, such as sexual behavior that is not normal for his/her age group.
- The child may report abusive or neglectful acts.

Note: The above signs can indicate something is wrong but do not necessarily indicate abuse or neglect.

Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

Countless minors suffer abuse and neglect each year. Under Tennessee law, everyone has a legal duty to report child abuse and neglect. Together we can reduce the emotional and physical pain that minors needlessly experience.

What should you do? In case of an emergency, dial 911 immediately.

In addition, you must take these two steps if you suspect or know that a child is suffering abuse or neglect.

Step 1: Call the Tennessee Child Abuse Hotline

877-237-0004

Step 2: Call the University of Tennessee Police Department

865-974-3111 (Emergency)

865-974-3114 (Non-emergency)

Make a Report

- If you know that a minor is suffering abuse or neglect
- If you suspect that a minor is suffering abuse or neglect
- Regardless of who the suspected culprit may be—a family member, teacher, religious leader, student, or coach, well respected or not
- Regardless of where the abuse or neglect may be occurring—for example, in the home, at the University of Tennessee, or elsewhere

Before making a report, you do not need to conduct your own investigation or be certain that mistreatment has occurred.

You do not need to call the University of Tennessee Police Department concerning abuse or neglect that you encounter in a private capacity outside the scope of your university role. Report abuse or neglect to an appropriate authority or the local police department.

Anyone who makes a report in good faith receives legal protection from retaliation. So pick up the phone. It's your legal duty, and it's the right thing to do.

Conclusion

If you have any questions about your role and responsibilities, get advice. Talk to your program director or supervisor.

You can also email questions and concerns to safety-minors@utk.edu or visit programsforminors.utk.edu.



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