

Chapter 10: The voice of children and young people in our Church: Safeguarding guidance

Aim of the chapter

- i. To describe good practices for engaging with children/young people
- ii. To describe good practices for engaging with parents
- iii. To describe how we should support our junior leaders

Engaging with children/young people

Principles

In our schools, children participate on school councils and committees. Often, they have a role in hiring new teachers and contributing to the resource distribution. They can implement new strategies, for example, around making the school more environmentally friendly, and they can develop peer supports to enhance anti-bullying policies and influence the school's ethos.

At church, we can too often just simply tell children what to do, often unconsciously. We want our children to develop personally into adulthood; but also, we want them to mature in their personal relationship with Christ.

In seeking ways in which children can meaningfully participate – most commonly in worship, but also in other aspects of church life (the church's wider ministry, and even in some decision-making) – we actually create a stronger safeguarding environment.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) establishes a child's right to be listened to and taken seriously when decisions are made affecting them.

This is reinforced by national legislation and guidance such as the ethos behind the Children (NI) Order 1995 or the Children First Act 2015.

Why?

Actively listening to children and young people engaged in our organisations / ministries is critical to safeguarding in Joymount Presbyterian Church.

Children and young people will only really talk when they know they are being listened to and taken seriously, regardless of the subject matter.

If we are listening in the 'small things' then children will feel more confident to tell us the 'big things'.

We need an environment in which if children are at harm in any way, they can speak up sooner rather than later.

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We understand that this will be easier if children are thriving in an environment in which they are being taken seriously all of the time, not just if there is a problem.

Children need to know to whom they can speak.

We need to find the way to give children a meaningful voice in Joymount Presbyterian Church, so they can tell us how we might not only develop their connection to their Lord Jesus, but if we have a problem that we need to know about.

Ladder of participation

A simple guide to whether we are actively listening to our children was developed.

- At the lowest level, children are nominal, or manipulated, or used as a token; although they may be present, their presence actually serves to maintain the status quo.
- In the middle level, children have important parts to play, and are informed of them, or they are consulted and then informed of the results of the decision.
- At the top level, children and adults share power, and children's ideas and voices are considered as important as those of adults. For this to happen, there must be ways to include children in decision-making.

It is as we work up the ladder that we will see children become more engaged and empowered and it is in this space that we will have our strongest safeguarding cultures.

'Listening to and capturing the voice of the child is central to effective safeguarding practice. It's how we understand children's lived experiences, hear their views about their lives and circumstances, and take effective action to support or safeguard them.' (NSPCC, 2024)

What?

In Joymount Presbyterian Church organisation and ministries children need to be able to:

- Be able to speak up
- Be able to be heard loud and clear
- Be a real part of the Joymount Presbyterian Church family
- Be connected to the wider church family
- Be part of a safer church

Good practice: Questions for consideration

1. Have we considered all the ways in which children can communicate? It's not always verbal (mood, actions, drawings etc.)

2. Have we considered children who are non-verbal and how they can communicate and have their voice heard?
3. Have we got to know the child's family? Can we take cues from them as to how best to engage with their child?
4. Pastoral visitation is not just for mum and dad – have Elders, Ministers and pastoral care teams engaged also with the children/prayed with the children?
5. Have we given children the opportunity to make a difference in Joymount Presbyterian Church? Do they feel like they are making an impact? Or do they feel invisible and disappointed?
6. Have we thought about the actual experience of children today, or are we pushing upon them what it was like for us to be children, or even how we raised our own children?
7. Have we considered a meaningful and age-appropriate way for children to influence and give feedback on their church experiences?
8. Are we fostering a culture of safe, trusted relationships? Are our general safeguarding practices strong around recruitment and vetting? Do we understand that children see all adults in a church as trusted, especially those who are the front for any reason?
9. Does Joymount Kirk Session ask itself, 'How would this affect our children and young people?'

If we consider both listening to and hearing from children and young people in our church in a meaningful way, we know that we will hear much more quickly if they are worried or concerned, or if something bad is happening to them.

If children already have a genuine belief that their voice is important and they are worshipping in a community in which they can trust many adults, it is more likely that they will be able to tell someone that something is not right or scaring them. The sooner we know that, the better, in every circumstance.

Practical tips

- Ensure that safeguarding posters are accessible to children and:
 - put them at a height that children can see them
 - have a clear, up to date photo of the Designated Person so that children can identify them
 - ensure that information is clearly written with no jargon
- Ensure that the children have all been introduced to the Designated Person. Ensure that the DP has had an opportunity to explain their role to the children/young people
- Session should invite the family/children's/youth worker (if there is one in place) to feed back to them on the children's/youth experiences in the church, on a regular basis

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- Design a meaningful way to allow children to speak up and be heard about the issues that impact them in Joymount Presbyterian Church
- Connect with the wider Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at both Presbytery and island-wide level, to engage with resources and experiences for their children and young people

Engaging with parents

Parents/carers are primarily responsible for their children and leaders should never make significant decisions that would impact a child without consulting with parents.

Leaders should never assume a parent's views on something, and should always respectfully enquire.

Leaders should remain mindful if a child is in foster or residential care. Those foster parents/carers often need to consult a social worker before some decisions can be made; such families need to be given enough advance notice to make some activities possible.

Parents are responsible for advising leaders of any conditions or changes that are significant to a child attending an organisation as the season progresses.

Parents should be clear who the leaders are, including the Leader in Charge of the organisation or activity.

Parents should be clear who the church's Designated Person is, and how to contact them.

Leaders should ensure that parents are advised of all accidents and incidents, no matter how short-lived they were.

Communication with parents about any issues is best done face to face with the Leader in Charge and another leader present. It is not appropriate to communicate significant issues via messaging forums.

CHAPTER END