

Working with Children Policy

By Hank Kwiatkowski, National Avocat

We unfortunately live in an age where child abuse is a reality in our society. Numerous high profile cases of such action have been exposed by our media in recent years. Children are defined as anyone less than 18 years of age. The Protect Our Children Act of 2008 as amended legislates the penalties for child abuse and misconduct in all its nefarious fashions. Penalties are severe for violations of the Protect Our Children Act. As Voyageurs Militaire, we must take seriously our responsibilities for the safety and care of children when in our presence or custody. Virtually all activities and functions of La Societe can expose Voyageurs to situations where prudent conduct with children is required. Accordingly these policies and guidelines must be strictly adhered to when working with children, in conjunction with any and all of our programs.

Working with children can be a tremendously rewarding experience. Those of us who participate in our Child Welfare and Flags for First Graders programs can readily attest to this. The drivers and train crews on our rolling stock also smile abundantly when children are on board. Some of these situations put us in the presence of children who are already well supervised by their parents or teachers. Others are not so overseen. It is these otherwise unsupervised situations where we must be most careful with our words and actions.

What You Should and Should Not Do

Never place yourself in a situation where you are alone with a child. Additional children or adults must be present or in viewing distance when you are working with children. Ideally, children will be accompanied by parents or teachers but this is not always possible. This rule insures safety and protects children from misconduct as well as the adult from unfounded allegations. Never be alone with a child in your care.

Always use good judgment about physical contact with children. Handshakes or touching them on the arm or shoulder to get their attention is acceptable. Never touch a child against their will. Never engage in highly physical contact with children such as tickling or picking them up. It should go without saying that kissing is forbidden and physical contact with children on or near genital areas is absolutely out of order and cannot be tolerated.

Extreme caution and prudence must be exercised when it comes to "potty breaks". Never go into a rest room stall with a child. Do not go to potty breaks with a single child but if you must in an emergency, maintain an appropriate distance from the fixture so your presence there cannot be misinterpreted.

Select words with care. Children periodically require correction when their behavior goes beyond the established norm. Do not use abusive or threatening language when correcting children. Adults can be stern without being loud to the degree of intimidating children. Should corrective action be necessary, you can do so discretely away from the group but always within visual contact of others.

Do not be overly friendly with children. Do not discuss matters with children regarding relationships with others. Do not take pictures of individual children for your own use. Pictures of individual children may be taken at the request of the teachers or parents but never for distribution to other than their parents or teachers. Group pictures of children with adults may be taken for publicity or commemorative purposes.

Do not allow children or adults outside of your group to intermingle with children under your care or supervision. Such individuals should be politely asked to leave but if they persist, remove your group to another area and request assistance from other Voyageurs, if necessary, in order to preserve group safety.

Informal contact with children and teens may occur outside of our official programs. Such contact is discouraged. Informal contact may happen by chance in a public area, by telephone or through E-mail. Should you elect to partake in such contact which is unrelated to the 40 & 8, the parents must fully understand such communication is not part of La Societe's programs.

Do not indulge in alcoholic beverages when working with children. Never approach or work with children when under the influence of alcoholic beverages. Never function as a driver or crew member on rolling stock when under the influence of drugs or alcoholic beverages. Do not allow other adults under the influence to approach children in your care. Such activity is strictly prohibited.

Should You Suspect Something is Wrong

Child abuse can be physical, sexual or emotional and might occur before or during your association with the child. Should circumstances compel you to reasonably conclude a child under your control has been so violated or abused, it is your responsibility to report this to law enforcement. Law enforcement will then guide you further.

Should you suspect another Voyageur to have a character or behavior disorder which could preclude his/her participation in La Societe programs with youth, discuss this possibility with your Chef de Gare or Program Directeur. Individuals who receive such reports can and should demand a background investigation report on the suspect. Such reports are not overly expensive (less than \$20) and usually are paid for by the individual being investigated. Anyone who does not freely and willingly agree to such an investigation should be eliminated from all program considerations to work with children.

There are web sites where known sexual offenders are listed. Some are indexed by physical address and others by an individual's name. You can easily check for known offenders in your area. "Family Watchdog" is one such free service to help identify and locate registered sex offenders in any area of the country. This service is easy to access, amazingly fast and well worth your time to visit. Other services can be purchased on this web site such as background reports, criminal and public records. Identifying and locating known sex offenders is a free service.

The Department of Justice has a "Working with Children" website which can be accessed for additional information on this subject. The government can make things difficult to work with but the site is still worth visiting.

When all things are considered, common sense is the best rule for working with children. Never allow children under your care to be exposed to anything you would not allow your own children or grandchildren to be subjected to. Please act accordingly. You represent the entire organization when you work with children.

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