

## **Child and Youth Protection**

### **1. Scope and Principles**

This Child and Youth Protection Policy (hereafter referred to as policy) applies to any person who is employed by *Wiener Volkshochschulen GmbH* or who volunteers for *VHS* and works with children or youth.

This policy is set up by a set of principles that are derived from the UNCRC, from the European Convention on Human Rights, from the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse and from the Comment No. 13 (2011) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and includes:

- No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable;
- A child rights-based approach to child caregiving and protection requires a paradigm shift towards respecting and promoting the human dignity and the physical and psychological integrity of children as rights-bearing individuals rather than perceiving them primarily as “victims”;
- The concept of dignity requires that every child is recognized, respected and protected as a rights holder and as a unique and valuable human being with an individual personality, distinct needs, interests and privacy;
- Children’s rights to be heard and to have their views given due weight must be respected systematically in all decision making processes, and their empowerment and participation should be central to child caregiving and protection strategies and programmes;
- The right of children to have their best interests be a primary consideration in all matters involving or affecting them must be respected, especially when they are victims of violence, as well as in all measures of prevention.

### **2. Behaviour protocols**

The Code of Conduct of *VHS* includes guidelines on appropriate behaviour of personnel and staff towards all customers including children and youth as well. It encourages personnel to interpret the code in a spirit of transparency and common sense, with the best interests of the child and the youth as the primary consideration.

The Code of Conduct is necessary to underline what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour towards children and young people and to ensure that all personnel clearly understand these guidelines and align itself. The Code of Conduct includes guidelines on appropriate behaviour of children and young people towards other children and young people, especially for the projects where they constitute the core and the actors of the activities.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of obligations that the whole staff of *VHS* must comply with within the organisation:

- Always act in respect of minors, respecting their psychophysical well-being, their fundamental rights, including the right to participation and expression;
- Refrain from acts or attitudes that could put a minor in difficulty or in danger;
- Refrain from having behaviours that are a negative example for minors;
- Refrain from any sexual activity with under-age persons;
- Refrain from humiliating, belittling, or putting the minor in a situation of feeling ashamed and abstaining from any form of violence, abuse, abandonment and exploitation against the child, even avoiding an inadequate language;
- Refrain from any kind of discrimination against a minor. Treat minors without any distinction, regardless of any consideration of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political opinion of the minor her-/himself or her/his parents or guardians;
- Refrain from tolerating or sharing behaviour of minors considered illegal, abusive or that put at risk their safety.

### 3. Communication Guidelines

As underlined by the UNICEF guidelines on “*Developing a Child Protection Policy and Procedures*” the communication guidelines include the essentials and as many desirables as possible:

- Acquire permission of child / guardian / responsible NPO to use images for publicity / fundraising / awareness (informed consent) as much as possible;
- Let people give their own accounts as much as possible rather than others speaking on their behalf; highlight the ability of people to take responsibility and action for themselves;
- Accurate and balanced portrayal of children and young people, with emphasis on dignity and as much reference as possible to their social, cultural and economic environment;
- Balanced portrayal even in cases of ‘victimhood’ (recommended use of ‘before’ and ‘after’ images /stories);
- Accurate representation of children and young people: avoid manipulation or sensationalising text and images; emphasis on dignity;
- Establish system of signed consent for use of organisation’s visual materials by outside individuals / organisations with ramifications for misconduct;
- Avoid: degrading, victimising or shaming language and images; making inaccurate generalisations; discrimination of any kind; taking pictures out of context (try to provide informative caption);
- Children and young people must be appropriately clothed in images and not in sexually provocative poses;
- No personal and physical information to identify location of a child or a young person that could put them at risk, to be put on website or in communications;
- Always ask permission before taking photos of children and young people except in exceptional circumstances.

## 4. Reporting & Reaction Protocols

*VHS* is committed to report all concerns immediately to local and national authorities regarding the protection of minors and to take appropriate steps within the organisation's power to protect the child or the young person from further harm.

*VHS* defines the General Procedure for the assignment of a manager and for reporting and management of a suspected mistreatment, abuse or exploitation of vulnerable minors.

In particular *VHS* establishes that:

- within the organisation, the Managing Director/CEO is appointed as Focal point, who is responsible for the protection of minors, to whom is attributed the responsibility to receive and manage any reports of abuse against children or teenagers;
- the Focal point, once received an alert, will start the investigation procedure to assess that the alleged abuse occurred and will take any appropriate measures in consultation with the Board and the staff council.

The reporting procedure appears to be clear, easily accessible and capable of ensuring compliance with the higher interest of the child and two key values:

- Confidentiality: the name of the people who made the report will not be made public, the subject of the report and the identity of the accused person, unless the case arrives before the Judge and request to hear witnesses;
- Loyalty: the accused person who is part of the staff, interns and members of the *VHS* board will find support from the organisation in its maximum capacity and possibility and, by virtue of the legal principle of presumption of innocence, will be deemed innocent until proven otherwise.

Any alleged violation of the Policy must be reported and investigated in accordance with the Policy itself and the related General Procedure.

Any violation of the Policy constitutes a disciplinary offense that can be sanctioned, in the most serious cases, also with the withdrawal from the employment contract in accordance with the applicable labour law.

The procedural actions taken by the Focal Point include, but are not limited to:

- Collect information and documentation on the incident;
- Carry out an internal investigation (including interviews with witnesses);
- Temporarily suspend the person being reported from his activities, if related to the projects with children and vulnerable adults, during the course of the investigation;
- Inform the person concerned of the complaints made against him;
- Give the suspect the opportunity to present his version of the events in question, before any determination of guilt or innocence is reached;
- Ensure that the victim receives protection and psychological and socio-economic support;
- Ensure that those who made the report are informed about the progress of the activated procedure;

- Where there is a hypothesis of a crime, report the report to the competent Authority;
- The same process will be performed in the event that a *VHS* staff member gets in contact with a risk or an abuse of children or young people. He will report that to the Managing Director/CEO, who will analyse the case and report it to the authorities.

## **5. Ramifications of Misconduct**

*VHS* is committed to ensure the complete protection of minors. In the case of an allegation by a named individual from a verifiable source, the accused individual is to be suspended (on full pay if relevant) pending outcome of an independent investigation. The notice and report of misconduct of internal or external personnel may include the reporting to the police.

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