

The Branch Family Ministry Policies and Procedures

New Team Member Onboarding Process

Because we love kids and students and desire to protect them, The Branch requires all staff members and volunteer team members working with either kids or students to complete five safety steps before ministry work or volunteer placements begin.

Step One: Screening Process

- **All leaders must be a member of The Branch Community Church**
- **Complete an application with two personal references (must be non-related)**

Step Two: Pass a Criminal Background Check

The Branch requires that all leaders wishing to serve in Branch Kids and Branch Students to undergo a criminal background check. Individuals who have been arrested for, charged with, are on deferred adjudication or regular probation for, or have been convicted of sexually oriented or sex related crimes, either misdemeanor or felony, cannot serve in any area of kids ministry or students ministry. The Branch utilizes a comprehensive background check and relies upon the truthful answers of applicants and their references for this information. This check will be renewed every two years.

Step Three: Sexual Abuse Awareness Training

Team members should have a basic understanding of the characteristics of sexual abusers and their behaviors in grooming a child or student for sexual abuse. Grooming is the process used by an abuser to select a child, win the child's trust (and the trust of the child's parent or gatekeeper), manipulate the child into sexual activity, and keep the child from disclosing the abuse.

To equip our team members with the information necessary to recognize abuser characteristics and grooming behavior, The Branch requires all team members to complete an approved sexual abuse awareness training. This training will be renewed every two years just like the background check.

Step Four: Signed Adherence to The Branch Policies and Procedures

Staff members and volunteer team members are required to review the policies and procedures contained in this manual and sign the last page indicating that he or she has read the policies and procedures, has understood them, and agrees to comply with all of them moving forward.

Ministry Practices

1. Biblical Teaching

The Branch Ministries will use curriculum and methods to teach the Bible creatively while giving the proper life application for kids and students. Biblical teaching is foundational for kids' and students' spiritual growth and maturity. It is our highest aim to partner with parents as they seek to disciple their children to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

2. Age-Appropriate Teaching and Socialization

The Branch Family Ministries will create age-appropriate environments and experiences in order that kids and students are able to learn and practice what it means to both love and worship God as well as to love and serve others.

3. Safety-First Mentality

Each week parents entrust the Family Ministries of The Branch Community Church with their precious children. Therefore, before God and others we firmly commit to do everything in our power to keep their children physically, theologically, emotionally, and socially safe. We are dedicated to the never-ending process of improving our trainings, systems, and environment to keep every child safe at every event we do.

4. Healthy and Intentional Shepherding

Team members must view their roles not simply as “babysitters,” but rather as “shepherds.” Shepherding is the core biblical metaphor for godly leadership. Good shepherds (leaders) know, love, lead, feed, correct, and protect their flocks (followers). All team members working in The Branch Family Ministries should see themselves as a good shepherd.

Various Team Member Expectations and Procedures

Staff members and volunteer team members should always be above reproach in their words and conduct. They are to behave in a godly manner that demonstrates love, respect, honesty, and trustworthiness.

1. Zero Tolerance Policy and Reporting

The Branch has zero tolerance for abuse in ministry programs and ministry activities. It is the responsibility of every leader to act in the best interest of kids and students. In the event that leaders observe any inappropriate behaviors (i.e. policy violations, neglectful supervision, poor role-modeling, etc.) or suspected grooming or abuse (physical, emotional, sexual or neglect), it is their personal responsibility to immediately report their observations to their respective supervisor on staff with the Branch Kids or Branch Students teams. Any report of inappropriate behaviors or suspicions of abuse will be taken seriously and will be handled promptly and appropriately, in accordance with this policy manual and Texas state law.

Leaders should always contact a supervisor on staff with The Branch when there has been any of the following:

- A report, implication, or suspicion of physical or sexual abuse
- A report of drug or alcohol abuse by a kid/student or kid's/student's family member
- A divorce or separation with parents of a kid/student
- A report of outbursts of anger by a kid/student or kid's/student's family member
- A report of self-harm or threats of suicide by a kid/student or kid's/student's family member
- A death in the family of a kid/student
- Any observed, implied, or suspected policy violation or inappropriate behavior by a leader

Reporting Requirements and Expectations

All team members at The Branch are required to report suspicions of adolescent abuse or neglect, or any inappropriate behavior of a colleague or co-worker to a ministry leader or elder. Additionally, Texas law says anyone who thinks an adolescent is being abused, neglected, or exploited must report it promptly and directly to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (pursuant to

Chapter 261 of the Texas Family Code). Anyone may contact the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Abuse Hotline toll-free 24 hours a day, seven days a week, nationwide, or report on a secure website and get a response within 24 hours.

For more information: <https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Contact Us/report abuse.asp>

If a team member has cause to believe that abuse or neglect has or will occur:

1) The team member is obligated to report such abuse or neglect to their ministry leader or elder, who will walk the team member through the process of reporting such abuse or neglect to the proper authorities. All employees and volunteers of The Branch are mandatory reporters by state law.

- Phone: 1-800-252-5400
- Website: <https://www.txabusehotline.org/>

2) All information reported should be kept confidential and should only be disclosed to Branch Kids or Branch Students Leaders and the proper authorities.

3) Any person making a report is immune from civil or criminal liability as long as the report is made in good faith.

Leaders should never in any way discourage others from reporting a suspicion of abuse or neglect to the appropriate Texas authorities. If a leader makes a report regarding a suspicion of abuse or neglect, he or she must immediately notify a ministry leader or elder. The elders will also take appropriate action on behalf of The Branch when a report of abuse occurs.

2. Never Alone Policy

Branch Kids

At no time should a leader be in a room or an enclosed area alone with a kid. This is for the protection of the kid(s) as well as the leaders.

Branch Students

No student should ever be left unattended or unsupervised during activities or events hosted by Branch Students. Leaders are prohibited from being alone with an individual student outside the view of others. In the event a leader finds himself or herself alone with a student, that leader should immediately move to another

location where others are present. After every event, leaders must ensure every room and restroom is checked prior to leaving. Any two students together in an unseen or less easily viewed area should be redirected to another location where others are present.

Leaders should always make attempts to include another leader or student in meetings and communication with students. Leaders may occasionally minister to students on an individual basis. In this rare event, leaders should conduct one-to-one meetings with an individual student at a location where others are present. Leaders should not visit a student in the student's home without a parent present. Leaders should not host a student in their home without parental consent and other people present. Leaders should completely avoid one-to-one meetings or communication (phone calls, text messages, direct messages, etc.) with students of the opposite sex.

3. One-On-One Interactions with Kids and Students

The Branch Community Church recognizes that meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of kids and students may occasionally require staff members and volunteers to minister to them on an individual basis. Staff members and volunteers should observe the following guidelines when ministering to kids and students one-on-one.

- Staff members and volunteers should conduct one-on-one meetings with an individual kid or student at a time when others are present and where the interactions can be easily observed.
- Team Members need to notify other serving team members or ministry leaders if such one-on-one meetings are needed.
- Staff members and volunteers are to never be alone in isolated areas with a kid or student.

4. Physical Contact

To promote a positive, encouraging, and life-giving ministry to kids and students, the following guidelines will be followed regarding physical contact between team members and kids or students.

- Hugs, pats on the back, high fives, and other forms of appropriate physical affection are important for kids' and students' development and are generally suitable.

- Inappropriate touching and inappropriate displays of affection are forbidden. Any inappropriate physical contact, touching, or displays of affection should be immediately reported to a ministry leader or an elder.
- Physical contact and affection should be given only in observable places or when in the presence of other kids, students, church members or team members.
- Do not force any physical contact, touch or affection upon a reluctant kid or student. A kids' or students' preference not to be touched must always be respected.
- Ministry staff and volunteer team members are responsible for protecting kids and students under their supervision from inappropriate or unwanted touch by others. If you see something, say something.
- Any inappropriate behavior or suspected abuse by staff or volunteers must be reported immediately to a ministry leader or an elder.

5. Sexually Oriented Conversations and Materials

Staff members and volunteer team members are prohibited from proactively engaging in any inappropriate sexually oriented conversations with children and students.

However, it is expected that from time-to-time youth ministry discussions and lessons may address issues related to purity, dating, sexuality, gender, and sexual immorality. These lessons will convey to the kids and students the Bible's views on these topics.

6. Verbal Interactions

Verbal interactions between leaders, kids, and students should be positive and uplifting. Leaders should strive to keep verbal interactions encouraging and constructive. Leaders should not talk to kids and students in a way that is or could be construed by any reasonable observer as harsh, threatening, intimidating, shaming, derogatory, demeaning, or humiliating.

7. Arrival for Branch Kids Team Members

Branch Kids' Team Members are asked to arrive no later than 15 minutes prior to their scheduled service time.

8. Departure for Branch Kids Team Members

- Team members need to remain in their ministry area until all their kids are picked up.
- Team members need to make sure their area of ministry is clean and tidy

9. Responsibilities Limited to Adults (18 years and older)

To maintain the highest safety standards for our smallest visitors, we ask that only adults, ages 18 and older, handle certain responsibilities in the classroom. Those responsibilities are:

- Changing diapers
- Meeting, greeting parents, and receiving children at the door to the room
- Addressing parents' questions/concerns

10. Cell Phone Use

We ask that team members refrain from using their cell phone for personal or non-essential purposes during classroom time.

11. Classroom Management and Discipline

Leaders are prohibited from using physical discipline in any way for behavior management of kids and students. No form of physical discipline is acceptable. This prohibition includes spanking, slapping, pinching, hitting, push-ups, running, or any other physical force as retaliation or correction or inappropriate behaviors by kids/students.

If a kid/student is unruly or fails to comply with verbal warnings or instructions from leaders, that kid/student will be asked to leave (if not endangered by doing so) or the kid's/ student's parent will be contacted to pick them up. In the event of a fight or physical altercation between kids/students, leaders will first seek to verbally redirect kids/students involved and will try to avoid physical intervention. Uncontrollable or unusual behavior should be reported immediately to parents and to a ministry leader with Branch Kids or Branch Students.

12. First Aid

Every ministry area is equipped with a first aid kit in the event it is needed. Team members and Ministry Leaders should always know where the nearest first aid kit is located.

Check-In Procedures

Every child, ages 0-5th grade, is required to check-in to their classrooms. This includes all visitors.

Check-in kiosks are clearly marked. After electronic check-in is complete, the computer will print two tags, one for the child and one for the parent.

Any allergies should be noted by the parent/caregiver

Parents will be encouraged to take photographs of their check-in sticker in case they lose it before pick-up.

Check-Out Procedures

When picking up the child, the parent must present the printed security tag to receive their child at the door of the classroom.

Team members will take the parent tag and match it with the kid tag before releasing the child.

Only older siblings who are youth aged (6th grade and above) are allowed to pick up kids.

What if the parent loses the security tag?

- Option 1: Ask if the parent has a photo of the tag to verify. If not, move to Option 2.
- Option 2: Text the number that is on the child's tag for the parent, and make sure you see your text come up on the parent's cell phone. Text them these words: "Lost Tag Confirmation." Do not text a number other than what is on the tag. (If the child seems hesitant to be taken, notify your Ministry leader immediately.) If your text does not come up on the individual's cell phone, move on to Option 3.
- Option 3: Alert the Ministry Leader or an elder and they will determine how to handle further.
- Option 4: If it is determined that the individual attempting to take the child is improperly doing so, a pastor, deacon, elder, or safety team member will be notified and will handle the situation from there.

If team members are not diligent in requesting the identification tags of those who are picking up kids, they may be removed from serving.

Safety Plans

1. Leader Ratios

The Branch Kids Ministry will adhere to its established limits for kid-to-leader ratios. When these limits are reached, classrooms will be closed, and parents will be asked to keep their child(ren) with them as they attend service. Exceptions to these limits can be made on behalf of first-time guests, as The Branch's heart is never to turn away a first-time guest from a classroom.

- **Infants: 2:1**
- **Toddlers: 4:1**
- **Pre-K: 5:1**
- **K-5th grade: 8:1**

There should be a minimum of two adults in each classroom (see Never Alone Policy).

Any helper who is youth aged may serve as a junior helper. This does not replace the 2nd adult in any classroom.

2. Sickness

If a kid or student has one or more of the following symptoms, they will not be allowed into the ministry area.

- Vomiting or diarrhea during the night preceding the event, program or church activity
- Temperature elevation exceeding 100 degrees any time within the 24 hours preceding the church event, program or activity.
- Any rash (exception: a non-contagious diaper rash or heat rash)
- Continual yellow or green nasal drainage
- Persistent cough
- Conjunctivitis of the eyes (pinkeye)
- Head Lice
- Any other symptom connected with a transferrable sickness

3. Incident Reports

An incident report should be written for any injury leaving a mark, cut, or bump (any that the child did not arrive with prior to service). Incident reports should be signed by the classroom leader and the parent at the end of service.

Biting incidents and aggressive behavior (hitting and pushing) must be reported to the parents of both children, both the aggressor and the recipient. Leaders should immediately notify their ministry leader if such events happen. If any child exhibits persistent biting or violent behavior, the ministry leader or an elder will notify the parents for further discussion.

4. Accidents or Injuries

First aid kits are available in each ministry area for small treatable injuries. After treating the kid or student, an incident report should be completed. The parents should be informed of the accident or injury by the ministry leader.

Serious injuries involving broken bones, convulsions, fainting, unconsciousness or any other serious bodily injury should be treated as follows:

- The kid or student is not to be moved
- Send a fellow team member to find a ministry leader or pastor (or deacon or elder if they can't be found)
- The ministry leader or elder will assess the situation and, if necessary, call 911
- The parents will be contacted and a follow up with the parent will be made as needed
- All team members and staff members involved in the emergency should complete an incident report of what happened immediately following the emergency
- AED is located in the lobby area adjacent to the coffee bar

5. Blood Spills

Extreme caution should always be exercised when there is potential contact with blood. When dealing with a blood spill, always wear the disposable gloves found in the first aid kit of your ministry area.

Attempt to control the bleeding immediately with compress or direct pressure. If possible, stop the bleeding with the application of a bandage from the first aid kit.

If the spill occurs inside, clean up as soon as possible with cleaning supplies located in your ministry area. Make sure the area is sanitized.

If the blood spill occurs outside the building, attempt to flush the area thoroughly with water.

Dispose of any paper towels, wipes, sponges, cloth, etc. in a covered container or sealed bag.

6. Open Wounds

Kids or students with open wounds are not allowed into any Family Ministry area. They must be bandaged before being allowed in.

7. Vomiting

If a kid or student vomits, keep others away from the soiled area. Using gloves, team members will treat the kid or student and clean up the soiled area.

A parent will be contacted to pick up the kid or student.

8. Evacuation Policy in the Event of an Emergency (ex: Fire)

Each team member is required to read and understand the evacuation route for their group or classroom. These are posted by the exit doors of each room.

Kids and students should be counted before and after evacuating the ministry area.

Each volunteer must make sure that the children in their care get safely outside and away from the building as quickly as possible.

A roll away crib should be utilized in the nursery to assist in the evacuation of infants and toddlers.

Once evacuated, a staff member, elder, or pastor will give further instructions. Team Members should stay with their kids and students at all times. They are not to leave to go get their own children until the evacuation is complete.

Parents will not be allowed to take their children from the care of the team member during the evacuation process. The parents will be able to walk with their kids or students but will not be released until everyone has arrived at the designated location.

9. Weather Emergency (Severe Storms, Tornado, etc.)

Ideally, Family Ministry Events will be cancelled if there is a credible threat of a weather emergency.

If a weather emergency occurs, all workers and children should protect themselves after they are in their designated shelter area by:

- Sitting on the floor, face turned down.
- Drawing their knees up under them.
- Covering the back of their head with their hands.

The current shelter area for **all** classrooms is the “Blue room” (across from the nursery.)

Children must be closely supervised in their designated shelter area until the “all clear” signal is given by a Ministry leader or an elder.

10. Active Shooter Scenario

In the event of an active shooter, The Branch has individuals who have been trained to engage the shooter. All classrooms will close the door and shelter in place until all-clear is provided or further instruction is given by the safety team.

11. Playground

We desire for our children to have the safest experience possible in our playground area, therefore we ask that the playground be reserved for 5th grade and below.