

This policy explains how we keep children safe, what we expect from everyone connected to Laughter Africa, and what to do if you're worried about a child.

OUR COMMITMENT

Laughter Africa works with some of the most vulnerable children in Sierra Leone, the children living on the streets. Many have already suffered serious harm. We will do everything we reasonably can to make sure that no child is harmed through contact with our staff, volunteers, trustees, partners or activities, and to respond quickly and properly whenever there is a concern.

This policy is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and international good practice in child safeguarding.

- A **child** is anyone under 18, whatever the local age of majority or age of consent.
- The **child's best interests** come first in every decision.
- Every child has an equal right to protection, whatever their gender, age, disability, ethnicity, tribe, religion, sexual orientation, HIV status or background.
- We will support children who have been harmed, and make sure anyone who harms a child is held to account.

YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULTS AT RISK

Many of the young people we meet on the streets are 18 or over, and some are still very vulnerable. We work with young adults up to the age of 25. Everything in this policy, including the code of conduct and how to report a concern, also protects them. Adults have the right to make their own choices, so we will always listen to what they want, and only act without their agreement if someone else, especially a child, is at risk, or if the law requires it. Our PSEAH policy also protects adults from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

WHO THIS POLICY APPLIES TO

Everyone who works for or represents Laughter Africa, in Sierra Leone, the UK or anywhere else: staff, volunteers (UK and overseas), trustees, consultants, contractors, partners, visitors, and anyone taking photos, filming or writing about our work. It applies at work and in their private lives, and to our activities in the UK, such as school talks and events with young people, as well as in Sierra Leone.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE

- **Designated Safeguarding Lead:** our Director, who leads on safeguarding and makes sure this policy is followed.
- **Safeguarding focal point in Sierra Leone:** our Head of Administration, who receives concerns in Sierra Leone and is also our PSEAH focal point. Phone +232 78 202949.

- **Lead safeguarding trustee:** a trustee who is independent of the Director, leads on safeguarding for the board, and receives any concern about the Director, at safeguarding@laughterafrica.org.uk.
- **The trustees** are responsible for making sure this policy works. Safeguarding is discussed at every trustee meeting.

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. If you are worried, you must act.

WHAT ABUSE LOOKS LIKE

Somebody may harm a child by doing something to them, or by failing to protect them. Children can be harmed by family, by people in their community, by people in positions of trust, by other children, by strangers, or online.

- **Physical abuse:** hitting, beating, burning, shaking or any other physical harm, including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation.
- **Emotional abuse:** making a child feel worthless, unloved or frightened; humiliation, threats, serious bullying (including online), or exposing a child to violence. This includes harmful practices against children accused of witchcraft.
- **Sexual abuse and exploitation:** involving a child in any sexual activity, with or without contact, including rape, sex in exchange for money, food or anything else, and making or sharing sexual images of a child.
- **Neglect:** persistently failing to meet a child's basic needs for food, shelter, safety, health care or education.
- **Exploitation:** child labour, trafficking, early or forced marriage, or using children to commit crimes.
- **Online abuse:** grooming, bullying or sharing images of a child through phones, apps or social media.
- **Harm by other children:** older children bullying, beating or sexually abusing younger ones.

Children living on the streets, disabled children, girls, children who are pregnant or have babies, and children who use drugs are at particular risk. We take extra care to protect them.

PREVENTING HARM

1. How we expect everyone to behave

Everyone covered by this policy must:

- treat every child with dignity and respect, and use positive, non-violent ways to manage behaviour
- never hit, physically punish, shame, humiliate or frighten a child, even where this is culturally accepted
- never have any sexual relationship with a child (under 18), whatever the local law and whatever the child says about their age. Not knowing a child's age is no excuse
- never exchange money, jobs, goods, help or services for sex or sexual favours, with anyone
- never view, download, make or share sexual or abusive images of children
- not be alone with a child out of sight of other adults, unless it is unavoidable, and then tell their manager straight away. This includes in vehicles and homes
- never sleep in the same room or bed as a child
- not do things of a personal nature for a child that they can do themselves, such as washing or dressing
- not favour some children over others, or give children money or gifts privately

- not be under the influence of alcohol or drugs while children are in their care
- not give children their personal phone number or contact them through personal social media
- never help to arrange a payment or "settlement" between the family of a child who has been abused and the abuser
- report any concern immediately (see below)

Everyone signs this code when they start, and again every year. Breaking it may lead to dismissal, the end of a volunteering role, and reporting to the police or other authorities.

Appropriate touch. Kind, appropriate touch is fine, such as a handshake, a high five, a hand on the shoulder, or a side-on hug when a child wants one, with other people around. Never touch a child in a way that is sexual, rough or unwanted, never touch private parts of the body except for necessary personal care or first aid, and stop straight away if a child seems uncomfortable.

2. Safer recruitment

Before anyone works with children, we use:

- written applications, interviews that ask about safeguarding, and checks of identity and work history
- at least two references, from people who have known the person for at least two years and are not related to them
- criminal record checks: an enhanced DBS check in the UK (through our umbrella body), and a police clearance or the nearest equivalent in Sierra Leone. Where a police check isn't possible, at least three references
- checks through the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, so people dismissed for sexual misconduct elsewhere can't move between organisations
- a signed self-declaration about any criminal record, and a signed agreement to this policy and our code of conduct

3. Training and awareness

- Everyone has safeguarding training when they start, and a refresher every year.
- Our Designated Safeguarding Lead, focal point and lead safeguarding trustee have more in-depth training.
- Overseas volunteers and visitors receive a safeguarding briefing before they meet any child, and are never left alone with children.
- We tell children, in ways they understand, what safe behaviour from adults looks like, that they have the right to be safe, and who they can tell if something is wrong.

4. Photos, stories and social media

- We only take or share photos and stories of children with consent from the child and their parent or guardian, explaining how they will be used.
- We change names where needed and never share anything that shows where a child lives, sleeps or goes to school.
- Children are shown with dignity, never in a degrading way.
- Staff, volunteers and visitors must not post photos of the children on their personal social media.
- We will take down any photo or story if a child or family asks.

5. Safe projects

- We assess the safeguarding risks of every activity, including our outreach projects, the Interim Care Centre, family visits, events and trips, and plan how to reduce them.
- Before a child goes home, or goes to live with a relative or foster family, we check that the home is safe and keep visiting afterwards.
- Children's personal information is kept securely and shared only with those who need it.

6. Our Interim Care Centre

Children live at the Interim Care Centre, sometimes for weeks, so we take extra care there:

- girls and boys sleep in separate rooms, and younger children are kept apart from much older ones
- there is always at least one trained member of staff on duty, day and night
- personal care, such as help with washing, is only given when a child can't manage alone, and by a staff member of the same sex where possible
- all visitors sign in and are always with a member of staff
- children are never punished by being hit, locked in, or having food, sleep or contact with family taken away
- medicines are kept locked away and given by a named member of staff
- children are told how to raise a worry, and there is a suggestion box they can use without giving their name
- children can agree to their own medical treatment, such as a check-up, medicine or care after an assault. If a child needs an operation, the child's family must give permission. In an emergency, we get the child to hospital straight away and contact the family

7. Online safety

- Photos and information about children are stored securely, on Laughter Africa devices or accounts, not on personal phones, and deleted when no longer needed.
- Staff and volunteers never contact children through personal social media or messaging apps.
- When children use phones or the internet with us, we teach them how to stay safe online and who to tell if something worries them.

8. Visitors, supporters and Letters of Laughter

- Visitors, journalists and supporters who meet the children are briefed on this policy first, and are always with a member of our team.
- Letters between supporters and children use first names only. No addresses, phone numbers, social media, photos, gifts or money are exchanged directly, and our team reads every letter before it reaches a child.
- Nobody is allowed to make private arrangements to meet, contact or send money to a child.

9. Partners

Anyone we fund or work closely with, such as schools, vocational trainers, clinics and other organisations, must keep children safe too. We check their safeguarding before we work with them, share this policy with them, and expect them to tell us about any concern involving our children. If they don't keep children safe, we will stop working with them.

10. Disasters and emergencies

In floods, mudslides, disease outbreaks or other emergencies, children are at greater risk of abuse and exploitation, and normal routines can slip. This policy still applies in full. We check that every child in our care is safe and accounted for, watch out for anyone offering help in return for favours, and report concerns in the usual way.

11. A version for the children

We have a short, child-friendly version of this policy, with simple words and pictures. Our team reads it with every child, in Krio, so children know their rights and who to tell if something is wrong.

RESPONDING TO A CONCERN

If a child tells you they are being harmed

- Stay calm. Listen and believe them. Don't press for details.
- Only ask open questions, like "Can you tell me what happened?" Don't ask leading questions.
- Tell them they've done the right thing by telling you.
- Don't promise to keep it secret. Explain that you need to tell someone who can help, and what will happen next.
- Never investigate yourself, and never confront the person who may have caused harm.
- If the child is in immediate danger, act straight away to keep them safe.
- Write down what you heard and saw, in the child's own words, with the date and time, as soon as possible, on our incident record form (in our PSEAH policy). Sign it.

Small worries count too

If someone's behaviour doesn't feel right, even if it isn't abuse, tell the focal point. Examples are being over-friendly with one child, giving a child presents, or bending the rules about being alone with children. We write these worries down, because they help us spot problems early. Raising one is not the same as making an accusation.

Who to tell, and how fast

If the concern is about	Tell	When
Anything in Sierra Leone	The safeguarding focal point (Head of Administration), +232 78 202949	Immediately, and at the latest within 24 hours
Anything in the UK, or if you can't reach the focal point	The Director, at info@laughterafrica.org.uk or 0151 645 7322	Immediately, and at the latest within 24 hours
The Head of Administration	The Director	Immediately
The Director	The lead safeguarding trustee, at safeguarding@laughterafrica.org.uk	Immediately

The focal point always tells the Director within 24 hours. Anyone outside Laughter Africa, including children, families and members of the public, can raise a concern in the same way. In Sierra Leone, children and adults can also use the anonymous suggestion box at our projects, or call the Don Bosco Fambul child

helpline on 525. In the UK, anyone worried about a child can also call the NSPCC on 0808 800 5000, or the police on 999 in an emergency.

You will never be punished or treated badly for reporting a concern in good faith, even if it turns out to be unfounded. If you don't feel able to report inside Laughter Africa, you can get free, confidential advice from the whistleblowing charity Protect on 020 3117 2520.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

1. **Keep the child safe.** Any urgent action needed to protect the child is taken immediately.
2. **Safeguarding meeting within 24 hours.** The Director (or the lead safeguarding trustee, if the Director is involved) meets with the focal point and anyone else with the right expertise to decide what to do.
3. **Tell the right people.** Where a crime may have been committed, or a child needs protection, we refer to the relevant authorities in Sierra Leone, such as the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police, the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Social Welfare, or in the UK to the police or children's services. **Sierra Leone law requires any sexual penetration of a child under 18 to be reported to the police (Family Support Unit) and the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs. This is a legal duty. We always report straight away, and nobody at Laughter Africa can decide not to.** For other concerns, the Director decides how and when to refer, acting in the child's best interests. In every case we plan with the child how to keep them safe through the process. Parents or carers are told where this is safe and appropriate.
4. **Support the child.** We make sure the child gets the medical care, counselling and other support they need, and keep them informed. After sexual abuse, we get the child to medical care, such as the Rainbo Centre, **within 72 hours**, so they can receive treatment to prevent HIV and pregnancy, and so evidence can be collected.
5. **Investigate.** If someone connected to Laughter Africa may have broken this policy, we investigate fairly and confidentially, normally after any criminal investigation. We may use an independent investigator.
6. **Report.** Serious incidents are reported to the Charity Commission, and to any donor or authority that requires it.
7. **Learn.** We look at what happened and change how we work if needed.

If a child goes missing

If a child goes missing from the Interim Care Centre, an activity, or after going home, we start looking straight away, tell the focal point and the Director immediately, and contact the child's family and the places they are known to go. If we can't find them quickly, we report them missing to the police, straight away if the child is very young or in danger.

If a child harms another child

We keep the child who was harmed safe and supported first. We also remember that the child who caused the harm is a child too, and often has been harmed themselves. We separate them where needed, follow the same reporting steps, and make a plan to keep everyone safe.

If the concern is about someone connected to Laughter Africa

- A staff member will normally be asked to step back from their duties on full pay while we investigate. A volunteer will be asked to stop volunteering. This protects everyone while we look into it. It does not mean they are guilty.

- If abuse is found to have happened, the person will be dismissed or their volunteering ended, the matter will be referred to the authorities, and we will report them through the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme.
- If the concern is not upheld, we will support them to return to their role sensitively.
- Deliberately false allegations made in bad faith are treated as a serious disciplinary matter.

Looking after our team

Hearing about abuse can be very upsetting. Anyone who receives a disclosure or helps with a case can talk it through in confidence with the focal point or the Director, and we will arrange more support if they need it.

Sharing information to keep a child safe

Data protection law does not stop us sharing information to protect a child. If you are worried a child is at risk, share what you know with the people who need to know, even if you can't get permission first.

Confidentiality and records

Information about a concern is shared only with those who need to know to protect the child. Records are kept securely and separately, with access limited to the focal point, the Director and the lead safeguarding trustee. Safeguarding records, including any allegation against a member of staff or volunteer and what we did about it, are kept for 50 years and then securely destroyed. This follows UK safeguarding guidance, because survivors sometimes come forward many years later. Anyone who deliberately spreads confidential information about a case will face disciplinary action.

RELATED POLICIES

PSEAH policy (protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment) · Child-friendly safeguarding guide · Staff code of conduct · Communications about children policy · Whistleblowing policy · Complaints policy · Safer recruitment statement · Serious incident reporting policy · Volunteer policy · Data protection policy and privacy notice

REVIEWING THIS POLICY

This policy is reviewed every two years, or sooner if the law changes or something happens that shows it needs to change. When we review it, we ask the children and young people we work with what helps them feel safe, and use what they tell us. The Director reports to the trustees on safeguarding at every meeting and gives a full report every year.

Laughter Africa is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO), registered charity no. 1154712 (England and Wales). This policy updates our 2015 Safeguarding Children Policy. Approved by the trustees: October 2026 · Next review: October 2028 · Owner: the Director (Designated Safeguarding Lead)