

OVERVIEW OF THE CHILD PROTECTION POLICY OF JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES

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I. Summary

1. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not tolerate any form of child abuse. Child protection experts have confirmed that Jehovah’s Witnesses are a “child safe” organization and that their child protection policy and practices “reflect a strong commitment to the protection of children.”¹ The child protection policy of Jehovah’s Witnesses meets or exceeds all legal requirements:

- Elders will report an allegation of child abuse to the authorities whenever it appears that any child might be in danger of abuse. They will do so based on the allegation of one person only and regardless of whether the allegation involves a parent, a guardian, or anyone else.²
- Elders clearly inform the person making the allegation of their absolute right to also report the allegation to the authorities.
- Victims and their families are offered pastoral support from the elders.
- Parents of minor children are also warned by elders of anyone associated with the congregation who has sexually abused a child.

¹ See, for example:

The August 2021 expert opinion of Professor Patrick Parkinson (Australia), paragraph 93, available at <https://www.childsafety.gov.au/resources/jehovahs-witnesses-2021-progress-report>.

The 16 June 2021 expert opinion of child protection expert Ian Elliott (United Kingdom), paragraphs 10-14, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20221215025025/https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/26619/view/CJW000126.pdf>

² By way of comparison, Articles 2 and 6(1) of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act requires only that child abuse committed by “a custodian,” defined as a parent or guardian, be reported to social services.

2. Unlike most other religions, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not provide services that separate children from their parents and, accordingly, child protection experts have confirmed that the risk of sexual abuse in the congregational life of Jehovah’s Witnesses is “very low.”³

3. Jehovah’s Witnesses ensure that all congregants, not just elders, are aware of their child protection policy. For example:

- In the summer of 2017, all congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Japan (and worldwide) attended a three-day convention, which included a talk “Safeguard Your Children From ‘What is Evil’” that reminded parents of the importance of taking steps to protect their children from potential dangers including sexual abuse. It included a three-minute video on steps parents are taking to protect their children from abuse.⁴
- In July 2019, all congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Japan (and worldwide) devoted three one-hour religious services to discussing the child protection policy of Jehovah’s Witnesses as summarized in the May 2019 issue of *The Watchtower*.⁵
- In 2020⁶ and 2021⁷, key parts of the May 2019 issue of *The Watchtower* were featured in dozens of daily text discussions in the booklet *Examining the Scriptures Daily*, a booklet used by Jehovah’s Witnesses worldwide for personal and family worship.
- This is not a new development. For more than 40 years, Jehovah’s Witnesses have published dozens of articles and videos, in hundreds of languages, providing parents and their children with clear, practical, and age-appropriate advice on how to protect children from abuse⁸ (for example, see the two-minute video [Protect Your Children](#).)

4. Child protection experts have commended Jehovah’s Witnesses for the clarity and frankness of the material they have published on this important subject, noting that the publications of Jehovah’s Witnesses “demonstrate a strong commitment to education about the

³ Expert opinion of Professor Parkinson, paragraphs 5(c), 31, 34, 45, 89, and 93.

⁴ Available at https://www.jw.org/en/library/videos/#en/mediaitems/FamilyChallenges/pub-jwbcov_201705_7_VIDEO

⁵ Study Articles 18-20, pages 2-20, available at <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/watchtower-study-may-2019/love-justice-face-of-wickedness/>.

⁶ Available at <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/Examining-the-Scriptures-Daily-2020/>

⁷ Available at <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/Examining-the-Scriptures-Daily-2021/>

⁸ For a list of some of that educative material, see the box “Educate Yourself and Your Children” found on page 12 of the May 2019 issue of *The Watchtower*, (<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/watchtower-study-may-2019/love-justice-face-of-wickedness/>).

problem of child sexual abuse, both to adults in their congregations and to the children themselves ... [Jehovah's Witnesses] do more to educate all their members about child sexual abuse than most mainline [religious] denominations.”⁹

II. Description of Jehovah's Witnesses

5. Jehovah's Witnesses are a worldwide Christian religion, numbering more than 8,7 million congregants with more than 20 million attending their religious services. They come from all walks of life and all professions. They are known worldwide for being law-abiding and peaceful citizens. In Japan there are more than 214,000 Jehovah's Witnesses with more than 310,000 attending their religious services. Jehovah's Witnesses are active in almost each country of the world.

6. Like all religions, Jehovah's Witnesses share a set of scriptural beliefs and engage in worship and other religious practices.

7. Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan, and worldwide, are organized into **congregations** which vary in size from approximately 50 to 150 persons depending on the population of the locality and the capacity of the place of worship.

8. Each congregation has a group of elders that attends to the spiritual needs of the congregation, including by presiding over religious services. The **elders** do not form a clergy class. They do not wear distinctive religious garb or other external identification as elders. The term “elder” is not used as a title or honorific. Elders are not paid for their religious services. Many are engaged in secular work, or have retired from such, and have their own family responsibilities. The process by which elders are ecclesiastically appointed has been adjusted over time but has always focused on the spiritual qualifications outlined in the Holy Scriptures.¹⁰ The number of individual elders composing the body of elders varies from congregation to congregation. Any person found to have abused a child through secular or religious processes would not be appointed as an elder

9. Congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses meet together twice each week to worship, study the Bible, sing, express their faith, and encourage fellow Witnesses and others. The **religious services** of Jehovah's Witnesses are open to the public; a person does not have to be one of Jehovah's Witnesses to attend. Most Jehovah's Witnesses (including elders) spend only a few

⁹ Expert opinion of Professor Patrick Parkinson, paragraphs 64 and 65 (<https://www.childsafety.gov.au/resources/jehovahs-witnesses-2021-progress-report>).

¹⁰ *The Holy Scriptures*, 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:2; and James 3:17, 18

hours a week together in public religious activities. Most of their time is spent like other Japanese – at work or school, commuting, caring for their families and homes, and engaging in various hobbies, entertainment, and sport activities.

10. A **Kingdom Hall** is a place of worship used by Jehovah's Witnesses for their religious services. Kingdom Halls are functional, modest meeting places. Every Kingdom Hall has an auditorium where Bible study programs and lectures are held. The Kingdom Hall might also have an auxiliary auditorium.

11. The religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, whether nationally or at a congregation level, makes no arrangements that separate children from their parents such as crèches, playgroups, Sunday Schools, youth groups or clubs. They do not run schools, orphanages, home care or any other activity where the religious organisation assume responsibility for the care or custody of children. Nor do they provide or sponsor any extra-curricular program or activity, such as choirs, camps, outings, sports, outdoor walks, parties, and similar activities for youths or adolescents. This is based on Jehovah's Witnesses' understanding of Bible commands that parents have the sole Scriptural responsibility to provide their children with religious education and training and that others should not usurp or assume that parental role.

12. Jehovah's Witnesses believe they must respect secular authorities and the law, including compliance with mandatory reporting laws in Japan to protect children from child abuse. They do not shield any perpetrator of child sexual abuse from the consequences, both spiritual and legal, of their actions.

III. Child Protection Policy

13. Jehovah's Witnesses as a religion recognize they are not immune to the evil of child sexual abuse. They have endeavoured to address this pernicious evil at its root by providing elders, congregants, and parents with practical and Scripturally-based guidance and ongoing education on the subject of child sexual abuse.

14. Since the early 1980s, Jehovah's Witnesses have provided congregants with clear, timely, practical, and Scripturally-based guidance and education in *The Watchtower* and

Awake! magazines¹¹ and in religious books and videos¹² on practical steps to protect children from the crime of sexual abuse. Those publications have been distributed in millions of copies and in hundreds of languages.

15. Beginning in 2018, Jehovah’s Witnesses published a worldwide child protection policy incorporating existing policies and practices (“Child Protection Policy”). That policy includes the following publicly available documents: :

- The document *Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Scripturally Based Position on Child Protection* (“*Scripturally Based Position*”), published on the official website of Jehovah’s Witnesses www.jw.org, and which is available for all congregants worldwide and the general public.¹³
- The May 2019 study issue of *The Watchtower*, Study Articles 18 to 20. These articles are designed for all congregants and explain and expand on the *Scripturally Based Position*.

16. These policy documents are written in language understood by their target religious audience, who will readily understand the Child Protection Policy and grasp the underlying Scriptural principles. These policy documents are Scripturally-based for the greatest motivational effect and impact on this religious community.

17. The following is a non-exhaustive list of the key elements of that policy:

- A statement of commitment to protect children from sexual abuse.¹⁴

¹¹ See for example:

The Watchtower, 1 October 1983, “Help for the Victims of Incest”, available at: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/w19831001/help-for-victim-of-incest/>;

Awake!, 8 October 1991, “The Innocent Victims of Child Abuse” and “The Secret Wounds of Child Abuse”, available at: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/g19911008/adult-victims-child-abuse/> and <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/g19911008/effects-of-child-abuse/>;

Awake!, 8 October 1993, “How Can We Protect Our Children?” and “Prevention in the Home”, available at: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/g19931008/child-protection/> and <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/g19931008/prevent-child-sexual-abuse/>;

Awake!, October 2007, “Keep Your Children Safe!”, available at: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/g200710/protect-your-children/>;

“How Can Parents Teach Their Children About Sex?” (2015), available at: <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/parents-teach-children-about-sex/>.

¹² See for example, the animated video “Protect Your Children”, available at: https://www.jw.org/en/library/videos/#en/mediaitems/BJF/pub-pk_17_VIDEO.

¹³ Available at <https://www.jw.org/en/legal/global-information-brochures/packet-jw-scripturally-basedposition-child-protection/>

¹⁴ *Scripturally Based Position* (paras. 1-3); *The Watchtower*, May 2019 (pp. 8-10, paras. 1-9).

- A description of what child abuse is, together with the signs of such abuse.¹⁵
- Whom in the congregation congregants may contact to report an allegation of child abuse, in addition to their right to report an allegation to the authorities.¹⁶
- Immediate response to allegations, including the criteria to determine when an allegation should be reported to the authorities by elders.¹⁷
- Victims and parents are informed of their right to report an accusation of child abuse directly to the authorities.¹⁸
- Pastoral care offered to victims and their families.¹⁹
- Parents of all minor children in the congregation are warned about any individual associated with the congregation who has sexually abused a minor.²⁰

18. The following eight steps outline how Jehovah’s Witnesses as a religion respond to allegations of child sexual abuse. Steps 1 to 4 directly concern the Child Protection Policy. Steps 5 to 8 concern the ecclesiastical process Jehovah’s Witnesses follow to determine whether a congregant who has committed child sexual abuse should be expelled (disfellowshipped) from being one of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Step 1: Immediately upon learning of an allegation of child sexual abuse, two elders from the congregation’s body of elders will telephone the Japan Branch Office of Jehovah’s Witnesses for situation-specific advice on reporting the allegation to the authorities as may be required by law.

The Branch Office will also advise the elders to follow the online policy, *Scripturally Based Position*, which provides at paragraph 4: “In all cases, victims and their parents have the right to report an accusation of child abuse to the authorities. Therefore, victims, their parents, or anyone else who reports such an accusation to the elders are clearly informed by the elders that

¹⁵ *Scripturally Based Position* (“Definitions”)

¹⁶ *Scripturally Based Position* (para. 4); *The Watchtower*, May 2019 (p. 10, paras. 13-14).

¹⁷ *Scripturally Based Position* (para. 5); *The Watchtower*, May 2019 (p. 11, para. 13)

¹⁸ *Scripturally Based Position* (para. 4); *The Watchtower*, May 2019 (p. 10, para. 14);

¹⁹ *Scripturally Based Position* (para. 8); *The Watchtower*, May 2019 (pp. 8-13, paras. 1-21).

²⁰ *The Watchtower*, May 2019 (p. 13, para. 18)

they have the right to report the matter to the authorities. Elders do not criticize anyone who chooses to make such a report.”

Step 2: The Branch Office will provide Scriptural guidance to the elders including on providing ongoing pastoral support to victim.

Even if the elders have no legal obligation to report the allegation to the authorities, the Branch Office will nonetheless review the matter with the elders to determine whether there are additional factors that would nonetheless favour reporting the allegation to the authorities. If so, elders will be directed to report the allegation to the authorities, even if there is only one witness, and will receive guidance on how to make that report.

Step 3: If it is determined that the elders should make a report to the authorities, the elders will be directed to do so immediately and to confirm that they have done so.

The elders will be advised that in making the report, they are to provide the authorities with the pertinent details of the allegation, including the name of the accused, if known.

Step 4: The elders will offer ongoing pastoral support to the victim and the victim’s family. Depending on the victim’s gender, the elders may be assisted by mature female congregants in providing pastoral support.²¹

Step 5: After taking the above steps, the elders will separately consider whether there is sufficient evidence to establish the allegation based on Scriptural standards. This is solely to determine whether the accused should be disfellowshipped (expelled) and has nothing to do with whether the allegations will be reported to the authorities (see Steps 2 and 3 above).

If the elders learn that the police are investigating, they may pause or postpone their ecclesiastical process until the police have had sufficient time to conduct their initial criminal investigation.

Step 6: If the congregation elders decide there is sufficient evidence from a Scriptural perspective that a gross sin has been committed, they will form an

²¹ This is in addition to whether the victim decides to consult with health care professionals, including mental health professionals. See *Scripturally Based Position* (para. 8); *The Watchtower*, May 2019 (p. 17, footnote).

ecclesiastical judicial committee, comprised of three elders. If the committee determines that the offender is not Scripturally repentant, he will be disfellowshipped (expelled). An announcement will be made to the congregation that: “[Name of person] is no longer one of Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

A victim is never required to confront the accused. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not take ecclesiastical judicial action against anyone for making unsubstantiated allegations of child sexual abuse). They do not teach that victims should be shunned. Quite the contrary, as stressed in their religious publications for decades, they teach that victims should be offered comfort and support. An entire article in the May 2019 issue of *The Watchtower* was devoted to the subject of providing comfort and support to victims of child sexual abuse. This article was studied in detail by all congregations worldwide during a religious service in July 2019.²²

Step 7: If the offender is found by the ecclesiastical judicial committee to be Scripturally repentant, based on Biblical standards, an announcement will be made to the congregation that: “[Name of person] has been reprovved.” Thereafter, as set out in the following paragraphs, elders will meet separately with parents of all minor children in the congregation to inform them about the offender.

Restrictions and cautions will be imposed on a congregant whenever (1) it is determined that a congregant who is guilty of child sexual abuse is repentant and will remain in the congregation; (2) one expelled for child sexual abuse is reinstated; (3) a congregant who denies an accusation of child sexual abuse is convicted by the authorities of child sexual abuse; or (4) a person viewed as a child abuser by the community at large or by the congregation becomes one of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The restrictions and cautions will include the elders (1) strongly cautioning the offender to avoid compromising situations with minors; (2) not giving the

²² “Providing Comfort for Victims of Abuse”, *The Watchtower*, May 2019 (pp. 14-20, available at <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/watchtower-study-may-2019/comfort-victims-of-abuse/>). The need to provide victims with comfort and support has been repeatedly encouraged in the publications of Jehovah’s Witnesses, see for example: “Consoling Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma”, *Awake!*, 8 October 1993, p. 14 (available at: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/g19931008/>).

offender any responsibilities, privileges, duties, or tasks in the congregation for decades, if ever; and (3) informing the offender that he may not qualify to share in the preaching activity of Jehovah's Witnesses and, if he later qualifies, "each time he shares in the [preaching activity] he is required to be in the company of an elder who is aware of the restrictions on his activity"; and (4) meeting with the parents of all minor children in the congregation (and any family with minor children that subsequently moves into the congregation) to caution that their children should never be alone with the offender and encourage them to review specific educative material published by Jehovah's Witnesses on protecting children from sexual abuse.

When warning parents, the elders do not provide any information that would identify the victim.

The restrictions remain in place indefinitely and follow the offender if he moves to a new congregation anywhere in the world, which includes elders meeting in person with parents of minor children in that new congregation to inform them about the offender. If the offender does not adhere to those restrictions, then this may result in his being expelled.

Step 8: An offender who was disfellowshipped may apply to be reinstated. In cases of child sexual abuse, the elders would seriously consider such a request only if sufficient time has passed (usually years). If the elders determine that the offender is Scripturally repentant, then they may decide to reinstate that person as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. In all such cases, the restrictions and cautions in Step 7 above will be imposed.

19. Accordingly, on learning of an allegation of child sexual abuse, the first thing elders do is contact the Branch Office to ensure the allegation is appropriately reported to the authorities (Steps 1 to 4 above).

20. Only after those important steps are cared for will the elders then consider whether the offender (if one of Jehovah's Witnesses) should be expelled (Steps 5 to 8 above). To repeat, that ecclesiastical process is not a substitute for the authorities handling of the matter. Instead, it is a purely religious or doctrinal process, applying Bible standards to determine whether the accused should be expelled.