
CHURCH CHOIRS



V1 - DATE
CHURCH IN WALES
2 Callaghan Square, Cardiff, CF10 5BT

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Church Choirs with Children

Code of Practice for Staff and Volunteers

Introduction

Staff and volunteers working and associating with children in the context of cathedral choirs or other church choirs where young people are present should be aware that safeguarding is paramount to both the cathedral (or church) and diocese. This code of practice is published in order that best practice may be followed, and misunderstandings avoided. It is clearly in the interests of all children and adults, and of the Church itself, that staff and volunteers follow this code of practice to avoid putting themselves, colleagues, and choristers at risk.

This code of practice attempts to set out guidelines for the ways in which all adults should interact with children in a music department in order to maintain healthy and unambiguous relationships and avoid situations which may be misinterpreted or misused. For the purposes of this document a child (sometimes referred to as a 'chorister') is anyone of school age, even if over 18, who is currently in a cathedral choir or other church choir or consort or present in or around a cathedral, or with a music department elsewhere.

The contents of this document apply to all Church staff and volunteers who come into contact with children in a choir, including organists, clergy, choir chaperones, parent helpers, lay clerks and adult members of the consort, whether or not they have direct responsibility for the choristers.

Some of the adults who are involved with the choirs may also be parents of choristers. In this instance, it is clearly acceptable for those adults to associate with choristers who are friends of their child in the normal way outside of choir. There is no need to avoid other choristers coming round to play with their child, or to avoid giving lifts to other choristers along with their own children, etc. Common sense must prevail. It may, however, be wise to make it clear to the parents of such other choristers that any arrangements made are private arrangements between parents and not connected to one's position in the cathedral.

Personnel

The adults who are in regular contact with children in the choirs are:

- the director of music
- the assistant organist
- the cathedral clergy
- the choir chaperones
- the lay clerks
- the adult singers in a cathedral consort or other church choir

All adults should take care that their relationships with choir children reflect the age, gender and maturity of the children involved. It is especially important that all aspects of demeanour, language, and attitude, however conveyed, do not give rise to misunderstandings, especially when dealing with adolescent or older boys and girls.

Roles and Responsibilities

The director of music and the assistant organist are those principally responsible for the welfare of the choristers. They are employed by chapter and have a duty of care for the choristers. At all times when the choristers are at a cathedral, except in extreme circumstances, at least one organist/director is present and in a position of principal responsibility for the choristers. This responsibility includes musical and pastoral matters.

A team of voluntary choir chaperones assist in looking after the choristers. They are responsible for pastoral matters during their periods of duty, and deal with choristers' food and drink, sickness, the attendance register, misbehaviour, and emotional issues. They are responsible to the director of music and should report any significant issues arising during their duties to the organist/director in charge, who should in turn report them to the director of music as soon as reasonably possible.

There are a number of adult lay clerks in a cathedral or church choir and adult singers in the consort. These singers have no direct disciplinary or pastoral responsibilities for the choristers unless it is delegated to them by the organist/director on duty for a particular period, although they will naturally interact with the choristers and engage in conversation around practices and service. In extreme situations in the absence of the organist/director or chaperones they should deal with any problems that affect the choristers, but they should always report the action they have taken to the organist/director on duty as soon as practically possible. Although they have no responsibility for the discipline of the choristers, a very occasional instruction or rebuke might sometimes be in order (e.g., asking a chorister to be quiet or to desist from an antisocial or dangerous action) and can serve to reinforce the instructions and expectations of the choir director and chaperones. Any such rebuke must be mild, infrequent, and not repeatedly directed at the same chorister. If further action is thought to be necessary, this should be communicated to the chaperone or choir director, who will deal with the matter in a way they consider appropriate (which may on occasions be

ignoring the behaviour for the time being). It is rare for bad behaviour to be reported to parents rather than being dealt with by choir personnel, and the only person authorised to do so is the choir director (either the director of music or the assistant organist).

Physical Contact

All adults should avoid physical contact with the choristers, except in the following circumstances:

- Restraining a child to prevent them harming or injuring themselves or others or doing damage to property. Only reasonable restraint must be used.
- Comforting a child in distress. This should be done with the knowledge of, and preferably in the sight of, other adults.
- Administering First Aid.
- Sharing the peace at the Eucharist with a handshake.

Physical contact should be minimal, appropriate, and not prolonged or often repeated. Adults should take into account the age of the child concerned and take care to avoid contact which may be wrongly interpreted. If any unusual physical contact occurs between an adult and a child, even accidentally, it is important that the adult reports the incident to the director of music as soon as reasonably possible, no matter how embarrassing or trivial the incident may be.

Conversation and Demeanour

All adults should avoid comments in the presence of children, which could be taken to have sexual overtones, or be regarded as intimate: neither should they encourage debate or discussion of such subjects. There are a few possible exceptions to this rule. In situations where a child's distress is caused by physical or emotional concerns which have to be acknowledged in the interest of helping the child at that time, a chaperone (or in extreme circumstances an organist/director) may need to listen to a child explaining a personal problem and respond appropriately. They should not promise to be a confidante in such circumstances and must report the incident to the director of music, the cathedral's safeguarding co-ordinator and Provincial Safeguarding Officer as soon as possible.

Adults should ensure that all topics of conversation with children are appropriate, bearing in mind the age of the child. They should use their professional judgement to ensure that they are not drawn into areas of conversation inappropriate to their duties or their relationship to the child concerned.

The persistent and hurtful use of sarcastic, demeaning, or insensitive comments towards young people is a form of abuse and should be avoided.

The Pastoral Role of Chaperones

The chaperone may be the first person a child confides in, particularly if there are difficulties at home. Such encounters may require more collaborative engagement with the school. It may be in some circumstances that the cathedral (or church), through the gathering of information from the chaperone regarding a child's home situation, should work in collaboration with the school the child is attending, who may also be alive to the child's care or unhappiness. For example, a parent not collecting a child, or a child being a prime carer for a parent or having to do domestic work at home that impact on the child's well-being. These situations require pastoral care and working with other agencies, especially the school. Advice should be sought from a Provincial Safeguarding Officer if the chaperone has any areas of doubt.

Infatuations and Crushes

Adults should be aware of the possibility of infatuations and crushes developing, particularly in the case of adolescent and older children. They should alert a colleague if they observe a chorister developing an infatuation which could put that colleague at risk. Adults should remain professional and not add to the child's problems by joking about or providing any such situation. If they are concerned about a particular developing situation, they should talk with the director of music about it. Should a chorister initiate an unacceptable physical or verbal approach, the adult concerned should gently but firmly disengage himself/herself and explain that such closeness is not appropriate or acceptable. However, they should be careful not to react in such a way as to humiliate the child.

If a chorister develops a tendency regularly to stay behind with an adult as if to help, or to discuss matters, he/she should act to avoid this situation developing, either by asking another chorister to help with the same task, inviting another adult or chorister into the room, or preventing the opportunity recurring.

Concerts, tours, visits, and other off-site activities

When choir activities occur away from the cathedral (or church), adults should adhere to the same standards of conduct and behaviour, even in situations where they are 'off-duty' but in the presence of choristers. Adults should consider how their deportment and conversation may be perceived by choristers and understand that they may be held up as role models by some choristers.

Adults should be vigilant in foreseeing problems which may occur in unfamiliar settings. On tour children have less access to their parents, and some degree of homesickness may be

experienced, in particular by younger children. While it is appropriate for adults to reassure children in this context, they should not allow an inappropriate relationship to develop on account of a child's neediness or difficulties. Where adults detect a danger in this regard it is important that they bring other appropriate adults into the situation, so that the child concerned is not dependent on any one adult.

Social events

There are a number of social events in any music department calendar. Adults should be aware that the more relaxed relationships that may sometimes be appropriate in these contexts can be misinterpreted by young people. It is important to emphasise that the standards of conduct and behaviour around the choristers should be no different from those in choir activities. Adults should be aware of the particular care which should be taken with older, more mature choristers in these circumstances.

Meetings between adults and children outside Choir activities

It may appear to some that a cathedral (or church) should only be concerned with interaction between choristers and adults during choir activities. However, were a situation involving a child and adult from the choir to develop outside the bounds of choir activities, this would obviously impact on the Church.

It is usually inappropriate for an adult to arrange to meet with, to agree to meet with, or to prolong an accidental meeting with a chorister outside the choir environment. If adults foresee such an occasion developing, they should discuss it with the director of music. There are few exceptions to this rule, but one is a case where an adult is privately engaged by a parent in teaching a child on an instrument or in music theory. It is also possible that an adult may need to engage professionally with a child in a different context (e.g., as a member of staff at a school).

It is appropriate for members of staff to meet with children in the presence of their parents outside choir activities. However, parents should be encouraged to make their child aware of the appropriate relationship with the adult concerned to avoid confusion both in and out of the choir situation.

Communication with Choristers outside Choir activities

With parents' consent, the email addresses of older choristers can be added to the choir database, so that they receive the same emails as their parents do relating to choir activities. These email addresses are held only by the director of music and will not be used by him or her to communicate with the chorister individually.

Staff, volunteers, and visitors should not communicate directly with individual choristers outside choir activities. All media of communication are inappropriate, including telephoning, texting, e-mailing, letter writing, sending parcels, and other forms of electronic and non-electronic communication. Only the organist/directors and choir chaperones should hold mobile phone numbers for choristers if they are given them, and they may use these only for official purposes relating to choir activities. An official purpose might be to check on an older chorister's whereabouts on tour if parents have given permission for their child to be unsupervised for a limited period, or in the event that an urgent message must be sent to a chorister. Such communications should never be prolonged, and no one member of staff should regularly contact the same chorister.

For non-urgent communications, it is always advisable to contact the child's parents (or house parents in the case of boarders) and ask to speak with the chorister concerned. This kind of contact should not be regularly directed at any particular chorister. Parents have the right to withhold consent for an adult to talk to their children outside choir activities, and to act as intermediary where it is important that a message gets through.

Where an adult needs to contact a particular chorister as indicated above, they should contact them via the home telephone number or parents' mobile number rather than via the chorister's mobile phone. If the chorister happens to answer the home phone rather than a parent, the member of staff or volunteer should use his/her discretion in deciding whether it is appropriate to talk directly to the chorister or whether to ask to speak with the parents first. In the case of the younger choristers, it is likely always to be appropriate to talk to the parents first. All conversations should be brief and to the point.

Adults should avoid giving their contact details to any chorister and should avoid accepting friend requests from choristers on Facebook. It is, however, possible that a chorister may discover contact details and contact an adult by text or email, or by telephoning. If the communication is a simple one related to choir activities, it is fine to reply with a brief answer to a question. But if such communication becomes repeated or strays into areas not directly related to the choir, however, innocent, it would be wise to alert the director of music to this.

(Based on materials written for Brecon Cathedral by Dean Paul Shackerley)