

Mahboba's Promise Protocol for the Safety and Protection of Children and Young People

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1. Why this Matters

Many children who are part of Mahboba's Promise programs have been exposed to trauma, abuse and neglect. Abduction, human trafficking, child labour and an endemic culture of corporal punishment in schools and homes greatly affects the wellbeing of children in Afghanistan. The children and young people we have contact with are some of the most vulnerable in the world, and they are at high risk of abuse and exploitation. Because they rely on the organisation to provide for their survival, they may feel unable to speak up if they are hurt or worried. It is critical that Mahboba's Promise takes active steps to ensure children and young people are protected from harm, and that they are comfortable expressing their needs, fears and concerns.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this Protocol is to ensure that Mahboba's Promise protects the rights and safety of the children and young people that we come into contact with, and that no child or young person is harmed in any way as a result of their involvement in our work. This Protocol provides a set of clear rules to ensure that children and young people are safe and protected when they come into contact with Mahboba's Promise.

3. Scope

This Protocol applies to all Mahboba's Promise associated people in all Australian and international contexts, this includes:

1. Employees, board members, volunteers, contractors, interns, researchers, visitors and work placements.
2. Donors, vendors and suppliers who visit or have access to children's information
3. Partners.

Because our work in Afghanistan happens in a difficult environment where there may be active conflict, there are some aspects of this protocol that only apply to activities within Australia. Where this is the case, it is clearly stated.

It is noted that in Australia, some Mahboba's Promise associated people are registered foster carers for children who are or who have been part of our programs. Their relationship with this Protocol is as follows:

- When they are the registered carer for a child, they are subject to the rules of their foster care agency and not this Protocol when caring for that child.
- When they come into contact through Mahboba's Promise with children who are not in their care, they are subject to this Protocol.

4. Statement of Responsibility

Mahboba's Promise exists to provide support, assistance and care for disadvantaged women and children in Afghanistan. We have a responsibility to actively safeguard and protect the children we work with from any form of harm. Mahboba's Promise is a Child Safe organisation, committed to promoting and upholding the rights of children as defined in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*.

It is the responsibility of every person within the scope of this Protocol to actively take all possible steps to safeguard and protect children, including those outlined in this Protocol.

In Australia, it is the responsibility of the Management Committee to make sure that all people within the scope of this Protocol are aware of and follow its requirements. In Afghanistan, it is the responsibility of the Board of Directors to make sure that all people within the scope of this Protocol are aware of and follow its requirements.

5. Key Behaviours

In every action and decision, the best interests of the child will be our primary consideration. We will stay aware of the power difference between adults and children, and support children and young people to make choices and have power wherever possible in our interactions with them.

To reduce the risk of harm to children in contact with Mahboba's promise, the following are the key behaviours we expect of everyone within the scope of this Protocol.

Never be Alone with a Child

When working with children and young people, always make sure there are other people present. Where possible, this should be another adult. Some examples of this are:

- Keep the door open (for example, in an office), and ask another adult to stay present in an adjoining room.
- Keep windows or curtains open.
- If transporting a child or young person in your car, make sure that there are other adults present (if possible) or several other children.
- If attending appointments with a child or young person, make sure the professional (eg. doctor, nurse, caseworker) is always present.
- If you find yourself alone with a child, sensitively leave or redirect the situation. For example, move into another room where people are present.
- If you unexpectedly come into contact with a child while alone (for example dropping something to a family), do your best to keep the interaction in a public place. For example, don't enter the home if there is no adult present.

If you are alone and there is an urgent need to care for a child, for example if there is an immediate risk to their safety or health, then you should provide the care needed. Notify your supervisor straight away, so they can send someone to help you.

Make Sure Touching is Safe and Appropriate

Do your best to redirect children's need for affection and touch to safe and appropriate forms. Some examples of this are:

- Don't hold children on your lap. Sit on the floor or a chair with the child and place them close next to you or play with them on the floor.
- Don't initiate hugs. If a child initiates a hug, try to orient them so that they are next to you and your arms are around shoulder height (side by side). Or, you can redirect them with a 'high five' or a 'fist bump'. This must be done sensitively, so as not to make the child feel rejected.

- Rather than holding a child in your arms, you could kneel down next to them and hold their hand. This provides warmth and affection while avoiding body to body contact.
- If comforting a child, safe physical contact could include resting a hand on their shoulder or patting them on the upper back.

Encourage Independence

Children need independence and privacy according to their developmental stage, so we should not do things for children that they can do for themselves. While adults can sometimes feel an urge to care for children, consider whether the caring act is for the benefit of yourself or the benefit of the child. Physical caring tasks must be done only in the presence and under the direction of the parent / guardian / carer. Some examples include:

- If a child needs help with toileting or bathing, ask the parent / guardian / carer to do this.
- Changing nappies must only be done in the presence of the parent / guardian / carer.
- Encourage children to feed and dress themselves where they are able to do so. If a child needs help with dressing, they must be assisted by a person of the same gender, with the door ajar and another adult close by (for example, around the corner but within hearing distance).

Only Give Gifts to the Parent/Guardian/Carer

Children associated with Mahboba's Promise have experienced great disadvantage, so they do have need for material items. It is ok to buy items to assist with the care of children and young people. However, there are risks involved and these must be carefully managed. Perpetrators of child abuse will often 'groom' children and young people (prepare them for abuse at a later time) by giving gifts and cultivating a 'special' relationship. Giving gifts to children and young people can put them at greater risk of grooming. Because of this, all gifts and items of value given by Mahboba's Promise associated people must be given according to the following rules:

- Gifts must be given anonymously where possible, so as not to require gratitude from the child.

- Gifts are given to all children.
- Gifts must be given to the parent / guardian / carer to provide to the child.
- Gifts must be declared to the direct supervisor of the person giving the item.

This approach reduces the risk of exposing children and young people to grooming, supports the relationship of the carer with the child or young person, and ensures fairness and sharing between children.

Respect the Privacy of Children and Young People

Children and young people should have their privacy and personal space respected. Never enter a child's bedroom unless under the direct supervision of the carer and at the invitation of the child. Do not seek physical closeness or enter a child or young person's physical, personal or private space. Do not discuss or give the private information of a child or young person to anyone except their parent / guardian / carer.

Keep Relationships Safe

Because children and young people are dependent on others to care for them, they will see adults as being more powerful than them. It is the responsibility of adults to keep these relationships safe, and not to encourage 'special' or intimate relationships that might place children at risk of harm. These kinds of relationships increase the risk of grooming, but they can also result in feelings of abandonment, confusion or rejection for the child. Developing safe relationships with adults helps children and young people to build the skills they need to maintain safe boundaries throughout their lives.

To support this process, it is important that the following rules are followed:

- Do not interact with children online or on social media unless in a professional capacity (for example, a teacher or tutor using zoom through a carer's device in an open space). Do not add children to Facebook or chat on messaging platforms.
- Do not develop relationships with individual children outside of the work environment, for example taking a child to activities in the evening without the parent / guardian / carer.
- Never sleep close to children. If this is absolutely necessary in an emergency, notify your direct supervisor and make sure another adult is always present.

Respect Cultural and Religious Beliefs

Afghanistan has a diverse ethnic, tribal and religious population. The children and young people in contact with Mahboba's Promise to reflect the various forms of this diversity. Cultural and religious beliefs must be respected and supported. Children and young people should never be encouraged or required to change their beliefs or cultural practices or treated differently because of these.

Any perceived or real act of changing Afghan children's beliefs and practices is seen by the Taliban as reason for targeted intervention and represents a real risk to Mahboba's Promise Afghanistan children.

Respect the Family Relationships of Children

The children and young people in contact with Mahboba's Promise have family and kinship relationships with each other, their carers (both former and new), the organisation and their biological family members. These relationships, whatever form they take for the child, must be respected and supported. Creating artificial family relationships (for example encouraging children and young people to call volunteers 'grandma' or 'mum') can disrupt these existing and developing family relationships and is discouraged. It must be noted however that it is common practice for Afghan children to call people who are more than five years older than them in a care giving role, uncle, aunty and mother.

Don Not Interact with Children When Under the Influence of Alcohol or Drugs

People within the scope of this Protocol must not interact with or care for children and young people while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. These substances must never be provided to children and young people.

6. Protocols

Recruitment and Screening

Because of the nature of our work, all people volunteering or working with Mahboba's Promise are considered to be people who may have contact with children. Contact

with children includes incidental contact (being in the same place at the same time) and access to children's information.

Because of this, we require that the below recruitment procedures are followed. These same procedures are also outlined in our human resources policies, procedures and tools.

- Working with Children Check or relevant state / territory equivalent (Australia only).
- Australian Federal Police National Police Check (Australia only).
- A witnessed declaration stating that the individual has never been charged or convicted of any violent offence, including the exploitation, stalking or abuse of any person (Afghanistan only).
- Two verbal reference checks including questions about suitability to work with children (Australia and Afghanistan).
- Completion of onboarding and induction schedule, including signing the 'Code of Conduct – the way we work' and key policies (Australia and Afghanistan).
- Completion of onboarding training, including the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) 'Introduction to Safeguarding' (Australia and preferred in Afghanistan if language permits).

Supervising and Working with Children and Young People

People who work or volunteer with Mahboba's Promise should not be responsible for caring for children unless they have been recruited for that purpose and are suitably skilled. However, they may help with supervising, transporting or accompanying children and young people under the direction of the parent / guardian / carer.

In these instances, they must follow the 'Key Behaviours' in this protocol (above), in addition to the following:

- Make sure that handover of responsibility for supervision happens clearly. This can be as simple as saying 'I am watching them', to ensure that there is no confusion over who is supervising a child at a particular time.
- Depending on their individual stage of development, children should always be within eyesight or within reach, whichever is necessary for safe supervision.

- Use child friendly and age-appropriate communication and be aware of using language that the child understands.
- Do not use physical discipline of any kind, or discipline that could feel humiliating to the child (for example, drawing attention to their behaviour in a group).
- Encourage children to express their needs and wishes, and respect what they say. Take the time to ask if they are ok. Always listen to and include children's choices and treat them with dignity and respect.

Transporting Children and Young People

If transporting a child or young person, the following rules must be followed:

- Ensure that the parent / guardian / carer has consented to the transport and knows where you are going and when you are coming back.
- Travel with another adult in the vehicle if possible. If not possible, ensure there is more than one child or young person in the car (do not travel in a vehicle alone).
- Make sure that the child or young person feels comfortable and safe to go with you (ask them).
- Notify the parent / guardian / carer when departing and when you have reached your destination. Do this also when departing for the return journey.
- Make sure a copy of your drivers license (must be valid and unrestricted) and vehicle registration has been provided to Mahboba's Promise staff
- Make sure your vehicle is fully insured (comprehensive and third party in Australia)
- Follow all road rules for your location and travel by the safest route possible (seek local advice if needed)

Visitors to Mahboba's Promise Premises (Australia only)

Children and young people can be present at Mahboba's Promise premises at any time. This includes the office, garden, hall and foster care residences. If there are no children present, they could arrive unexpectedly. Because of this, all visitors must be signed into the visitor book and accompanied by a screened (see recruitment and screening) volunteer or staff member at all times while on the premises. This includes

tradespeople, contractors, donors, political representatives and members of the public).

7. Concerns for the Safety of Children and Young People

If a Child Tells You about Their Worries

Many of the children and young people we work with have survived severe trauma. This trauma will be experienced and expressed by every child differently, and may affect their psychological wellbeing, health, sleep, speech and play. It is important that children and young people are able to talk about their experiences only if and when they feel safe to do so. Do not ask or expect them to disclose anything about their history in your interactions with them. Thinking or talking about traumatic experiences in a way that is not controlled by the child can sometimes cause more harm. However, if a child or young person talks to you about difficult things that have happened, these are some helpful ways to respond:

- Listen calmly and non-judgementally.
- Try not to appear shocked or distressed by the content.
- Allow the child to tell the story at their own pace and in their own way.
- Make the space and time to listen – prioritise the disclosure.
- Acknowledge how hard this is to talk about and reassure them that it is ok to talk about what has happened.
- Take as long as needed to help the child or young person to feel calm and safe after the conversation. Remember, sometimes talking about traumatic events can make the child feel like they are there again. They may need reassurance to bring them back to the present.

When to Report a Child Protection Concern (Australia only)

If the child or young person has experienced harm in the past and they are not at risk of harm currently, there is no need to report. However, if a child under 18 years is at risk of significant harm, you have an obligation to make a child protection report. Significant harm includes:

- Basic physical or psychological needs not being met.
- Caregivers not arranging necessary medical care that they know how to access.
- Caregivers not providing access to education.
- Risk of physical or sexual abuse.

- Emotional abuse.
- Domestic and family violence in the home.
- Being used for labour hire.

Note, harm to children must be clearly differentiated from culturally or religiously diverse caregiving practices, home furnishings, toys and foods.

If you think a child is at immediate risk of harm (for example, sexual abuse or violence perpetrated by the carer), consider calling emergency services on 000. If you are unsure about what action to take, discuss with your supervisor as soon as you can.

How to Report a Child Protection Concern (Australia only)

If you think a child is at risk of significant harm, you must report this to the statutory child protection organisation in your state or territory.

In NSW, this can be done by calling 132 111 or through the Childstory Reporter Website (<https://reporter.childstory.nsw.gov.au/s/>).

Recording a Child Protection Concern

If you are concerned about the safety of a child, or if you make a child protection report, you should complete the Mahboba's Promise Reporting Form for Suspected Child Abuse, Appendix 3 of the Mahboba's Promise Child Protection Policy.

If you have reported based on something a child has told you about, try to record the information as soon after the conversation as you can, and use as many of the child's own words as possible.

For all Mahboba's Promise Afghanistan activities, suggestion boxes must be made available for children to provide reports and requests. Children must also be informed of their right to approach any trusted adult to report a concern or complaint. Child friendly sessions seeking feedback are also encouraged.

This must be submitted to your supervisor as soon as you are practically able to do so.

Acting in Emergencies

Mahboba's Promise recognises that there are times when the urgency of operations, emergency situations and risk of harm can mean that it is not possible to follow these Protocols.

If a situation like this happens, we ask people associated with Mahboba's Promise to take the action that is necessary to ensure the safety of everyone concerned.

After the emergency has passed and everyone is safe, we ask that you tell your supervisor that you needed to act in a way that is different from this Protocol. This will allow the organisation to review what happened, make sure everyone is safe, and adjust the Protocol if needed.

Definitions

See the Mahboba's Promise Child Protection Policy. For consistency, all terms in this Protocol are defined there.

8. Legislation and References

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
- *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations*, Australian Human Rights Commission 2018.
- *'Child at risk of harm and neglect'*, Department of Communities and Justice, NSW Government.
- NSW Children and Young Person (Care and Protection) Act 1998.
- Mahboba's Promise Child Protection Policy.
- The Vice and Virtue Authority regulations in Afghanistan must be considered for safety and security purposes – to be read in conjunction with MP Afghanistan's Child Protection Policy. This authority visits Mahboba's Promise's Hope Houses every 2 months.

- Mahboba's Promise's Risk Management Appetite and Risk Management Framework.
- Mahboba's Promise Partnerships Policy.
- Mahboba's Promise's Communications and Privacy Policies.
- Mahboba's Promise Afghanistan Child Protection Policy.

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