



Policy & Procedure Manual
Autism Unplugged
April 2023

Autism Unplugged Volunteer Policy and Procedure Manual

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1) LETTER OF INTRODUCTION
- 2) VOLUNTEERING AT AUTISM UNPLUGGED
 - Autism Unplugged Volunteer
 - Working Environment
 - Application and Screening Process for Prospective Volunteers
 - Initial Orientation and Training for Prospective Volunteers
 - If Being an Autism Unplugged Volunteer is Not Right for You
 - Conflicts
 - Grounds for Disciplinary Action
- 3) RESPONSIBILITIES AS AN AUTISM UNPLUGGED VOLUNTEER
 - Attendance
 - Meeting Minutes
 - Boundaries
 - On-going Volunteer Training and Supervision
 - Annual Evaluation and Re-commitment
 - Conflict of Interest
 - Confidentiality
 - General Responsibility to Protect Confidentiality
 - Obligations to Disclose
 - Access to Records
 - Internal Safeguards of Confidential Information and Records
 - Technology and Electronic Communication Safety
 - Duty to Disclose

4) OFFICE POLICIES

- Property
- General Safety
- Safety Procedures for Public Space Meetings

5) AGENCY/PROGRAM VOLUNTEER RELATIONS

- Open Door
- Agency Letterhead
- Media Communications
- Personal Involvement with Mentees and Families
- Transportation
- Legal Advice

6) CORE VALUES – ETHICS

7) AUTISM UNPLUGGED VOLUNTEER SIGNED ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Dear Volunteer,

On behalf of Autism Unplugged, thank you for deciding to volunteer with our program. Since this program's inception, we have focused on volunteers' vital role within our organization. We are delighted you would like to join our organization and are eager to begin our work with you. Your commitment to the philosophy and goals of Autism Unplugged will help us maintain a high level of effectiveness and professionalism. As a volunteer, you serve an essential function within our organization.

This manual was developed to provide information about some basic volunteer policies. We hope you will familiarize yourself with this information because it will help you in your job and your contribution as an Autism Unplugged volunteer. From time to time, the program may change or revise procedures. You will be notified of any changes that are made. As a volunteer, you must stay abreast of current systems.

The policies and procedures manual does not guarantee any fixed terms and conditions of a volunteer's participation in the Autism Unplugged program. Your service as a volunteer will last only as long as you and the Autism Unplugged program mutually agree. However, we look forward to a long and rewarding relationship with our volunteers.

Autism Unplugged volunteers are an integral part of the program. Your commitment to our policies and procedures will not only make the Autism Unplugged program a more robust and more effective organization. Still, it will also help you give mentees a sense of permanency and belonging.

Your experience with us will be gratifying for you and beneficial for our mentees. We welcome suggestions for improving our services, program, or volunteer policies and procedures.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A Johns', written in a cursive style.

Amanda Johns, LCSW
Executive Director Autism Unplugged

2) VOLUNTEERING AT AUTISM UNPLUGGED

Autism Unplugged Volunteer

An Autism Unplugged Volunteer is an individual who is at least 18 years of age, has completed the application and screening process, been trained by leadership and agreed to the expectations and requirements of the program.

An Autism Unplugged Volunteer is an individual who respects a mentee's inherent right to be authentic in who they are as an autistic individual, and who understands, respects and promotes a neurodiversity affirming system of belief.

The Autism Unplugged Volunteer is an individual who advocates for the mentee's best interests and supports healthy growth and development.

Working Environment

Autism Unplugged endeavors to promote a comfortable and productive working environment for all volunteers. In keeping with this policy, sexual, racial, religious, ethnic, or other kinds of harassment of volunteers is a violation of Autism Unplugged policy and will not be tolerated. We expect volunteers to treat each other, those we work with, and Autism Unplugged staff with respect. Please let us know if you experience any difficulties.

All volunteer policies are administered without discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation.

Application and Screening Process for Prospective Autism Unplugged Volunteers

All prospective volunteers must:

- complete a volunteer application, statement of suitability and agree to the code of conduct
- provide the names and addresses of three references (who are not relatives of the applicant);
- have a personal interview with the Autism Unplugged Director before and after the training.

Volunteers must also authorize the Autism Unplugged program and other appropriate agencies to conduct the following record checks and provide necessary information:

- Criminal records from the court jurisdiction in which the applicant currently resides and works
- State criminal records
- FBI or other national criminal database
- National Sex Offender Registry

It is the policy of Autism Unplugged to verify information on applications to the best of our abilities.

If a volunteer applicant refuses to sign a release of information form or submit the required information or fingerprints for any of the checks required by Autism Unplugged, the application will be rejected.

Record checks will be repeated at least every four years.

If the prospective volunteer has lived in another state within the past five years, Autism Unplugged secures the records checks specified in any area in which the person has resided in the previous five years. Those checks may be covered in the FBI or other national criminal database check if the county and state the applicant previously lived in is covered in the national check.

Any applicant found to have been convicted of, or having charges pending for a felony or misdemeanor involving a sex offense, child abuse or neglect or related acts that would pose risks to mentees or the credibility of Autism Unplugged will not be accepted as a Autism Unplugged Volunteer.

If an applicant is found to have committed a misdemeanor or felony that is unrelated to or would not pose a risk to mentees and would not negatively impact the credibility of Autism Unplugged, the program will consider the extent of the rehabilitation since the misdemeanor or felony committed as well as other factors that may influence the decision to accept the applicant as a Autism Unplugged Volunteer.

All screening must be completed before the volunteer is assigned to a mentee.

Volunteers are required to keep staff apprised at all times of matters in their personal and professional lives that may impact on their availability or Autism Unplugged

Initial Orientation and Training of Prospective Volunteers

Autism Unplugged provides prospective volunteers with an initial training and orientation. We will discuss topics such as cultural awareness, neurodivergence affirming language, mandated reporting and helpful information about how to approach specific problems and situations. It is mandatory that all prospective volunteers attend these training sessions.

At the end of the training period, prospective volunteers must participate in an interview and be advised if they are suitable as new Autism Unplugged Volunteers. At this time

Volunteers may choose to not become an Autism Unplugged Volunteer. Volunteers must then sign their volunteer contracts.

If Being an Autism Unplugged Volunteer is Not Right for You

Occasionally, a volunteer's performance or conduct is inappropriate and will place the volunteer in danger of dismissal. The Autism Unplugged supervisor will, after discussion with the volunteer, set a time period with specific goals for improvement and action to be considered. At the end of this period, the situation will be reviewed. The volunteer will either be restored to his/her previous status or dismissed. All volunteers may discuss disciplinary decisions with their supervisor. If the matter remains unresolved, the volunteer may ask for an appointment with the Autism Unplugged Director. The Directors of Autism Unplugged reserve the right to terminate or discharge any volunteer, at any time, without a meeting.

Conflicts

Volunteers with grievances are encouraged to handle these grievances with the supervisor assigned to the volunteer. If you do not reach a resolution regarding the grievance, then you are encouraged to discuss the grievance with one of the program Directors.

Grounds for Disciplinary Action and/or Dismissal

- Reasons for Dismissal of a Autism Unplugged Volunteer include, but are not limited to:
- Taking action without program approval that endangers the mentee or is outside the authority of the program.
- Failing to complete the training requirements of the initial training and continuing education requirements
- Violating a program policy or law.
- Breach of confidentiality.
- Failing to demonstrate an ability to effectively carry out assigned duties.
- Falsifying his/her application or misrepresenting facts during the screening process.
- Having allegations of child abuse/neglect and other criminal charges brought against the volunteer.
- Existence of a conflict of interest which cannot be resolved.

3) RESPONSIBILITIES AS AN AUTISM UNPLUGGED VOLUNTEER

Attendance

Autism Unplugged volunteers are encouraged to meet with their mentee per the agreed upon schedule. Autism Unplugged volunteers are also expected to make best efforts to attend group functions.

Meeting Minutes

All volunteers must keep record of what transpired during their meeting with their mentee. Minutes must include time and date of meeting, be legible and should avoid judgmental statements. These minutes do not need to be all inclusive, but rather highlight major themes. Any discussions that are sensitive in nature require more detailed note taking. Minutes must be emailed to the supervisor within a week of meeting with the mentee. The purpose of this is so that meetings can be discussed in supervision, to support transparency and as a way to hold all participants accountable. Autism Unplugged volunteers should ensure the confidentiality of the minutes at all times.

Boundaries

Under no circumstances is an Autism Unplugged Volunteer to transport the mentee; take a mentee to the volunteer's home; give money or expensive gifts to the child or family; provide legal advice or therapeutic counseling. No volunteer is to assume a professional role when serving as an Autism Unplugged volunteer. Autism Unplugged volunteers must keep in mind that they are advocates for the mentees. All mentors and mentees must review and agree to the Autism Unplugged Code of Conduct.

On-going Volunteer Training and Supervision

Autism Unplugged believes that on-going training is an essential ingredient for productivity as well as job satisfaction. Autism Unplugged offers regular training and supervision opportunities for volunteers, such as in-service training sessions and individual supervision.

- Autism Unplugged provides supervision which is appropriate to the volunteer's needs and complexity of the mentee assignment and holds volunteers accountable for the performance of assigned duties and responsibilities.
- Supervisors are easily accessible and provide timely and thorough guidance to Autism Unplugged Volunteers.
- The Autism Unplugged program supervisor holds regularly scheduled group supervision with volunteers to review any program needs and to discuss issues that may arise in the course of volunteer activities.

Volunteers are encouraged to attend relevant workshops offered outside the program.

Autism Unplugged has in place mechanisms for Volunteer recognition.

Annual Evaluation and Re-Commitment

The Autism Unplugged Director will formally evaluate each volunteer on an annual basis, including discussion of the volunteer's re-commitment to Autism Unplugged. The volunteer will also have an opportunity to evaluate the program services.

Conflict of Interest

If a potential conflict could affect the mentee, this should be discussed with the program director. Autism Unplugged volunteers can not be related to, friends with or have a professional relationship with their assigned mentee.

Confidentiality: Your Responsibility as a Mentor

While there is no legal obligation to protect confidentiality with mentees, Autism Unplugged believes it is important that mentees feel that they can talk about what they are experiencing without fear that this information will be shared with others.

A) General responsibility to protect confidentiality:

It is Autism Unplugged policy that volunteers and staff must respect mentees and families' rights to privacy in regard to personal information.

- No information should be released to anyone not authorized to receive it and there should be no disclosure of information to anyone outside of Autism Unplugged
- The Autism Unplugged Volunteer shall never discuss a mentee or their family in public.
- Confidential information may be shared with Autism Unplugged staff.
- Exception to confidentiality exists if there is a concern that the mentee is in danger of being harmed, or harming others.

B) Obligations to Disclose:

Information gathered by an Autism Unplugged Volunteer is safeguarded as confidential to a limited extent. Unlike doctor-patient or lawyer-client relationships, there is no privilege of absolute confidentiality for Autism Unplugged. At the start of each mentorship, the Autism Unplugged Volunteer should carefully inform the mentee about their rights in regard to confidentiality; for example, what will be maintained about them and what information will be shared, with whom and under what circumstances.

C) Volunteer Records:

An Autism Unplugged volunteer may request access to their Volunteer Record at any time except for volunteer references which are confidential. The Autism Unplugged director can grant access to review portions of the Volunteer Record. If a volunteer finds a discrepancy in the volunteer record, the volunteer should inform the Autism Unplugged director immediately.

D) Internal Safeguards of Confidential Information and Records:

In order to insure maintaining confidentiality, Autism Unplugged has adopted certain procedures regarding case records that volunteers must follow. All Autism Unplugged materials concerning a mentee or volunteer must be kept in a safe place. Autism Unplugged volunteer case records and any other materials relating to their case should not be left in plain view of, or accessible to, any unauthorized persons.

E) Technology and Electronic Communication Safety

Increasingly, we will all be dependent on electronic means of communication. There are some basic “netiquette” rules to follow:

- Emails intended for one individual should not be copied or forwarded to another without the original author’s permission.
- Use the “blind copy” when using an individual's email address in a group message so you are not inadvertently sharing someone’s personal email account without their permission.
- Take care that many email programs automatically copy previous emails on a reply, so you may inadvertently be sharing discussions or information that was intended to be private or that we simply do not have someone’s permission to forward.
- Emails can serve the purpose of recording a conversation in a way that allows documenting information or retrieving this information at a later date.
- Emails can also serve to include a number of individuals in a discussion so you do not need to repeat the conversations.
- Give thought before hitting “reply all” that everyone on an email need or should have the information you are sending. It can save time and energy to “reply all” to include people in a discussion. Conversely, it can unnecessarily clog people’s email boxes or share information you did not intend to share with someone.
- Acknowledge receipt of emails as quickly as possible. Sometimes emails do vanish, and this helps you know that the intended recipient has received the information.
- Spam filters will sometimes automatically send emails to your “spam” folder if the sender’s email is not recognized. Periodically check your spam folder to make sure you are not missing critical emails.

- Be mindful of sending or opening attachments from unrecognized sources as they may contain viruses or objectionable material.
- The tone of emails can mis-communicate your intent. We tend to be more conversational in email, but humor or a casual comment may be misconstrued.
- Be mindful of all of the above when using text communications.
- Do not delete any text or email communication with mentees.

F.) Duty to Disclose:

- Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect:
 - If an Autism Unplugged volunteer has a “suspicion” that a child within their assigned case is being maltreated, neglected, or abused, the volunteer should report his/her suspicion to an Autism Unplugged supervisor immediately.
 - The Autism Unplugged volunteer must report any situation in which the Autism Unplugged volunteer has reason to believe that a child is in imminent danger to appropriate authorities. The Autism Unplugged volunteer must report emergency calls to the Autism Unplugged staff as soon as possible, but in an emergency call the police first.

If a volunteer has any questions, based on their external professional status, about their obligation to report, they should confer with the program director and if necessary, the licensing body for their profession.

→ Harm to self and others:

If you learn someone may harm himself or others, you may have a duty to disclose this information. You must discuss this immediately with your supervisor, but in the case of an emergency, call the police first.

4.) OFFICE POLICIES

Property

Autism Unplugged cannot accept responsibility for personal property. Volunteers are requested to keep all valuable property safely secured.

General Safety

Autism Unplugged considers its volunteers to be its most important asset. You are asked to help us maintain a safe work environment. It is the responsibility of every volunteer to report any unsafe or questionable conditions to your Autism Unplugged supervisor.

Safety Procedures for Public Space Meetings

Autism Unplugged volunteers should always dress appropriately when meeting with their mentees. Do not make visits with expensive jewelry. No volunteer should travel with large sums of money.

Always let your supervisors know when you plan a public space meeting, and when you are expected to return.

Upon approaching a building, if you do not feel totally comfortable about entering because of suspicious people in the area, dark conditions, etc., do not enter. Arrangements for another public space meeting may be made at another time.

Please bring any safety concerns to the attention of Autism Unplugged staff immediately.

5. AGENCY – PROGRAM VOLUNTEER RELATIONS

Ultimate responsibility for all Autism Unplugged mentees rests with the Autism Unplugged Director. As a volunteer, however, you also represent Autism Unplugged, and what you do reflects the organization. Always conduct yourself in a way that reflects favorably on the program. Volunteers must comply with all rules and policies stated herein, which Autism Unplugged may change at its discretion when warranted. The Autism Unplugged Director holds the final decision whether to retain the services of a volunteer and may terminate any volunteer for non-compliance with policies or procedures or for any other reason that Autism Unplugged staff, in its sole discretion, deems appropriate.

Open Door

Autism Unplugged has an “open door” policy. If you have any questions or concerns regarding either the responsibilities or the provisions outlined in the Autism Unplugged manual, or other matters directly related to your work, you are encouraged to take up the matter directly with the Autism Unplugged Director.

Agency Letterhead

Volunteers act as official representatives of Autism Unplugged when using Autism Unplugged letterhead in normal business situations. Use of letterhead is at the discretion of the program and must receive prior approval.

Media Communications

The Autism Unplugged Director handles inquiries concerning Autism Unplugged, its policies and procedures, practices, or participants. Volunteers are not permitted to make any statements involving Autism Unplugged to the media without the prior consent of the Autism Unplugged Director.

Personal Involvement with Mentees and Families

Autism Unplugged's effectiveness and standing in the community depend on volunteers maintaining professional relationships with mentees and families. Volunteers and staff will maintain professional volunteer boundaries with Autism Unplugged mentees and families, volunteers shall not give money or expensive presents to mentees, families or caretakers; or accept or extend invitations to attend personal social engagements unless approved by Autism Unplugged staff. Autism Unplugged Volunteers are not permitted to transport the child or other parties or take a child to the volunteer's home or any other home.

Transportation

Transporting mentees has to be a program decision, with approval from the Board of Directors.

Autism Unplugged volunteers are not permitted to transport mentees or take mentees to the volunteer's home

Legal Advice

Autism Unplugged will provide for legal advice or representation pertaining to Autism Unplugged as needed.

6. CORE VALUES – ETHICS

We are committed to the highest standards of ethics and integrity in all our work. Unethical behavior is never justified, no matter the intention or outcome.

Respect

We expect all people will be treated with dignity, fairness and respect. Rude or demeaning treatment is and will not be tolerated anywhere within the organization.

Confidentiality

We are committed to the highest standards of confidentiality regarding clients, volunteers, staff and donors. Inquiries from the media or public for information regarding confidential matters are dealt with only by the Autism Unplugged Director, Board President or their designated representative. Decisions to release information

about confidential matters are made on a case basis by the Autism Unplugged Director and Board President. However, general information about the Autism Unplugged program may be shared by anyone associated with the organization with the exception of contact with the media.

Mentees and Families

The organization's first responsibility is to protect and advocate for the best interests of the mentees served by the program. All resources are allocated and policies and procedures carried out in accordance with this responsibility. Examples include screening procedures, training programs, staff qualifications, the ratio of volunteers to paid staff, the ratio of mentees to volunteers and commitment to the highest standards of confidentiality.

Culturally Competent Support

Support that is in the best interests of the mentee requires tremendous sensitivity to the mentee and family's culture, ethnic identity, religion, and the many other factors that contribute to the mentee's identity. The organization and all those within must make a diligent and deliberate effort to ensure that support provided is culturally sensitive and appropriate. Further, we must always strive to do better in this area, to grow beyond our current understanding and competency level.

Attitude Toward Families

Mentees love and value their families. We therefore recognize that support for the mentee is often closely tied to support for the family. We promote respectful treatment of all parents and family members.

Volunteer Advocates

Autism Unplugged is committed to providing volunteer advocacy for mentees. Although not child welfare professionals, the Autism Unplugged program operates with the highest standards of professionalism.

Purpose of Providing Support to Autism Unplugged Volunteers

Autism Unplugged Volunteers need and deserve excellent, competent, professional support to be the most effective mentors possible. We work hard to offer support which will maximize volunteers' strengths and minimize their limitations.

Limitations to the Autism Unplugged Volunteers Autonomy

Autism Unplugged staff collaboratively work with volunteers.

Responsibilities

→ Commitment to inclusivity:

Autism Unplugged recognizes that the best services will be provided to mentees when members of all the communities to which these mentees belong are well represented at every level within the organization: policy setting (Board of Directors), service (Autism Unplugged Volunteers), and support roles (paid and unpaid staff).

→ Responsibility to donors and the public:

We endeavor to be accountable to the public in matters of stewardship and the conduct of our services, and especially to those who support us financially.

Teamwork

Everyone working to further the Autism Unplugged Program's mission, regardless of job title or paid or volunteer status, is equally important. Teamwork is necessary.

Autism Unplugged Volunteer Signed Acknowledgement

Each volunteer receives a copy of the Volunteer Policies and Procedures Manual and provides signed acknowledgement of reading and understanding the policies and procedures.

I have read the Autism Unplugged Volunteer Policies and Procedures and agree to abide by them.

Volunteer Mentor Signature

Date

Volunteer Printed Name

Program Representative

Date