



Promoting the safety of children in the volunteer activities of the Finnish Red Cross

Instructions for organisers of volunteer activities for the Finnish Red Cross in branches, districts, headquarters and institutions

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Background

On 1 May 2014, Finland instituted a new act, which pertains to conducting background checks on all volunteers who work with children. The aim of the act is to ensure the personal integrity of all children in volunteer activities and protect their growth, development and well-being. An additional goal is to respect the privacy and personal data protection of those who engage in volunteer activities. In certain situations, the act provides the right to conduct a criminal background check but does not impose an obligation to do so.

The act primarily aims to prevent problems relating to the discussion and operating culture around volunteer activities. Preventive measures are often more effective than simply checking the criminal record extract.

The Finnish Red Cross is committed to operations that promote the safety and personal integrity of children. These instructions supplement the Code of Conduct on operating methods to improve children's safety and checking the criminal records of volunteers 'Toimintaohje: Lasten turvallisuutta lisäävät toimintatavat ja vapaaehtoisen rikostaustan selvittäminen' (hereinafter 'Code of Conduct'), as prepared jointly by Allianssi, SOSTE Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health, Arts Promotion Centre Finland Taike and the Finnish Sports Confederation Valo.

In its meeting on 29 August 2014, the Board of the Finnish Red Cross approved the Code of Conduct for use by the organisation. The Code of Conduct was updated during 2020, and the Board of the Finnish Red Cross approved the updated document at its meeting on 28 September 2020.

The branches, districts, headquarters and institutions of the Finnish Red Cross are committed to the Code of Conduct and the measures specified therein. The Code of Conduct is available in Finnish on RedNet and at the headquarters and district offices (address rednet.punainenristi.fi/osastotoimisto).

Starting with prevention

The Finnish Red Cross aims to increase safety among children and young people through the following preventive measures:

- Volunteers are provided with orientation training and information on the Code of Conduct through branch meetings, mentorship district visits and branch bulletins.
- The activities are primarily organised in such a way that the minors are guided by instructors of at least 15 years of age. Two volunteer instructors are always designated to supervise sleeping, swimming and sauna bathing arrangements.
- A criminal record extract is required for all network volunteers who work with minors.
- Those in charge of the operations foster an open and safe culture of discussion, so that children and young people are not afraid to talk about sexual harassment or abuse.
- The children and young people as well as their parents are informed of the person in charge of the branch or district, in addition to the group or club instructor. For example, it is recommended for branch chairs or youth contact persons to participate in a Reddie Kids club meeting or young activity group meeting to introduce themselves and discuss the rights of the children and young people directly with them. The planning officer or executive director of the district's youth activities discusses the relevant matters with the instructors and leaders in the context of the camp planning organised by the district. This ensures that the children know who to contact in situations that they, or their parents, wish to report.
- The organisation's website includes a section for providing feedback or reporting suspicions or misconduct. The address can be used to send messages on any suspicions or misconduct related to the operations, rules and ethical procedures of the Finnish Red Cross.

Intervention

Wherever activities are organised, a person in charge is always agreed upon to assume responsibility in matters related to the safety of minors. For branch operations, the person in charge can be the branch chair or the contact person for youth activities, for example. For district operations, the person in charge can be the district's executive director or planning officer for youth activities. The responsibility for addressing and resolving any issues falls on the adults alone, instead of any children or young people.

All complaints and suspicions must always be taken seriously. Even if the case does not involve a serious suspicion of abuse, and is focused rather on the behaviour between an adult and young people is slipping in an ethically improper direction, the situation must be addressed: the matter must be discussed as soon as possible. Not all cases of sexual harassment constitute a crime and may be considered improper behaviour instead. In the event of more serious suspicion of harassment or abuse, communication between the suspected victim and perpetrator shall be suspended until the matter has been investigated. If there is reason to suspect that a crime has been committed (i.e. an act specified in the Criminal Code of Finland), the police and a child welfare authority must be contacted immediately. If the parents of the child or young person are unaware of the situation, they must be contacted.

Finnish Red Cross volunteer duties to which the legislation applies

The Finnish Red Cross has assessed and specified the volunteer duties that require a criminal background check on all assigned volunteers. These duties are described below. Furthermore, branches, districts, institutions and the headquarters can have specific volunteer duties that meet the criteria for checking the criminal background of volunteers (Code of Conduct, Section 4.2). In cases where a volunteer duty has not been specified in this Finnish Red Cross instruction document, this must be done in conjunction with applying for a criminal record extract.

Camp volunteers

CAMP INSTRUCTORS are volunteers who must be at least 15 years of age. A camp is a close-knit and intensive social environment. At camp, campers and instructors are in regular and often close interaction with each other. Camp instructors mostly operate as a group, but there are situations, tasks, trips and other activities that involve an individual instructor assuming responsibility for a smaller group or interacting very closely with an individual camper. Examples of this are supervision of swimming and sauna bathing activities, sleeping arrangements and providing comfort for homesickness.

CAMP BOSSES persons at least 18 years of age who are in charge of the camp for children and young people either alone or with a partner. Over the course of the camp, the camp boss guides, motivates and supports the camp instructors closely and regularly. The camp instructors are fairly often minors. In some cases, the camp boss may have in a close and personal interactive relationship with underage campers. A camp is a close-knit and intensive social environment. There is a relationship of power between the camp boss and instructors, and the camp boss often handles the relevant duties alone.

A criminal record extract is always required for camp instructors and camp bosses, because the camp environment creates a close and personal relationship with the campers and other instructors, which can lead to uncomfortable situations.

Friends for young clients

Volunteers who serve as friends to minors in either face-to-face or online activities are mainly people 16–29 years of age who have completed the basic course on friend activities. Clients who need friend volunteers are aged between 13 and 29. The friend pairs meet with each other exclusively and regularly, twice a month, for example. The interaction between friends is very personal. The interaction can also take place via telephone, e-mail and social media. Friend pairs primarily meet one-to-one. Underage friend clients can be in a very fragile or vulnerable state and therefore susceptible to abuse of a position of power, for example.

Friend activities are regular one-to-one activities, and the interaction is always personal. A criminal background check must always be conducted when the friend client is under 18 years of age.

Instructors for children and young people

REDDIE KIDS INSTRUCTORS are persons of at least 15 years of age who regularly serve as instructors for minors. The club participants are aged between 7 and 12. Serving as a club instructor involves personal interactions, even though all club members are usually present during the activities. The instructors primarily work in pairs, but there are also clubs where the instructor works alone.

HOMEWORK HELP VOLUNTEERS help minors with homework. Generally speaking, Homework Help club instructors do not work alone. The club meets regularly, but it may be the case that not all children participate every single time. Club instructors are often part of a circle of volunteer instructors, but the shifts can be irregular. The clubs involve personal interaction, but the situations largely involve at least one other adult as well as several other children. Homework Help activities are also organised online.

YOUTH GROUP INSTRUCTORS are persons of at least 15 years of age who are tasked with guiding a youth activity group. An essential element of the duties is regular guidance and instruction of minors. Youth group members are primarily aged between 13 and 17, but some may also be 18 and above. Group guidance involves personal interaction, even though all group members are usually present at all times. The instructors primarily work in pairs, but there are also groups where the instructor works alone. This volunteer duty also includes youth first aid groups and other department groups with underage participants.

LEADERS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDY TRIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE are at least 18 years of age and often youth delegates. Study trips abroad involve very regular and close interaction as well as situations where the participants may require highly personal support and assistance in the unfamiliar environment. Study trip participants can include both minors and adults.

VOLUNTEERS WHO SERVE AS INSTRUCTORS OR FRIEND VOLUNTEERS IN YOUTH FRIEND GROUPS are primarily 16–29 years of age and have completed the basic course in friend activities. The group meetings take place regularly (e.g. once a month) and they are attended by friend clients aged between 13 and 29. In the group meetings, the interactive relationship between the volunteers and the friend clients can be personal. Group instructors can work alone or with another volunteer. Underage friend clients can be in a very fragile or vulnerable state and therefore susceptible to abuse of a position of power, for example.

YOUTH SHELTER VOLUNTEERS always perform their volunteer duties together with the shelter personnel. The volunteer duties can be very regular, but in most cases they are fairly irregular. A criminal record extract is only required at a youth shelter when a volunteer works alone with a young person. This may be the case if the volunteer serves as a support person for an adolescent, for example. Youth centre directors request the extract at the start of such a role or other similar activities.

Instructors are asked to provide a criminal record extract if they work with a group consisting mostly of minors, the activities are regular and the instructors work alone. If there are two or more instructors per group, an extract will not be required.

Online volunteer activities

ONLINE VOLUNTEERS participate in some form of the online volunteer activities organised by the Finnish Red Cross. These include online friend activities, Sekasin chat volunteers and remote Homework Help activities. The online volunteers primarily work alone, but there are also forms of online volunteer activities where the volunteers work in pairs. In the online environment, children and young people are especially vulnerable, and we want to build the foundation for an operating environment that is as safe as possible.

A criminal record extract is required for all network volunteers who work with minors.

Conducting a criminal background check in practice

The organiser (i.e. party responsible for the activity group, camp or other context in question) is always responsible for conducting a criminal background check and ensuring a safe operating environment. A criminal background check on a volunteer can be carried when they are first being assigned a task that meets the criteria specified in the relevant legislation. The organisation may only request a criminal record extract on those volunteers who have become involved in the activities since 1 May 2014 or whose duties have thereafter changed in such a way that the extract can be lawfully requested. The extract can be requested from a volunteer only once, meaning that it cannot be requested again in the context of any new duties.

The organisation may also carry out a criminal background check on minors aged 15 and above. If a volunteer has obtained a valid criminal record extract in relation to work tasks or studies, it is sufficient to present this to the organiser of the activities.

No later than the recruitment phase, volunteers must be clearly informed that they will be required to undergo a criminal background check.

Ordering a criminal record extract

Criminal record extracts are requested by the organiser of the volunteer activities with the written consent of the person in question (Code of Conduct, Appendix 1). The extracts must be applied for in writing through the website of the Legal Register Centre or the suomi.fi service. The extract cannot be ordered by telephone.

Branches can authorise the district to conduct a consolidated order of criminal record extracts on their behalf. The mandate must be prepared in writing. In these cases, the branches must sign a mandate agreement (Code of Conduct, Appendix 2) that authorises the district to apply for the criminal record extracts on their behalf.

Youth shelters handle the criminal background checks related to their volunteer duties through the directors of the shelters. They also cover the costs and keep the records.

It costs €12 to request an extract, and the invoice is sent directly to the organiser of the volunteer activities. Application processing at the Legal Register Centre takes seven business days.

The following information must be attached to the application for a criminal record extract:

- Reference to the fact that the Board of the Finnish Red Cross on 29 August 2014 approved the Code of Conduct prepared by Alliassi, Taike, SOSTE and Valo, entitled 'Toimintaohje: Lasten turvallisuutta lisäävät toimintatavat ja vapaaehtoisen rikostaustan selvittäminen'.
- Written consent of the volunteer. The consent form is available as an appendix to the Code of Conduct and on RedNet. The signed form must first be scanned or photographed so that it can be attached to the electronic application.
- Name, registration ID and address of the volunteer task organiser.
- Volunteer's name, personal identity code (or date and place of birth), municipality of residence, contact information, nationality and vocation.
- Information about the duties that it is intended that the volunteer will handle. The task description is also required for the Legal Register Centre to be able to assess the fulfilment of the criteria.

Applications to the Legal Register Centre can be sent electronically through suomi.fi or by using the online forms in the electronic services of the Legal Register Centre.

Processing of a criminal record extract

Information on offences under the law is listed in the criminal record extract: indecent acts, sexual offences, violent offences, aggravated robbery, human trafficking and drug offences.

If the extract lists any of these offences, the person in question may not serve as a volunteer in any duties of the Finnish Red Cross that involve interaction with children. In these cases, the volunteer is urged to engage in other volunteer duties under the organisation.

The Legal Register Centre sends the extract directly to the organiser of the volunteer activities. In terms of receiving and checking the extract on behalf of the organiser, these tasks are handled by a person who has the authority to decide whether or not the volunteer can be recruited for the duties in question. In other words, the extract cannot be checked by an office secretary, branch secretary or other similar person who will not be making the decision. The organiser of the activities is obliged to check the criminal record extract of all persons applying for a position for which it is required, before they start the activities.

The activity organiser must then ensure that a record of the extract is added to the volunteer's personal details in CRM Onnimanni. The entry into CRM Onnimanni should primarily be conducted by the district and secondarily by the headquarters. The activity organiser only e-mails the youth activity officer at the district office or headquarters the identifying information of the criminal record extract.

These details are the volunteer's full name, year of birth, when the extract was issued and when the extract was checked. The CRM information can also be supplemented with an entry indicating which branch or district checked the extract. Copies of the extract or information about its content must not be sent. The only permitted entries in the volunteer's details are an indication of the criminal record extract having been presented and the identifying information of the extract (person's full name and date).

Example: Emma Example, extract checked on 16 January 2014, extract date 13 January 2014.

Once the activity organiser has sent the extract's identifying details to the district or headquarters, they will send the extract back to the volunteer in question. Once the matter has been processed (within one month), we will deliver the extract to the volunteer in question without delay either by post or in person (not by e-mail). If the volunteer does not want the extract, it can be shredded. The extract may not be copied, its content must not be recorded and any details or copies of the extract must not be attached to other documents. Details in the criminal record extract must not be disclosed to persons other than those who absolutely require them to make the decision on whether or not to recruit the person for the duties in question. Therefore it is important to enter the correct recipient when ordering the extract.

The relevant instructions, forms and volunteer duty descriptions are available in the branch office section of RedNet at rednet.punainenristi.fi/osastotoimisto.