



## **NORTHSTAR LEARNING CENTERS**

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New Bedford, Massachusetts 02740

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# **Family Handbook**

## ***School-Age Child and Youth Support Programs***

*Dear Parents/Family:*

*Welcome to NorthStar! While this handbook is addressed to parents/guardians of children and youth in our programs, please read it as a family to make sure everyone understands what to expect. We know that families take many different forms. In this handbook, we use "parent" to include grandparents and other relatives, foster*

*This handbook is intended to serve as a bridge to establishing open three-way communication between your child, you, and us and our working as a team.*

*Child/youth + parent + staff = team.*

*Sincerely,*

*Maria A. Rosario, Executive Director*

## Who We Are

### Our history and mission

Founded in 1974, NorthStar Learning Centers is committed to *"helping children and youth learn essential competencies and hopefulness with which they can overcome adversity and transform their lives and communities."* To fulfill our mission, we offer a wide range of prevention, intervention, and educational programs serving children from 1 month old to adulthood. We are a non-profit organization; that means all of the money we receive goes back into our programs to benefit the people we serve. Besides providing direct services to improve the lives and prospects of children, youth, and families, we advocate for change in the systems, structures and practices that affect them.

### Our name

Our name, *NorthStar Learning Centers*, refers to a powerful symbol of freedom in our local and national heritage. Using the North Star to navigate their dangerous journey northward, escaped slaves saw it as a beacon of freedom. Learning is a pathway to opportunity, key to freedom from prejudice, a route out of poverty.

## Changing Young Lives

We offer children and youth opportunities to make positive changes in their lives:

- ☑ **PHYSICAL HEALTH:** Make healthy choices and live a healthy life style.
- ☑ **ACADEMIC SUCCESS:** Improve school attendance, grades, and attitudes—where education is the most realistic pathway to wider life and work options.
- ☑ **EMOTIONAL HEALTH:** Learn to express feelings and cope with difficulties.
- ☑ **CONFIDENCE:** Develop belief in self-worth and capacity to succeed.
- ☑ **CARING/COMPASSION:** Develop empathy, including for people you don't know.
- ☑ **CONNECTION:** Strengthen bonds with family, positive peers, and other caring people.
- ☑ **INTEGRATION & BELONGING:** Contribute to the broader, increasingly multicultural community (the "new mainstream") to which we all belong.
- ☑ **LEADERSHIP:** Learn what it means to be a leader and how to make a difference.
- ☑ **BELIEF IN THE FUTURE:** Set and work on goals to achieve a better life.





## Benefits of Educational Excursions



We take children and youth to museums, cultural events, colleges, nature reserves, and other places. Why? Educational excursions can offer powerful learning experiences that broaden horizons and support long-term success:

- ☑ **INTERACTIVE LEARNING:** Visiting new places, meeting new people, and experiencing new things can connect classroom learning with the real world.
- ☑ **FUN:** Educational excursions are fun and can get children and youth excited about learning.
- ☑ **NEW EXPERIENCES:** Through being exposed to new people, activities, and places, children and youth can imagine a brighter, wider future for themselves.
- ☑ **TEAMWORK AND COMMUNITY:** As they experience an educational excursion together, children and youth bond with positive peers and caring adults.

## Your Rights and Responsibilities

It is important that you understand your *rights* and *responsibilities* while you are with us.

### ***Children/youth and their parents have the right to:***

- Be treated with dignity, respect, and fairness.
- Participate in programs free of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, age, color, religion, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, or in any other discriminatory manner prohibited by state or federal laws.
- Receive services that are reliable, of high quality, and responsive to cultural and language differences.
- Be in a safe and secure program environment, with reasonable protection from verbal, physical, sexual harassment and abuse.
- Be informed about available services and be able to choose from available alternatives.
- Refuse any services, unless mandated by law or court order.
- Request changes in services.
- Be informed about any service refusal or rules violation that would result in services being discontinued.
- Be involved in end-of-service planning, including being informed about other support options in the community.
- Make complaints and have them heard and dealt with in a fair and objective manner, without fear of it affecting decisions relating to the assistance you receive.

- Involve an advocate of your choice.
- View your records without undue delay.
- Decide who else can see your records—except for limited situations when we are permitted or required to disclose health information without your signed authorization.

#### **Including children/youth in decision-making**

While children/youth under 18 are minors and need their parents' permission before they can participate in NorthStar programs, best practice calls for giving children/youth an opportunity to have a say about issues and decisions that affect them. We strongly encourage that the decision-making process about issues that are real and relevant to the child/youth should include getting their assent as well as the informed consent of their parent. Children/youth are more likely to support the outcome if they have been involved in developing it. Just as with informed consent of the parent, obtaining assent from the child/youth should involve information-sharing according to their ability to understand to enable them to make real choices.

#### ***Children/youth and their parents have the responsibility to:***

- Treat others with courtesy and respect.
- Show respect for other people's cultures, backgrounds, and identities.
- Respect the privacy of others.
- Respect the rights of others to feel safe.
- Respect all property that belongs to others.
- Be on time for appointments.
- Notify us 24 hours in advance of cancelations.
- Provide correct and necessary information to assist us in providing services to you.
- Ask questions if you don't understand or need more information about any aspect of the program you are in.
- Inform us right away of any change in your address, phone number or health information.
- Give us feedback to help us offer better support to yourself and others.
- Participate to the fullest of your ability in our programs.

***Personal items.*** While we will help your child be responsible for their things and not misplace them, NorthStar is not responsible for their lost or stolen items. We also reserve the right to limit the use of items brought in.

## Meeting Special Health Care Needs

When we enroll a child or youth with special health care needs, a health professional familiar with the child/youth must complete a special care plan that identifies all appropriate specific measures to be taken to meet their health requirements. A qualified health professional must train staff on how to perform any special medical procedure. Parents must be involved to assure that the plan supports their care expectations for their child.

**Administering medication.** When possible, parents and physicians should adjust children's/youths' medication schedules so that our staff are not responsible for medication administration. Recognizing this is not always possible, we will agree to administer medication to make our programs accessible to a child or youth. Medication will be administered by a staff member who has completed medication administration program training.

*Self-administration of medication for asthma.* Our programs permit children/youth to carry and self-administer medication for asthma as needed, without the direct supervision of program staff, if their parent provides written authorization for the self-administration of medication, including releasing liability for our organization and our employees for any injury resulting from self-administration, and if written certification is provided by the child's health care provider.

## About Our Staff

Our case managers and counselors are carefully selected for their commitment and ability to work with children, youth, and families. They are college graduates and are familiar with the communities they serve. All staff have passed a background check and a driving record check. They have each completed many hours of training in safety and emergency procedures, including first aid and CPR. All case managers and counselors are certified to use the Massachusetts Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) behavioral assessment tool to understand why a child or youth is exhibiting challenging behavior and to plan positive behavior support interventions.

## Child and Youth Guidance

At any time, you may request a copy of the complete School-Age Child and Youth Positive Behavior Support policy. Following is a summary.

### **How we approach child and youth guidance**

We try to keep our child and youth guidance practices simple, age-appropriate, positive, and consistent with our big-picture behavior goal—getting children and youth to develop self-

control and take responsibility for their own behavior. This can be achieved by modeling respect, kindness, and persistence when interacting with them.

Our child and youth guidance policy builds on the following principles:

1. All children and youth have strengths. Most have the potential to behave appropriately.
2. Using a positive approach and positive reinforcement when a child/youth is doing something right works better in promoting desirable behavior than threats, put-downs, or ridicule to try to stop bad behavior.
3. *"Don't sweat the small stuff."* Before responding to what you think is inappropriate behavior, ask yourself whether it is really a problem worth doing something about.
4. Understanding why a child or youth is behaving inappropriately—*What happened to them?*—can help adults respond more effectively.
5. Children and youth aren't miniature adults. They may not foresee dangerous consequences of their actions that seem so obvious to you.
6. Support children and youth as decision-makers. Involving them in making rules inclines them to "own" and follow them.
7. *"Good people can do bad things."* Understanding their behavior can be bad, but they aren't bad invites a child/youth to consider, own, and stop their negative behavior.
8. Keep in mind that children and youth don't go by what we say; they go by what they see us doing. We all need to set good examples for children and youth—be part of the solution rather than the problem as poor examples—all the time.

### **What is unacceptable behavior?**

Sometimes it depends on age and the situation. What is okay for nine-year-olds on a recreational outing may not be acceptable for middle or high school students on a college tour. While the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* can be fuzzy, some things are never okay such as:

- Using or possessing alcohol, tobacco and/or illegal substances
- Having a weapon or a "look alike" weapon such as plastic knives or guns
- Assault or fighting
- Stealing or destroying the property of others
- Profanity of any kind, written, spoken, graphics, and/or actions
- Persistent disruptive behavior that interferes with group activities
- Intimidation, harassment, or bullying—violating others' rights to be in a safe program
- Leaving the facility or group without permission

### **How we respond to inappropriate behavior**

We approach behavior challenges with creativity, patience, consideration of the issues going on the child's or youth's life, and a focus on prevention. Responses that work are respectful,

preserve a child's or youth's dignity, and redirect their behavior. Trained on how to address behavior problems safely and effectively, staff start with very simple and non-threatening strategies that gently remind the child or youth and allow them to monitor and manage their own behavior. Giving a disruptive child or youth a special job to help can redirect a plea for attention into something more positive. If one approach doesn't work, we try another.

We will promptly notify parents of any harassing or violent incident involving or witnessed by your child. They may want to process their experience with you.

While holding children and youth accountable for their actions, we don't "punish" or "discipline" them. Instead, we try to tailor consequences to their individual needs and level of functioning. We want to keep them in our programs, where we can help them develop self-control and personal responsibility and learn from their mistakes. If a child/youth fails to thrive in our program, we have failed them.



*NorthStar doesn't condone and won't permit physical punishment, restraint, bullying, intimidation, scaring, profanity, ridicule, humiliation, isolation, deprivation, or other negative approaches that, in the end, undermine efforts to teach appropriate behavior and instead legitimize and reinforce negative behavior.*

## Protecting children/youth from abuse and neglect

You may request a copy of our entire child abuse and neglect policy. This is a summary.

### **Our legal obligation to report known or suspected child abuse**

As "mandated reporters" under state law, staff are required to make a child abuse report anytime they discover facts that lead them to know or reasonably suspect a child is being abused, physically or sexually. Our legal duty to report suspected or identified abuse extends to information disclosed about another child or youth. Whenever possible, we try to obtain permission of the child or youth who shared the information.

If we note early warning signs of a potentially abusive or neglectful situation, we will relate our concerns to the parent. We will share our knowledge of child/youth development and positive guidance techniques. We will help parents obtain support services such as counseling, drug treatment, and food stamps to help address family problems.

If a report is filed alleging that a child was abused or neglected while participating in one of our programs, we will fulfill all reporting requirements, fully cooperate with any official investigation, take immediate steps to protect all children/youth in our programs, and promptly conduct our own investigation. Until the state investigation is completed, a staff member accused of child abuse will either be temporarily reassigned to a position where they won't come in contact with children/youth or placed on administrative leave.

## Rights to Confidentiality

### **Children's/youths' right to confidentiality and parents' right to know**

Children under 18 are minors and need their parents' permission before they receive NorthStar services. The general rule is that since the parent consented for their child to receive services, they have a right to see their child's records. We ask parents, however, to respect their child's confidentiality. Why? Because the special relationship that children/youth develop with staff depends on building trust. Privacy is especially important in winning that trust. Children/youth discuss problems or pass on information about others, trusting that the information will go no further. Developing a "zone of privacy" is particularly important for teens who are naturally becoming more independent.

### **Communicating with parents**

Wanting to promote stronger and better parent-child relationships, we try to balance protecting a child's/youth's right to privacy and respecting their parent's right to information. Even if we don't have a child's/youth's assent, or "okay," to share specific personal information with their family, we will provide the parent with general information about their child's progress. We will also encourage the child/youth to share directly with their parent what is going on in their life and will help them figure out the best way to tell them. Also, when meeting with parents, the counselor or case manager may sometimes describe problems in general terms, without using specifics, help them know how to be more helpful to their child.

Parents can support their child's progress by informing the case manager or counselor on how their child is doing at home, in school, and in social situations. You may meet with your child's case manager or counselor to discuss ways to support progress at home.

We also understand that parents feel they have a right to know about major risks their children face and believe that their children's case managers and counselors have a duty to share critical information involving their children's safety.

### **Exceptions to confidentiality**

There are exceptions to confidentiality that are important for children and teens to understand before they share personal information with counselors or case managers. We will explain these limits to the child/youth in terms they would understand.

The legal requirement to report child abuse is one of the exceptions to staff's duty to confidentiality. We will also break confidentiality to prevent a child/youth from hurting themselves or someone else. In situations where we are required to report information about the child/youth in the interests of their safety, we inform and try to involve them in the process. When at all possible, we make this report with their assent.

Anything a child/youth says about sex, drugs, and feelings will be kept confidential—except where, in the counselor's or case manager's judgment, it meets the very specific circumstances where the child/youth poses a danger to themselves or to others or has been abused.

Case managers and counselors may consult with other professionals to get other perspectives and ideas concerning how best to help a child or teen with whom they are working. During such consultations, case managers and counselors will not reveal any personally identifying information regarding your child.

### **Confidentiality and group counseling**

The nature of group counseling makes it difficult to maintain confidentiality, even though the counselor running a group will frequently remind group members of the importance of keeping what is said in group confidential and has the right to remove any group member who violates the confidentiality rule. If you choose to have your child participate in group counseling, be aware that the counselor cannot guarantee that other group members will maintain your child's confidentiality.

If your child is in group counseling, records will include only their personal progress in group—not information about other group members.

### **Requests to release confidential participant information**

None of your child's protected health and service information will be released to or requested from other organizations without your informed written consent, except in response to a court order or as otherwise permitted or required by law. When we receive a request for your information, we will ensure that your consent is current and valid. If you do sign a consent to release information, you are encouraged to discuss the release our staff working with your child and you to allow you to maintain the highest level of confidentiality possible—specifically, what information is to be released, the purpose for which the information is to be used, and the expiration date to ensure that the authorization won't last longer than reasonably necessary. Please discuss with our staff any concerns or questions you have about confidentiality.

Requests for information must be written in plain language and must include:

- Name of the person whose information is being released
- Signatures of the participant whose information is being released and of their parent if the participant is a minor and date of the signatures
- The purpose or need for the disclosure
- A description of the information to be used or disclosed that identifies the information in a specific and meaningful fashion
- The name of the person or organization that will receive the information
- The effective date of the release

- A specific expiration date not to exceed one year from when the release takes effect or an expiration event that relates to the individual or the purpose stated of the use or disclosure
- The name of the organization that is releasing the information
- Statement that the consenting parent understands that they have the right to revoke the authorization at any time
- Statement that a provider cannot condition treatment on a program participant signing an authorization
- Statement that the information disclosed per the authorization may be subject to further disclosure by the recipient and no longer protected by the federal privacy regulations

If you withdraw your consent, your withdrawal will not affect any use or disclosures allowed by your authorization while it was in effect.

We will give you a copy of the release form you signed authorizing the disclosure of confidential information and place a copy in your child's file.

When we are required to release your information in response to a valid court order or as otherwise required by law, we will still inform you that the information will be shared, to whom the disclosure will be made, and for what purposes. We will release only information necessary to comply with the request or court order. We will also keep documentation of the disclosure in your child's file.

## Referring Your Child for Additional Services

Getting appropriate help at the right time can make a big difference in a child's or youth's life. We will assist you in getting additional services your child may need. If we think your child may benefit from additional services, we will meet with you about our concern.

## Complaints, Comments, and Compliments

We are always interested to hear your views on any aspect of our service or your experience of dealing with us. Hearing about any good work we may have done with you helps us continue on our path of continuous quality improvement. Just as we welcome your compliments on what you think we are doing well, so we want to know about any concern or complaint you have about any aspect of our programs. We see complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve what we do and help put things right for you.

### How to make a complaint

NorthStar is committed to ensuring that any complaints we receive are handled in a way that is responsive, fair, and courteous and that respects the privacy of the person making the complaint. The only people who will have access to information about your complaint are those who are working on resolving it. Whether your complaint is upheld or not, you will receive a reply describing what was done to investigate your complaint, the conclusions from the investigation, and any action taken as a result of your complaint.

Making a complaint won't affect support you receive from us now or in the future. At any time, you have the right to have anyone you wish present for support in making your complaint. You can ask a staff person you feel comfortable with to assist you in carrying your complaint forward.

While there's no time limit on making a complaint, it is best to raise your concern right away. It is often more difficult to deal with the specifics of an issue that happened months ago and is just being brought to the forefront now.

**STEP 1: Informal resolution.** Most complaints are best resolved informally by the people involved. We encourage you to talk or write to the person responsible for the decision or conduct about which you are complaining, or to their immediate supervisor. They will generally try to take care of the problem for you there and then.

**STEP 2: Formal consideration.** If you feel you don't want to discuss the problem with that person, or if they cannot deal with your concerns, or if your complaint or concern is more serious, you may bring the matter directly to the program director (youth services, early education and care, or clinical). If the program director happens to be the person whose decision or conduct you are complaining about, we will work with you to identify an administrator you are comfortable with to consider your complaint. Every effort will be made to sort out the problem at this step. Once you and the program director (or other administrator) have agreed on how your complaint will be resolved, they will write you a summary letter within 5 business days of that date.

**STEP 3: Appeal.** If you are unhappy with our response at Stage 2, you have the right to appeal to the executive director. You will have the opportunity to discuss your complaint with them or a suitably senior person they designate. They will respond in

writing within 5 business days of your appeal. If more time is required because of the complexity of the complaint, we will keep you informed about what is happening.

### **What is expected of me?**

When you make a complaint, you are responsible for:

- Giving us a clear idea of the problem and the solution you want
- Giving us up front all the relevant information that you have
- Letting us know whether anyone else is currently dealing with your complaint
- Telling us new facts or letting us know if you no longer wish to pursue your complaint
- Cooperating with us
- Treating our staff with respect

### **What is NorthStar responsible for?**

We are responsible for:

- Handling your complaint professionally, efficiently, and fairly
- Keeping you informed of our progress
- Giving you reasons for our decisions
- Treating you with courtesy and respect
- Providing you with assistance to carry your complaint forward
- Documenting your complaint, including the investigation process and outcome

### **What if I am still unhappy with the outcome?**

At any time, you can go to an outside agency with your complaint.

## Government Agencies You Can File a Complaint With

Type of complaint	Agency	How to file a complaint
Individual professional misconduct (fraud, practice while impaired by alcohol or drugs, sexual misconduct, other violations of practice standards)	Division of Professional Licensure, Massachusetts Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation	Download the complaint application form available on <a href="http://www.mass.gov/dpl">www.mass.gov/dpl</a> , fill it out, and send it back to the Division of Professional Licensure's Office of Investigations. If you are unsure whether the mental health professional's actions fall into the category of misconduct, you can contact a Division of Professional Licensure investigator by calling 617-727-7406 to discuss your concerns.
Child abuse	Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF)	Anyone who is concerned that a child is being abused can make a report by phoning the DCF Child-at-Risk Hotline anytime of the day or night at 800-792-5200. All mandated reporters are required by law to mail or fax a written report to DCF within 48 hours after making the oral report. Download the form from: <a href="http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dcf/child-abuse-reporting-form.pdf">http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dcf/child-abuse-reporting-form.pdf</a> .
Discrimination	Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD)	If you believe you have been discriminated against, you should go file a complaint in person at an MCAD office. The New Bedford office (508-990-2390) is at 800 Purchase Street, Room 501, New Bedford, MA 02740. With few exceptions, the MCAD cannot accept complaints if the conduct complained of occurred more than 300 days before the complaint is made.
Discrimination in access or provision of services; possible violation of health information privacy rights under HIPAA Rules	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights	File a complaint in writing by mail, fax, e-mail, or online via the Office of Civil Rights Complaint Portal. It must be filed within 180 days of when you knew that the act or omission complained about occurred. The Office of Civil Rights may extend the 180-day period if you can show "good cause." For help filing a complaint, email the Office of Civil Rights at <a href="mailto:OCRMail@hhs.gov">OCRMail@hhs.gov</a> or call 800-368-1019.
<b>Complaints about mental health services:</b> Poor quality of care or breach of participant rights (alleged abuse, neglect, misappropriation, mistreatment)	Division of Health Care Facility Licensure and Certification, Complaint Intake Unit, Massachusetts Department of Public Health	Download the Consumer/Resident/Patient Complaint Form, available at: <a href="http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/quality/healthcare/consumer-resident-patient-complaint-form.pdf">http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/quality/healthcare/consumer-resident-patient-complaint-form.pdf</a> . Fill it out and fax (617 753-8165) or mail (Division of Health Care Facility Licensure and Certification, Complaint Intake Unit, 99 Chauncy Street, Boston, MA 02111). If you are unable to file a written complaint, call the 24-hour consumer complaint line at 800-462-5540.

## *School-Age Child and Youth Support Programs* *Family Handbook* Acknowledgement of Receipt

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (parent/guardian's name) have received a copy of the *School-Age Child and Youth Support Programs Family Handbook* and the policies and guidelines detailed in it have been explained to me. I agree to review it with my child. I understand that if anytime either of us have any questions or concerns about the information provided in the Family Handbook, we should ask program staff for further information or clarification.

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Program participant (print)

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Parent/guardian's signature

Date

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Program participant's signature

Date

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Orienting staff member's signature

Date

\* Please sign and return this form to be included in your child's file