

ACT to Keep Children's Ministry Safe

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."
(Matthew 19:14, NIV)

Child sexual abuse is a documented problem in churches and children's ministry. GuideOne Insurance, a company that insures nearly 43,000 churches, has found that one in 100 churches will face a sexual abuse incident each year.

Churches are popular targets for child molesters because they serve many children, face a shortage of workers, and are trusting by nature. Children may also be abused by older children and youth who are brought together by church programs.

This is depressing information for Christians, but there is good news too. Churches and ministry workers are learning to safeguard children with proven methods. Many church leaders agree that safe practices do not weaken ministry but in fact make it more effective.

Three key safety strategies for children's ministry volunteers include **A**wareness, **C**ommunication, and **T**aking Action. These can be remembered with the acronym **ACT**.

Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse can happen in any church. No denomination, size, or type of church is immune.

Sexual abuse usually occurs with isolation of a child and a molester (adult or older child/youth). For this reason, many recommended practices attempt to minimize opportunities for one adult to be alone with one child. When ministry is conducted "out in the open," volunteers avoid even the appearance of misconduct.

Patterns of behavior, or warning signs, are spotted after the wrongdoing comes to light in many cases. The most common warning sign is a worker who seeks to be isolated alone with a child. Warning signs do not prove harmful intent of course. They do suggest that a change in ministry procedures is needed or that a worker should use better judgment to avoid even the appearance of wrongdoing.

Worker behaviors that warn of possible sexual abuse include the following:

- ⌚ Seeking opportunities for isolated time with a child
- ⌚ Being overly affectionate, and initiating physical contact rather than letting children take the lead
- ⌚ Providing selected children with excessive attention, inappropriate gifts, or lenient discipline ("playing favorites")
- ⌚ Acting as if safety rules do not apply to them
- ⌚ Arranging contact with church children outside of church sponsored activities, especially in one-to-one situations (such as babysitting)

Workers should be aware that some church activities and places have proven riskier and therefore require extra precautions. Precautions may include extra adult supervision, modifying the activity, or avoiding it entirely.

Activities and Places That Require Extra Caution

- 🕒 Infant nurseries and diaper changing
- 🕒 Restrooms
- 🕒 Overnight activities
- 🕒 Transportation (vehicles can provide isolation of adult and child)
- 🕒 Audio-visual rooms (darkness and seclusion are hazards)
- 🕒 Any situation that provides opportunities for isolation of adult and child
- 🕒 Mixed age group activities. (One researcher found that as much as 56 percent of child molestation cases involved an adolescent (usually male) as the perpetrator.)

Children Who are More Vulnerable Require Extra Precautions

Workers need to be aware that some children are more vulnerable than others. Children who deserve extra care and precautions include the following:

- 🕒 Infants (because they need diaper changes and can't recognize or report abuse)
- 🕒 Any child who needs extra attention or has trouble communicating. (Disabled children are four to ten times more vulnerable to sexual abuse than non-disabled kids.)
- 🕒 Children with significant behavior problems or who are alienated from adults
- 🕒 Children who have suffered prior abuse or neglect
- 🕒 Children with a weak understanding of appropriate behavioral limits between adults and children (also known as "having poor boundaries")

Communication

Prompt and honest communication is a key strategy to preventing child sexual abuse. A worker who observes questionable behavior by another worker must bring this to the attention of a ministry leader. Workers should ask their leaders to clarify church policies and resolve safety problems when needed.

All states have "mandatory reporting laws" that require certain occupations to report suspected child abuse. In some cases ministry volunteers are included as "mandated reporters" in these laws even if the alleged abuse does not occur in connection with church activities. Workers must communicate with their leaders to understand what their reporting responsibilities are under law. Workers should always "err on the side of caution" by discussing any suspected abuse with a supervisor or other responsible church official

Taking Action

The *ACT to Keep Children's Ministry Safe* video illustrates how workers can take action by using proven practices to make ministry safer.

A brief checklist of proven practices includes the following:

- 🕒 Two adults working together (“the two adult rule”)
- 🕒 Open doors and windows and other practices that keep ministry in “plain sight”
- 🕒 Restroom procedures
- 🕒 Diapering procedures for nurseries
- 🕒 A check-in and check-out system for nursery and young children
- 🕒 Specific rules for transporting children in vehicles
- 🕒 Extra adults and extra vigilance for riskier activities and situations
- 🕒 Discipline policies (no physical punishment!)
- 🕒 Policies on appropriate touch

Many tragic cases of child abuse could have been prevented or detected sooner if adults had been more proactive by using best practices in child safety, communicating about concerns, or taking action in suspicious situations. Awareness, communication, and taking action have proven successful. Prevention is much easier than facing the horror of child sexual abuse. Most importantly, though, teaching and caring for God's children is a sacred responsibility that requires our best efforts.

Scripture calls on Christians to be
“wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:18, KJV).

We must be wise in adopting proven prevention methods
and harmless in our ministry with children.

(04.25.08) © 2008 GuideOne Center for Risk Management, LLC and Group Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved. This material is for information only and is not intended to provide legal or professional advice. You are encouraged to consult with your own attorney or other expert consultants for a professional opinion specific to your situation.