



SafeChurch® **ACT to Keep Youth Ministry Safe**

In Ephesians 5:3, the apostle Paul says to the church “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality....”

Sexual abuse is a documented problem in churches and youth ministry. GuideOne, a company that insures thousands of churches, has found that one in 100 churches will face a sexual abuse incident each year.

This is depressing information for Christians, but there is good news too. Churches and youth ministry workers are learning to safeguard teens 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 awareness, communication, and taking action. These can be remembered with the acronym “ACT.”

Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse

Knowledge about the real possibility of abuse, and the ways it happens can help prevent it. Sexual abuse can happen in any church. No denomination, size or type of church is immune. This article and the video entitled ACT to Keep Youth Ministry Safe will describe how abuse usually happens, and outline prevention practices.

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. Volunteers and staff can communicate to resolve a risk only after they identify it.

Adult volunteers must contact a responsible church leader immediately if they have reason to believe that a young person has been abused in or out of a church activity.

Take Action

GuideOne Insurance has found that most abuse cases involving teenagers happen in three common situations:

1. One-to-one counseling or mentoring.
2. Young adults exploiting teens sexually.
3. Unsupervised teens participating in sexual activity.

Both males and females can be abusers, and their victims may be the opposite or the same sex.



One-to-One Counseling or Mentoring

In most cases, the teen is manipulated into tolerating abuse in a counseling situation because of unquestioning trust of the counselor, disguised motivations of the counselor, and the desire to be part of a “healing” process.

Most youth ministry workers are not equipped to offer counseling, so GuideOne recommends that individual counseling be avoided or minimized.

However, if pastoral counseling is provided a variety of safeguards must be used.

Counseling and Mentoring Safeguards

Youth ministry volunteers should avoid meeting with teens individually more than 3-5 times to talk about personal issues. Volunteers must get approval from church leadership before counseling. All meetings should take place in open settings with other adults nearby. Parents should give permission, participate, or be nearby. Also, youth workers should consider team counseling instead of one-to-one.

Adults should refer teens with serious problems to appropriate services. Talk with ministry leaders and ask them to make the referral.

Young Adults Exploiting Teens Sexually

Twenty-something and college age adults can be great youth leaders, although there is some risk with some young leaders. The closeness in age between an adult and a youth can result in confusion about right and wrong. Young adults and teens can mistakenly believe that a romantic or sexual relationship is okay because the age difference is so small.

Safeguards for Young Adult Leaders

Teens and adult leaders need to be taught that romantic or sexual relationships between adults and young church members are wrong, period. They have no place in a healthy youth ministry.

Adults must be trained to understand that young people are not mature enough to give consent for sex. In addition, churches must teach adults in ministry that they are 100% responsible for maintaining healthy relationships.

Adult leaders of *any age* should follow the other proven safety practices in the video and this article, especially “avoiding isolation” and the “two-adult rule.”

Unsupervised Teens Participating in Sexual Activity

Churches have a responsibility to supervise the young people in their care and prevent harmful activities even if teens do not resist. Churches can be held responsible for failure to supervise young people, and the consequences can be great.

Safeguards for Peer Sexual Activity

Close supervision by adults is the key! This means that there must be enough adults for the type of activity. Some activities, like overnights, off-site programs, and public events, require more adults for safe supervision. Who comes to an event can increase the risk as well. Teens “off the street” who are not known to the adult staff can increase the risk.

Warning Signs of Sexual Abuse

For any of the three common situations described above, there are warning signs that can alert adults to a potentially risky situation. These patterns of behavior are spotted after the wrongdoing comes to light in many cases. Noticing and reporting these “red flags” in advance may prevent the tragedy of sexual abuse.

Warning signs do not prove harmful intent of course. They do suggest that improvement in ministry procedures is needed, or that a worker should use better judgment to avoid even a “hint of sexual immorality.”

Here are worker behaviors that are warning signs of possible abuse:

1. Seeking opportunities for isolated time with a young person.
2. Individual counseling or mentoring in secluded settings.
3. Being overly affectionate, and initiating physical contact with teens.
1. Providing selected kids with excessive attention, inappropriate gifts, or lenient disciplines (“playing favorites”).
4. Ignoring safety procedures.
5. Arranging one-to-one contact with teens outside of church sponsored activities.
6. Frequent and private communication with a teen by phone, text, or email.
7. Breaking rules and crossing boundaries with teens in order to test their response, such as sharing alcohol or pornography, or talking about sexual activities.

Conclusion

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. Most importantly, though, teaching and caring for God’s young people is a sacred responsibility that requires our best efforts.