

Child Protection

Child abuse is an issue that many people find hard to talk about. In particular, some Christians find it hard to believe that child abuse happens in churches. Consider the following statistics:

- A child is molested every two minutes.
- Thirty-three percent of girls and 20 percent of boys will be abused by the age of 18.
- Ninety-five percent of sexual abuse victims know their abuser.
- There are an estimated 60 million survivors of sexual abuse in the U.S. — 20 percent of the population.
- The typical child sex offender molests an average of 117 children — most of the children do not report the offense.
- Sixty percent of convicted sex offenders are on parole or probation.

Awareness is a key factor in preventing child abuse

Knowing and recognizing abuse is very helpful in stopping it. Abuse has **three forms**: physical, emotional and sexual.

Physical abuse occurs when someone harms a child's body. **Emotional abuse** occurs when someone harms a child using critical words, threats, demeaning terminology, etc. **Sexual abuse** is "criminal behavior that involves children in sexual behaviors for which they are not personally, socially and developmentally ready." Sexual abuse is not always "touching"; it can involve showing children pornographic videos, obscene phone calls, exhibitionism, or verbal comments.¹

There are some common **symptoms of sexual molestation**.¹

Physical signs may include:

- Lacerations and bruises
- Nightmares
- Irritation, pain or injury to the genital area
- Difficulty with urination
- Discomfort when sitting
- Torn or bloody underclothing
- Venereal disease

Behavioral signs may include:

- Anxiety when approaching the church
- Nervous or hostile behavior toward adults
- Sexual self-consciousness
- "Acting out" of sexual behavior
- Withdrawal from church activities

Verbal signs may include the following statements:

- “I don’t like [a particular church worker].”
- “[A church worker] does things to me when we’re alone.”
- “I don’t like to be alone with [a church worker].”
- “[A church worker] fooled around with me.”

Child Protection and the Church

To ensure child protection, there are six basic areas that are important to cover. **Please understand that this is not legal advice. Awana is not able to give legal advice.** Nothing can substitute for competent legal counsel from an attorney who knows your church.

1. Develop policies and practices for child protection and follow them!

- Include an explicit statement prohibiting child abuse, as well as procedures for staff to report known or suspected abuse.
- Emphasize staff compliance with policies. The best policies are useless if they are not followed or are only followed occasionally.
- Encourage staff support for policies.

2. Screen workers

As secular community groups tighten their worker screening, so must the church.

- Utilize an application form designed for volunteer and employed church workers which includes permission from the prospective worker to conduct a background check.
- Use reference checks and background checks through a reputable background check reporting service to screen workers.
- Select an appropriate person to conduct the background checks, such as a mature person with the gift of discernment. Also determine, with the help of legal counsel, how the records will be stored and for how long.
- Interview prospective workers. Develop a list of questions that you plan to ask every worker.
- Use the 6-12 month rule: the prospective worker must have been a member or regular attender for “X” number of months before being allowed to work with children.

3. Retain records

- With proper screening of workers, comes the issue of record storage and retention. Determine, with the help of legal counsel, what records to store, how they will be stored, and for how long.

4. Train workers

- Train all new workers on the child protection policies of the church before they can work with children.
- Re-train all returning workers on a regular basis.

5. Supervise workers

- Be present — have worker supervisors. Have supervisors check on classes throughout Sunday school, nursery time, Awana, etc. Have windows from the hallway into classrooms — if there are no windows, have a “doors open” rule.
- Confront unusual behavior.
- Utilize the Two-Adult Rule.
- Utilize a proper worker-to-child ratio.

6. Seek legal counsel and professional advice

- Awana cannot provide legal advice; we can only offer some suggestions and resources. The attorney for your church, as well as your insurance agent and local social service and law enforcement agencies, should be able to help your church in this important area.
- There are some excellent resources available on the Web and in the *Awana Ministry Guide*.

7. Report abuse and suspected abuse

- Laws vary by state. Most states have mandatory child abuse reporting statutes that require persons in certain occupations to report child abuse. Check with your legal counsel to determine if pastors or other church workers are required reporters in your state.

One only needs to peruse Scripture to gain insight into the importance Jesus placed on children coming to Him: ... “*Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not ...*” (Luke 19: 16). Because the Bible is so clear on this, it is imperative for the church to do everything it can to create a safe place for children to grow in the Lord.

¹ From *Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse*, Christian Ministry Resources, 2003.