



# Essentials

Sexual Abuse  
Prevention  
and Response

**ARITF**

Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force

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Sexual Abuse  
Prevention  
and Response

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# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Train .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Screen .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Protect .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Report .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Care .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Supplements .....</b>	<b>57</b>



# Introduction

*“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—  
not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you  
to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording  
it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”*

**1 PETER 5:2-3 NIV**

Thank you for taking the time and energy to care for the children, students, and vulnerable adults in your church—to help keep them safe and provide help when abuse happens. Sexual abuse is widespread and permeates every aspect of our society. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that **over half of women and almost 1 in 3 men experience sexual violence involving physical contact at some point in their lives.**<sup>1</sup> While these statistics may seem staggering, they only begin to tell the story. Actual incidences of sexual abuse far exceed the number of reported occurrences, because most survivors never report their abuse. **Out of every 1,000 incidents of sexual abuse, only 25 abusers ever face incarceration.**<sup>2</sup>

Church congregations are not immune to these statistics, but church leaders are often overwhelmed by the scope of the problem and unsure how to implement best practices surrounding abuse prevention and response. How do you develop policies to better protect your most vulnerable members? How do you screen and train your employees and volunteers to improve the safety and security of your ministries? What do you do when someone discloses abuse to your church leadership? How do church leaders shepherd victims through the devastation of abuse?

While the answers to these questions are complex, this guidebook and the corresponding video training sessions are designed to provide **general principles that can be a starting point** for church leaders who are working to implement effective abuse prevention and response policies and practices, no matter the size of the church.

## To help make our churches safe from abuse, we must be proactive.

Developing policies and procedures ahead of time, training and educating staff and volunteers, and partnering with abuse experts will help set up your church to be a safe place for your community. It is up to the pastors and leaders of a church to lead this charge.

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1. “Fast Facts: Preventing Sexual Violence.” CDC 24/7: Saving Lives, Protecting People. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 22, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/fastfact.html>.

2. “Scope of the Problem: Statistics.” RAINN. Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, 2024. <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem>.

There are **five essential actions your church can take now** to help prevent abuse and prepare to respond well to those who are affected by abuse:

- **TRAIN** – Provide initial and ongoing TRAINING for staff, volunteers, and church members that raises awareness and shares effective actions to prevent incidents of abuse in the church.
- **SCREEN** – Adopt a careful vetting process for all those working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. SCREENING should include an application, interview, references, social media review, and background checks.
- **PROTECT** – Create and implement policies that PROTECT children, youth, and vulnerable adults from grooming and abuse.
- **REPORT** – Have a written plan in place to REPORT abuse to the appropriate government authorities and communicate with the church in the event of an abuse allegation.
- **CARE** – Identify and offer resources that will provide victims, survivors, and their families with options for ongoing CARE.

The following diagram is a pathway to begin protecting your church from predators and to help care for victims and survivors of abuse in your church and community. Notice this diagram is a circle divided into steps, each with an arrow pointing to the next one. Every step of this pathway is equally important and necessary, and nothing should be left out. The arrows and the circle also stress the reality that this process should be something that is continuous and ongoing.

This guidebook and the corresponding video sessions at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) will unpack each of these essentials and their importance to you and your church, as well as provide easy “**Next Steps**” to put them into practice. We encourage churches to gather a team of church leaders and those who lead or work with children, students, and vulnerable adults to work through the five essentials together. The essentials are designed to be implemented in the order they are presented. Your church may already have several of the recommendations in place, and that’s great! But don’t skip the reading or video sessions for each essential, as there is always something you may learn or could improve upon at your church. Be patient. It will take time to complete the entire process depending on what your church already has in place. It may take three to six months or even a year. We have included many of the documents you will need to carry out the “Next Steps” for each essential. Most of this information is provided in the Supplements portion at the back of this guidebook, in the Tool Kit section on the website, and on the Essentials thumb drive. We will also point to additional videos from [churchcares.com](http://churchcares.com) for further training throughout the book.

This is a watershed moment in the life of the Southern Baptist Convention, and our hope and prayer is that *Essentials: Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response* will bring about generational change—that churches of every size, all across our convention, would actually implement these five steps and thus see countless numbers of children, students, and vulnerable adults spared from the horror of sexual abuse, respond well when incidents do happen, and be a safe and caring place for those who have experienced the trauma of abuse, whether inside or outside the church. Blessings to you and your team as you embark on this journey!

Scan to access video sessions at  
[sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com).



## TRAIN

*"Blessed are those who find wisdom,  
those who gain understanding, for  
she is more profitable than silver and  
yields better returns than gold."*

**PROVERBS 3:13-14 NIV**

## SCREEN

*"Wise choices will watch  
over you. Understanding  
will keep you safe."*

**PROVERBS 2:11 NLT**

### TRAIN

Proverbs 3:13-14

### SCREEN

Proverbs 2:11

## The Pathway to Prevention and Response

### CARE

Psalms 147:3; 9:9

## CARE

*"He heals the  
brokenhearted  
and binds up  
their wounds."*

**PSALM 147:3 NIV**

*"The Lord is a refuge  
for the oppressed,  
a stronghold in  
times of trouble."*

**PSALM 9:9 NIV**

### REPORT

Proverbs 31:8-9

## REPORT

*"Speak up for those who cannot speak  
for themselves, for the rights of all who  
are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly;  
defend the rights of the poor and needy."*

**PROVERBS 31:8-9 NIV**

### PROTECT

Psalms 140:4

## PROTECT

*"Keep me safe, Lord,  
from the hands of the  
wicked; protect me from  
the violent, who devise  
ways to trip my feet."*

**PSALM 140:4 NIV**



# TRAIN

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*Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.*

**PROVERBS 3:13-14 NIV**



Scan to access  
video sessions.

Every church should desire and acknowledge the need for biblical wisdom and understanding when it comes to dealing with abuse. Though many pastors and church leaders think they understand how to protect and care for the vulnerable in their churches, the reality is that sometimes, they may not. Pastors and church leaders need to understand the full scope of the problem. **Churches must provide initial and ongoing TRAINING for staff, leaders, and volunteers that raises awareness about sexual abuse and shares effective actions to help prevent and respond well to incidents of abuse in the church.**

Wisdom and understanding are needed to effectively train leaders to see the importance of prevention and response. There are three critical components that need to be considered as you train leaders in your church. First, you must help them understand that dealing with sexual abuse in the right way is a gospel issue. Second, you must address misconceptions and misunderstandings about sexual abuse, including how widespread the problem really is and how frequently abuse incidents occur. And finally, you must provide and require sexual abuse awareness training for all staff and volunteers that educates them in all areas of abuse prevention and response.

## **1. Help people understand dealing with sexual abuse in the right way is a gospel issue.**

When discussing how to deal with sexual abuse, churches must first turn to Scripture. There is no doubt we have a clear, compelling gospel and scriptural call to provide a safe environment for children, students, and vulnerable adults. Churches must do everything they can to prevent abuse and care well for those who have experienced abuse. We must not turn a blind eye or deaf ear, even though it may be hard to deal with this subject. While many verses address abuse in Scripture, there are four significant ones from both the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus left no doubt about how He felt about children and their protection—and what would happen to those who did cause harm to them. In Matthew 18:6, He said these powerful and difficult words: “But whoever causes the downfall of one of these little ones who believe in Me—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea” (HCSB). There is nothing more heinous that would cause the downfall of a child more than sexual abuse.

The second Scripture is found in the book of Micah. The prophet was speaking to the nation of Israel, telling them the Lord said He was no longer interested in their sacrifices or their own ways of trying to do good. The Lord had told them clearly what was good and what He wanted from them. Micah 6:8 says, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (ESV). This is a clear command for every believer to practice three things: to do justice, which is a part of one’s everyday life—seeking fairness, honor, and rightness for others, no matter the circumstances; to love kindness or “mercy,” demonstrated by a person’s treatment and care for others; and finally, to demonstrate humility in their walk with God.

The third verse is Proverbs 31:8-9, where the writer gives yet another powerful command: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice” (NLT). It is very difficult for a victim/survivor of sexual abuse to ever tell anyone about their abuse—so difficult, in fact, that the majority never do. When someone does find the courage and voice to speak, they need others to come alongside them, help speak up for them, and help ensure justice happens.

Finally, in Luke 4:18, at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, He read from Isaiah 61 and said that He had come to “proclaim release to the captives” and to “set free the oppressed” (CSB). This is a clear gospel call by Jesus for believers to care for the oppressed and the captives—which certainly includes sexual abuse victims in our congregations. Churches must make it a priority to help victims find the help, hope, and healing they so desperately need.

→ *To go deeper, see Lesson 1 on “Ministry Context” at [churchcares.com](http://churchcares.com).*

It must be noted that pastors and church leaders must be careful not to misunderstand or misuse Scripture when addressing sexual abuse. Because abuse is sin, it may seem logical to address the sin of the alleged abuser directly if the abuser is part of the congregation. However, this presents a challenge in ministry, because abuse is not only personal sin, it is also illegal—and confronting the abuser can be very dangerous for the victim. **We have a responsibility to protect victims of abuse and a legal obligation to report abuse to the proper authorities.** Thankfully, the Bible provides guidance in this area. Matthew 18 explains how to handle sin within the church body, while Romans 13 provides guidance concerning sin that is also illegal. We are called to let the governing authorities deal with all things illegal as the church simultaneously deals with the sin, always taking care to put the safety of the victim first.

*“If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he won’t listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established. If he doesn’t pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn’t pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you.”*

**MATTHEW 18:15-17 CSB**

*Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience.*

**ROMANS 13:1-5 CSB**

*"Church leaders are often hesitant to get the government involved, usually due to mistrust coupled with a desire to handle abuse internally. Rather than mistrust, the church should view these authorities as a resource—God-ordained entities that have been put in place for the safety of those they serve and protect."*

**-SAMANTHA KILPATRICK, Attorney and Contributor for Church Cares**

→ To go deeper, see Lesson 2 on "Ministry Tensions" at [churchcares.com](https://churchcares.com).

## **2. Address misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding the size of the problem and the frequency of abuse incidents.**

Many times, churches fail to implement best practices regarding abuse prevention, response, and survivor care due to misconceptions and misunderstandings that often surround the topic of abuse. Feelings of inadequacy or being overwhelmed prevent many churches from even starting the process. So, it is critical from the beginning to help your church and leadership understand the problem and, where necessary, correct misconceptions, misunderstandings, and confusion to help clearly address this issue.

### **There are many common misconceptions in the church regarding sexual abuse.**

- Church leaders often believe sexual abuse couldn't or wouldn't happen in their church because they "know" everyone in their church.
- Church leaders can also believe that sexual abuse isn't actually that prevalent to begin with, or at least not prevalent in Christian communities. They think of sexual abuse as a cultural issue rather than something that could happen within the church.
- Church leaders often think criminal background checks alone are adequate indicators of safety and that nothing else is needed to ensure someone is trustworthy to interact with children, students, and vulnerable adults.

- Church leaders may not know how to recognize grooming behavior/patterns in potential offenders or what a potential offender looks like. These indicators are often far more subtle than leaders might think.
- Church leaders often minimize abuse as a “mistake,” thinking of it like other sins that should simply be forgiven and forgotten. This improper view of abuse can cause irreparable harm to victims and their families and allow a perpetrator to continue abusing people.

## Clarifying facts:

- In 2021, 147 children were sexually abused every day on average in the United States, with 53,528 reported cases.<sup>1</sup>
- 93% of child abuse victims know their perpetrators, which means their abusers are people they likely trust—like a Sunday School teacher, youth leader, neighbor, or relative.<sup>2</sup>
- 93% of convicted abusers self-identify as “religious.”<sup>3</sup>
- Only 16% of child victims ever tell someone about their abuse. Even if they do share about their abuse, many stay silent for 10-15 years or longer.<sup>4</sup>
- One in 4 girls and one in 20 boys are sexually abused before they turn 18, though many experts believe the number for boys is actually higher and under reported.<sup>5</sup> This could potentially mean 25% of the average church congregation has likely experienced sexual abuse.
- A study by Emory University found that a male abuser who molests boys has an average of 150 victims. A male abuser who molests girls has an average of 52 victims.<sup>6</sup>
- Less than 10% of offenders ever encounter the criminal justice system,<sup>7</sup> and even further, only 3% of offenders will ever be convicted.<sup>8</sup> So, while background checks are important and necessary, they only reveal a small percentage of offenders and are not sufficient indicators of a person’s trustworthiness.

1. “The Nation’s Children.” CWLA. Child Welfare League of America, April 2023. <https://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Nations-Children.pdf>.

2. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement (2000).

3. “The Abel and Harlow Child Molestation Prevention Study.” Bishopaccountability.org. April 2002. <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/specialtopics/abuse-data/2002-04-Abel-Harlow-Child.pdf>.

4. “Delayed Disclosure.” CHILD USA. March 1, 2020. <https://childusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Delayed-Disclosure-Factsheet-2020.pdf>.

5. “Fast Facts: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse.” CDC.gov. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 6, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html>.

6. “The Abel and Harlow Child Molestation Prevention Study.” Bishopaccountability.org.

7. “Preventing Sexual Abuse - What Leaders Should KNOW.” MinistrySafe. 2023. <https://ministrysafe.com/ncbaptist/>.

8. “The Abel and Harlow Child Molestation Prevention Study.” Bishopaccountability.org.

### 3. Provide and require sexual abuse awareness training for all staff, leaders, and volunteers that educates them in all areas of abuse prevention and response.

It is critical to provide **initial and ongoing training** for staff, leaders, and volunteers that raises awareness and shares effective actions to help prevent incidents of abuse in the church, respond well if abuse occurs, and care well for those who have experienced abuse, whether inside or outside the church. The welcoming environment of many churches and their need to rely on volunteers to run their ministries make them soft targets for predators. If employees, volunteers, and members are not trained to recognize and prevent abuse, and if safety policies and practices are ignored, churches can be exploited by those seeking to abuse the vulnerable.

It is imperative that all church employees and volunteers be required to attend periodic training on how to prevent and identify grooming behavior and sexual abuse. The safety and protection of the children and vulnerable members of your congregation are well worth every penny and hour devoted to equipping your staff and volunteers.

In-person training is recommended so participants can personally engage and ask questions. (See **Supplement 1: Chart of Providers.**)

## What does sexual abuse awareness training look like?

Good training helps leaders, staff, and volunteers:

- Define and understand the problem and identify the risk of sexual abuse.
- Define and understand peer-to-peer sexual abuse.
- Recognize predatory grooming habits and behaviors of abusers.
- Recognize indicators for those who have possibly been abused.
- Properly handle disclosures of abuse from a child or youth.

In advance of the training, you need to make sure you develop proper reporting procedures both externally and internally. You also need to track participation and completion of the training.

One of the most important pieces of training is teaching everyone in your church family how to recognize grooming behaviors. It is difficult to believe someone you know would abuse a child or that it would happen at your church, but you must challenge this mindset. Churches can attract offenders and can be easy targets because there tends to be a high level of trust. Churches should indeed be institutions with a high level of trust, but they should also have high levels of awareness and accountability. Offenders can use relationships, positions of authority, and the trust of parents and organizations to groom children

and those who care for them. Offenders will look for opportunities to be isolated with their victims. This creates an environment where they can do harm and keep their victims compliant without using physical force.

## The best defense against grooming is adequate training and rigid, enforced policies.

When volunteers are on alert for signs of grooming and you have safety policies that are applied and implemented across the board to everyone in your ministry without exception, it will be much more difficult for a predator to gain the access they need to exploit a victim.

### Grooming practices to watch for:

- Gifts or special attention given to a specific child
- Attempts to get a child alone
- Excessive physical touch of a child (beyond the usual high fives or a quick hug)
- Helping a child break rules
- Keeping secrets with a child
- Shaming or blaming a child
- Inappropriate communication with a child in person, by phone, or online

## Next Steps

- 1. SELECT A PROVIDER** to supply your church with necessary training, and enroll all staff, leaders, and volunteers. (See **Supplement 1: Chart of Providers.**)
- 2. DETERMINE TRAINING PERAMETERS:** Will you provide in-person or online training? How often will you require training (every year, two years, etc.)? How will you track training progress and completion?
- 3. SET A DEADLINE** to have all staff, leadership, and volunteers complete training.

# TRAIN FAQs

## **How do we train someone who does not have internet access if we're using online training?**

Arrange to view the training as a group for anyone who does not have internet access. This could be during the Sunday School hour or at a specially planned time on a Saturday or Sunday after church. Make sure you document who attended. Depending on what training you use, your volunteers may need to take a quiz at the group gathering. Have a laptop or other compatible device available so they can take the quiz.

## **Why do we need to document the training that's been completed?**

Training everyone who works with children, youth, and vulnerable adults in sexual abuse awareness shows good practice and due diligence. Documentation through sign-in sheets (if in person) or online completion certificates provides proof that this due diligence was taken.

## **What ages should participate in the training?**

Most providers' online trainings are suitable for ages 13 and up. However, inform the parents of young volunteers about the training, and encourage them to watch it with their children or to give permission for their students to participate. Some providers have training options specifically tailored to students.

## **How often should we train staff/volunteers?**

It's recommended to do a full training every two to three years, but annual refresher training is ideal.

## **What are the differences between in-person and online training?**

In-person training allows for more interaction and working through scenarios in groups. Online training allows the candidate to view the training on their own time, allowing them to stop and start as needed. If your church frequently has new volunteers, online training makes the most sense, as in-person training might only be offered once or twice a year.

### **Should we train our leadership? Deacons and elders?**

Yes. Everyone in a leadership or decision-making role should be trained in sexual abuse awareness. This ensures everyone is implementing and adhering to policy with the same knowledge and awareness.

### **Should we make training available to parents?**

It's a great idea to make training available for parents so they can be aware of the realities of sexual abuse and how the church is taking precautions. Some online providers offer a training specifically for parents to empower them to be part of the prevention system by talking to their kids about sexual abuse.

### **Should a volunteer wanting to work with children and students have to wait to be fully trained before they are allowed to serve in those ministry areas?**

Yes, the screening process and training should be complete before someone is allowed to have any access to children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

### **Do insurance carriers require or incentivize training?**

You should check with your insurance carrier to see what their requirements are to maintain coverage. But even if they do not require it, stay diligent in making training mandatory at your church.



# SCREEN

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*Wise choices will watch over you. Understanding will keep you safe.*

**PROVERBS 2:11 NLT**



Scan to access  
video sessions.

Once we understand our churches are at risk for incidents of sexual abuse to occur, we are called to make wise choices in the selection of those who serve children, youth, and vulnerable adults in order to create the safest environment for everyone.

While thoroughness in our hiring of staff and volunteers for children's and youth ministries requires effort, it takes seriously the duty of the shepherd to protect the flock. Increasing our levels of awareness and consistency for abuse-related prevention will not only help us hire trustworthy staff and volunteers but also make it much more difficult for abusers to have access to children, youth, and vulnerable adults in our congregations.

Sexual offenders typically do not have a visual profile. Most of the time, you would not be able to visibly recognize them or know who they are when they walk through the door. They manipulate families, church leadership, and others responsible for protecting the vulnerable into believing they are trustworthy and kind in order to gain access to victims.

Churches are often considered soft targets because of their willingness to easily accept and trust others. This is why it's strongly recommended to have a careful vetting and screening process that goes beyond a simple background check for anyone working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Remember, less than 10% of sexual offenders ever encounter the criminal justice system. While a background check is necessary, it provides limited information about an applicant from a single source. A complete screening process gathers information from multiple sources to help you wisely determine if an applicant is suitable for ministry and "screen out" those who may be a potential risk. This lowers the risk of abuse and raises the bar of safety.

***A robust screening process signals to everyone that safety is prioritized in your church ministries.***

No matter who someone is, what their position may be in the church, or who he or she may know, it's important for everyone to go through the same screening process. In today's environment, we can't skip over or "fast track" this process simply because we are in dire need of volunteers or because we already "know" someone. 93% of children who are abused are harmed by someone they know and trust.<sup>1</sup>

Working with children, youth, or vulnerable adults is not a right; it's a privilege. Be aware—there may be applicants who elect not to participate in the screening process because they think it's too time consuming, a hassle, or not necessary. This reality cannot deter us from our commitment to screening. We have a biblical responsibility to properly

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1. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement (2000).

vet anyone who will have access to vulnerable individuals in our churches and ministries in order to ensure their safety.

**Screening should include a written application, references, a background check, an internet search and social media review, and an interview.** Additionally, an applicant should be a member or regular attender at the church for at least six months prior to signing up to serve with vulnerable individuals. Requiring this waiting period allows the church to observe how the person interacts with the congregation and those with whom they form relationships—and it can also act as a deterrent for someone seeking quick access to children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

## **This five-step screening process should be used for everyone, including staff, church leadership, and volunteers.**

### **1. Written Application**

A written application allows you to gain information about a person directly from him or her in an efficient manner. The application should include basic personal data, previous residential addresses, previous paid or volunteer experience with children, youth, or vulnerable adults, and previous church attendance or membership. It should also include sensitive questions related to criminal activity and sexual abuse. This application should provide all the information necessary to run a background check and contact references. This first step begins the process of documentation that will strengthen your church's screening efforts. **(See Supplement 2: Sample Application.)**

### **2. References**

Reference checks are one of the most important tools for screening new employees or volunteers, because they help verify that people are who they say they are. However, references are not helpful unless you actually follow through on reaching out and speaking to them. A reference check should always occur prior to hiring or volunteer service. You should ask each applicant to provide three character references, one of whom can be a family member. It's best if these references are unbiased and objective. Include a disclaimer on the application that grants permission for you to contact not only the references listed but anyone else mentioned on the application who may give you pertinent information. If you have reservations after checking the provided references, consider speaking with someone from the applicant's previous church who was not listed as a reference. Document your reference calls and the information gained from each call. **(See Supplement 3: Sample Reference Check Form.)**

### **3. Background Checks**

Background checks must be conducted on all staff and volunteers over the age of 18 at regular intervals (every two, three, or five years). While background checks are critical and necessary, they are not a guarantee that a person is safe and should never be your only screening

mechanism. When choosing a background check provider, it is important to choose one that includes identity research, national database, and sex offender registry checks, at a minimum. There are more in-depth checks you can and, in some cases, should perform depending on the level of responsibility the applicant will have. Deeper checks include driving records, multi-state, and county checks. Free internet searches are not adequate background checks.

Be sure to include a Background Check Authorization Form in your written application where the applicant can consent this step of screening. **(See Supplement 4: Background Check Authorization Form.)** Refer to the Chart of Providers in the Supplements section for assistance as you look for a background check provider. **(See Supplement 1: Chart of Providers.)**

Abuse tactics and offenses are varied and occur in many different forms and degrees of severity. Background checks can highlight “Red Flag Offenses” that indicate the potential for abuse and should immediately disqualify an applicant from serving. There may be other offenses that show up on a background check that are not necessarily related to abuse but may potentially be problematic. In these cases of “Yellow Flag Offenses,” you shouldn’t move forward without further screening and questions. Each church should decide beforehand which types of offenses that may appear on a background check are acceptable and which are unacceptable for church service. Always adhere to the same set of standards for every applicant. **(See Supplement 5: Red and Yellow Flag Offenses.)**

#### 4. Internet Search/Social Media Review

In an era in which most people have an online and/or social media presence, a lot of data can be gathered simply by searching the internet or viewing social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram, X, or LinkedIn. Review an applicant’s social media content and interactions, and look for anything that could indicate improper behavior. Red flags often found on social media are inappropriate pictures, suggestive or even explicit comments, and excessive commenting on or interest in children or students. You may come across other information through a simple internet search that indicates the applicant is not a good fit for ministry service. Refer to the guidelines in the Supplements section to help with this process. **(See Supplement 6: Internet and Social Media Check Guidelines.)**

#### 5. Interview

Finally, the screening process must conclude with a personal interview. This offers an opportunity to be face to face with a potential applicant and discuss anything that might have come up throughout the screening process—on their application, from a reference call, in their background check, or in their internet/social media review. You should ask direct questions about prior jobs and volunteer service, as well as their interest in serving with children, students, or vulnerable adults.

The interview provides a time for you to share further information about your church ministries and review policies and procedures with your applicants. You should ask the potential employee or volunteer if he or she has any questions or concerns about the policies and procedures. Observing body language and responses can be helpful indicators of the applicant’s level of agreement and support regarding the policies and procedures. It’s helpful

to provide some scenarios and have the applicant tell you how he or she would respond in certain situations. Document the interview and the applicant's answers. **(See Supplement 7: Sample Interview Questions for Adult Volunteers and Volunteers under 18.)**

For most volunteers, screening will be a simple process with no red or yellow flags. In the event something is discovered during screening, the applicant must be informed by the person designated by the church to discuss the potential problems. The applicant cannot be allowed to work or volunteer in the ministry of the church until the red or yellow flags are favorably resolved.

It's important to keep all documents of the screening process in a personnel folder. Hard copies must be kept in a secure location, and digital storage must be password protected. Documentation should be kept for an indefinite amount of time. This provides proof that a screening process exists as an important safety measure.

## The screening process is the first and best line of defense to prevent abuse in our churches.

While effective screening alone is not guaranteed to prevent abuse, it plays a vital role in the larger safety system of the church. Thorough screening allows us to make wise, informed choices when granting staff and volunteers permission to serve vulnerable individuals in our churches. This may seem like a daunting task for a church with numerous volunteers, but churches of every size need to make this a priority. The better we screen staff and volunteers, the safer our churches will be.

This process will eventually become quicker and easier as you enlist new staff or volunteers. It might be helpful to find someone within the church who has exceptional administrative skills to keep the screening process organized, contact references, and become educated in reviewing background checks. Treat screening as a ministry and a way for people to contribute to the culture of safety your church is creating.

## Next Steps

- 1. CUSTOMIZE THE APPLICATION AND FORMS.** Download or copy the sample application and sample reference check forms, tailoring them to meet your church's needs. Distribute the forms to all current staff and volunteers who do not have a completed application on record, and set a deadline for the forms to be returned. Have packets of blank applications and reference check forms prepared for new applicants.
- 2. RUN BACKGROUND CHECKS FOR ALL STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS.** Once you receive their completed applications with permission to run a background check, select a provider to run the checks. If background checks on current staff or volunteers are older than five years, it's time to rerun them.
- 3. MAKE PERSONNEL FILES FOR ALL STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS.** Each staff member and volunteer should have a file that includes every step of the screening process: their application, references, background check, internet/social media review, notes from the interview process, and his or her training certification.

# SCREEN FAQs

## **How do we move our current volunteers into this new screening system?**

If current volunteers have not completed an application, have them complete one for their file. If their background checks are older than five years, rerun them. If they have not been trained in sexual abuse awareness, require them to take the training. Ask for references outside the church community, and explain why volunteers are being asked to re-apply under the new hiring and screening process.

## **What if the applicant has completed a background check recently somewhere else (e.g., new employer, community volunteer, teacher)?**

It's recommended to run your own background check through your selected provider. That way, you have proof of the process and can view the results personally.

## **Why ask the personal questions about abuse on the application?**

Serving with children, students, and vulnerable adults comes with a high level of responsibility. Staff and volunteers may witness signs and symptoms of abuse or hear disclosures of abuse. It's important to make sure past experiences will not hinder someone from following your policies and procedures regarding reporting.

## **Why do we need to screen students under the age of 18?**

Everyone who has access to children, including older children, must be screened. Screening conveys a message of the importance of safety and responsibility. It's good practice for youth who will eventually be screened for employment one day. Also, peer-to-peer abuse is rampant. While we cannot effectively run background checks on those under the age of 18, we can and should implement the other four screening measures.

## **How long do we need to keep documents?**

Due to the recent trend of lifting statutes of limitations, it's important for churches to maintain documentation indefinitely.

## **How many references should we ask for?**

Always ask for at least three references.

## **Why should we ask for both male and female references?**

It is good to have different perspectives from the opposite sex in order to understand how the individual interacts with someone of the opposite sex.

## **Why should we ask for one reference to be a family member?**

Family members can usually provide a broader picture of an applicant's personality and behavior over a longer span of time.

## **Should we call or email references?**

It is highly preferred to speak to someone on the phone, but emailed responses are acceptable.

## **What questions can and should we ask references?**

Please refer to **Supplement 3: Sample Reference Check Form**.

## **How often should we run background checks?**

Background checks should be rerun every two to five years.

## **Do we need permission to run a background check?**

Yes, you will need to get written permission, and it must be in compliance with relevant state and federal laws including the Fair Credit Reporting Act. (The provider you choose should give you all the necessary documents to be in compliance.)

## **What steps do we take if we turn down an applicant because of something on his or her background check?**

You need to be in compliance with relevant state and federal laws including the Fair Credit Reporting Act. You also need to clearly document the reasons why the applicant was turned down."

## **How long should interviews be?**

The length of the interview isn't as important as the information you gather. You should determine which questions you feel are important and let that list of questions guide your conversation. Always allow time for applicants to ask questions about policies and procedures.

# PROTECT

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*Keep me safe, Lord, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent, who devise ways to trip my feet.*

**PSALM 140:4 NIV**



Scan to access  
video sessions.

**Churches must create and implement policies that protect children, youth, and vulnerable adults from grooming and abuse.** Effective policies and procedures show the ways in which a church is actively working to keep its congregation safe. They are also designed for the safety of the staff and volunteers while they are serving. When we create policies that put the safety of the people first, we inevitably protect the church as well. The church's main priority should be its people, not organizational liability. Solid policies and their implementation help us garner trust in our congregations and our communities. However, policies and procedures are only effective when they are implemented and followed.

Having well-written policies in place that are followed by everyone demonstrates a level of commitment to safety and accountability. It communicates that your church is aware that the vulnerable are at risk and that you've taken the time to think through the best ways to protect them. **Your policies and procedures should be a representation of what you actually implement and follow, not just words on paper.**

There are many things to consider when drafting policies and procedures. Some providers and insurance companies can supply you with sample policies and procedures to start with or to build from, or you may want to contact another church in your area or your association or state convention for samples and guidance. A downloadable sample policies and procedures document is provided for you in the Took Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) and on the Essentials thumb drive.

Policies are often seen as just a way to protect an organization from future liability. Sometimes, churches avoid creating written policies for fear that any deviation from them could be used against them. Organizational liability should not be our primary filter when creating—or avoiding—good safety policies. **As God's people, we should prioritize protecting the vulnerable over risk management, people over the organization. Good policies are a way to love and care for people by keeping them safe from harm.**

Be aware, perpetrators are not concerned with following the rules, which is why the implementation and enforcement of these policies are so critical. Policies and procedures are another layer of protection for the vulnerable. Should someone with ill intent make it through your screening process, the enforcement of solid policies will hopefully prevent an incident of abuse.

Effective policies and procedures alone are not guaranteed to prevent abuse, but they play a critical role in the larger prevention system encompassed in these essential steps. While drafting good policies and procedures requires a lot of work, it's time well spent. Following good policies and responding well to violations of those policies are ways to show

love to those you serve, keep them safe, and protect them. Be patient through this process, and remain committed to completing these steps for the safety of vulnerable individuals in your congregation and the volunteers who serve them. Your church and every person who walks through your doors will be safer because of your efforts.

## Five important guidelines for developing or reevaluating your church's policies and procedures:

### 1. Policies and procedures need to be tailored to your church.

If you decide to use sample documents, you need to view them as a starting place. You shouldn't simply replace another church's name with yours and consider the work done. Every church is different. They have different leadership structures, demographics, ministries, volunteer requirements, and are even built differently. State reporting laws vary, so it's important to educate yourself on what your specific state requires and ensure your policies reflect that so any reporting is done properly, should incidents of abuse be discovered. While it's important to tailor your policies to fit your church and your ministries, it's equally important to craft policies that are feasible and realistic. Don't create policies that you don't intend to follow.

### 2. Policies and procedures should be written with awareness of the risk of certain types of offenders and their grooming patterns.

**While we would like to think we could recognize dangerous people or sexual predators when they walk through our doors, most have no visual profile.** Preferential offenders—those who have a clear and consistent preference for sexual contact with children, typically of a specific age and gender—pose the biggest risk to our congregations and often look like everyone else, many even having families and children of their own. We must be knowledgeable about the characteristics of these offenders and the behaviors they employ to deceive both adults and children. These are referred to as grooming patterns (see page 13 for more information on grooming patterns/behaviors).

When leaders understand grooming patterns, they can write and implement policies that potentially stop abuse before it starts. *For example, once a preferential offender has targeted a child, they will often use tactics like meeting a need or giving gifts and treats to win favor and gain trust. Your church can write and implement policies such as no gift giving to individual children or students. If someone is caught violating that policy, pushing the boundaries as these offenders do, he or she can be stopped in the grooming process before physical abuse has a chance to happen. Another tactic offenders often use is isolation, so it's imperative to have a policy that no adult can ever be alone with a minor.* Unless you and all those who serve with children and youth are educated in sexual abuse awareness, policies like these might sound unnecessary or over the top. But the risk is real. This is why training is so important: It provides a foundational understanding that guides us in the creation and implementation of policies and procedures that actually help minimize the risk.

Policies and procedures, when written with this knowledge, can be a deterrent for these types of offenders or for anyone who might try to harm minors. Once they see policies in place that directly prohibit tactics used in the grooming process, they may decide it's too hard to navigate through them and go somewhere else where the barriers are lower.



### 3. All leadership, staff, and volunteers should be aware of and commit to following your policies and procedures AFTER they have been trained in sexual abuse awareness and BEFORE they begin serving.

Before people have access to minors, they must read and agree to abide by your policies and procedures. But training is the FIRST key to understanding the policies, the reasons behind them, and how following them protects everyone. Going back to the previous example of gift giving as part of the grooming process, unless they understand that reality, the policy may seem unnecessary. With that understanding, they are more apt to abide by the policies put in place, notice when someone may be pushing the boundaries, and understand why that needs to be brought immediately to the attention of church leadership. **Your policies and procedures need to be followed by everyone, all the time—no exceptions!**

Once you've given your staff and volunteers the policies and procedures and they have read through them, have them sign an acknowledgment that they commit to abide by them. Keep this documentation for your records.

**It's important to note that these policies are not only designed to protect children but, when properly implemented, to help provide a level of protection for staff and volunteers against false allegations.**

Unfortunately, the problem is often not that there was no policy in place but that it wasn't being followed. That's why it's important to present staff and volunteers with the policies and procedures *after* they have been trained to understand the risk and *before* they are allowed to serve with minors.

You need to lay out clear directions for how to report a policy violation and the consequences for those violations. Openly stating what the consequences for broken policies are will allow you to swiftly remove someone who could potentially be a threat to vulnerable individuals. Creating, implementing, and consistently following good policies—and responding quickly to violations—will help you diligently protect and shepherd your congregation.

### 4. Staff and volunteers should be trained on policies and procedures.

Take every opportunity to remind and train your staff and volunteers about the policies you have in place. A great place to introduce or review the policies and procedures is in the interview step of the screening process (**see page 18 for more on the interview process**). It's also helpful to review the policies before major events involving children, youth, and vulnerable adults such as VBS or summer camp. It's highly recommended that you review your policies and procedures with your staff and volunteers every year. We also encourage you to share your policies with your congregation and the parents of those you serve. **It's a way to build trust and foster a culture of safety.** Any time policies are updated or new ones are added, notify staff/volunteers of those changes immediately.

### 5. Policies and procedures should be reviewed annually.

Have the safety team you assembled review your policies annually and update them if anything changes in your church. You may want to create additional policies if you become aware of new risks. For example, if you want to start a youth mentoring program, the one-on-one

setting in which mentoring usually takes place creates risk. You'll need to add policies and procedures for that ministry and how it functions. Similarly, a new building addition may change the way a ministry meets or functions.

**Annual reviews also allow for input on the feasibility of policies.** Can they be practically implemented as written? Remember, you don't want to write policies that you can't actually follow. Are they worded in such a way that they are followed properly?

Ask for policy feedback from parents, staff, and volunteers. As you involve everyone in the process, you continue to build a culture of safety and trust.

Reviews also provide a time to reflect on policy violations and incidents that may have occurred throughout the year, assessing how effectively those were handled and determining if a policy needs to be adjusted or amended.

**Don't neglect this annual review.** This allows policies to remain fresh and current. Each annual review will only strengthen and solidify your policies. Be sure to include in your policies the fact that they will be reviewed annually, and list the date of the most recent review on your policy.

You may also choose to seek outside reviews of your policies and procedures from your insurance company, an expert at your local association or state convention, or another industry professional. Once you've made any additions, updates, or amendments to your policy as a result of your annual review, make sure you share the new version with everyone and replace all old files with the new.

## Basic Policies

Now that you have guidelines for policies and procedures, here are some very basic things you must include in your policy. **This list is not exhaustive**, but it's a great place to start.

### Check-In/Check-Out Policy

We want to make sure children go home with the right people! Only release children to parents, legal guardians, or specific adults designated by parents/guardians on documentation.

### Two-Deep Policy

Require at least two adults (over the age of 18), preferably with no family connection, to be present with children, youth, or vulnerable adults in all circumstances.

### "Known to Your Church" Policy

Staff and volunteers should be known to your church for a designated length of time—many experts suggest six months or more—and by a specified number of leaders to be eligible to serve with children, youth, or vulnerable adults. Sometimes this policy alone will deter offenders seeking quick access to vulnerable people. This policy should not be used as a substitute for full and proper screening.

### Hall Monitor Policy

Designate a volunteer to walk through the building during service times to ensure that no one is alone anywhere with a child, youth, or vulnerable adult.

## Open-Door Policy

Have an open-door policy at your church. This means that unless the door has an unobstructed window, it must remain open. This prevents areas of seclusion that could easily be utilized for abuse.

## Online/Social Media and Digital Communication Policy

Determine guidelines for acceptable social media and digital communication between adults and minors, and include all online and mobile platforms. Any form of digital communication with minors must be approved by parents and church leadership and provide a level of transparency and accountability by including other adults. No single adult should be communicating with minors via text, social media, group chat, or any other platform.

## Transportation Policy

It's important to establish a policy regarding transportation to and from church events that prevents one-on-one settings. The two-deep policy used for church facilities and events applies to methods of transportation as well—a minor should never be alone in a vehicle with an adult leader. This policy prevents opportunities for predators disguised as volunteers to gain access to victims under the guise of being “helpful” by offering rides.

## Respect for Child's Privacy Policy

Specific policy needs to be set regarding bathrooms, diapering, and changing clothes. Ensure that children and youth are guaranteed privacy from both adults and other children when changing or using the restroom. These policies should be applicable to off-site church settings such as camps and retreats as well.

## Overnight Policy

The two-deep policy should be maintained for all overnight activities. Additionally, female staff or volunteers should chaperone girls during overnight activities, and male staff or volunteers should chaperone boys during overnight activities. Sleeping arrangements should prohibit any adult from sharing a bed with minors or having only one adult sleeping in a room with minors. Avoid any times of isolation between an adult and a minor.

## Workers under the Age of 18

Youth volunteers must be trained in sexual abuse awareness—with a parent's permission and oversight. While it's important to involve youth in serving opportunities at church, it's also important to recognize that with that service comes a high level of responsibility. Younger children may confide in an older student and disclose abuse. Youth should be trained to know what to do with that information and be prepared to report it. They need to be included in any volunteer training regarding policies and procedures and must agree to abide by them. Clear expectations must be set for what they can and can't do in their serving role.

## Reporting and Recording Policy Violations and Abuse

Your policies should identify a clear process for staff and volunteers to report and record policy violations and any suspicions or witnessing of abuse. This applies to both reporting externally to legal authorities and internally to church leadership. All states have differing laws, so you need to know what your state requires regarding reporting. The REPORT section of this booklet will provide helpful information on creating a response plan and reporting.

Finally, no matter the size of your church, it's helpful to designate a **child safety coordinator** and put together a safety team to develop, review, and implement policies and procedures that help prevent abuse. This team should be made up of both church staff and members whose backgrounds could contribute expertise or a unique perspective to the area of abuse prevention. For example, consider members of your congregation with backgrounds in law enforcement, human resources, social work, counseling, law, or education. It would be valuable to consider a church member who is an abuse survivor and is at a stage in his or her recovery where this would be a healthy experience for them. The team should include both men and women who are familiar with all aspects of your church, its ministries, and facilities. No matter their background or level of experience, each of these team members should go through the screening process outlined in the prior screening section and be trained in sexual abuse awareness and prevention before serving on the team.

## Next Steps

**1. CREATE A SAFETY TEAM.** Identify people in your church who can help create policies and procedures that are tailored to your church.

**2. BUILD OR REVISE YOUR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES DOCUMENT.**

A downloadable sample policies and procedures document is provided for you in the Took Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) and on the Essentials thumb drive. If you already have policies and procedures regarding abuse prevention, have the safety team review them in light of the information provided in this book and video trainings. Agree on any changes or additions that need to be made, and produce a final document that includes the date of creation.

**3. HAVE CHURCH LEADERSHIP REVIEW AND APPROVE THE FINAL DOCUMENT.** Once your team has finalized your tailored policies and procedures, make sure church leadership looks over the document carefully and approves it.

**4. INTRODUCE YOUR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES.** Copy and distribute your document to your church. This is a great opportunity to address this issue directly from the pulpit, recognizing your safety team's effort and dedication to the prevention of abuse. Hold a training for church leadership and current staff and volunteers to go over these policies and procedures. Document their training, and require staff and volunteers to agree in writing to abide by all policies and procedures.

# PROTECT FAQs

## **How extensive should our policies and procedures be?**

It depends on what is necessary and relevant to your church. A downloadable policies and procedures checklist is available in the Took Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) and on the Essentials thumb drive.

## **Should legal counsel review our policies and procedures?**

Yes, legal review is strongly recommended to be certain your policies and procedures are in compliance with state and federal laws.

## **Should we post our policies and procedures online?**

Yes. This demonstrates transparency and promotes trust with parents and caregivers for vulnerable adults, and it may be a more immediate deterrent for potential predators.

## **How often should we review our policies and procedures?**

Policies and procedures should be reviewed annually. However, should something change at your church throughout the year (e.g., adding new ministries, new ministry leadership, etc.), the policies will need to be revisited at that time.

## **Should we have a detailed abuse response plan in addition to our policies and procedures?**

Yes. A well-thought-out response plan should include more than a phone number to call. You should establish a step-by-step process for responding and reporting. A downloadable sample response plan is available in the Took Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) and on the Essentials thumb drive.

## **Should we consult our insurance carrier regarding our policies and procedures?**

Yes, it is good practice to consult your insurance carrier.

## **What is a child safety coordinator?**

This person usually leads the safety team in charge of the creation and implementation of your policies and procedures. They oversee the entire five-step process laid out in this book. This individual should be knowledgeable about every step of the process.

## **Should we insure our church against sexual misconduct?**

Yes.



# REPORT

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*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

**PROVERBS 31:8-9 NIV**



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video sessions.

The next step that a church needs to take is learning how to report. This is a topic that can seem overwhelming, difficult, and complicated, yet God's Word clearly lays out a biblical mandate to speak up for the vulnerable and defend their rights. That is what this REPORT essential is all about. It is critical that every church has a written plan in place to communicate with both the appropriate government authorities and the church in the event of an abuse allegation. **This essential has three main goals:**

## **1. Address the reporting process and steps for both internal and external reporting**

- Awareness of the state's relevant laws, requirements, and definitions of abuse
- Cooperation with government agencies and law enforcement

## **2. Provide a road map for what to do when a disclosure of sexual abuse is made**

- Important details and provisions to include in policies and procedures
- Safety considerations in the reporting process

## **3. Address frequently asked questions and common mistakes**

This information is not a replacement for legal advice. It is intended to provide a framework for reporting and overall guidance from a legal and biblical perspective.

# The External Reporting Process

This must be done first!

## What is sexual abuse?

Many times, sexual abuse involves physical acts. However, not all sexual abuse involves physical touching. Explicit texting, exposing minors or vulnerable adults to obscene/inappropriate images, inappropriate sexual conversations or verbal statements, and sexual requests all fall under the category of sexual abuse and constitute reporting. Be aware of how your state laws define types of sexual abuse. When a disclosure is made, consider: Does the abusive act fit your state's legal definition of sexual abuse?

## WHAT to Report?

It's important to note that reporting abuse is not a declaration of guilt or final judgment but a request for investigation. Three things call for external reporting: a disclosure of abuse, a suspicion of abuse, or a witness to abuse.

## What is a disclosure of abuse?

A disclosure is made when a minor or vulnerable adult tells another person that they have been abused. Disclosures of suspected abuse or witnessed abuse can also be made by other observers. In rare cases, a disclosure may be made by the offender themselves.

## Suspensions of Abuse

The standard is that reporting should take place whenever there is reasonable suspicion that abuse has occurred. Note that you do NOT have to have evidence, confirmation, or proof of abuse to report a suspicion. The focus is on whether there is "reason to believe" that abuse occurred. These suspicions might include an indirect disclosure—not always from the victim themselves—or a situation where the identity of the abuser is unknown.

The primary question or hesitation most leaders have is, "What if this is a false allegation?"

**False allegations of sexual abuse are extremely rare.** It is far more likely that the allegation is true. It's **NOT** your role to determine whether the allegation is true or false. Treat every disclosure as credible. Remember, a report is not a finding of guilt or final judgment; it is a request for investigation, which every victim of sexual abuse deserves.



## Handling a Disclosure from a Child

- **SAFETY** of the child who disclosed must be the number one priority. Depending on the situation, this may involve removing the child from the current area, separating him or her from the abuser, or even calling 911.
- **REMAIN CALM AND LISTEN** with humility, empathy, and compassion.
- **AFFIRM** the victim's choice to disclose the abuse and their courage to tell someone.
- **BELIEVE THE VICTIM.** What has happened to the victim is not OK and NOT their fault. Assure them that they are not "in trouble."
- **DON'T MAKE A PROMISE YOU CANNOT KEEP.** Never tell someone that you will not share what they disclose. Emphasize that their safety is your top priority. The right people will be told to help keep the child safe.
- **ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS** rather than leading or specific questions. Listen only to the information offered. Don't pressure victims to offer anything further.
- **SUMMARIZE** and clarify what you hear from the child to ensure you have understood the disclosure.
- **DOCUMENT** the disclosure on a "Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form" immediately following the disclosure or suspected abuse. Include in your documentation the facts (when the abuse happened, who was involved, what took place, etc.) and any direct quotes from the child that you can remember. Use the form to record and prepare notes for making the official report. (See Supplement 8: Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form.)

## WHO should Report?

Each state has mandated reporting laws for known or suspected abuse, and who is classified as a mandated reporter can vary state to state. Some states only require the reporter to be a legal adult, while other states may have a more extensive list of qualifications. Depending on your state laws, this may include pastors, volunteers, parents, and staff members. The majority of states designate as mandated reporters **all adults** over the age of 18 who provide care for and/or have custody of a child. If you're not sure about the qualifications for your state, rest assured you will never get in trouble for reporting.

While the law sets the **minimum** standard for reporting to ensure child safety, as the church we can and should go above the call of the law. **When in doubt, REPORT.** There is a link to the reporting laws for each state in the Tool Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com).

Whoever receives the disclosure or suspects/witnesses abuse should report it. They don't have to do it alone. The person reporting may seek help in filing the report. The church can designate certain people to assist reporters, guide them, and provide moral support. However, the person offering assistance should **never** attempt to influence a reporter regarding whether or not to report.

## Important information for the reporter to know:

1. Legal obligation is not satisfied merely by reporting suspected abuse to the church. Remember: Reporting must always take place both internally AND externally. If you only report internally, you run the risk of the disclosure not being legally reported or potentially delayed unnecessarily.
2. The identity and personal information of the reporter is kept confidential and, in limited circumstances, only revealed to authorities/law enforcement for investigative purposes. (Be aware that it is possible that a suspected abuser might figure out who has reported due to the details given by the reporter.)

## WHERE to make the Report?

Always prioritize safety! If the victim is in imminent danger, call 911. The abuser may need to be escorted from the premises by law enforcement. Proceed carefully, as it is hard to predict how the abuser will react when confronted or found out. He or she could be a harm to others or themselves.

It is advisable to notify both CPS and law enforcement to ensure a report is carried forward. Please note that CPS often has limited jurisdiction since they deal primarily with the safety of children. Many states and counties also have local Child Advocacy Centers that can provide guidance and support in the reporting process. They often work in conjunction with multiple agencies and law enforcement.

Provide details about the alleged abuse. Refer to the notes made on the “Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form” for help. (**See Supplement 8: Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form.**) It’s OK to only have partial information. You do not need “proof” or “evidence.” Report with the information available to you. It’s OK to say, “I don’t know,” or “I’m not sure.” If the identity of the alleged perpetrator is known, be prepared to share any pertinent information you may have (e.g., current location, contact information, role at the church, current access to other children, etc.).

## WHEN to Report?

How quickly you need to report can vary from state to state. Generally, you should report immediately or as soon as possible. Know your specific state’s requirements, and be sure to note them in your reporting procedure documents.

## Additional Best Practices for Reporting

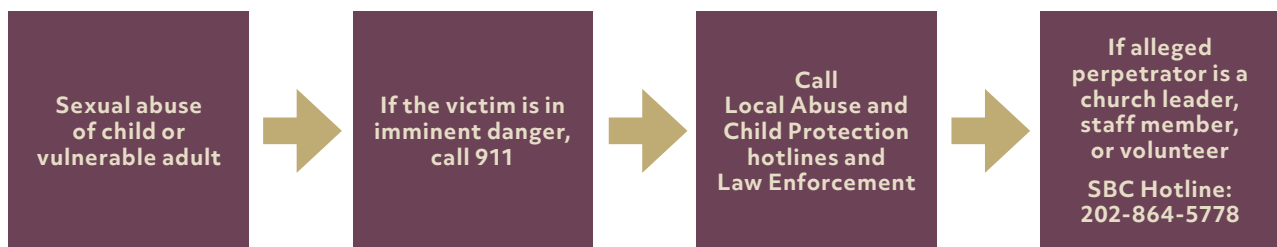
Have a predetermined, step-by-step procedure in place for reporting externally. A reporter should never have to wonder what to do in the midst of an abuse disclosure. Throughout the reporting process, you will be required to cooperate in any ongoing investigation, but remember that it’s OK for you to ask questions and provide input too.

You may ask questions such as when the alleged abuser will be informed that a report has been made or whether or not an order of protection is in place. Inform law enforcement/CPS that other families in the church will also need to be notified as soon as possible if the abuse occurred at the church or by a staff member or volunteer.

Timing can be crucial. Any communication to your church body should be done in consultation with law enforcement and perhaps a trusted child protective expert.

# The Internal Church Reporting Process

Having a written internal reporting plan is crucial. Without a plan in place, chaos can quickly erupt in the midst of an incident. For everyone's safety and privacy, confidentiality must be maintained. Leaders, staff, and volunteers should know exactly who to contact within the church if they need to make a report. And they should only contact the specific people designated in the plan—no one else. Once it's determined that a report needs to be made, there must be a clear process for what to do next with the information.



Every person designated as contacts on the internal reporting plan should be involved in implementing next steps throughout the process. No one voice should control the situation. All parties involved must take reports of abuse seriously and seek the church's genuine, transparent response and compassion in addressing these incidents.

**Follow the plan and predetermined step-by-step process, no matter who the alleged abuser is in the church.** This can be difficult sometimes, as there may be personal biases, interests, or loyalty to the alleged abuser. Abusers are often known to the church and considered trusted, likable individuals.

## WHEN to share information?

Take guidance from state and local agencies regarding sharing information with those within the church (other parents, leaders, etc.) while maintaining transparency as a priority.

The church must always maintain the integrity of the investigation. Allow law enforcement/CPS to do their job, and wait for an outcome. The process is sometimes resolved quickly but can often take much longer.

## WHAT can be shared?

Once you have considered who needs to know for safety purposes, reveal only as much information as is absolutely necessary, because confidentiality is crucial for safety and respect.

Church members, families, and volunteers may ask about the identity of the victim. They may understandably be upset or fearful and demand details. It's imperative that the church keep confidential the identities of the victim and any witnesses to the abuse.

### Some general information you may share:

1. Type of abuse (e.g., sexual acts, sexually explicit conversations and/or texting, child pornography, etc.) (This may help to alert and identify red flags for other potential victims.)
2. Context of abuse (e.g., church retreat, youth group, specific classroom, or nonchurch context)
3. Instructions for providing further information (contact for the detective, CPS worker, etc.)
4. Boundaries that have been established for the alleged abuser to help alleviate fears and assure families their children are safe (no longer on premises, removed from role, etc.)

## Reporting internally to congregation

In most cases, it is necessary to inform the church in order to protect children and potential future victims. This is also an opportunity for other victims to be identified. With sexual abuse, it is highly unlikely that there is only one victim, so be prepared for this information to trigger further disclosures. When there are numerous victims, the investigation may be carried out for all relevant incidents at the same time. Each testimony provides a larger picture for law enforcement and prosecutors as to the depth, span, and timeline of abuse. Multiple victims being willing to come forward may make the difference in law enforcement's ability to make a formal arrest or for the case to proceed.



## Tips on reporting to the congregation

- Consider how you're going to inform families, members, or those who have participated in the affected ministries.
- Notify families whose children were possibly exposed to the alleged abuser and other families who had a connection to the alleged abuser, including nonmembers or attendees.
- Report only the facts, and avoid any conclusory statements.
- Make it clear the church will be cooperating in an investigation, the outcome of which has not yet been determined.
- Explain that law enforcement will require the cooperation of staff and church members.
- Designate two people to be point persons within the church for questions and support. (It's a good idea to have both a male and a female.)
- Provide resources for help and support. This is a traumatic event for church members, whether or not their family is directly impacted.

It's important to note that the decision to communicate with the congregation and how you go about it send an important message. Informing the congregation makes it clear that the church's primary interest is not its own image or reputation; the church's priority is the safety and protection of children. It should also communicate to other victims of sexual abuse that they will be believed, heard, and cared for if they speak up about their experience.

To prepare to effectively shepherd and minister to your church body, it's recommended you have a predetermined, written, step-by-step procedure in place.

## Building a Step-by-Step Response Plan

To begin formulating a roadmap and procedure for responding to a disclosure, utilize the safety team recommended on page 27 in the PROTECT session.

**First, collect and compile contacts—phone numbers for local CPS, law enforcement, and statewide hotlines.** All of this contact information is specific to your location. Incorporate these contacts into your step-by-step procedure, and make it available to staff and volunteers.

**Next, begin to customize a step-by-step response plan.** A downloadable sample response plan is provided for you in the Took Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) and on the Essentials thumb drive. The plan should include steps for reporting both externally and internally. This documented plan must be created in addition to your policies and procedures. You may invite the input of child protective experts and those of various professions or expertise. Determine the chain of communication for reporting internally to leadership. This should be approved by church leadership and then incorporated into all training, volunteer materials, and/or handbooks.

Your finalized response plan **MUST** be accompanied with training staff, leaders, and volunteers how to recognize and respond to abuse. Everyone should know the exact steps for reporting. This will eliminate panic or uncertainty as to what to do when a disclosure is made by a victim or when abuse is witnessed/suspected.

**Finally, use the “Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form” or another similar method for documentation. (See Supplement 8: Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form.)** Proper documentation is critical for two main reasons: first, to have proof of compliance with mandated reporting laws and second, so the suspected abuse is documented for future reference. If the church were to have turnover and staff or volunteers changed, it would be important for church leadership to be aware of the situation if the perpetrator were to return to the church—or if the investigation concluded and no findings or actions were taken. In addition to the “Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form,” always make detailed records of dates, times, and the “who, what, when, where” when corresponding with CPS, detectives, and law enforcement. This practice ensures important details are written down and will not get lost or forgotten in the midst of chaos.

When a report of abuse surfaces in our church or our community, we are confronted with a decision on how we are going to respond both individually and as a body of believers. You will be confronted with the undeniable and difficult tension of ministry versus liability. But the core of why we report and how we respond is, at its most basic level, a gospel issue. Because of this, even in the midst of tension, grief, and chaos, we must exhibit a courageous and loving response. We must be courageous in the sense that we confront, address, and put an end to sin. We can do this for others because it has already been done for us. The same courage and care were exhibited through Christ’s work on the cross. We see in Roman 3:26 that Jesus is both just and the justifier. Through His own Son, God courageously confronted humanity’s sin and yet, at the same time, comforted those very same people in need. And we’ve been called to live the same way, because that is exactly what we have received in the gospel.

## Next Steps

- 1. COLLECT AND COMPILE LOCAL CPS, LAW ENFORCEMENT, AND STATE HOTLINE INFORMATION.** Get to know your state’s laws regarding reporting abuse. Refer to the Tool Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) for state specific laws and phone numbers.
- 2. CREATE A STEP-BY-STEP RESPONSE PLAN.** This will be in addition to your established policies and procedures. Your response plan must be more in depth than a simple list of numbers to call. Include all external AND internal reporting steps. Refer to the sample response plan provided in the Took Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) or on the Essentials thumb drive as a starting place. As with the policies and procedures process, tailor the plan to fit your church. Also, attach the “Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form” to your plan. **(See Supplement 8: Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form.)** Make sure all staff, leaders, and volunteers have access to it and know how to fill it out.
- 3. TRAIN ALL CURRENT STAFF, LEADERS, AND VOLUNTEERS ON THE RESPONSE PLAN.** Make sure everyone knows exactly what to do, when to do it, and whom to inform and contact. A plan can only be useful if everyone knows how to execute it.

# REPORT FAQs

## What do we do if nothing comes of the report or no investigation is made?

Regardless of whether or not an investigation or criminal action commences, the church cannot ignore any inappropriate behavior and must take some sort of action. This may mean consulting an outside expert or hiring an outside agency to conduct an independent investigation. Having a written policy/procedure is extremely helpful when handling such a scenario. Ultimately, the church's decision on how to shepherd and protect the children in its congregation cannot be dependent upon the status or result of a law enforcement investigation. Protective measures must still be in place while awaiting the outcome of an investigation or when an investigation does not move forward.

## Should a church first try to determine if an allegation actually happened before reporting?

**No, you should always report immediately following a disclosure.** Ministering to those harmed by sin is the church's responsibility, and exploration of a potential crime is the role of the government/local law enforcement. The church and its leaders may be inclined to attempt to conduct a preliminary assessment or investigation to determine if the allegation has any truth to it before reporting. This is inappropriate and is problematic for a few reasons:

- Church leaders are not properly trained to conduct trauma-informed interviews with victims and do not have the knowledge necessary to fully assess abuse situations.
- Any delay of reporting can result in the loss, tampering, or destruction of evidence.
- If the alleged abuser is tipped off that a report is being made, they may take advantage of any delay in reporting to threaten or pressure a victim to remain silent.
- Delay in reporting is, in many cases, a violation of the law.
- By attempting to conduct an internal investigation or hinder a professional investigation, a church could actually expose itself to liability.

## What if it's an old allegation and the victim is now an adult but was a child when the abuse happened?

Mandatory reporting obligations on this issue are different in every jurisdiction. Be certain to respond to the disclosure in the same ways previously mentioned (listen, believe, encourage, etc.). For adults who were sexually abused as children, many states waive the statute of limitations, allowing victims to report and file claims as adults. Again, this is state specific. For your purposes, the most important consideration is: **Does the abuser still have access to minors**, or could they easily gain access? This question is important no matter how long ago the abuse occurred.

If any minor is in potential danger of victimization, refer back to your mandatory reporting procedures. Maybe the abuser is attending a different church now. Many abusers move between churches with no accountability and are given access to minors over and over again. Sometimes abusers serve at numerous churches/ministries at one time without the church leaders' knowledge. **When in doubt, report.** The goal is always safety and to prevent abuse of other victims.

## What do we do with the alleged perpetrator if that person serves in the church?

This is the most likely scenario, as offenders often tend to be actively involved in their faith community in order to gain trust and access to children. Acknowledge that your reflexive response (and the response of other leaders, staff, and volunteers) may be personal prejudice, shock, and disbelief. **You must be objective.** Remember that **safety is the highest priority.** Remove the alleged perpetrator from ministry immediately. Do not allow the person on church premises or at any church-related activities, especially when children are present. A victim should never be forced to attend church with their alleged abuser. If the case escalates quickly, there might also be a relevant criminal or civil Order of Protection put in place that would prevent the victim and the abuser from being in the same vicinity.

## Do we tell a family member that a report is being made regarding their child?

It depends. You are not required by law to notify the family that you have made a report, but you should take various safety considerations into account when determining whether or not to notify the family. It's not always straightforward. For example, you are not always aware of the full scope of the abuse. Abuse situations can be complicated, and even though you are aware of the facts of the disclosure, you do not know the full picture or potential implications.

For example, if the child is being abused by a parent, alerting the parents about the report could be potentially dangerous for the child. Always consider whether the family's knowledge of the report could result in an immediate safety concern to the child, other children, or spouse. A parent/guardian may in some cases be notified after a report is made; for example, a child may need to be accompanied to and seen immediately at a Child Advocacy Center for collection of physical or medical evidence. Ultimately, if you're unsure whether or not you should inform the family, consult a professional. Law enforcement/CPS can provide guidance as well.



## Where do we find our state's reporting laws?

[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org) — Click on “Public Policy,” then “Laws in Your State.”  
[www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/)

## Should we notify our insurance carrier if we make a report of abuse that happened in the church?

Yes.

## How do we find out the results of the report we made?

You should contact the CPS worker, law enforcement officer, prosecutor, or detective involved (as applicable) and request an update. For reports of child abuse, CPS often has a specific time period within which they must determine a case as founded, unfounded, etc. This time period varies from state to state. If there is a criminal court case, information such as case status and future trial dates may be available and accessible as public record, depending on your state.

## How do we know if we should report to law enforcement or Child Protective Services?

If the victim is in immediate danger, call 911. A church must follow their state's reporting laws. However, in order to ensure a report is followed through by the proper authorities, it is recommended to make the report to **both law enforcement and CPS**.

## Do we report peer-to-peer abuse?

This depends on a number of different factors, including your state laws. It is advisable to consult your state reporting hotline, child protective expert, or local CPS concerning cases where the alleged abuser is also a minor. Additionally, there is always a chance that the alleged abusing child could also be a victim of sexual abuse, which is often evidenced by non-age-appropriate sexualized behavior. However, the determination in such a situation is best addressed by an expert. The disclosure should not simply be dismissed by the church based on the age of the alleged abuser.

## **How do we handle a known sex offender who wants to attend our church?**

**The protection and needs of children and survivors must come first.** One option is to require sex offenders to sign a written contract that sets clear boundaries relating to any church-related services, volunteering, and functions, along with resulting consequences for failing to abide by these boundaries. If truly repentant, a sex offender should understand, support, and abide by these limitations, accepting the accountability for the safety and protection of others. A sample Sex Offender Attendance Policy can be found here: <https://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/risk-management-forms/sample-sex-offender-attendance-policy/>.

## **What do we do if someone reports something but it's not a "crime"?**

It is not for your church to determine whether or not something constitutes a crime. This must be left to professionals. The action may sometimes fall within the category of "grooming" but not meet the required legal standard for a crime. In such a situation, the authorities may choose not to arrest, prosecute, or investigate further. No matter what law enforcement decides in this situation, it helps to have clearly articulated boundaries within your policies and procedures that identify certain behavior, conduct, or statements as requiring the alleged offender's removal from their place of service or volunteer position.

## **What if a parent does not want us make a report concerning their child?**

Explain to the parent you are obligated by law to make a report. In many cases, the external report should be made first—before notifying the parent. However, it may be advisable to notify the parent and make the report simultaneously. Explain to the parent that they are not powerless and they can follow up with the local agency or law enforcement. Their child should not be interviewed without their knowledge, and they can be a part of the entire process. If the parent is the alleged perpetrator, you absolutely must not notify them.

# CARE

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*The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*

**PSALM 9:9 NIV**



Scan to access  
video sessions.

When a report of abuse is entrusted to church leaders, we must shepherd victims, their families, the congregation, and sometimes the abuser through this difficult and disorienting time. As the Body of Christ, the church is called to represent God for who He says He is—and He is for the oppressed and for the brokenhearted (Luke 4:18-19). Church leadership should seek to have a biblically grounded approach that prioritizes the care and safety of the victim.

**The church's response in supporting survivors of sexual abuse will either accurately reflect the character of Jesus Christ or misrepresent Him, thereby bringing harm to the survivor, congregation, and abuser.**

Training, screening, and protecting are preventative measures. They require forethought, intentional implementation, and ongoing refinement to ensure they stay up-to-date as a church grows and effective for their intended purpose rather than providing a false sense of security. Reporting is done when we cross the threshold of “reasonable suspicion” about the abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult.

But even when these steps are completed, the role of the church is not finished. While we have a governmental mandate to report abuse, we have a God-given mandate to care for our congregation. That involves the victim, the alleged offender, if he or she is a member of our church, and the congregation as a whole.

The previous session on reporting provided guidance for receiving an abuse disclosure from a child. Keep that guidance in mind as we explore how to navigate that conversation and care for a victim.

## **The following is a model for how to approach a conversation with the victim.**

This conversation assumes the victim is a minor. In addition to this written model, video segments of these conversations are available in the Tool Kit at [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) and on the Essentials thumb drive if you feel you need further assistance/training or to help facilitate a conversation.

Once the young person indicates they want to share something weighty that may involve a history of abuse, there are two things to do right away. First, move the conversation to an area that ensures privacy but has enough visibility that the child does not feel like they are being coaxed into another compromising position. Then, affirm their courage to tell someone what happened, and let them know you may need to share what they confide in you with some other safe grown-ups (authorities) to ensure their protection.

“Thank you for trusting us and sharing what happened to you. You are very brave. I know you might feel nervous, but you’ve done the right thing so you can be in a safer situation and be cared for. As a church, there are few ways that we will work with you to try to ensure your safety and care for you well. We will be very careful with the information you are sharing today. We know this can feel scary. Sometimes, the scariest part is not knowing what will happen next.

Although we don’t know exactly what will happen next, we will do our best to help you understand what you can expect. For today, it’s important that you know we may have to share what happened to you with Child Protective Services. As your church, we promise to work with trusted adults to help you find the safety and care you need. You are doing a very courageous thing, and we are here to support you. Do you understand?”

Give the child an opportunity to ask questions, and then continue.

“I want you to know that you’re not in trouble for the things that happened to you. Even if someone made you promise to keep the things that happened to you a secret, it is not wrong for you to talk about it. It was wrong of them to ask you to make that promise. You don’t have to share any more details than you’re comfortable with. So, as you feel able, can you tell me what happened? Please let me know if you need to pause, or if you want to clarify part of the story later. I’m here to support you.”

At this point, just listen. If the young person starts to talk in a way that conveys they are trying to prove what happened is true, assure them this is not necessary. Once you’ve heard what they want to share, begin to prepare them for what will happen next.

“Thank you again for having the courage to share what you’ve experienced. Talking about it may make you feel afraid or ashamed. It can be easy to confuse feeling bad with being bad. What you are doing is brave and good. It allows us to pursue the help you need. That’s what I want to talk about with you now. Let me tell you what’s going to happen next.

First, I am going to need to share what you shared with me with Child Protective Services (CPS). If you want, we can call them together now so you hear everything that is said and understand what steps they may need to take.

Second, I want to make sure that you have a safe place to go home to. We can talk about who you want to stay with tonight—maybe your home or a grandparent, aunt, or uncle. If you’re not sure, this is something CPS can help us think about.

Third, I want to help you regain your composure before we finish our conversation. If you're about to go out to a setting where you'll be around friends, I don't want you to be embarrassed about having been upset. What you've done is brave. It's natural to be upset. We'll take the time you need to regroup.

Does that make sense? [Pause and listen]

How do you feel about us calling CPS now?"

At this point, you have two immediate responsibilities. **First, you are responsible to make the required call to CPS whether the young person wants to participate in the conversation or not.** When you call CPS, write down when you called, with whom you spoke, and the case number. Second, you want to help the young person manage their emotions after having taken the unsettling step of sharing a weighty secret. Invite them to take a few deep breaths, make sure your eye contact is warm and compassionate, continue to affirm that what they are doing is good even if it feels hard, and assure them that you are taking steps to help keep them safe.

In the days, weeks, and months ahead, your role is to be supportive of this young person and those members of his or her family who are supportive of the child's choice to come forward as he or she walks through what is bound to be a very difficult time. Caring for victims is an ongoing process that only begins with this initial conversation and reporting phone call.

When a child chooses to confide in someone, it shows they trust that person. That particular person should continue to support the child through this process, not just the initial reporting phone call and praying for them. You can also ask the young person who else they know and trust at church to support them. This young person should know they don't have to face this difficult journey alone.

In a legal setting, the alleged abuser is "innocent until proven guilty." That is a good civil standard. If applied in the church, however, this standard would unintentionally present the victim as "liar until proven truthful." It would also leave other vulnerable children in harm's way until the legal process runs its course, which is often not a quick process. That is why a church should err on the side of protecting the most vulnerable in the early phase of responding to an abuse claim.

**Once a disclosure has been made and the incident has been reported to the proper authorities, church leaders must have a conversation with the alleged abuser.**

For this type of meeting, it is recommended that you have more than one pastor, elder, or ministry leader present and that a script of the primary points you intend to make be written and given to the individual at the end of the meeting. The same kind of model conversation will be used in this section to show how this meeting is best handled. Notice that the wording and tone of these conversation prompts are more objective than compassionate. That is intentional.

“Thank you for coming today. We know this will be a difficult conversation. Concerns have been raised about your behavior which would be unloving for us not to address with you and irresponsible for us not to address as a matter of congregational care.

[Here is where you will give a concise summary of the accusation.]

In a moment, we are going to ask you to respond to these concerns. But first, we want to recognize that you have the right to abstain from answering our questions. However, if you choose not to respond, we will take the actions that would be appropriate if the claims were true. We also want you to know that, if a legal proceeding results from these concerns, we will testify to the things said in this meeting.

With that understood, are the concerns brought to us valid?

In this part of the conversation, three things are happening. First, you are framing this conversation with an individual as a part of your congregational care responsibilities. Abuse cases are times when a pastor’s responsibilities to specific sheep and his responsibilities to the entire flock are often in tension. Second, you are differentiating legal standards of the state from the character and shepherding standards of the church. Third, you are providing informed consent that church leadership would testify to the information shared in this meeting if requested to do so in a legal process.

The next part of the conversation cannot be pre-scripted. It is your response to the alleged offender’s answer to your question. The alleged offender may choose not to respond (silence), confess to the abuse, or deny that they were abusive. A sample response is provided for each.

[If silent] “We respect your right not to answer our questions. You are free to speak or not speak as you choose. But your silence does not remove our responsibility to care for the congregation. If you do not feel the freedom to speak for fear of self-incrimination, we will take the actions that would be wise in the event that these accusations are true.

[If confession] “Thank you for the courage to be honest. That is not easy. Our encouragement to you is to also make this confession to the local authorities. It will expedite the process for you and for the victim(s). In light of your confession, we want to make you aware of the actions we believe are wise for us to take as a matter of congregational care.”

[If denial] “We hear you. We now have two members of our congregation offering different accounts of the same situation. The actions in question, if true, are not just immoral but also illegal. For this reason, the church submits the investigative role to our Romans 13 partners (local authorities) for justice. We must allow the legal process to run its course to determine the merit of the concerns raised. While this process takes place, we want to make you aware of the actions we believe are wise for us to take as a matter of congregational care.”

In each case, you are respectful to the alleged offender's response and then you articulate the church's expectation for this individual, which is covered in the dialogue section below.

Regardless of whether the alleged abuser is silent, makes a confession, or denies the allegations, the church's expectation for them will be the same during the time the legal authorities are assessing the situation. Being neutral toward the accusation of abuse does not equate to being passive towards the church's responsibility to ensure the safety of children entrusted to its care. The church has an obligation to take reasonable steps to ensure the safety of children while the factuality of the accusation is being determined.

"In light of what we've shared, here is what we expect of you. First, do not contact the child who came forward or their family. If you seek to force communication against their wishes, this could be grounds for a restraining order or add harassment to your potential legal charges.

Second, during the legal process, our expectation is that your participation in church be via our online programming. This is a way of honoring the second Great Commandment of 'loving your neighbor as yourself' and the biblical imperative to prioritize the most vulnerable. We ask that you not be in the church's children or student ministry spaces; this includes activities for these ministries outside the church property during this time.

[If applicable] Third, we will be sending a communication to parents in our congregation about the concerns that have been raised. We would like to read that letter to you now so you are aware of its content.

Once the legal process has run its course, we will revisit these expectations."

As you can see, these expectations focus on the peace of mind of the victim and stewarding the trust of parents who allow their children and teens to participate in the church's ministries. If the alleged offender had any leadership role over children at the church, then it is recommended that a letter be sent to parents (more on that in the next section). If a letter needs to be sent, the alleged offender should be made aware of the content of that letter at this time.

### **The primary commodity you are stewarding in the care of the church is trust.**

Many of the steps we've outlined in this process will need to be vetted by your church's legal counsel, and when you do this, your attorneys will advise you on how this kind of situation might impact the church financially (e.g., exposure to legal risk for things like a defamation lawsuit). We are called to steward many things in our church well, and certainly finances is one of them. But church leaders will have to decide which will take the higher priority: finances or the trust of the congregation and the community. The following recommendations have been written with an emphasis on stewarding trust.

The primary way we steward trust is communication. Good communication results in high trust. Delayed, confusing, or absent communication results in trust withdrawals.

Those most directly affected should receive in-person or at the very least voice-to-voice communication; for instance, parents of children who were in an alleged abuser's Sunday School class should be reached out to personally. But you will reach a point where, in order for those of comparable closeness to the situation to receive communication at the same time, written communication is needed.

Crafting a letter like the sample below helps you communicate the same information to everyone (verbally or in writing). Being consistent is an important aspect of stewarding trust.

We are writing to let <church members/parents, etc.> know about allegations that have been brought against <name>, who served as <role> from <start date> to <end date>. (If applicable, include: He or She has been <arrested/charged> for <allegation>. More information can be found at <link to public record or news article>.)

We are committed to fully cooperating with the appropriate authorities if we learn of any abusive behaviors happening within our church. In light of what we have learned, we are sending this communication to give parents the opportunity to submit any additional information their children may disclose to them regarding this situation.

We want to accomplish four things through this letter:

- (a) to make you, as parents, aware of the situation,
- (b) to give you an opportunity to talk with your child (if you desire to do so), bearing in mind that they may hear about this situation from their friends at church
- (c) to ensure that all requisite legal steps are taken for any additional inappropriate behavior that may have occurred, and
- (d) to offer pastoral care for your family if any such behavior has occurred or if you have any concerns.

Any time our church is made aware of credible claims where children could be or may have been in a compromising position, we want to make sure we let you, as parents, know so you can follow up to ensure the safety and well-being of your kids.

If you learn of any abusive or inappropriate actions, we would encourage you to take two steps. First, contact the appropriate legal authorities. This honors the guidance of Romans 13:1-6 and helps ensure that local authorities have the information necessary to fulfill their God-given protective role. If you want a pastor to support you in this process, we are willing to come alongside you as you take this step.

<In this space, we give a bullet point list of all of the relevant authorities with phone numbers so that people don't have to find the information on their own.>

Second, let us know so we can provide pastoral support and care for your family. We know that law enforcement and CPS run point on the legal side, but we want to be active in our supportive role as your church. We would not want you to walk through this experience alone. <Contact person with email address> is the best initial contact to help us coordinate care for your child and your family. We can also recommend licensed Christian counselors experienced in abuse/trauma care, if desired.

We will continue to be praying for you as you follow up on this letter and would encourage you to join us in praying for anyone who is currently hurting alone because of unreported abuse.



## As you read this letter, you should notice several things:

1. It is addressed to parents and provides them with the information they need to follow up with important conversations with their children.
2. It provides enough information about the abusive actions to equip parents to have these conversations. When charges have a public record summary, it is better to link to those charges or news reports than it is for the church to try to summarize those charges.
3. This letter should be sent in cooperation with legal authorities. This draft is written as if it is being sent after charges have been made (a frequent trigger for churches to become aware of a leader's deviant behavior). If charges haven't been pressed, law enforcement may advise you on when or how to send this letter to prevent confounding an ongoing investigation.
4. This letter demonstrates how the shepherding responsibilities of the church and legal responsibilities of legal authorities work cooperatively when an action is both illegal and immoral.
5. This letter does not try to convey a false sense that "everything is OK." The reality is that this letter is sent to find out if more incidents need to be reported.

It is intimidating to think about sending a communication like this. But if parents are the primary disciplers and caretakers for their children—and they are—then this is an example of how we, as church leaders, honor that reality when credible claims of abuse emerge against someone who has led in our children or student ministries.

There is much more that can and should be said on these subjects. The CARE essential is intended to provide the most immediate care responses for the victim, alleged offender, and congregation. If you want to learn more, you can access a free curriculum called "Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused" at [churchcares.com](http://churchcares.com).

In this curriculum, you'll hear from a variety of people with different types of experience and expertise: social workers, law enforcement, attorneys, victims, advocates, pastors, and psychologists. You'll develop an even greater appreciation for what each of these roles has to offer for a holistic response to abuse. You'll gain a better sense for the kind of questions you'd like to ask these professionals in your community. Don't wait until a crisis hits; begin having those conversations now!

*He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.*

**PSALM 147:3 NIV**

In order for churches to truly represent the character and intention of God pictured in this Psalm, we must match the courage of those who trust us with the story of abuse. We must not shrink back from the task of being a faithful ambassador of the Good Shepherd to those who have been abused. Remember, caring in these situations is a marathon, not a sprint, and the church should be prepared and committed to shepherding God's people with a heart like His.

## Next Steps

- 1. FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE RESOURCES PROVIDED.** Don't wait until the first person entrusts you with their story of abuse. Get prepared now.
- 2. SPEND TIME GETTING TO KNOW THE RESOURCES LOCAL TO YOUR AREA.** Learn about the resources in your community for abuse victims, such as Child Advocacy Centers and trauma-informed counselors.
- 3. REMAIN SUPPORTIVE OF THE VICTIM.** This young person who has entrusted you with their story of abuse has a long journey ahead of them. You will learn a great deal as you remain supportive of them on this journey. Don't feel like you must know all the answers. Knowing they don't have to face this journey alone often does more than "answers" ever could.

# CARE Additional Tips

## Caring for Victims/Survivors and Their Families

### Safety

#### Guidelines when hearing a disclosure from a victim:

- Prioritize the victim/survivor's safety. If immediate help is needed, call 911.
- Recognize the amount of courage it takes to disclose sexual abuse. Ensure that the victim sharing his or her story feels cared for and believed.
- Communicate that what has happened to the victim is not OK.
- Let the victim know you are required to share with someone who can help.
- Do not prod or investigate further. Do not ask leading questions; instead, ask open-ended questions.
- Avoid re-traumatizing a victim in any way (e.g., asking them to confront an alleged abuser, repeat the account of the abuse, or participate in a "reconciliation" meeting or any other meeting involving both parties).

### Communication

- Respect the survivor's confidentiality at all times when communicating inside and outside the church. Avoid sharing their story or personal information without their explicit consent, even within the church community.  
**NOTE: Protecting confidentiality does not mean avoiding mandated reporting.**
- Take care not to dismiss or minimize their experience. Avoid downplaying or invalidating the survivor's experience. Don't try to explain away the alleged abuser's actions as a misunderstanding. Refrain from making judgmental statements, and certainly never suggest they should "just get over it." Any type of commentary like this is completely inappropriate.
- Select at least one trustworthy staff member or church member, preferably one trained in victim advocacy and ministry safety, to be the primary church contact for the victim and the family of the victim. This will help ensure they feel cared for, believed, and supported throughout any investigative, legal, and healing processes.
- Maintain regular, transparent communication with the survivor. Keep the survivor informed regarding any necessary steps the church must take to enact safety plans and cooperate with outside investigations.
- Refrain from giving unsolicited advice or attempting to fix the survivor's problems. Instead, focus on active listening and offer support without imposing your own ideas or agenda.
- If requested, the SBC Hotline can provide survivors with available options for care and put them in touch with an advocate.

## Care

- Prioritize caring for the survivor, not protecting an institution or the alleged abuser.
- Avoid blaming or shaming the survivor for what happened to them. Abuse and trauma are never the fault of the survivor, and it's important to communicate that they are not to blame for what happened.
- Offer resources to the victim and their family, such as counseling, support groups, hotlines, and legal assistance. Connect them with trusted professionals who specialize in trauma recovery. Consider supporting them with funding for these services. **(See Supplement 10: How to Search for Reputable Counselors.)**
- Empower survivors. Encourage them to make their own decisions about their next steps on their healing journey. Offer support and guidance without imposing your beliefs or agenda onto them. **(See Supplement 9: Guiding Principles of Victim Advocacy.)**
- Don't pressure survivors to forgive. While forgiveness can be a part of the healing process for some survivors, it should never be forced or rushed. Respect the survivor's autonomy, and allow them to decide if and when they are ready to forgive.
- Don't simply "hand a victim off" to a counselor; instead, continue to follow up with them as they journey towards their healing.
- Utilize resources to provide help, hope, and healing to survivors. **(See Supplement 11: Resources for Caring for Victims/Survivors.)**

## Caring for the Alleged Offender

### Safety

- The safety of victims and other vulnerable people is the priority.
- The alleged abuser should be removed from ministry settings and not allowed on church property.
- Under no circumstances should church leadership ask a survivor and an alleged abuser to participate in a "reconciliation" meeting or any other meeting involving both parties.
- While church discipline may be appropriately exercised (as described in Matthew 18), it is not a substitute for reporting abuse to the proper agencies or for outside investigation.

## Communication

- If the alleged abuser is a church member/attender, clearly communicate boundaries and church policies related to restricting access to church property.
- Communicate with people on a need-to-know basis to ensure the victim's privacy. Communication with the Preschool, Children's, and/or Youth Minister, as well as the Security/Safety Team, may be helpful to ensure safety; however, avoid gossip and share only information essential to safety.
- If the alleged perpetrator is a church leader, member, or volunteer, consider designating a church representative to act as a liaison for the accused and his or her family.

## Care

- While forgiveness and grace can and should be offered to a repentant abuser, it does not preclude the reality of the consequences of sin. A repentant abuser is still subject to any legal ramifications and necessary church discipline.
- Refer alleged perpetrators for professional counseling with someone who specializes in working with sexual offenders and abuse/control/power dynamics.
- Refer family members for trauma-informed counseling. (**See Supplement 10: How to Search for Reputable Counselors.**)
- Consider taking church to the alleged abuser in person through designated trained staff or lay leaders or via online sermons, Bible studies, etc.
- For further information, see Lesson 11: "Response to Abuse By a Church Leader" in "Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused" at [www.churchcares.com](http://www.churchcares.com).

## Caring for the Church

### Safety

The people of our church should never question that their safety (and the safety of their children) is our priority. This is the vital trust environment we must cultivate.

- Ensure the safety and care of the church body.
- Prioritize awareness, safety, training, and reporting.
- Adhere to mandated reporting guidelines.
- Remove the alleged abuser from church property.
- If the allegations of the alleged abuser are credible, determine if he or she had access to any other potential victims. Follow reporting guidelines covered in the REPORT section.
- Contact the SBC Hotline to promote long-term protection.

## Communication

- Take great care in determining what information needs to be communicated and to whom.
- Be diligent in protecting the survivor's confidentiality when communicating inside and outside the church.
- If the abuse occurred within a church, the church may benefit from obtaining trusted legal counsel to assist in how to respond during an investigative process.
- Consider preparing a cohesive statement available to church staff and leadership to help them communicate safely and clearly to church members who ask about the situation.

## Care

- Ministry to survivors of abuse should involve more than just paid church staff.
- It may be helpful to compose a ministry team for the purposes of walking alongside victims/survivors in the church and continually assessing the church's strengths and weaknesses in abuse prevention and care.
- Consider utilizing discipleship resources to increase awareness and trauma-informed response to sexual abuse. **(See Supplement 11: Resources for Caring for Victims/Survivors.)**

# CARE FAQs

## **What do we do if our lawyers advise us not to inform our congregation?**

A church should always carefully consider legal advice from their counsel; however, the church has the ultimate responsibility to consider what is the best course of action. While a lawyer may be primarily concerned with protecting the institution of the church (e.g., from financial litigation or damaged reputation), the church's primary commitment should be to uphold the truth out of commitment to Christ and to care and protect their church members.

## **What does your congregation need to know in order to maintain trust with the church's leaders?**

"The best way to dispel rumors is with the truth. The best way to prevent gossip is by being forthcoming. The basic questions that need to be answered are: What happened? How did it come to light? What is currently being done? When will more information be available? Answers to these questions should be clear, concise, and avoid speculation. The names of victims should not be used. As much as possible, information should be communicated in a way to limit the impact on the offender's family." (Read more on pages 162-163 of "Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused" at [churchcares.com](http://churchcares.com).)

## **How does a care response differ if the victim is a child vs. an adult?**

The care response for child victims typically involves mandatory reporting to Child Protective Services, specialized trauma-informed care tailored to their developmental stage, collaboration with caregivers, and age-appropriate support interventions such as play therapy. In contrast, the care response for adult victims emphasizes informed consent, confidentiality with exceptions for safety concerns, empowerment to make decisions about their healing journey, and access to therapeutic interventions and legal support tailored to their individual needs.

## **What is secondary victimization, and how can we avoid it when responding to victims?**

Secondary victimization occurs when a victim suffers further harm due to the manner in which individuals and institutions respond to the victim. This can be avoided by seeking to offer belief, ongoing support, consistent protection, and not minimizing or blaming the victim but doing everything possible to hold the abuser accountable. Transparent communication and ongoing efforts to help are all essential. In summary, the response to the victim should be the opposite of the trauma experience rather than the perpetuation of it.

## What is trauma-informed care, and how can we be sure we are responding in a trauma-informed way?

According to the National Substance Abuse Services and Mental Health Administration, trauma-informed care includes: the realization of trauma; understanding how trauma can affect individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; recognizing the signs of trauma; and responding in a way that resists re-traumatization.<sup>1</sup> The church fulfills its mission by rooting these concepts of trauma-informed care in Scripture and showing Christ's love and care for those who have been victimized.

## What is a victim advocate?

A victim advocate is a **trauma-informed professional** who provides support and assistance to individuals who have experienced trauma, crime, or abuse. These advocates work to ensure that the rights and needs of victims are addressed and respected throughout the legal process and beyond. Their primary goal is to empower and help victims navigate the often complex and challenging aftermath of a crime/trauma.

Victim advocates can be found in a variety of work settings, including law enforcement agencies, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and community-based support services. They play a crucial role in helping individuals navigate the aftermath of a traumatic event and rebuild their lives.

## What is a crisis response/care team?

A crisis response team is a group of trained volunteers or staff members who are equipped to provide immediate support and assistance in times of crisis or emergency within the congregation or community. They may provide first aid, emotional support, practical assistance, and spiritual care to those affected by the crisis, working closely with local emergency services and other community resources as needed. A crisis response team is composed of individuals who are trustworthy, have knowledge and understanding about abuse dynamics, and can intentionally walk with a survivor and a survivor's family through the reporting and care process. This team may help the survivor take care of themselves, provide a healthy emotional outlet, pray for the survivor, accompany them to meetings, and assist with communicating any needs to church leadership. The crisis response team should be a mix of both males and females and may include an elder or deacon in church leadership.

For more information, see Lesson 9: "Pastoral Care After Reporting: Reporting Is Not a Ministerial Hands Off" in "Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused" at [churchcares.com](http://churchcares.com).

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1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.





# SUPPLEMENTS

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1. Chart of Providers .....	58
2. Sample Application .....	59
3. Sample Reference Check Form .....	64
4. Background Check Authorization Form .....	66
5. Red and Yellow Flag Offenses .....	67
6. Internet and Social Media Check Guidelines .....	68
7a. Interview Questions for Adult Leaders .....	69
7b. Interview Questions for Volunteers Under 18 .....	70
8. Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form .....	71
9. Guiding Principles for Victim Advocacy .....	74
10. How to Search for Reputable Counselors .....	76
11. Resources for Caring for Victims/Survivors .....	78

# Chart of Providers

Provider	Assessments	Consultation	Awareness Training (In-house)	Background Checks (In-house)	Sample Document Library <sup>1</sup>	Reporting Resources	Response Resources	Digital Dashboard	Independent Investigations	Cost <sup>2</sup>
ECAP <sup>3</sup>	●	●					●			Based on membership <sup>4</sup>
G.R.A.C.E.	●	●	●			●	●		●	See website
Lifeway OneSource				●						\$9-\$40
MinistrySafe	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		\$400 annually <sup>5</sup>
Plan to Protect	●	●	●		●	●	●			See website
Protect My Ministry			●	●	● <sup>6</sup>			●		a la carte Ministry Mobilizer <sup>7</sup>
Safe Ministry Solutions	●	●	●	●				●		SBC pricing
Safeguard from Abuse			●					●		\$6.75 - \$7.25/pp
Zero Abuse Project			●			●	●			See website

\*Please note this is not an exhaustive list; however, these are some of the most commonly used providers for churches.

1. Provides editable sample documents such as applications, reference forms, interview forms, and policies and procedures
2. Costs at time of publication, subject to change.
3. Offers accreditation
4. Membership based
5. Background checks and awareness training not included in annual fee
6. All digital forms
7. Ministry Mobilizer does not include background checks or awareness training

## Application Form for Staff and Volunteers

*Our goal is to create the safest possible environment for our staff and volunteers and those we serve. This confidential application should be completed by any person seeking to fill a position involving the supervision of children, youth, or vulnerable adults. The information gathered will help us continue to ensure the safety of everyone in our church.*

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Position applying for: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you been a member or regular attender of this church for at least six months ? Y / N

If not, and you've been given an exception to this requirement, share the exception here:

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List any other names you have gone by (e.g., maiden name, nickname, etc.):

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Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Social Security No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Sex: M / F

Driver's License No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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How long have you lived at your current address? \_\_\_\_\_

Previous address: \_\_\_\_\_

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List all other cities and states where you have lived as an adult:

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Please list all previous volunteer work or employment involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults. Use the back of this application if you need more space.

ORGANIZATION NAME	ADDRESS	DATES SERVED	DUTIES/RESPONSIBILITIES	CONTACT PERSON	REASON FOR LEAVING

List any skills, training, or other experiences that have equipped you to work with children, youth, or vulnerable adults:

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Why do you want to work with children, youth, or vulnerable adults at our church?

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Do you have a preference concerning the age group or sex of those with whom you would like to work? If so, what is the basis for this preference?

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What is your philosophy concerning the redirection or discipline of children?

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When you are upset, angry, or emotional about a person or circumstance, what do you do?

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List church(es) where you have previously attended regularly or held membership:

CHURCH NAME	CITY AND STATE

Because we have zero tolerance for abuse and strive to provide the safest environments for our staff and volunteers and those we serve, please answer the following questions.

(All answers will be kept confidential.)

Have you ever participated in, or been accused or convicted of, or pled guilty or no contest to abuse or any sexual misconduct? Y / N

If "Yes," please provide more information:

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Have you ever been convicted of, or pled guilty or no contest to, any crime? Y / N

If “Yes,” please provide more information:

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Do you consider yourself physically or sexually abused as a child? Y / N

We realize this information is sensitive. It will be kept entirely confidential as long as another child’s safety is not negatively impacted by confidentiality. If “Yes,” please explain:

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A separate reference form will be required as a part of this application. Please provide one professional reference (if applicable), one personal reference, and one family member. References must include at least one member of the opposite sex.

## RELEASE

I, (applicant's full name) \_\_\_\_\_, understand that this church is relying on the accuracy of all information given on this application. With my signature below, I attest and affirm that the information provided is accurate and truthful. I understand any intentionally false or inaccurate information provided by myself on this application shall be grounds for denial of the application.

I authorize this church to contact all individuals, organizations, and references listed on this Application Form and the separate Reference Form. I also authorize any such person, church, or organization to provide this church with information and opinions relating to my background and/or qualifications.

I agree to release from liability any person, church, or organization providing information related to me, including those persons I have listed as references, as well as contact persons from my previous volunteer work or employment with children.

I specifically authorize this church to undertake a criminal background check concerning my past.

I understand and agree that any information received from the background check and application verification will not be disclosed to me except as required by law. I hereby waive any right I may have to inspect any information provided about me by any person or organization identified by me on this form.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

## MINOR APPLICANT'S PARENTAL CONSENT

I, (parent/legal guardian's full name) \_\_\_\_\_, affirm that I am the parent/legal guardian of the applicant. With my signature below, I attest and affirm that the information provided is accurate and truthful. I further attest and affirm that I am not aware of any harmful tendencies or traits of the applicant that may pose any threat to children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_



QUESTION	REFERENCE 1	REFERENCE 2	REFERENCE 3	REFERENCE 4
How do you know this person? In what capacity did you work or serve with them? What was their job title at the time?				
Describe their spiritual life. Are they intentional about their time with God? Are they mentoring or discipling anyone?				
Describe their general personality, attitude, and disposition.				
Describe their general leadership and supervisory style and ability.				
What are some of their key strengths and skills that you have observed?				
What would you see as their development needs—areas where they need improvement?				
How do they interact with other staff members? How do other staff members perceive them?				
How do they interact with church members, volunteers, and lay leaders? Describe their social and relational skills.				

QUESTION	REFERENCE 1	REFERENCE 2	REFERENCE 3	REFERENCE 4
How do they handle administrative responsibilities? Do they focus on the details? How do they manage multiple tasks, deadlines, and assignments?				
What type of leadership style do they best respond to?				
What areas of ministry are they most passionate about?				
How do they handle decisions made by others that may not match their own thinking? How do they manage conflict?				
Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the candidate that you would want to know if you were in our position?				
If you could, would you hire or permit them to serve again in the same position?				
Other questions:				
Other comments:				

## **[Church Name]**

# **Authorization for Background Check**

I authorize [Church Name] to solicit background information relative to my criminal record history. I understand that [Church Name] may make inquiries into my background that may include motor vehicle records, personal references, criminal records, and any other public record reports pertaining to me.

I authorize, without any reservation, any person, agency, or other entity contacted by [Church Name], or their agent, for purposes of obtaining background report information to furnish the above-mentioned information.

I release [Church Name], their respective employees, or agents, and employees of their agents and all persons, agencies, and entities providing information or reports about me from any and all liability arising out of furnishing any such information.

*Please Print*

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Name(s) Used: \_\_\_\_\_

Social Security No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How long at this address? Years: \_\_\_\_\_ Months: \_\_\_\_\_

Previous Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How long at this address? Years: \_\_\_\_\_ Months: \_\_\_\_\_

## RED FLAG OFFENSES

**Individual should not be employed by or allowed to volunteer in the church.**

- Providing alcohol/tobacco/drugs/pornography to a minor
- False imprisonment
- Voyeurism (“Peeping Tom”)
- Contributing to the delinquency of a minor
- Criminal solicitation of a minor
- Public indecency
- Exhibitionism
- Assault
- Sexual assault (or any crime that is sexual in nature)
- Homicide
- Kidnapping
- Injury to a child, elderly individual, or disabled individual
- Abandoning or endangering a child
- Matters related to interference with child custody
- Failure to stop or report the aggravated sexual assault of a child

## YELLOW FLAG OFFENSES

**Individual needs additional screening to determine compatibility with church policy.**

- Driving under the influence or while intoxicated
- Possession/distribution of a controlled substance
- Making a firearm accessible to a child
- Theft, including identity theft

## Internet and Social Media Guidelines

In an era in which most people have an online presence, it is helpful to review an applicant's online information for red flags or any content that could indicate improper behavior. A general Google search may yield helpful information. Are there any news articles that include their name?

By searching the applicant online, you may be able to ascertain what the applicant values, their level of discernment, and how they interact with children. Red flags often found on social media include inappropriate pictures, suggestive or even explicit comments, and excessive commenting on/interest in children or students by someone older. An internet search may reveal some of these red flags or other information that indicate the applicant is not a good fit for ministry service.

### Potential inappropriate social media posts could include:

- Inappropriate pictures
- Suggestive or explicit comments or affiliations
- Language or content that would be deemed inappropriate for service in a church setting

### Questions to consider:

- Do the applicant's posts contain language/content that would be deemed inappropriate for a volunteer or staff member serving with minors in a church setting?
- Who are the applicant's friends? For example, if the applicant is in his 30's or 40's and a large portion of his friends are young teenage boys, that should raise a red flag.
- What sites is the applicant affiliated with? Are the movies, music, and other items of interest on their social media telling in some way?

The answers to these questions provide a profile of the applicant's personal life that helps to determine if the applicant is the type of person the church would consider to be a positive influence for minors.

## Interview Questions for Adult Volunteers

1. What is your interest in working with children, youth, or vulnerable adults?
2. How do you set limits with children/youth?
3. Give examples of situations when you disciplined or corrected a minor's behavior.
4. What gifts do you have for working with children or youth?
5. Describe a situation when you became angry or frustrated with a child or youth and how you handled it.
6. Describe a time when you interacted with a child or youth and felt guilty about the interaction.
7. Children and youth need affection and attention. How would you provide appropriate affection and attention to children and youth?
8. What would be your reaction if a child or youth complained about inappropriate actions taken by a parent or other caregiver?
9. What do you think should be the church's response to adults who are accused by a child or youth of misconduct?
10. Is there any part of the church's policy you disagree with or could not follow?
11. Describe the risks of meeting one-on-one with a child or youth.
12. Describe your social support network.
13. Describe how sexual contact between an adult and a child or youth could be harmful.
14. What are some examples of emotional abuse, and why is it harmful?
15. Describe your relationship with Jesus Christ and your relationship with this church.

## Interview Questions for Volunteers under 18

1. Why are you interested in working with children or youth?
2. Give examples of situations when you disciplined or corrected a child's behavior.
3. Describe a situation when you became angry or frustrated with a child or youth and how you handled it.
4. Describe a time when you interacted with a child or youth and felt guilty about the interaction.
5. Why do you think it might be important for you to work together with adults in this ministry?
6. Why do you think our church has a policy that helpers should never be alone with children or youth?
7. If you needed help with a child or youth, who would you ask for help?
8. What would you do if someone asked you to do something wrong or inappropriate or in violation of the policy?
9. To whom would you report a possible situation of child abuse?
10. What do you think will be the hardest part about working with children or youth?
11. If you have younger brothers and sisters, what frustrates you most about them?  
If you have older brothers and sisters, what frustrates you most about them?
12. If you call yourself a Christian, what does that mean to you?

## Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form

This form must be used to record details of a child abuse incident or allegation. The information recorded here will be referenced for a mandatory report to Child Protective Services and local law enforcement. The victim's information on this form must be kept confidential, with the exception of legal authorities.

Date of incident: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian's name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Person making report: \_\_\_\_\_

Role/relationship to the child: \_\_\_\_\_

### TYPE OF INCIDENT (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

- ☐ Suspicion or allegation of abuse or neglect of the child based on visible observations
- ☐ Suspicion or allegation of abuse or neglect of the child as told by the child
- ☐ Suspicion of potential harm to the child

### ALLEGED PERPETRATOR(S) DETAILS (IF KNOWN)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Connection with the child: \_\_\_\_\_

Any other relevant factors: \_\_\_\_\_

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Were there any other witnesses to the incident? YES or NO

If "yes," provide their details below.

Full name: \_\_\_\_\_

Involvement as witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact phone number: \_\_\_\_\_



### DETAILS OF INCIDENT

(Describe the incident, including alleged behavior of the perpetrator(s), sighted injury, or other indicators of abuse, as well as the conversation with the child. Be as thorough as you can.)

### INCIDENT RESPONSE

Please check which of the following have been informed of this incident, and note the date.

#### EXTERNAL

☐ Police

Department: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Child Protective Services

County: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Name of dispatcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Case #: \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Other (please specify):

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

#### INTERNAL

☐ Children's Ministry Director: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Senior Pastor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF FORM COMPLETION

I have completed this form to the best of my knowledge and ability.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

**TO BE COMPLETED BY THE SENIOR PASTOR OR HEAD DEACON**

Date Pastor/Children's Ministry Director was notified: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Date Deacons were notified: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Date report was shared with insurance company: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Date Pastor attempted to contact family: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Date Pastor met with family: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Outcome from meeting with family:

Date Pastor communicated with alleged abuser: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Outcome from that meeting (termination, suspension, etc.):

## Guiding Principles of Victim Advocacy

Often, abuse victims will talk to church leaders first because of a preexisting relationship of trust. We want to be good stewards of that trust. As pastors preach about holiness, sin, justice, and perfect love, we recognize that a pastor's response to abuse is highly likely to become intertwined with a victim's understanding of the gospel. To foster continued trust and honor the victim's courage to come forward, we must handle disclosures of abuse with great care. It is vital to believe the victim.

*Until there is evidence to the contrary, we take the posture of 1 Corinthians 13:7—"Love believes all things."*

### Begin with the Five Guiding Principles of Victim Advocacy<sup>1</sup>

- 1. SAFETY FIRST:** Attending to the victim's immediate safety is the priority.
- 2. "DO NO HARM":** Ensure that no additional harm comes to the victim; this occurs when we do not believe the victim or imply that the victim is to blame.
- 3. EMPOWER:** Abuse is about denying a victim power and control. Allow the victim to reclaim control over his or her own decisions, opinions, actions, goals, and future.
- 4. TRAUMA-INFORMED:** Sexual assault and domestic violence are complex traumatic events. Focus on "What has happened to this person?" not "What is wrong with this person?"
- 5. CONFIDENTIALITY:** Confidentiality is critically linked to safety and justice for the victim.

### The "Dos and Don'ts" of Victim Advocacy<sup>2</sup>

The following "Dos and Don'ts" are not an exhaustive list, but they are a great place to start.

#### WHAT TO DO

- Listen with compassion, and talk very little.
- Make sure the victim feels heard, believed, and safe.
- Take notes, including as much detail as the victim feels comfortable sharing.
- Explore needed resources, and refer them to experts.
- Plan a time to reconnect.

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1. Adapted from the "Crisis Line Handbook" provided by the Centers for Disease Control Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 10- 22

2. Adapted from *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*, "Lesson 3: Ministry Responsibilities."

**WHAT NOT TO DO**

- Do NOT investigate the validity of the claims. Allow experts to determine legitimacy.
- Do NOT engage the abuser. This can be very dangerous for the victim.
- Do NOT make any decisions for the victim.
- Do NOT point out sin or blame the victim in any way.
- Do NOT reframe the situation into “what God is doing.”
- Do NOT question children or lead them during a disclosure in any way.

## How to Search for Reputable Counselors

Experiencing trauma and abuse creates a heart wound that requires ongoing, careful support and intervention. It is recommended for churches and institutions to encourage individuals with histories of abuse to meet with a trained, licensed professional and have a list of recommendations for referrals. It often takes research and time to find the best fit. Here are a few things to consider when seeking a counselor who has specialization in trauma.

In looking for reputable counselors, start with a web search for “trauma-informed Christian counselor” or “trauma-informed counselor.” It is important to look for those who are licensed within the state where the victim lives. Licensed individuals have certain levels of education and ongoing educational training, and they are under the auspices of professional ethical guidelines governed by the state. For the level of nuanced, complex care that is needed for sexual abuse/trauma, it is recommended to find a licensed counselor who has training in trauma-informed care. Another advantage to licensed counselors is that they often take medical insurance for those with mental health benefits, which can help cover costs.

There are different titles and credentials for those who serve in the role of counselor/therapist based on the type of degree and some slightly differing emphases and approaches. Those who are licensed may have master’s or doctorate degrees. These include:

- Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)
- Licensed Social Worker/Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LSW, LCSW, may be CSW in some states)
- Licensed Psychologist
- Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT)

### ASSESSING ISSUE-SPECIFIC COMPETENCY

Most counselors now have some experience with trauma, but in cases of sexual abuse/trauma, it is important to look for a counselor who specializes in trauma and abuse. Next, you may want to consider other preferred characteristics (e.g., gender, age, therapeutic approach, faith background, location, in person and/or virtual/telehealth). When researching counselors, it is helpful to ask questions via email, phone call, or an in-person meeting prior to beginning treatment. Their responses will help to guide an assessment of their perspective and experience.

These questions may include:

1. How many years of counseling experience do you have?
2. Do you have experience working with victims of sexual abuse?  
What percentage of your cases would you say include sexual abuse/trauma?
3. What kinds of trauma do you specialize in?
4. Do you have any experience working with [specific situation] (e.g., clergy sexual abuse)? What percentage of your cases would you say include this kind of trauma?

5. What type of approach/interventions do you use when working with trauma/sexual abuse?
6. In what ways is your approach effective in treating individuals with trauma/abuse?
7. Do you receive ongoing clinical supervision or consultation from anyone?  
Does this person have experience working with trauma/sexual abuse?
8. Do you have any specialized certification?
9. How do you think trauma impacts a person?
10. What resources do you recommend/use?
11. How would you approach therapy with someone like me?

### **TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE**

A therapist who works with trauma should be trained in trauma-informed therapy approaches. According to our nation's Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, trauma-informed care includes these guiding principles:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and mutuality
5. Empowerment, voice, and choice
6. Historical, cultural, and gender factors associated with trauma<sup>1</sup>

It can be helpful to ask the therapist about their understanding of trauma-informed practice and how that influences the way they do therapy. You may ask questions such as:

- What does trauma-informed care mean to you?
- What training have you had on trauma-informed practice?
- Why do you think trauma-informed practice is important?
- What are some things you have done to implement trauma-informed practices?
- What are your thoughts on (the six principles listed above)?

A listing of potential referral sources may include this additional information:

1. What are their fees?
2. Do they accept insurance? If so, what kind?
3. Do they have a sliding scale fee?
4. Do they work with children and teenagers?
5. Do they meet in person and/or virtually/via telehealth?

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1. "6 Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach." Cdc.Gov. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 17, 2020. [https://www.cdc.gov/orr/infographics/6\\_principles\\_trauma\\_info.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/orr/infographics/6_principles_trauma_info.htm).

## Resources for Caring for Victims/Survivors

### Online

#### **CHURCH CARES**

[www.churchcares.com](http://www.churchcares.com)

#### **TRAUMA HEALING BASICS**

[www.traumahealingbasics.org](http://www.traumahealingbasics.org)

#### **TRAUMA HEALING INSTITUTE**

[www.traumahealinginstitute.org](http://www.traumahealinginstitute.org)

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHURCHES DEALING WITH ABUSE**

(blog post)

Diane Langberg, Ph.D.

<https://www.dianelangberg.com/2019/02/recommendations-for-churches-dealing-with-abuse/>

#### **FEARLESS SERIES** (Small Group resource)

Dr. James Reeves, Teaching Pastor at City on a Hill Church, Fort Worth, TX

[www.fearlessresources.org](http://www.fearlessresources.org)

#### **PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO CLERGY PERPETRATED SEXUAL ABUSE**

David K. Pooler, Ph.D., LCSW

[https://www.baylor.edu/social\\_work/doc.php/302534.pdf](https://www.baylor.edu/social_work/doc.php/302534.pdf)

#### **TOWARD A MORE TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH: EQUIPPING FAITH COMMUNITIES TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO ABUSE**

Pete Singer, Executive Director of GRACE

<https://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/444/483>

### Articles by Brad Hambrick:

[www.bradhambrick.com](http://www.bradhambrick.com)

- “When Prevention Fails: A Sexual Abuse Response Policy for Churches”
- “Small Group Leader Video: If I Learn of Abuse, When Am I Mandated to Report and What Should I Do Even When I’m Not Mandated to Report?”
- “Why Is It Inappropriate (and Dangerous) to Alert an Alleged Offender of Abuse Before Calling CPS and/or the Police?”
- “Why Is It So Hard to Have Constructive Conversations About Abuse?”

## Books

***Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused***

Brad Hambrick, General Editor

***Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores***

Diane Langberg, Ph.D.

***Is It Abuse?: A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims***

Darby Strickland

***On the Threshold of Hope: Opening the Door to Healing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse***

Diane Langberg, Ph.D.

***Healing the Trauma of Abuse: A Woman's Workbook***

Mary Ellen Copeland, M.A., M.S. and Maxine Harris, Ph.D.

***The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma***

Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.





# ARITF

Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force

With the help of outside professionals, the Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force (ARITF) has created these materials so that churches of any size can easily implement effective prevention and response measures that will protect children and vulnerable adults from sexual abuse. This guidebook and its supplements and sample forms, in conjunction with the video training sessions and downloads found on the website and the Essentials thumb drive, are designed to provide general principles that can be a starting point for church leaders as they work towards making their churches the safest they can possibly be for those who are most vulnerable. If you have any questions along the way, please contact your association, state convention or visit the website [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com) for more information.

[www.sbcabuseprevention.com](http://www.sbcabuseprevention.com)

