

Child sexual abuse and the church: Reporting and care after abuse occurs

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This article is part of a series on child sexual abuse and the church:

- [How widespread is the problem?](#)
- [Impact on children and youth](#)
- [Impact on adults](#)
- [The church's responsibility to protect children](#)
- [Reporting and care after abuse occurs](#)
- [Prevention resources](#)

The church has the incredibly important task of creating a safe atmosphere for children. The [previous article](#) in this series considered a brief theology of care of children and then pivoted to practical steps the church can take to provide effective protection for the safety of children.

Now, think about what no one wants to think about. Consider the role of ministry personnel as mandated reporters when abuse occurs. Here, we will explore what must happen and how the church can assist child victims and families after abuse takes place.

Ministry personnel as mandated

reporters

Guidelines for reporting child sexual abuse vary from state to state and have changed over time. So, it is not unusual for ministry personnel to be confused about who must report, when a report should be made, and the process for filing such a report.

Who must report child sexual abuse?

In Texas, reporting is governed by the [Texas Family Code, Rule 261.101](#), which states that *any person* who suspects child abuse is a mandated reporter. Thus, regardless of profession and whether or not employed by the church, any person working in ministry must report suspected abuse or neglect of a child.

If a church has a specific policy about reporting abuse, an employee must follow that policy to report, but it is still the individual's responsibility to make sure the report has been filed. Texas also prohibits an institution—like a church—from taking any action to prevent, hinder or discourage an employee from filing an abuse report. For pastors or other ministers in Texas, clergy-penitent privilege does not allow a minister to avoid reporting abuse. *The requirement to report abuse supersedes anything told to a church minister or counselor in a confidential setting.*

When should a report be made?

Ministry personnel must make a report when the individual believes abuse has taken place.

According to Texas Family Code, Rule 261.101: “A person having cause to believe that a child’s physical or mental health or welfare has been adversely affected by abuse or neglect by any person shall immediately make a report as provided by this subchapter.”

That means any person—either an employee or volunteer—working for a church must report suspected abuse and must do so “immediately” or soon after reaching the conclusion that abuse has taken place.

In a ministry setting, it is important to notify supervisors or other ministry individuals overseeing children of what the child disclosed. It is also important for ministry personnel to remember that they do not need to investigate what the child has revealed but need to report what has been disclosed by the child or what the ministry individual suspects has taken place.

In talking to the child, ministry personnel must be careful not to lead the child in telling his or her story, must not suggest information to the child, and must not fill in blank spots in the story for the child. When the child is telling the story, asking, “What happened next?” allows the child to provide information that is not shaped by the person hearing the story.

The pertinent information from the child’s story is reported to Child Protective Services, who can make their own determination about the need for further investigation.

To whom should the report be made?

Reports of child abuse are made to Texas Child Protective Services, which is a part of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. To report abuse, an individual can call 1-800-252-5400, or can go to the reporting website [here](#).

If the person reporting has any concern about the immediate safety of the child, he or she should call the phone number above, conveying to hotline personnel the critical nature of the situation. If the reporter is not sure what is classified as abuse, the [DFPS website](#) provides guidance. It also relates what information to have ready when calling or reporting online and what questions the person reporting will be asked.

Reporters are encouraged to provide their name and contact information so that CPS can follow up if they need more details or further information. CPS is required by law to keep reporters' identity confidential. Reporters may also choose to report anonymously.

Providing care for abused children

When ministry personnel become aware that a child has experienced sexual abuse, what actions can be taken to help the child best, and how can the church support the child's family?

Make sure the child is safe.

When sexual abuse of a child comes to light, one of the immediate needs is making sure the child is safe. Oftentimes, when abuse is reported, Child Protective Services will attend to safety concerns in an initial focus. Even though officials may assess safety needs, church personnel also can communicate with family members to gauge and to work toward the child's protection.

In the church setting, consistent and loving care will help the child feel safe. Ministry adults who are familiar to the child can provide the child with a sense of safety and consistency in a time when the child's world is upside-down.

Assure the child he or she did the right thing in telling a parent or adult.

A child often feels guilty in disclosing the abuse. This can be true especially if the perpetrator encouraged or threatened the child to keep a secret or if the perpetrator told the child the adult, the child or both could get in trouble if the child disclosed the abuse. The child needs to hear he or she did the right thing to tell adults and that his or her brave act of telling an

adult is part of people now acting to keep the child safe.

Be patient if the child is struggling or acting out.

Children who have been abused might be depressed and withdrawn, or they might act out their anger, hurt and frustration. What may appear to be misbehavior can be the child dealing with a confusing mix of emotions brought on by the abuse.

Ministry personnel working with children can support the child by expressing patience if the child is withdrawn or acting out. Clear, consistent boundaries and lots of love within these boundaries is an active part of a child's recovery from abuse.

Ministry personnel who would like more information about working with abused or neglected children can consult the excellent website [Child Trauma Academy](#), which has an online library of information about working with abused children.

Remember to support the entire family.

The impact of abuse is felt by the entire family. Parents and siblings often feel anger at the perpetrator, but also may notice feelings of sadness and embarrassment. If abuse involves CPS or police, parents may experience frustration and further anger. Family members—parents and siblings—commonly feel profound guilt for not being able to recognize or prevent the abuse.

Ministry personnel can recognize the immense stress on a family surrounding the discovery or disclosure of abuse. Listening to, weeping with, and walking alongside the family will support them in this difficult time.

Ministry personnel need to avoid immediately urging the family to forgive the perpetrator. Recovery from abuse, whether the child or the family,

involves a great deal of grieving over what took place. If a family is prematurely urged to forgive, the grief process can be interrupted due to the added feelings of guilt over struggles to forgive.

Refer the child and his or her family to counseling.

When abuse occurs, an ideal scenario involves referring the child to a counselor. Families who are willing to seek counseling should look for a licensed counselor trained to work with children and—most specifically—a counselor who has experience in addressing childhood trauma or abuse.

If a ministry individual does not know a counselor, several entities have counselor databases and may be able to guide a family to a counselor:

- [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#)
- [Christian Counselors of Texas](#)
- [Focus on the Family](#)
- [American Association of Christian Counselors](#)

Child abuse is one of the most difficult things that can occur to an individual or a family. Churches cannot protect every child or family, but they can be intentional and proactive in having plans to respond should knowledge of abuse come to their attention. Taking decisive steps and communicating support to the family may not only mitigate the damage done but clearly demonstrates God's love and care for those in distress.

Upcoming article

- What [resources are available](#) to churches and families to help prevent abuse and to help the family where abuse has already occurred?

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