

Child sexual abuse and the church: The church's responsibility to protect children

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

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Previous articles considered [the rate](#) of childhood sexual abuse and how abuse impacts [children](#) and [adults](#). Now, we ask what is the church's role in ensuring protection to children and their families? To answer this question, we will consider a brief theology of care of children and then will look at how the church can provide effective protection for the safety of children.

What does Scripture say about care for children?

The Bible gives a clear pattern for how the world should work. In God's design, children are to grow up in a safe environment where they can learn about God. Big people, like parents and adults who work with children, are

to be loving and caring and to help little people grow up to be healthy, responsible adults who follow God with all their hearts.

Passages like Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Psalm 78:5-8 tell of the importance of parents passing their faith along to their children. These children grow up and, in turn, pass their faith along to their children.

Mark 10:13-16 relates a time when Jesus was in Judea, well into his ministry. Individuals were bringing their children to Jesus. The disciples believed it was not the best use of Jesus' ministry for him to spend time with children. They actually rebuked parents for bothering Jesus with their little ones.

When Jesus saw the disciples doing this, the New American Standard Bible says he was "indignant," telling the disciples to "permit the children to come to me." In commenting on this passage, S.D.F. Salmond states that the word indignant conveys both wrath and grief. Jesus was both angry and sad that the disciples failed to recognize the importance of children.

The importance of safety and care for children is also evident in Matthew 18:1-6. As Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of heaven, he called a child and presented the child to the disciples, instructing them about the importance of childlike faith. Jesus concluded his discussion by saying, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

Children were important to Jesus. It is impossible to consider these and other passages and conclude care for children is unimportant.

Big people are responsible for caring for little people. Church leaders and ministers are responsible for creating a safe environment where children can learn and grow in Christian faith. Abuse is antithetical in every way to this care for children, and it is imperative that ministry leaders do all they

can zealously to provide a safe environment for children.

How can the church provide a safe environment for children?

Churches can be proactive in creating a safe atmosphere for children. Regardless of congregation size, budget size, or education level of church members, the following simple steps can provide children with the best opportunities to learn and grow free from harm by those who should be protecting them and nurturing their spiritual growth.

Remain actively aware.

No church has the luxury of naiveté, the belief that “it can’t or won’t happen here,” or the right to laxness concerning care for children.

Awareness is essential and must happen in many directions. Churches must be aware of the extent of child sexual abuse—discussed in [Part 1](#) of this series. Churches also must be aware of how abuse happens and who tends to perpetrate abuse.

Churches that function with eyes wide open are in the best position to protect children most effectively.

Designate a point person.

Assuming care for children is someone else’s responsibility is a grave mistake. Designating a point person decreases the likelihood that the task will fall through the cracks.

A church can designate a point person to be responsible for developing and implementing safety procedures. This person might be a paid staff member or a volunteer. Many churches will have a person, whether a staff member

or lay leader, who will take such a responsibility seriously.

Utilize existing resources.

Not knowing where to start can be a reason for delay or failure to implement safety procedures for protecting children.

Support for child safety is often available at the associational, state and national levels. Many local churches that have developed policies for protecting children are glad to support other churches who need to do the same.

Other churches make use of existing entities like Ministry Safe or Protect My Ministry, both of which have extensive programs and resources to guide churches in protecting children. Right Now Media, utilized by many churches, also has numerous online resources that can be used for education and training.

Develop a child safety task force.

To broaden ownership of child safety, a church could develop a task force to oversee the development, implementation and evaluation of child safety policies.

Such a task force likely would involve paid staff, such as an administrative pastor or children and pre-school personnel, but might also include other church members, such as teachers, licensed counselors, social workers and police officers. A wide array of individuals from these or related backgrounds can bring rich experience to a child safety task force.

Develop policies and procedures.

A church should work toward a clearly considered and clearly articulated set of policies and procedures for child safety, whether using an outside resource, such as Ministry Safe, or a resource produced by a church's own

task force.

After developing policies and procedures for children's safety, it is absolutely essential those policies and procedures are followed and that those who work with children follow these stated guidelines. Task force personnel or other church leaders must work with childcare personnel to ensure they receive proper training, understand the guidelines and follow them.

After policies and procedures are developed and implemented, their regular review and updating will demonstrate due diligence in an ongoing process of developing the most effective system of child protection.

Carefully screen those who work with children.

Laxness in screening procedures opens the door to predatory individuals who desire to harm children.

Recruiting enough volunteers to work in preschool, children and youth ministries is often challenging. Therefore, the tendency can be to welcome anyone who wants to work with these groups and to be lax in screening possible helpers.

Churches must do thorough background checks on all individuals who work with children. For any paid position, churches should never cut corners in checking references. Pastoral Care, Inc. even recommends checking arrest and conviction records and obtaining a set of fingerprints to have on file for key childcare positions.

Have a plan to respond when abuse does occur.

While the preceding steps should reduce the occurrence of abuse significantly, abuse may still happen. Therefore, in addition to providing guidance for protecting children, church leaders or a child safety task force also should have a plan of response in place before abuse happens. For

example, if the incident happens in the church, the church needs to have guidelines for both internal and external investigations of how the abuse occurred.

The Bible is unequivocal. We are to care for children. Jesus' estimation of children is clear in his own interaction with little ones and in his indignation toward the disciples when they failed to see the importance of children.

There are many steps a church can take to increase the likelihood children will be safe at church. These steps are necessary and essential if we are to provide the type of care Jesus demonstrated.

Upcoming articles:

- *Who must [report abuse, and](#) how can churches help abuse victims and their families?*
- *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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