

Child Abuse in the Church

Child Abuse is such a hideous crime that affects innocent children everywhere. Our churches are not immune from such acts and needs to establish safeguards to protect the integrity and the values of the church as well as the children involved. To better equip us with guidelines to avoid such incidents, one should look at how and why this is prevalent in our society.

The definition of child abuse varies from state to state but generally includes any contact or interaction between a child and an adult in which the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of the adult or another person. The incidents of sexual abuse in America is startling. The National Center on Child Abuse reports the 1 in every 5 girls and 1 of 8 boys is a victim of some form of child abuse by age 12. Reported victims have been as young as 6 months, but the incidence of abuse peaks at ages 8 to 12. Children of all social, economic, and racial strata are susceptible.

What do sexual offenders look like? Are they tall or short, skinny or fat, old or young, or do they come from wealthy or poor families? The answer is yes to all the above. A pedophile and other sexual offenders come from every walk of life, any economic background, religion, and race. They may be as close as the guy next door, your Sunday school teacher, or the “grandfatherly” man down the street. There are no immediate stereotype characteristics.

While children are taught to be wary of strangers, most studies show that 65% to 85% of the abuse cases reflect that the offender is known to the child. In many cases, the offender is a family member. And too often, it is a person in a position of trust and is in frequent contact of children, such as a teacher, childcare worker, children’s church minister, nursery attendant, youth ministers, or even a clergy person. About 90% of sexual offenders are men and in the majority of cases, were victims themselves of being sexually abused as a child.

Violent acts seldom occur because the abusers are usually not trying to injure or hurt the child but satisfy their sexual drive and stimulation. They are people who are drawn to and can relate well with children. Sexual predators prey on the innocence of children. They feed on the thrill, sometimes treating this as a game to capture and lure their victim. They play the game slowly, befriending them, playing, and building trust to better know them and eventually violating it.

Most consider sexual offenders as being narcissistic and psychopaths. Narcissistic people are those who are self-centered, satisfying their own needs before others, and are driven to meet those needs. Many will say they care about others but will do most anything to accomplish what they really want. They are extremely great manipulators. Many have

practiced this art to perfection since birth. Everything they may say or do is entirely for the effect, to get the reaction and event they want from a child. Manipulation is a subtle thing, slowly convincing one to action or believing their thoughts. Since most sexual predators are treating this as a game, the truth is irrelevant, truth or lies are the same. In their mind, there are no lies when it comes to pretend. It is whatever works!

In an undercover surveillance operation, one child predator bragged on how easy it really is to talk to a child either in person or on the internet. He says he can spot a lonely child, one who is an easy target. He also said without hesitation that it is so easy to gain a child's trust. "All you have to do is to pay a little attention to them, make them feel special, and you have them where you want them." He used soap crayons to get the children undress themselves, encouraging them to do more, and even make it seem so delightful, they asked him to join their fun. He also liked to play in the yard and get children wet with a water hose. Afterward, he would make a big fuss to cause them to think they would get in trouble for going home wet. Then he offered them a T-shirt to wear while he dried their clothes. He stated, without reserve, that he had never had to undress a child. The children were so comfortable with him that they undressed themselves. Once the clothes came off, the game advanced as he molested them.

A child's mind does not travel in the direction of that of a predator, nor as an adult. They usually think in concrete terms, such as "this is because someone told them". Parents tell their children, "don't say this or that or don't act this way or that way" but does very little to educate their children in teaching them their bodies are very special and private. Children are often lured to a "new friend", one who understands them and likes to be with them. These deviates find ways to enter into a relationship with a child only with a plan or goal to lead them down the direction of victimizing them.

The church is not immune from such predators. What better place for a predator to find acceptance and availability to children than a church. The church is so willing to accept anyone to be faithful in their attendance and is especially excited about the idea of people "helping out" in children's church or the nursery. Many say, "Wow, we have a volunteer, another worker, that will free up some of our time, we never have enough workers to work in our program!" Many of these predators are church-going believers that "sneak" into the trust of others without being checked out for any previous sexual abuse. Most churches do not have applications for church workers or staff that includes questions of past sexual abuse, either convicted or accused. And most churches do not run a background check for sexual offenses. What a tragedy!

Most sexual abusers of children are respectable, otherwise law-abiding people who cultivate friendly relationships with their chosen prey, and many escape detection for precisely those reasons. Research agrees the typical child molester is able to harm large numbers of children without being caught. In part, because they have already established a trusting relationship, playing on children's sense of loyalty, vulnerability, shame, naivety, and fortifying their power to silence children through bribery, coercion, and violent threats. Some even use the supernatural threats of "God's wrath and hellfire." Many warn that molesters are often "good Christians."

Dr. Gene G. Abel, director of the Sexual Behavior Clinic of New York State Psychiatric Institute, has reported that, on the average, offenders have more than 60 victims. In one study, they discovered that 403 pedophiles had molested more than 67,000 children! Pedophiles who targeted male victims averaged 232 victims, while pedophiles who targeted girls averaged 23 victims.

Megan's Law. It is believed there are over 400,000 child molesters in America. On May 17, 1996, President Clinton signed into law, which addressed sexual offenders. Megan's Law was much needed, despite Washington State's 1990 Community Protection Act, which included America's first law authorizing public notification when dangerous sex offenders are released into the community. It was the brutal 1994 rape and murder of 7 year-old Megan Kanka by a previously registered sex offender that prompted the public demand for broad based community notification.

This law provides two components. 1) It must require all sex offenders of children to register in their state because they pose a high risk of re-offending after release from custody, protecting the public from sex offenders is a primary government interest, privacy of sex offenders are less important than for the public safety of others, and to release certain information about sex offenders to public agencies and the general public to assisting the general public. 2) Allows the state's discretion to disclose private and personal information on registered sex offenders available to the public, to assist law enforcement in investigations, establish legal grounds to hold known sex offenders, deters sex offenders from committing new offenses, and offers citizen information to protect children from sex offenders, child molesters, and victimization. Anyone can check with their state agencies for a listing of anyone in your community who may have been convicted of sexual offenses.

Ministers are not excluded from being suspect to child molestation. The Church Mutual Insurance Company of Merrill, WI, has seen about 200 claims against ministers for sexual abuse during the late 1980's. The company estimates there are as many as 2,000 cases of sexual abuse by clergy in the courts. One study of 250 reported cases in 1988 and 1989 involving child-molesting clergy in the U.S. and Canada, that 75 were Catholic priests (39.5%) and 111 were Protestant ministers (58%). Also charged were 1 Mormon clergymen, 1 occult minister, and 2 cult ministers. The majority cases did not go to trial, with 61% of accused ministers pleading guilty or no contest. Three-quarters of the clergy who pleaded innocent were found guilty.

In these cases, involving 190 ordained clergy and 60 non-ordained clergy staff, such as Sunday school teachers, crimes occurred at church locations. One convicted priest molested victims just before Mass. Sexual abuse can occur anywhere, even in the church van. About 50% of the clergymen were officially involved in youth functions. About 33% were accused of molesting youths during camping trips, youth group activities, retreats, and crusades. About 20% were accused of molesting children at religious schools, at church homes, or foster care. 11% were accused of abusing children during counseling sessions exclusively.

Sexual assault charges ranged from indecent touching to rape, sodomy, and child pornography. Most of the abuse was long-term with children assaulted as many as 1,000 times. Included in this study were prominent clergy and evangelists who made names for themselves through special ministries or “good works.” Charges for all 190 cases involved a total of 847 identified victims. Conservatively, according to speculations made by investigators, the 190 clergy had at least 4,000 other victims.

While the above study focused on clergy, the most trusted individuals of the church, others are more prevalent. Most parents feel their children are safe at church and with “other Christians”. Youth groups, Sunday school outings, Christian scouting, day camps, summer camps, church schools, athletics, church nurseries, church day cares, sleep-overs, and other similar functions or activities are sometimes un-chaperoned and normally do not raise suspicions from parents.

Prevention is the best method to avoid such tragedies! The Devil never plays fairly and people who manipulate innocent children should be convicted to the letter of the law as well as the people who allow such incidents. If a church knows of someone who has been accused of sexual offenses and does nothing, they are legally responsible and can be fined for such inexcusable actions. Perpetrators will always go to another source and prey on other victims. The Fox News Network reports that society can rehabilitate shoplifters and other forms of criminals but cannot rehabilitate pedophiles.

What can the church do?

Employment screening for all staff and volunteers cannot be over emphasized, especially when they involve positions with being in contact with children on a regular basis! Many sexual offenders consciously or unconsciously choose career paths that involve working with children. Many of these could be screened out before such incidents occur. Remember, it is not unusual for an individual who has been terminated by one worship center or school to seek employment at another, in the same area or state.

One cannot be absolutely certain to screen out all sexual abusers, many feel one can safeguard their church with the suggested guidelines listed below. It is important for all places of worship, schools, camps, day care centers, and youth groups to consider these suggestions very seriously when placing guidelines for employees or volunteers.

1. All applicants should complete an application whether the position is for pay or on a volunteer basis. Questions should include:
 - Current and previous residence addresses.
 - Current and previous employment or volunteer history including addresses, dates, duties, titles, and reasons for leaving.

- Names and addresses of schools attended and degree(s) earned.
- References from previous employers, churches, or organizations, which serve children.
- Pending criminal charges (where not prohibited by law), sexual accusations, convictions, or other sexual misconduct.

Include a statement, which the applicant should acknowledge in writing, certifying that the statements provided on the application are true and complete, and that any misrepresentation or omission may be grounds for rejection of the applicant or for dismissal if he or she is employed. This acknowledgement should authorize the church to contact any individual or organization listed on the application.

2. Review all statements made in the application, paying attention specific attention to any gaps in time and irregular employment patterns or unexplained absences. Pursue these gaps with employers listed and in a subsequent employment interview.
3. Contact in writing all listed references and employers. Inquire as to the reason why applicant left, and ask for any information that might help make determination of the applicant's suitability for the position trying to be filled. If inquiries are not responded to within a reasonable period of time, follow up with a telephone call. Make notes on any information given by references or if they are unwilling to provide any information.

If there are discrepancies between statements made by the applicant or former employer or reference, discuss them with the applicant. It is also normal for an applicant to be reluctant to provide information about their current employer because of fear of present employer knowing they are leaving and may agree with the applicant to only contact present employer if the position will be offered.

4. Conduct employment interviews with those applicants in which the church are still interested. Do this after reviewing the application and contacted previous employers and references. If detrimental information is uncovered, but still find the applicant desirable, discuss the information with the applicant. If applicant is ultimately hired, document reasons for overriding the detrimental information.
5. Check for arrest and conviction records of the key applicants. This can be done through court clerk offices for the county in which the applicant lives or through the Department of Justice. Almost all other entities across America do background checks.
6. At the time of offering the applicant the position, ask them to complete a set of fingerprints for the file. This might seem rough and controversial, but it serves to find any criminal records the applicant is hiding and it will assist law enforcement officials in their investigation if any sexual abuse is suspected.

Guidelines for People Who Work with Children

To avoid situations where sexual abuse is most likely to occur, a well-developed set of operational and supervisory guidelines will help protect children and the vast majority of adults who wouldn't think of sexually abusing a child.

1. Designate a "confidential counselor" to whom any student, camper, or other child can go to any time, without any special permission, to discuss any problems he or she is having.
2. Make sexual abuse awareness part of an annual safety program or include it in any curriculum.
3. Establish a policy of conducting a fair and discreet investigation of all alleged incidents of sexual abuse. Make it known to the entire staff that all allegations will be investigated.
4. Encourage employees and volunteers to limit their physical contact with any children.
5. Require that activities be done in an open area or room, and not in a private office.
6. Require that more than one adult be present when accompanying children on field trips and related activities.
7. Require more than one adult to be present when accompanying a child to another location outside of the activity or for any disciplinary reasons.
8. Periodically inspect classrooms, offices, work areas, and other areas where children and adults are together. Also check bathrooms, closets, vans, and other areas where sexual misconduct may occur.
9. Install windows in classrooms and make it a policy to keep doors open except where excessive noise prohibits it.
10. Pay close attention to adults who spend considerable "off duty" time with the same child or children. Discuss the matter with the adult, if necessary, with the child.
11. Notice children who are suddenly touching their private parts or who are finding a sensation to talk about or show private body parts to others. This could mean a child is being sexually abused by someone. Ask the child why they are doing that and where they learned to do that. Report incident to leadership of the church and report all child abuse to the proper authorities.

12. Develop a written standard of conduct for adult/children relationships. Establish parameters of conduct and contact during and after working hours. Include guidelines for transportation of children, specifically to where and when offers of transportation are acceptable, and by whom. This standard of conduct/contact should be communicated to the staff, parents, and children, so they know what is expected and what is unusual.
13. Communicate to the staff that these guidelines are for their benefit, as well as for the church, and for the children's benefit.

Detecting Sexual Abuse

Most cases of sexual abuse go undetected. There may not be any physical or psychological signs. Some can only be detected through physical examination. Most reports come from casual remarks made by the child that required the parent or caregiver to inquire deeper. Many children say nothing but know that what was done to them is wrong. They may be frightened or embarrassed to speak up. Many do not want the offenders to get into any kind of trouble, especially if the "friendship" has developed between the victim and offender. In some cases, there are "telltale" physical and emotional signs that may arouse suspicion.

Physical signs may be:

1. Difficulty in walking or sitting.
2. Torn, strained, or bloody underclothing.
3. Pain or itching in the genital area.
4. Bruises or bleeding in external genitalia, vaginal, or anal areas.
5. Venereal disease, especially with pre-teens.
6. Pregnancy.

Behavior signs may be:

1. Unwilling to change for gym or participate in physical education class.
2. Withdrawal, fantasy, or infantile behavior.
3. Bizarre, sophisticated or unusual sexual behavior or knowledge.

4. Poor peer relationships.
5. Delinquency or running away.
6. Reports sexual assault by caretaker.

The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect provided outlines above and cautions that these signs can indicate other problems that are not tied to sexual abuse. But repeated occurrence of an indicator, or the presence of several indicators, warrants further investigation.

What to Do If It Happens

If any employee or any other person discovers or have any reason to believe a case of sexual abuse has occurred or is occurring, seek professional help. Do not ignore any reported incident. The law states that everyone has to report any known or suspected abuse to any child. The church may want to follow suggested guidelines:

1. Inform the employee or volunteer of the accusations, and discuss them with he or she. If employee or volunteer admits wrongdoing, encourage them to report the incident themselves and inform them that the administration is required by law to report such incidents.
2. Suspend with pay the alleged offender while a confidential investigation is being conducted if employee or volunteer denies reports.
3. Immediately consult with the church attorney for advice regarding compliance with reporting laws. File the necessary reports with the appropriate agency within the time frame required by the state.
4. Together, with the reporting agency official, meet with child's parents and in their presence and with permission, with the child. The purpose of the meeting is to learn more fully the nature of the allegations, including when and where the alleged offense occurred. Reassure child that he or she has done nothing wrong and that it was right to report the incident. Allow the child to speak freely. Do not coach responses for them and do not become defensive from statements. The truth and child's well-being is most important. If a physical injury occurred, advise the parents to have the child examined by a qualified physician.
5. Notify the church's insurance company for liability purposes. Do not wait until there is an investigation to be conducted unless the church attorney so advises. Do not wait until criminal charges have been files or are faced with a civil

- lawsuit. Involving the insurance company does not admit to any negligence or liability. It is a good idea because some insurance companies require immediate notice, otherwise coverage may not be granted and to determine whether the church has coverage for sexual abuse, molestation, or misconduct. Some insurance companies offer advice that may be helpful. Early involvement by the insurance company may help minimize the civil consequences to the church, it's ministry, and speed up settlement to the child.
6. Cooperate in the investigation conducted by the agency to which the report was filed and to the insurance company.

How Parents Can Protect Their Children

Education is extremely important for any child or parent to help eliminate possible abuse. Most schools are good about sharing sexual abuse safety in their curriculum. The key to their programs is that they are geared to safety protection, not sex education. The reason for such programs is that the world is different than when parents were children. Some parents may feel the following suggestions may be burdensome or time consuming but remember, the most important thing is the safety of our children. Listed below are suggestions for parents to use for prevention:

1. Quiz your child's safety plan. A parent cannot always be around their children, so they must trust their intelligence when they find themselves in danger, such as getting lost or if someone is trying to hurt them.
2. Educate them to distinguish "good touching" and "bad touching"—say "no!" to adults in certain situations. Draw a full bathing suit that covers most of the body and quiz that child that it is not appropriate to touch anyone in places where the bathing suit covers. Instruct them to tell other adults if anyone touches them there or tries to touch them there. Let them know that not everyone in this world is good and not everyone is bad.
3. Be creative. Use games to practice "what would you do..." scenarios. There are lots of games (mostly for ages 5-17) that simulate online and day-to-day activities that help children identify potential dangers.
4. Set aside time to talk to children about the dangers of being around dangerous people and strangers. Gear the talk to the children's level.
5. Parents should spend quality time with their children, giving them attention, so that they will not be enticed to be with others.
6. Parents should be aware of adults that prefer to be with children than with people their own age, discourages others to help or go along with them, keeps children

alone, excessive touching such as tickling or wrestling, gives excessive gifts, or introducing children to pornographic materials.

7. Control access to people who have access to their child. Develop a code or password that the child knows it is okay for an adult to pick them up.
8. Fight and run away from a person who does not give the proper code or password, yell out “Stay back, you’re not my parent” when sensing an attack, and kicking, biting, and yelling if someone tries to abduct them.
9. Be aware of what is going on with a child. Look for warning signs of body language, withdrawing, excessive touching body parts, and inquire if someone has touched them.
10. Provide current files on their child, such as photos, physical descriptions, extra activities, friend’s names, along with addresses and phone numbers. Mentally note what children are wearing each day.
11. Teach children to know full names of parents, addresses, and phone numbers to call for help, let them know how to make a long distant call from pay phones, and call 911.
12. Teach children how to answer the door or phone calls. Instruct them to never say they are alone. If child is scared with a phone call or someone at the door, instruct the child to know who to call such as a neighbor or trusted friend who can easily come over.
13. If a child is separated while shopping, be sure children know who they can look to for help, such as the nearest clerk.
14. Avoid having children to walk alone to school or anywhere else.
15. Monitor and be involved with the activities of their children.
16. Be aware of any possible convicted sexual abusers in the neighborhood. Information can be retrieved at meganslaw.net or com and will have access to each state’s directory of anyone living near you. Show the photo to your child to inform them to stay clear of that person.

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