



Preventing and responding to abuse: A tough part of youth ministry

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- *Amy has been working at the church for a couple years as the youth minister. While she was at camp with members of the youth group, one of the girls from her church sat down next to her and said, "I've never told anyone this before but..." She proceeded to tell Amy about her history of sexual and verbal abuse. She wanted Amy to keep it a secret. At the same time, Amy felt the girl was asking for help.*
 - *You notice that Sean is pretty withdrawn. He does not really trust adults. He often gets in fights. Maybe Sean is "just being Sean" or maybe something else is going on.*

These are just a few of the many scenarios that youth ministers may actually face in the course of working with young people. If you found yourself in a similar situation, how would you respond? Are you aware of the general behavior indicators that may suggest a young person is in an abusive situation? Does your congregation have policies and procedures for preventing abuse as well as reporting and responding to it? Not sure how to answer? Read on. This *Help Sheet* can serve as a starting point for helping youth, families and your congregation with a difficult and painful issue—abuse.

Recent statistics on abuse

- Abuse of children is most often committed by someone the child knows (a family friend, relative or family member) rather than by a stranger.
- Approximately 3 million child abuse reports are made each year. The actual incidence of abuse and neglect is estimated to be three times greater than the number reported to authorities.

- Nine out of ten Americans polled regard child abuse as a serious problem, yet only 1 in 3 reported abuse when confronted with an actual situation.
- Both child maltreatment and domestic violence occur in an estimated 30 to 60 percent of families where there is some form of family violence.

(from www.childhelpusa.org)

The history of abuse of children and youth

Until not so long ago, children were seen under the eyes of the law as property. In Roman times, “a father could sell, abandon or kill his child and still remain within the norms of society.” (Becca Cowan Johnson, *For Their Sake: Recognizing, Responding to, and Reporting Child Abuse*, p.12. Published by American Camping Association, 1992)

It was finally in 1874 that a case against a parent abusing a child was brought forth in the United States. It was only after the founder of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals initiated this case that the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was formed. We have come a long way since then, yet we still see the *cycle of abuse* continue in our society today. Parenting skills are passed on to the next generation. If a child knows little of love, acceptance and respect, she is likely to pass on to her own children—through her own behavior—what she learned from her parents about abuse and neglect. It is a tragic cycle. For instance, 90% of those imprisoned for committing sexual crimes were abused as children.

This is clearly a call to spread the love of Jesus! Remember, Jesus welcomed the children. Jesus offered hope, healing and unconditional love. He didn’t treat them as property. Being a “safe” person or providing a safe place for youth to live and grow is a big accomplishment (and challenge) for a congregation. What follows is a basic outline of what abuse is, how to recognize it, how to report it, and ideas on preventing abuse in your church.

What kinds of abuse are we talking about?

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act provides this definition: “Child abuse and neglect means the physical or mental injury, sexual abuse or exploitation, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen.” Here are the categories of abuse in a bit more detail:

Neglect

This is the most widely reported type of abuse. It can be physical (food, clothing, shelter, medical care neglected or withheld) or emotional (no nurturing). Income does not matter. This can happen in the best of homes.

Physical

The main areas of abuse occur between the neck and the knees. Which means that you may not be able to see the bruises or injuries. Youth may act out in extreme ways in these cases—very withdrawn or very aggressive. Some try to cover up the problem and make sure everything appears “okay.”

Sexual

The most reports of sexual abuse are of children who are 6-12 years of age. The sexual abuser may be a parent, aunt, uncle, family friend or even older sibling or babysitter. Often this sort of abuse is blocked out by the youth and comes to light when they are in their early 20s.

Emotional

If a child's parents are constantly fighting or if there is spousal abuse in the home, the young person will often experience physical or emotional abuse. This also can occur when parents verbally abuse their child, or form inappropriate emotional bonds with them (i.e., a mother emotionally confiding in her son as a replacement for her emotionally absent spouse).

Recognizing abuse: The obvious and not-so-obvious

Not all of the following indicators need to be true or present for there to be abuse, but generally a person in an abusive situation will have a number of them. Some youth in abusive situations will exhibit their own unique combination of behaviors and indicators while others may seem very "normal" and "well-adjusted" as if nothing negative is happening to them. It is important to be observant of patterns of behavior while remembering that any given indicator may not necessarily mean a young person is experiencing abuse. Some indicators may be manifestations of other kinds of stress or of developmental issues. The following indicators will give you a general idea of what to look for. ([*For Their Sake: Recognizing Responding to and Reporting Child Abuse*](#), pp. 40-44.)

Indicators for physical abuse:

- Is wary of adults
- Is extremely aggressive or withdrawn
- Is dependent and indiscriminate in his or her attachments
- Is uncomfortable when other children cry
- Controls his or her own crying
- Is manipulative
- Exhibits a drastic behavior change when not with parents or caregiver
- Has poor self-concept
- Alcohol/drug abuse
- Is self-mutilating
- Is frightened of parents or of going home
- Is overprotective or responsible for parents
- Suicidal
- Has unexplained marks, fractures, bruises, burns (or the explanation is inconsistent or improbable)
- Wets the bed

Indicators of neglect:

- Is truant or tardy to school, or arrives early and stays late
- Attempts suicide
- Substance abuse
- Appears to be exhausted or sleep deprived
- Engages in delinquent behavior
- States frequent or continual absence of parent or guardian
- Engages in dangerous activities (because he or she is often unsupervised)

Indicators of emotional abuse:

- Overly eager to please
- Seeks adult contact
- Views abuse as being warranted
- Exhibits changes in behavior
- Is excessively anxious

- Is depressed
- Is unwilling to discuss problems
- Exhibits aggressive or bizarre behavior
- Is withdrawn
- Is apathetic
- Is passive
- Has unprovoked fits of yelling or screaming
- Exhibits inconsistent behavior at home and school
- Runs away from home
- Suicidal
- Low self-esteem and low self-confidence
- Has difficulty sustaining relationships
- Has unrealistic goals
- Is impatient
- Sabotages his or her chances of success
- Has a sleep disorder, nightmares, or restlessness
- Eating disorder
- Is hyperactive
- Exhibits developmental lags
- Wets the bed

Indicators of sexual abuse:

- Is withdrawn or (especially in boys) is overly aggressive or violent
- Exhibits sexualized behavior: unusual sexual behavior and or knowledge beyond that which is common for his or her particular developmental stage
- Has poor peer relationships
- Either avoids or seeks out adults
- Is pseudo-mature
- Is manipulative
- Is self-conscious
- Has problems with authority and rules
- Exhibits and eating disorder
- Is self-mutilating
- Is obsessively clean
- Uses or abuses alcohol and/or drugs
- Exhibits delinquent behavior, such as running away from home
- Is extremely compliant or defiant
- Is fearful or anxious
- Suicidal
- Is promiscuous
- Is unwilling to participate in sports activities
- Engages in fantasy or infantile behavior
- Pain, bleeding, itching in genital area
- Bedwetting

Abuse prevention and education

- **Find out what procedures your church staff has for reporting abuse.** If the answer is *none*, you may want to write a proposal. Contact your [synod office](#) to see if they have resources and suggested procedures. You can also go to the [ELCA Youth Ministries Web Links](#) page to locate organizations that offer resources on developing abuse prevention

- policies and procedures (see sections on "professional guidelines and behavior," "risk management" and "violence prevention").
- **Establish written behavior guidelines for adults who work with youth (paid and volunteer).** Make sure every new volunteer or staff member is briefed on the guidelines as well as the congregation's policies on responding to and reporting abuse.
 - **Always interpret prevention guidelines, policies and procedures in the positive context of ministry and care for youth,** not as "necessary evils," what the law has forced you to do, or as deterrents to ministry and relationships.
 - **Find out if you are a mandated reporter.** In most cases, you probably are. If you aren't, you still can report suspected abuse and be confident that you are acting ethically. Call the [ChildHelp USA](#) national Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD) or your local Children's Protective Services (CPS) for assistance.
 - **Research who you would need to call in your area.** It may be the police, Child Protective Services or social services. Some states have a statewide phone number to report to; others do it by county.
 - **Find some abuse prevention training at a local or county level.** Some sexual assault centers or social service agencies provide this service for a nominal fee.
 - **Consider offering/requiring prevention education for adult leaders and counselors, teachers, church staff and others in the congregation.** This is a great service for a congregation to provide for a community.
 - **Begin a file of highly recommended counselors, especially ones on a sliding scale.** Often counseling seems prohibitive, but there are usually agencies (i.e., [Lutheran Social Ministry Organizations](#) or a United Way agency that will provide counseling on an affordable sliding scale). A health care professional in your church or the pastor may be able to provide these resource lists and referrals.
 - **Weave prevention education into your youth ministry.** Use Bible studies, discussions, programs or activities to help youth develop healthy relationships, understand violence and build positive self-esteem from the context of their faith and scripture.
 - **Look into the resources provided by the ELCA's [Safe Haven for Children](#) program.**
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Things to do when you suspect abuse

- **Document your observations.** Make note of patterns of behavior you notice over time. Documentation will help if you need to report in the future.
- **Realize that you do not have to know for sure.** You are not the professional investigator, social worker or therapist. It is not your job to prove or disprove abuse before you report a suspicion of it. Your job is to exercise good judgment, care, concern and support for young people and their families.
- **Discuss the situation and process with your supervisor/pastor at your church.** Maintain confidentiality with the person you are consulting with.
- **Decide if you or the pastor will make the call.** Follow the established procedures for your congregation or synod. If you are not sure who to call, contact one of the following agencies (they vary from state-to-state):
 - Children's Protective Services (CPS)
 - The local police
 - Department of Social Services
 - The National Hotline for ChildHelp USA is 1-800-4-A-CHILD or 1-800-422-4453. They also have a Web site www.childhelpusa.org. The hotline staff can tell you where and how you can make a report and send you resources.
- **If a youth ever says "Can you keep a secret?" or "I have never told anyone this before..." it may be important to let the young person know that you can keep their confidence unless you determine that they are being harmed or pose a threat to themselves or others.**

- **Make sure you listen to the young person.** If you are the first person they have told, they may try to minimize the story, feel guilty about it, rationalize, or may even deny it the next day. In many cases, they don't always remember everything in a neat chronological order. Just listen and assure them it is not their fault and that there are caring people who will help. It is extremely rare that a young person or child will make up a story of abuse—take them seriously.
- **Do not discuss the situation with other youth or adults.**
- **Remember the young person, their family and the situation in your personal prayers.**

Dealing with the uncomfortable, broken, painful and sick parts of life is part of the ministry you are called to. These are the situations and human circumstances that cry out loudest for God's healing and reassuring presence experienced through one another. We wish these painful realities didn't exist, especially for young people, but they do exist and you and I are called to respond each day with the care and wisdom that can be found only through the presence of God's Spirit and the example of Jesus' life among us. Blessings and strength in your ministry with youth!

Resources

- Your [synod](#) office.
- [Childhelp USA](#). Hotline: 1-800-422-4453. Childhelp USA offers crisis counseling for children, parents and adult age victims of child abuse. They also will send out brochures on specific abuse subjects and can answer questions about reporting abuse.
- ELCA [Commission for Women resources](#)
- ELCA [Vocation and Education](#) unit
- ELCA Youth Ministry *Help Sheet: [Ensure Safe Boundaries in Youth Ministries](#)*
- [ELCA Youth Ministry Links](#) ("professional guidelines and behavior" and "risk management" sections)
- [For Their Sake: Recognizing, Responding to, and Reporting Child Abuse](#) by Becca Cowan Johnson (Published by [American Camping Association](#), 1992). Though this is ten years old, it is written especially for youth ministry leaders, camp directors and staff, childcare providers, teachers, and other youth professionals and volunteers.
- [National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- [Safe Haven for Children](#) program (ELCA)
- [Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church](#)

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