We Won't Let it Happen Here!
Preventing Child Abuse in the Church

Second edition

And Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them; and taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me…"

Adapted from Mark 9:36 – 37, RSV

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We Won't Let It Happen Here: Keeping Children Safe in the Church

Working in a childcare program exposed Joanne to the world of abused children. She was stunned, at first, on hearing the stories of some of the children. She began working with other staff to find resources to help children learn about what is and is not abuse and what to do if they are being abused. The state in which they worked provided some of these resources and, eventually, required a number of protections for children in childcare. One of these was mandatory criminal background checks on all childcare staff in licensed childcare programs. When Joanne read that the increased use of background checks by agencies that work with children might mean that sexual predators would seek contact with children through organizations that did not do such screening, she thought about her church. However, when she talked with her pastor, he quickly assured her that their large, suburban, well-respected congregation wouldn't have such a problem. "It can't happen here."

But it does happen here! Child abuse is very much a part of our society, and society includes our churches. An alarming number of children die each year because of child abuse. Many more are physically and emotionally scarred by the trauma of child abuse. National statistics indicate that child abuse is not going away. If, every day in America, 7,942 children are reported abused or neglected, some of those children are children we know. If one in every three to five children has been sexually victimized in some way before they reach eighteen, some of these children are members of our churches. Some of these children and youth may confide in their church-school teachers or youth group leaders. Church personnel or volunteers may have been victimized themselves in the past.

Unfortunately, the church has been among the last institutions to respond to this crisis. There are a number of reasons for this.

- We are trusting. Our congregations are our spiritual communities. We know and like most of the members. We find it hard to imagine that someone in our community, someone we know and like, could abuse a child.
- We are welcoming. We want to share the Gospel with others. We believe that those who attend church with us will be striving to live Christian lives. We want to make new members feel comfortable. The idea of "screening" volunteers might make people feel unwelcome or might convey that we don't think they are truly serious about being Christian.
- We are forgiving. Many of us have believed that "forgiveness" is the erasing of sins, as though they never happened, and that someone who has repented will never sin again. Perhaps our discomfort with the idea that people abuse children makes us want to forgive the perpetrator and get the matter behind us. Perhaps we have doubts about whether allegations of abuse are true and worry that we might be accused of abuse as well. But forgiving child abuse perpetrators too quickly puts our children at risk.

It becomes very easy, under these circumstances, to deny that there is or could be a problem with child abuse in our church or involving members of our church. In doing so, we fail to protect our children or to respond to their needs.

One church discovered, to its horror, that many of their preschool children had been sexually molested by volunteers who always agreed to help with childcare during church, committee meetings, and pot-luck suppers. Although church members were in and out of the nursery and kindergarten rooms, the abuse was happening when the children were taken down the hall to the bathroom or when the children went out for walks or for outside play. The abuse went on for some time before it was discovered. Parents were angry and felt responsible for not having known what was happening. The staff who allowed the volunteers to do so much childcare felt responsible. The volunteers, also members of the church and of families within the church, were tried and convicted. The congregation would never be the same, and the children would not likely see the church as a sanctuary or a place to worship a great and good God.

Another congregation learned from the television news that their beloved youth minister had been arrested for child exploitation involving youth outside of the church. Conflict and tension arose between those in the congregation who believed him to be innocent and those who thought he should be fired.

Other congregations have found that they were respondents in lawsuits brought on behalf of children abused by a staff person in the childcare facility housed in their church.

As our society has become more aware of the problem of child abuse and as regulations have been put in place to protect children from abuse, more and more groups are requiring background checks and affidavits asserting that volunteers and staff have never been reported for, charged with, or found guilty of child abuse, sexual abuse, child exploitation, or other misconduct related to children. As more groups and agencies require such certification and background checks, persons who want unsupervised access to children will look for places where this certification is not required. This is one reason why the church must become involved.

In recent years, a number of forces have caused the church to take a closer look at efforts to prevent child abuse. Media attention has focused on child abuse cases, including some cases that have involved church staff. The public and the church have responded with horror, disbelief, anger, and shock. Adults have come forward and talked about being abused as children and about the impact that abuse had on their lives. Others have banded together to argue that most of the people who have alleged abuse in childhood are making it up, encouraged to do so by unethical therapists. Churches have often "forgiven" the perpetrator and even moved him[*]* (or allowed him to move) to another area of the country, hoping and believing that it wouldn't happen again. Starting in 1984, churches have successfully been sued for failing to deal effectively with child abuse by church staff and preventing further abuse of children.

[*] "Men" is used here primarily because men are more likely to abuse children sexually and because men have been more likely to be church staff. This does not in any way suggest that women do not abuse children.

The National Child Protection Act of 1993 urged states to be more insistent that all child-serving agencies and organizations complete criminal history background checks on all staff and volunteers. State and FBI files were made available to child-serving agencies. It is not clear whether churches are required to do such background checks, but the availability of such information makes it easier for churches to perform such screenings and makes it more likely that churches will be held liable if they *suspect* a child is abused and they have failed to screen staff and volunteers.

Legal liability issues are clearly present, though it is not known exactly how many churches and how much money has been involved. About one percent of all congregations have been sued because of child abuse in the church. Because some cases are settled out of court, the full financial consequences are not known. However, it is increasingly clear that, if a youngster were abused by a church staff person or volunteer and if a civil suit were brought against the church as well as the individual, the court would likely find the church negligent if they could have obtained information about the perpetrator and failed to do so. Companies who insure churches are quite aware of this and are increasingly encouraging churches to develop policies for the screening of volunteers and staff.

Many individuals, aware of the increased concern about child abuse and often unsure of what to believe, have become reluctant to work with children for fear of being falsely accused of abuse. Having in place a policy for the appropriate screening of staff and volunteers and guidelines that protect children from abuse, also protect adults from unjust accusations.

In addition to concerns about protecting children from abuse and protecting adults from false allegations, there is concern about the profound damage to congregations when abuse is alleged. The abuser is almost always someone known to the child and, thus, to the child's family and community. Many in the congregation don't want to believe that abuse could happen to one in their midst or that someone they know could be an abuser. Members who have a history of having been abused as children will often have strong feelings about how the situation is handled and may need to deal with their own grief and anger again. Congregation members who don't want to think about such distressing topics may criticize those who advocate for the prevention of child abuse in the church. The tension and potential for conflict may drive people away or may cause a congregation to split.

The tradition of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has long been to act in the world wherever injustices are present. This tradition is firmly rooted in the teachings of the Bible and our Confessions. We are created in God's image and are children of God. We share responsibility with God for the care of creation. We are repeatedly enjoined in the Old Testament to care for widows and orphans and are assured that God will surely hear their cry when they call out to Him. Christ went further by telling us that those who harm children (still considered property in his time) would be better off dead (with a millstone around their necks).

We are engaged by our Confessions and our covenant of baptism to participate in the nurture and guidance of all children of God. Children are to honor their fathers and mothers, but parents are not to provoke their children to anger.

The General Assembly has a long history of promoting the meeting of the needs of children. The Presbyterian Church (USA) and its predecessors have passed resolutions supporting a reduction in poverty, feeding of the hungry, a reduction in racism, and education for all children. The needs of children, including protection from abuse, were specifically targeted by the General Assemblies in 1991 and 1996, and by the Year of the Child in the year 2000-2001.

As we've learned more about abuse from the survivors, it has become apparent that one of the effects is impaired spirituality. Men and women who grew up thinking of God as "father" and who also had an abusive father find it difficult to worship God. They frequently question how a God who is all-knowing and all-powerful could allow abuse to have happened to them as children. Faith is shaken further when a minister or teacher of God's word is the one who victimizes them.

It is part of God's plan and our response to God's love and grace that each of God's children be nurtured in faith and love. Children cannot grow in faith and know God's love and grace when they are victims of child abuse. The church's complicity in or failure to respond to such abuse makes the experience of faith and love less likely. Our response must not be that "it can't happen here" but "We won't let it happen here!"

Developing a Policy

Jesus taught us, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5).

Children are our present and our future, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God. And yet, there were over one million children who were confirmed to have been abused or neglected in the United States in 1988 (the year for which the most recent statistics are available). Studies have estimated that one of three girls and one of seven boys is sexually abused before the age of 18.

Jesus also said, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones. ... it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). Our Christian Faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children.

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation, and ritual abuse occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural and racial lines.

Such incidents are devastating to all that are involved: the child, the family, the local church, and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

Minimally, churches should have

- An ongoing plan for educating the congregation and its leaders on the reality of child abuse, risk factors leading to child abuse, and strategies of prevention;
- Procedures for screening staff and volunteers;
- Safety procedures for church activities;
- Directory of resources for children who have been abused and their families;
- Liability insurance that includes sexual abuse coverage; and
- Awareness and self-protection curriculum for children in the church.

Most of these issues will be addressed in more depth in a later chapter of this resource.

Developing a policy for dealing with child abuse in the church provides an opportunity for a congregation to look at all the ways in which children need to be protected in the church. This includes other safety issues besides child abuse issues, such as van maintenance, fire extinguisher placement, First Aid training, and a multitude of related issues. Some congregations end up with a "Safe Church" policy, which is broader than one that limits itself to protecting children from child sexual abuse.

An important first step in developing a policy is to check insurance coverage. There are several reasons for doing so. It is important to determine if your church is covered in the event of child abuse in the church and, if not, to decide if it is necessary to obtain a rider for such coverage. The church will also want to talk with their insurance agency about savings there might be in premium cost if the church develops and implements a "Safe Church" policy.

A "Safe Church" policy needs to address

- Insurance coverage
- Selection and screening for volunteers
- Age and gender of volunteers in different capacities (nursery, youth group)
- Number of volunteers necessary in various situations
- Safety precautions and procedures which will be put in place
- Procedure for reporting abuse
- Plan for training staff and volunteers

Most of these topics will be addressed later in this resource. There is also a list of resources that might prove helpful in this process.

In developing your church's policy, it will be important to consult legal advice about screening applications and interviews. It will also be important to become acquainted with your state's child abuse laws and reporting procedure.

Education about Child Abuse

What Is Child Abuse?

There are many different definitions of what is and is not child abuse. Some lists include "neglect" under child abuse. The definitions may vary depending on whether the focus is from a medical, legal, or social service perspective. So what are these different types of abuse, and why is it important to have a definition?

The primary importance of knowing what is child abuse or neglect lies in knowing when a report to Child Protective Services is necessary. The most important definitions you will need to know are those found in your state law about abuse and neglect. As your congregation develops a policy to deal with child abuse, working with the local authorities or an attorney can be very helpful, so that the definitions in your policy are consistent with your state law.

"Abuse" is generally considered an act that causes physical and/or emotional damage to a child. There are generally three types of abuse delineated in the law.

Physical Abuse involves a person (older and larger) deliberately and intentionally causing bodily harm to a child. Examples include hitting a child with fists or objects, shaking a child (especially an infant), kicking, throwing, scalding, choking, burning, or otherwise causing injuries. The critical aspects of the definition are injury to a child and the injury being non-accidental.

Sexual Abuse generally is considered to be sexual contact between an adult and a child in which the purpose is the sexual gratification of the adult. Many states now specify that the abuser must be older and larger than the victim. Sexual abuse is not limited to intercourse, but generally includes fondling. It may also include an ongoing pattern of sexual talk or exposure to sexual material inappropriate for the child's age. Involving a child in the making of pornographic material or in prostitution is also generally considered sexual abuse.

Emotional Abuse or psychological maltreatment is more elusive, especially in state laws. It is generally considered to be a pattern of behavior that results in emotional disturbance in a child. It may include terrifying or humiliating punishments (killing a child's pet, making a child wear a sign that says he is a bed-wetter, locking a child in a dark place), isolating a child from others, convincing a child she is bad or incompetent, or exploiting a child (for example, using her to commit crimes because of the reduced likelihood that the child will be punished by the law). Physical abuse and sexual abuse often involve aspects of emotional abuse. For example, a child who is used for the sexual satisfaction of an adult will, over time, "learn" that they are not worth protecting.

"Neglect" is the failure of parents or other caregivers to provide for the basic needs of a child. Neglect can involve **educational neglect**, in which parents do not ensure that the child goes to school or learns in some other way the basic material required by state law. **Medical neglect** involves parental failure to obtain needed medical care for their children. **Physical neglect** can be the failure of parents to provide for basic needs of food, clothing appropriate to the weather, and shelter. Exposing a child to dangerous situations (letting a young child play near a busy highway without adequate protection or supervision) can also be considered neglectful behavior. **Emotional neglect** includes the failure of a parent to provide the love, nurture, and availability that children need to feel competent, self-confident, and loved.

Ritualistic Abuse is a term that has been used to refer to the intentional physical, sexual, or psychological abuse of a child when such abuse is repeated and/or stylized. This may include cruelty to animals, threats of harm to other people or pets, or costumes. The term was sometimes applied to allegations of satanic rituals and has, thus, become a term that has fallen into disfavor. However, there may be some reason to believe that some abusers use rituals and costumes to control the child victim or to make any report unbelievable. For example, if a very young child is made to "stab" a doll with a knife, with red food coloring used as blood, and if the child is then told that she killed the baby and will go to jail if she ever tells anyone, the child is unlikely to report even horrific abuse. If "Donald Duck" is the one who abuses a child, any report is likely to be dismissed as fantasy. Even if the child were believed, it would be much more difficult to prosecute someone who is in a costume whenever in interaction with the child. Reports of ritualistic abuse should not be dismissed out of hand, but extra caution and advocacy may need to be taken in such cases.

Who are the Abusers?

People who abuse children cannot be easily characterized. They come from all socio-economic levels, all races and nationalities, and both genders, though there are some differences based on the type of abuse. The proportion of abusers who are psychotic or crazy is no greater than in the general population. The proportion of abusers who are homosexual is no greater than that in the general population.

Those who physically abuse children often are experiencing other problems in their life. Parents may have chronic problems of low self-esteem or poverty, or the problems could be of more recent onset, such as illness or job loss. It takes considerable emotional energy to parent children, and all of us recognize that we have less patience when we are tired, worried, depressed, or ill. Parents who have been raised by abusive or inadequate parents may not know how to cope with the daily stresses of raising children. For parents with more stresses than usual or fewer emotional resources, lashing out at one's child can happen before the parent realizes what he or she is doing.

The stress in a situation can be increased if the child is also having problems. A child who is hyperactive, seriously ill, colicky, or otherwise makes extra demands on a parent's time or energy can increase the likelihood of abuse occurring.

Perhaps not surprisingly, small children are more likely to be physically abused by their mothers. Older children are more likely to be physically abused by fathers. Men are more likely to perpetrate child sexual abuse, but some women do as well. And girls are not the only child sexual abuse victims.

Parents who are neglectful may be depressed. Alcohol or drug use can play a role in any type of abuse or neglect. The chemical use may leave little money for providing for children, or parents may be sleeping or gone much of the time, leaving the child alone and unsupervised. Alcohol and drugs may decrease inhibitions about violence and sexual behavior.

It is more difficult to say what types of people sexually abuse children. There have been a number of typologies suggested over the years, but there has been little research support for these. Some have suggested that persons who sexually abuse children are inadequate in "normal" sexual relationships. While there may be some perpetrators who are like this, there are many who appear to have good marriages and adequate sexual functioning. Some may abuse a child or children out of anger and aggression. At least some men have molested a daughter to "get back at" a wife or girlfriend who has been less attentive than the man wished.

Impact of Abuse in the Lives of Children

The impact of abuse in the lives of children varies widely. Some children have nightmares, have trouble concentrating in school, become aggressive, or sexually act out. Others appear to have no problems and may even be exceptionally good students and eager to please.

There are many reasons for the different reactions to child abuse. For example, if a child is fondled by a neighbor, reports this immediately to his parents, is believed, and provided protection in the future, it is likely that there will be few, if any, effects of the abuse. On the other hand, if a child is regularly and aggressively sexually abused by a parent or other trusted adult, the long-range effects will be much more serious.

The following are factors that affect the degree to which children will be harmed by abuse:

- The relationship. Children abused by parents and others they trust are more harmed emotionally than those who are abused by someone they barely know. Abuse by trusted persons teaches them not to trust primary relationships. Victims of such abuse are more likely to blame themselves.
- The age at which the abuse occurs. Children who are younger when abused are more affected than children who are older. Children who are completely unable to protect themselves or to put into perspective what is happening to them will have more difficulty in social relationships, with self-esteem, and with overall functioning than do children who are abused after having had time to learn that not all relationships are abusive. It is also of note that younger children are more likely to sustain brain injury from physical abuse (or even physical neglect) than are older children.
- The age difference between abuser and abused. Injury is more likely to occur when a brother who is 16 hits a 6-year-old sibling than when the hitter is 7 years of age. The age difference is also a factor in the degree to which the victim feels

they have some control in their life and some ability to protect themselves. A larger age difference often leaves a child feeling they don't have a right to respond, to "talk back" to the older perpetrator, or to protect themselves. The older the abuser, the more likely the child is to see them as having authority that the child victim must obey.

- The degree of violence and aggression involved in the abuse. Obviously, abuse is more damaging when physical injuries occur or when a child is terrified than when the abuse is less violent.
- The duration of the abuse. Abuse that continues over a long period of time is more traumatic for children than is abuse that occurs for only a brief period or only once.
- Frequency of abuse. Abuse that happens often is more upsetting and debilitating than abuse that happens rarely.

Obviously, some of these factors interact with each other. Even infrequent abuse can be devastating to a child if it is particularly violent. It must also be clear that even occasional abuse, mild abuse (fondling as opposed to rape), or abuse by a stranger has some impact on children, especially when they fail to tell an adult who can protect them or tell an adult and are not protected.

Research has also found that the impact of any particular traumatic event is determined, in part, by exposure to previous trauma. For example, a child who has grown up in family in which parents have physical fights is more likely to be traumatized by stranger abuse than is a child who hasn't had the previous trauma. An adult raped as a teen will react more strongly, usually, to a motor vehicle accident than an adult not traumatized previously.

Some children survive abuse in defiance of all we know about reactions to abuse. Often, this is because there was someone in the child's life who valued the child, believed in the child, and was willing to take time with and advocate for the child. This person may or may not know about the abuse, but takes the report seriously if the child does report it. This person does, however, listen, care, and support the child in his or her school, friendship, and faith endeavors. If the child does report the abuse, it is likely to be to such a person.

How To Know When a Child Has Been Abused

Not too many years ago, there were checklists describing "Behavioral Indicators of Child Abuse." In fact, one was included in the first edition of this resource. We know now, however, that such checklists are easily misinterpreted.

No checklist of behavior problems should be used to determine whether or not a child has been abused. Many different problem behaviors may result from abuse, as we have seen in the section on "How Abuse Effects Children." Children react differently. Some may become withdrawn. Some may become aggressive. Some may act out the sexual abuse with dolls or with younger children. However, even sexual behavior does not necessarily mean that a child has been abused. Children are sexual beings. Little boys find at a very early age that stimulation of their penis feels good. For both boys and

girls, interest in the genitals increases during toilet training. Pre-school children discover that boys and girls are different and explore each other as they play "doctor." Most boys masturbate, and a large proportion of girls do as well.

Besides sexual behavior, most of the old checklists included a wide variety of behaviors often experienced by children, including trouble sleeping, inattention, social withdrawal, anxiety around strangers, and other changes in behavior. While these behaviors are sometimes exhibited by children who have been abused, they are not always seen in abused children. Further, there are a large number of children who exhibit these behaviors who have never been abused.

Lizzie, for example, screamed in terror every time the regular babysitter came to stay with her and her brothers and sisters even though the sitter had never abused her. The first time the sitter had come to stay with Lizzie and her siblings was the same night the family had moved into a new house. Lizzie was eight-months-old. She was left with a stranger in a strange place. Her crib was set up, but nothing else looked familiar. For years after that, the sight of the babysitter aroused in her that sense of abandonment, and she clung to her parents desperately.

An automobile accident, events on the news, the illness of a parent, the death of a friend, and countless other events in the lives of children can contribute to some of the behaviors found on many of the checklists of "Indicators of Child Sexual Abuse."

It is important, therefore, not to jump to conclusions when a child's behavior changes. When a child's behavior changes dramatically, it is best to stay alert, to ask the parents about changes in the child's environment, and to watch for indications of what the problem might be. It is also important to make certain that the child knows that they can talk with you about whatever their concerns are.

When a Child Reports Abuse

Most of us have one of two reactions when a child mentions to us that they have been abused. One is denial--ignoring the child or responding with something like "Honey, I know your Daddy. He would never do anything like that." The second is an attempt to make it all better by taking on the role of investigator-therapist. "Tell me everything that happened."

While these may be the normal reaction, they are not helpful to the child. You don't have to have been trained as a child abuse investigator or a licensed therapist, however, to be responsive if a child tells you about abuse.

- Know the church policy on handling reports of abuse and of sexual misconduct.
- Remain calm. This may be quite difficult if you haven't been the recipient of such news in the past. It becomes more difficult if you know and like the accused or if you have been a victim yourself in the past. If you are a Sunday school teacher, a pastor, a youth group leader, or a nursery volunteer, practice **now** with peers or in front of a mirror so that you can remain calm when you are trusted with such confidences. Be aware of your body language.
- Listen, and don't ask questions. Remaining calm and listening to what the child has to say communicates that you are concerned and want to help and that you are taking the child seriously. Asking questions may communicate that you don't

believe what the child is saying. Further, asking questions can forever affect the child's believability to those who must investigate. For example, if you ask questions which suggest an answer (Did your Mommy do this? Did it happen at church?), the investigators (and the court, if it comes to that) will never know if the child is reporting what really happened or what you suggested. This may result in social services dropping the case and, thereby, failing to protect a child who needs protection.

- Reassure the child in a meaningful way. It is all right to say, "I'm really sorry." However, these comments should not editorialize on the incident being reported. To tell a child, "Your babysitter is a bad person for doing this to you" may again suggest to the child information **you** think is important. If a child likes the person being accused, they may feel uncomfortable with your negative comments and feel less willing to discuss this with others.
- Let the child know that you will help her. "I am really glad that you told me about this. I would like to help you so that this doesn't happen any more. To do that, I will need to report this to Child Protective Services, because they know better than I do how to help you. I will do as much as I can to help you."
- Write down word for word (or as close as possible) everything the child told you. Use the child's words. If she tells you someone touched her "monkey," don't write down the correct anatomical name (and don't tell her the correct name at this time. It would affect her believability.)
- Follow the church's policy on reporting. There is usually someone on staff who is responsible for receiving such reports. Most, if not all, states also require the person who first hears the information to make a report to the appropriate agency (Child Protective Services), even though it has been reported within the church structure. Share with CPS what you have written down. You may want to invite the child to be a part of this reporting, so that he can add to or correct your report. This helps to maintain the accuracy of the report.
- The church's policy should also give some guidelines about informing parents. This may not happen until AFTER the report has been made. Ask Child Protective Services for guidance about when and what to tell parents.
- If the abuse occurred on church property or if church personnel (staff, elders, deacons, teachers, pre-school staff), a report to the Presbytery Sexual Misconduct Response Coordination Team also needs to be made.

Anyone who might have to report child abuse and, especially, those creating a congregation's policy would benefit from reviewing the **Sexual Misconduct Policy and Its Procedures** (PC(USA), 1993). The goal of the sexual misconduct policy and the established response coordination teams in the presbyteries is to address the "needs that have to be met for the good of all persons, groups, and entities. . . . . This team will not investigate the allegation or in any way function as a special disciplinary committee, but should confine itself to coordinating a process that will meet the specific needs of the situation. . . . In cases of sexual misconduct, these are the needs of accuser/victim and their families (if any), the accused and family (if any), employing entities, congregations, and governing bodies."

While the focus of the congregation policy should be on protecting children, it is also helpful to be aware of the impact of abuse on all others affected by allegations of abuse.

Procedures for Selecting and Screening Staff and Volunteers

> *Not all occupations and volunteer positions merit the time and expense of criminal history record checks. There are other means available to protect children from abuse, including the checking of prior employment history and character references and proper training and supervision of employees and volunteers. The committee expects that the states, in deciding which types or categories of positions require criminal history background checks, will consider the degree to which a particular position or child care activity offers opportunities to those who would abuse children. The committee expects that the states will find for examples, that positions involving long-term or ongoing contact with children in one-on-one situations merit criminal history record checks and that positions that involve infrequent direct contact or contact only in group settings do not merit such checks. The bill as amended leaves that decision to the respective states.* The National Child Protection Act of 1993 (excerpted)

Like all organizations that sponsor a variety of activities and programs, especially with children, churches face significant legal liability. The first step in reducing that liability is to engage in effective risk management strategies in the selection of church workers, whether those workers are paid or volunteer. A church safety program provides both the strategy and the tools to begin that process. The entire selection and screening process assists the church in recruiting the best possible staff members for both employment and volunteer service.

Some will have concerns about screening of volunteers and staff, especially when it comes to criminal background checks. Some of these concerns will be addressed when providing education about child abuse. Few people want to run the risk of being responsible for a child who is then abused. Most, when they think about the potential consequences in terms of the trauma to victims, the emotional and spiritual impact on the congregation, the potential for negative news coverage, the potential for litigation, the possible financial cost of litigation, and the personal impact on church members and church leaders, readily agree that it is best for children and the entire congregation to take precautions.

Reducing the risk of liability based on the negligent selection of church staff and volunteers can be accomplished with several precautions. While the risk can't be eliminated completely, it can be reduced dramatically by following several steps.

A first step in reducing risk might be to **check the church's liability policy**. It is not uncommon for liability insurance to specifically preclude sexual misconduct claims. This is especially likely if the congregation has sought relatively inexpensive coverage. However, the cost to a congregation if a sexual misconduct claim is brought can be

enormous financially as well as emotionally. The congregation needs to seriously consider if it can afford to be without such a rider.

Using employment and volunteer **applications** can be helpful in reducing the risk of child abuse in the church. In addition to the typical questions on applications, there needs to be questions about whether the applicant has ever been convicted of, or pled guilty or no contest to a crime other than a minor traffic violation or have charges pending against them at the time of the application. The application should also include a statement authorizing the church to collect information regarding the applicant's character and fitness for work with children and releases the church and those who provide information from liability in the gathering of that information (except, of course, when someone knowingly communicates false information). The applicant needs to sign and date the application (even if a vita or resume is used). Unsigned applications should not be considered. Sample applications are in the back of this resource.

References should be requested. We recommend at least three. The references should be people who know how the applicant interacts with children.

Some congregations have chosen to ask on their application forms about a volunteer's personal history of child abuse victimization. This provides some information that may be helpful to the selection committee, but it needs to be handled with great sensitivity. While we know that persons who abuse children have often been victims themselves as children, it does NOT follow that most people who were abused as children grow up to abuse children themselves.

Final candidates for staff or volunteer positions should be **interviewed**, with questions asked about background and whether or not the person's skills are suitable for the position. An interview provides the opportunity to follow up on questions about prior legal problems or child abuse history. If applicants have been asked if they were abused as children, a positive response needs to be discussed with the applicant. Such a discussion can be initiated with sensitivity by asking something like, "Were you a victim of abuse while a minor? Before you answer, let me assure you that if you are uncomfortable with this question you do not have to answer it. A yes answer, or a no response, will not automatically disqualify you from consideration." Use the interview as a time to assess whether there seem to be ongoing issues for the applicant that might make it difficult for them to work well with children.

During the interview, be alert for any red flags, such as resistance to supervision or an insistence on working with a particular age group. If someone has moved frequently, are they trying to avoid having a reputation catch up with them? Do the frequent moves allow them to avoid close personal relationships and intimacy? How would this affect their working with children? Or have they been a college student moving back and forth between home, college, and a summer work location?

It is recommended that no person who has been a **member** of the congregation for less than six months should volunteer with children and youth. This policy also discourages those who might come to a church to gain access to children.

References should be checked. Contact previous employers and previous places at which the applicant volunteered, especially if the applicant worked with children. Contact previous congregations. Telephone contacts can be most helpful, as it is easier

to hear hesitancies in the voice of someone who might not be willing to give a bad reference but may also be reluctant to give a good one. Asking questions that can be answered "yes" or "no" may be sufficient to provide the information needed. These may include questions such as "Would you hire this person again?" and "Would you trust this person to work with 20 junior high children?"

Criminal background checks are available in most states. Such checks should be completed on all pastoral candidates, non-minister employees, any who serve in a counseling position, and volunteers who will have unsupervised access to children and youth (not to mention those who work in ministries with the developmentally disabled, chronically mentally ill, senior citizens, and any others who may be vulnerable). Criminal background checks can be obtained through the state police, the FBI, and sometimes through child protective services agencies. Check with your local CPS to determine how best to access such background checks.

Other background checks may be completed as warranted. For example, those who might be driving children or youth should have driving records checked. Those who would be handling funds for the church might need to have their credit history checked.

No "second chance" should be given to anyone who has been found in the past to have problems with sexual misconduct or child abuse. Churches have often tried to be forgiving, only to find that child abuse was repeated.

Once staff and volunteers are in place, the congregation continues to have an obligation to provide supervision and to take complaints seriously. Negligence in keeping an employee or volunteer about whom there have been complaints of misconduct will also contribute to the church's legal liability. Your presbytery should have a policy concerning sexual misconduct. A similar policy can be followed for dealing with other complaints.

Providing a Safe Environment

In addition to providing a screening process, making the church safe for children involves supporting volunteers who work with children and providing for resources for child safety. For example, the church may want to have a policy that all vehicles used to transport children have passed a safety inspection within a specified time period. You may want to ensure that there are fire extinguishers in all the classrooms.

In addition to screening staff and volunteers, it is helpful to set some minimum criteria for those who will work with children. Including in your policy a **minimum age for volunteers** is a good idea. The age needs to be set with consideration of the many situations that can arise. A volunteer working with children needs to be old enough to be seen by the children as having some authority over them. They also need to be old enough to be aware of risks and to be able to take responsibility for reducing these risks.

One of the authors volunteered with a Scout troop a number of years ago. The regional Scout administrator was in his early 20s. On a planned bicycle trip, he and some of the high-school-aged Scouts took a detour for a dip in an abandoned stone quarry, telling no one what they were doing. He clearly did not consider the risks (diving onto boulders beneath the surface, getting tangled in trash under the water) or the liability of the Scouts if someone was hurt or killed.

In other situations, a college student dating a high-school senior and serving as a volunteer supervising a church youth group on a camp-out may not provide adequate supervision for any of the participants.

A minimum age of 18 years allows for at least some maturity and some authority over younger children. However, it is highly recommended that volunteers also be at least five years older than the oldest youth they will be supervising. This increases the likelihood that supervision will be adequate.

Determining an adequate **child/youth to adult ratio** can also be done as part of the policy developed by the congregation. At least two adults need to be present with all groups of children when other adults are in the vicinity (in the church building, for example). Having two adults present with a group dramatically reduces the risk that one might abuse a child or that an adult will be falsely accused of abuse. It also allows for someone to go for help, if there is a crisis, while the other stays with the children. In a more remote setting (a camp-out or even a lock-in, when there are few others in the church building), a minimum of three adults is advised. This allows for two to stay with the children or youth while the third goes for help if necessary.

Beyond this basic guideline, it is important to have enough adult supervisors of children and youth to minimize injuries and accidents and to provide needed care. The number may vary with the nature and location of the activity. Children in a church-school class

who are discussing a Bible story will obviously need fewer volunteers present than the same number of children on a scavenger hunt in the woods behind the church.

For persons who work with children on a regular basis, **First Aid and CPR** training can be quite important. Little children, especially, are at risk of choking. Besides making certain that the nursery and the toddlers rooms don't have toys with small pieces, having staff or volunteers trained in CPR and First Aid further assures the safety of the children. First Aid training can also be really important for volunteers who work with junior high and high school groups, which are more likely to be leaving church property, going on mission trips, and camping out. First Aid and CPR certification need to be renewed on a regular basis. Training is available through the American Red Cross.

Having a first aid kit readily available to the classrooms (especially those of younger children) or on trips away from the church is also an important safety measure. All volunteers working with children need to know where the kit is located.

Ongoing supervision and education of staff and volunteers are also important. An **annual orientation** can review your church's policies about safety issues, the screening process, policies on reporting abuse, issues of confidentiality, and appropriate ways to manage discipline with a group of children. It can be a time to role-play hearing and responding to a report of abuse. Such an orientation session also allows a time to review the policies in an attempt to amend and improve them as necessary. As you put your policy into practice, you will undoubtedly find better ways of managing safety in your church.

The annual orientation is also a time to ask volunteers and staff to renew their commitment to following the safe church policy. Some churches use a **participation covenant** for all church leaders. See example on page 18.

Having a standard format for giving advance notice to parents and getting parental permission for children and youth to participate in special activities (especially those involving leaving the church property) can also reduce the congregation's liability. The parents should be given information about where the children or youth will be, what activities are planned, who will be supervising the activities, when the group will be leaving (and from where) and when they will be expected to return (and to where). Parents will want to know how to get in touch with the group if something unexpected comes up at home.

Some congregations have made structural changes to help insure the safety of their children. For example, one change involving minimal effort and expense, involves putting windows or Dutch-doors (doors in which the top can open while the bottom stays closed) in all classrooms used by children and youth. In that way, anyone going past the room can see in, greatly reducing the opportunity for inappropriate activities. Other churches have gone so far as to re-build classrooms so that each classroom has its own bathroom, so that children can go by themselves and won't be alone with an adult volunteer while going to the bathroom down the hall.

Keeping safe the smallest members of the congregation can be a special challenge, especially in a very large church or one that has a great deal of transition. Many congregations ask that only a parent drop off or pick up a child from the nursery.

Some put a sticker on the infant or toddler and give a matching sticker to the parent, so that it is easy to see when the parent returns which child goes with that parent. Other congregations may use code words. Some ask that parents sign the child in and out, allowing for the comparison of signatures. It is always a good idea to know, on any given day, how to contact the parent in the event of an emergency.

Clearly, if church-school staff and volunteers are using equipment with children, the equipment needs to be age-appropriate and in good working condition. A regular check of electronic equipment (projectors, tape recorders, VCRs), of playground equipment, and of any vehicles used to transport children is a good idea. It is equally important that staff and volunteers know how to use equipment safely and will help children be safe in their use of the equipment.

Again, it is a good idea to check the congregation's insurance policy. Are you covered for a trip away from the church? If there is an accident in a volunteer's van, whose insurance will cover that? If the youth group is going hang-gliding, will the church's policy cover injuries sustained in such risky behaviors?

Helping Children Avoid Sexual Abuse

It is never a child's job to protect herself from abuse. However, everything we adults do to protect children may not always be sufficient. Children do need to know what they can do to avoid difficult situations and to get help if they need to do so.

There are a large number of resources designed to tell children about "good" touch and "bad" touch. Many of them are limited in significant ways. In teaching children about child sexual abuse (and child abuse in general), there are several really important concepts.

One of these is an understanding of what is abuse. Children can quickly identify many aspects of life that are unpleasant but not abusive (sweeping the garage, for example), and teachers can help students identify what is and is not abuse.

Part of understanding what is and is not abuse involves children knowing what part of their body is private. The best way to describe this area is to talk about it being the area underneath a bathing suit. If children are not aware that their behind (and not just their genitals) are private, they may not report abuse when it happens.

It is also important for children to understand the different types of touch. There are many kinds of touch that are enjoyable (hugs, back rubs, high fives) and many which are not (hits, pinches). Some touch may be OK from one person but not from another. For example, a child may like a kiss from Mom or Dad but not from Aunt Matilda, who smells strongly of perfume. Tickling may be fun unless it doesn't stop when the child is ready for it to stop. Talking about touch can help children understand that there are different types of touch and that what they like and don't like may vary depending on who is touching and how they are being touched. They also need to know that they are free to refuse any type of touch with which they are not comfortable, even if it is a kiss from Aunt Matilda and even if Aunt Matilda has hurt feelings.

Children also need to understand when some unpleasant types of touch are necessary. For example, parents need to touch the private area of infants to clean them when the diaper is being changed. Doctors may need to touch private areas when examining or treating a child. Talking with children about this before it happens may make some medical appointments much easier. However, if when children are old enough to adequately apply medication to themselves, they should be allowed to do so, even if an adult needs to supervise.

Talking about touch in a context with the other senses can reduce the scariness found in some resources designed for children. Talk with children about what they do and do not like to taste, see, smell, and hear as well as what they do and do not like to touch.

It is also critical that abuse education not focus only on strangers. Even some otherwise very good programs have failed to prepare children for the fact that most abuse happens within families or at the hands of others known to the child. While it is important for children to know not to get into a car with strangers, it is even more important for them to know that they do not have to allow anyone to touch them in ways they don't like or in their private area, no matter who that person is (except for certain situations, as indicated above).

In talking with children about abuse, it is important for them to understand that they can tell a trusted adult about the uncomfortable touch, that they can keep telling about it until someone understands and protects them, and that they are not to blame if they are abused. It helps kids understand whom they can tell if you have the group generate a list together. The list can include parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, principals, counselors, ministers, police, and others. Children may mention brothers and sisters or friends when making such a list. They need to be cautioned that other children may not be able to protect them from the abuse. Children can also learn that, if a friend tells them of abuse, they need to tell an adult about their friend's problem.

It is helpful in children's understanding to distinguish between a surprise and a secret. We don't tell Dad what he is getting for Christmas, because we want it to be a "surprise." However, when an adult touches a child and asks that the child keep the touch a secret, it is something that should be told. Children can also learn that it is never too late to tell about abuse.

It is helpful for children to understand that persons who abuse children have problems and that other children cannot be protected and that the abuser cannot get help for his problems if those who are abused don't tell. Abusers often tell children that the child or the adult (or both) will be in trouble if the child tells. While the abuser may be in trouble, the child should be assured that most abusers get help rather than punishment. Sometimes children don't tell because they like the abuser and don't want the abuser to get into trouble.

Perhaps the best resource for use with children is My Very Own Book About Me!, written by Jo Stowell and Mary Dietzel, developed by Lutheran Social Services of Washington. There is a workbook for children, with guidelines for teachers and parents available from

ACT for Kids
7 S. Howard, Suite 200
Spokane, WA 99204-0323
509-747-0609 (fax)

Developing a Training Plan

It is very important that congregations develop a training plan to educate staff and volunteers who work with children about the realities of child abuse, how to prevent abuse, how to recognize signs of abuse and what to do in cases of suspected abuse. In planning for such training, the following issues need to be taken into consideration.

Any training should be built on a **Biblical base**. Take time (or assign trainees) to look up references in the Old and New Testament about the treatment of children and orphans. Become acquainted with the teachings about children in our *Confessions* and in the historical actions of the denomination. You may also want to use this resource and the Sexual Misconduct Policy of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as references.

The **goals of training** are to ensure that staff and volunteers who work with children understand the nature of child abuse and how to respond if it becomes apparent that a child has been abused. Training is also useful in reviewing and modifying the church policy, as volunteers who have had experience working with the policy share their experience.

At least part of the training should be **provided by** someone knowledgeable about child abuse and about the laws and policies in your state. Attorneys, child protective service caseworkers, counselors who have a lot of experience in this field, and school social workers are among those who may have the training and experience to help with your program.

Topics to be included are

- What is child abuse?
- How do we recognize child abuse?
- What is the church policy about volunteers working with children and youth?
- Why are an application and references necessary and how will they be used?
- How do we keep children safe?
- What are the state laws concerning reporting?
- How is a report made?
- How can we talk to children about child abuse without scaring them?
- What are the community resources available?
- Any topics which may be specific to your congregation
- Specific information for paid staff
- Specific information for volunteers

Training would ideally occur **annually**, perhaps at the beginning of the church school year. This allows new volunteers with youth to be trained and returning volunteers to help coach each other and to evaluate the policy and how it has functioned.

The training should involve **all employees and volunteers** who will be working with children and youth as part of your church program. This may include people who are not members of your church but who work in a church-housed daycare program.

You may want to allow time to review the application procedure and to explain and emphasize the need for references who know the applicants work with children and youth. It is also appropriate to review the "Safe Place" policy. This acquaints new volunteers with the policy and allows experienced volunteers to evaluate how the policy has worked over the past year.

If your congregation chooses to use a covenant, the training session would be a good time for volunteers and staff to discuss what it means and to ask all to sign them.

Directory of Resources

A directory of resources in the community who can help in the event of child abuse in the church can be a part of the materials handed out during orientation. Such a directory would likely include whom to reach

- Child Protective Services (including their after-hours number)
- The local law enforcement agency.
- Community agencies that are trained to assist in circumstances of suspected abuse.
- Persons within the Presbytery who can assist in helping the families and the congregation in dealing with abuse within the church.
- The person at the Presbytery level who receives reports of sexual misconduct
- Counselors who specialize in work with sexual abuse victims and their families
- Counselors who specialize in work with sexual abuse perpetrators

- In addition, it might be helpful to include some printed material, such as:
    - A guide for reporting child abuse, which includes an idea of to whom it should be reported, what information will be needed, and other pertinent information.
    - References for more information on dealing with child abuse in the church

National Child Protection Act of 1993

The purpose of the *National Child Protection Act of 1993* is to encourage states to improve the quality of their criminal history and child abuse records. The Act was passed in October 1993, and amended in the *Crime Control Act of 1994*.

- *Requires states to submit "child abuse crime information" to, or index such information in the national criminal history background system maintained by the FBI.* A state's reporting all felonies and serious misdemeanors to the FBI will satisfy this requirement of the *Act.*
- *Mandates that the U.S. Attorney General establish timetables for each state's criminal history records system to reach milestones for improvement and completeness.*
- *Authorizes a state to establish procedures requiring organizations serving youth, the elderly and individuals with disabilities to request a nationwide criminal history background check on prospective employees and volunteers.* 31 states and the District of Columbia have laws mandating some individuals working with children to undergo criminal history background checks. The *Act* expands this to the elderly and individuals with disabilities and encourages criminal history checks for a more uniform, but broader, cross-section of employees and volunteers.
- *Provides access to the National Criminal History Records system maintained by the FBI in order to perform criminal history record checks.* Access is limited to the states in which permissive legislation or regulations have been established.
- *Establishes minimum procedural safeguards for conducting criminal history record checks.* Procedures require checks to be based upon fingerprints; the agency checking the records must attempt to obtain disposition data; the actual record cannot be conveyed to the seeking organization but a statement must be provided by the state agency indicating whether or not the individual has been convicted of or is under pending indictment for a crime that bears upon the individual's fitness for taking care of children; and, the individual authorizes the check and signs a statement that he or she has never been convicted of a crime or if he or she has been convicted of a crime, lists the particulars of that crime on the form requesting the criminal history background check.
- *Places responsibility on states to define crimes that bear upon the individual's fitness to work with children, the elderly and individuals with disabilities.*
- *Places responsibility on the states to identify the positions that will require criminal history background checks.* Requirements for criminal history background checks will vary from state to state.
- *Shields organizations from liability "solely for failure to conduct a criminal background check…*" The *Act* allows organizations to use other kinds of child abuse prevention strategies so that failure to conduct a criminal history record check could not be used as a sole reason for liability.
- *Limits the cost of criminal history record checks so that "fees to nonprofit entities for background checks do not discourage volunteers from participating in child care programs."* Amendments to the *Act* limit the fee that can be charged by the states to $18 and those charged by the FBI to $18 or a total of $36. The amendments also permit some federal funds to be used to offset some or all of this cost.

Resources for Child Advocacy

This is a list of places from which one can get information or assistance with developing a policy or with education about child abuse and child advocacy:

Center for the Prevention of Sexual And Domestic Violence 240045th Street, #10 Seattle, WA 98103 1-206-634-1903 (Telephone) 1-206-634-0155 (FAX)	**Prevent Child Abuse America** 200 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, IL 60604-2404 1-312-663-3520 (Telephone) 1-312-969-8962 (FAX)
Child Advocacy Office Presbyterian Church (USA) Patricia Chapman 100 Witherspoon Street, 4615 Louisville, KY 40202-1396 1-888-728-7228, ext. 5838 (Telephone)	**Presbyterian Child Advocacy Network A Network of PHEWA** Nancy Troy 100 Witherspoon Street, 4617 Louisville, KY 40202-1396 1-888-728-7228, ext. 5794 (Telephone)
Presbyterian United Nations Office 777 United Nations Plaza New York, NY 10017 1-212-697-4568 (Telephone) 1-212-986-3002 (FAX)	**Presbyterian Washington Office** 110 Maryland Office Washington, DC 20002 1-202-543-1126 (Telephone) (ask for information sheets on various topics)
Presbyterian Distribution Services Presbyterian Church (USA) 100 Witherspoon Street Louisville, KY 40202-1396 (for any resource with a PDS#) 1-800-524-2612 (Telephone) www.pcusa.org	**Children's Defense Fund** 25 E Street, NW Washington, DC 20001 1-202-628-8787 (Telephone) www.childrensdefense.org
UNICEF UNICEF House 3 United Nations Plaza New York, NY 10017 www.unicef.org	**The Annie E. Casey Foundation Advocates** 701 St Paul Street Baltimore, MD 21202 1-410-547-6600 (Telephone) www.aecf.org

National Association of Child Advocacy
1522 K. Street, NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005-1202
1-202-289-0777 (Telephone)
www.childadvocacy.org

References

Bavolek, Stephen J. (1990). *A Handbook for Understanding Abuse and Neglect.* Park City, UT: Family Development Resources, Inc.

Burdick, Faye, ed. (1996). *God's Plan for Growing Up: Amazing Stuff.* Louisville: Curriculum Publishing, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Sexuality curriculum for grades 4-5.

Burdick, Faye, ed. (1996). *God's Plan for Growing Up: Wonderfully Made.* Louisville: Curriculum Publishing, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Sexuality curriculum for grades 2-3.

Children's Defense Fund. (1994). *Welcome the Child: A Child Advocacy Guide for Churches*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

Cobble, James F., Jr., and Hammar, Richard R. (1996) *Selecting & Screening Church Workers: A Guide to Selecting and Screening Ministers, Church Employees, and Volunteer Workers.* Matthews, NC: Christian Ministry Resources (P. O. Box 1098, zip 28106; (704) 841-8066).

God's Gift of Sexuality: A Study for Young People in the Reformed Tradition. (1989) Louisville: Curriculum Publishing, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Sexuality curriculum for younger and older youth.

Guidelines for Child Care at Church-Sponsored Meetings. (1995). Published by the Child Advocacy Network. (PDC #72-650-95-002).

Hammar, Richard R., Slilpowicz, Steven W. and Cobble, Jr., James F. (1993). *Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in Your Church.* Matthews, NC: Christian Ministry Resources. (Produced by Church Law & Tax Report, complete package includes a video in two parts: part 1 is 10 minutes, especially appropriate for viewing by church leadership as well as volunteers; part 2 is 15 minutes are more appropriate for viewing by church leadership specifically.)

Heggen, Carolyn Holderread. (1993). *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches.* Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

McDonald, Bonnie Glass. (1995). *Child Abuse Ministry: A Bibliography of Resources for the Religious Community.* New York: National Council of Churches.

Melton, Joy Thornburg (1998). *Safe Sanctuaries*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources.

Reid, Rev. Kathryn Goering. (1994) *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: A Curriculum for Children, Ages 5-8.* Cleveland: United Church Press. (Available from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence.)

Reid, Rev. Kathryn Goering with Marie Fortune. (1990). *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: A Curriculum for Children, Ages 9-12.* New York: The Pilgrim Press. (Available from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence.)

Voelkel-Haugen, Rebecca and Rev. Marie Fortune. (1996). *Sexual Abuse Prevention: A Course of Study for Teenagers.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. (Available from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence.)

Videos

Hear Their Cries. (48 minutes). Available from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Provides definitions, signs for recognizing abuse, and examples of how to respond.

Bless Our Children: Preventing Sexual Abuse. (40 minutes). Available from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Story of one congregation's efforts to provide abuse prevention information for their children.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample Forms

Appendix 2: Outline of a Suggested Training Plan

Appendix 3: Study Questions and Activities

Appendix 4: Covenant

Appendix 5: Tri-Fold Pew Brochure

(Name of church)
Volunteer Application

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____

Daytime phone _____ Evening phone _____

How long have you been a member of (name of church)? _____

Occupation (if employed) _____

Employer (if applicable) _____

Current job responsibilities _____

Previous work experience

_____

Previous volunteer experience

_____

Special interest, hobbies and skills _____

Can you make a one-year commitment to this volunteer role? _____

Do you have a valid driver's license? _____ Any restrictions? _____

Do you have vehicle liability insurance? _____ If so, are you willing to provide a copy of your coverage for the files? _____

Why would you like to volunteer as a worker with children and/or youth?

_____

_____

What qualities do you have that would help you work with children and/or youth?

_____

_____

What training have you received in the care and nurture of children and youth?

_____

_____

In caring for children, we believe it is our responsibility to seek adult staff that is able to provide healthy, safe and nurturing relationships. Please answer the following questions accordingly. Answering yes to any of the questions will not automatically disqualify a volunteer from working with children. Any special concerns can be discussed individually with the pastoral staff.

Have you ever been convicted of or pled guilty to a crime, either a misdemeanor or a felony (including but not limited to drug-related charges, child abuse, other crimes of violence, theft or motor vehicle violations? ___ yes ___ no

If yes, please explain fully

_____

_____

Your response to the following question is optional: Have you had an experience in your life that you feel would impede your volunteer work with children and youth? If so, do you feel comfortable explaining? Would you like to speak to the minister regarding this experience?

_____

_____

Would you be available for periodic volunteer training? ___ (yes) ___ (no)

References Please list three personal references (people who are not related to you by blood or marriage) and provide a complete address and phone information for each.

1. Name _____

   Address _____

   Daytime phone _____ Evening phone _____

   Relationship to applicant _____

2. Name _____

   Address _____

   Daytime phone _____ Evening phone _____

   Relationship to applicant _____

3. Name _____

   Address _____

   Daytime phone _____ Evening phone _____

   Relationship to applicant _____

I represent that each of my responses is truthful and accurate.

_____ _____
Signature of applicant Date

Waiver and consent

I, _____, hereby certify that the information I have provided on this volunteer application is true and correct. I authorize (name of church) to verify the information I have provided on this application by contacting the references and employers I have listed, by conducting a criminal background check or by other means, including contacting others whom I have not listed. I authorize the references and employers listed in this application to give you whatever information (including opinions) they may have regarding my character and fitness for the job for which I have applied. Furthermore, I waive any rights I may have to confidentiality to the extent that it may be harmful to myself or others.

I have read this waiver and the entire application, and I am fully aware of its contents. I sign this consent freely and under no duress or coercion.

_____ _____
Date Signature of applicant

_____ _____
Date Witness

(Name of Church)
CONFIDENTIAL Reference

The applicant named below has applied for a volunteer position as _____at (name of church). We ask that you take a few moments to complete and return this form in the envelope provided. [Revise this statement if you will be contacting references by telephone.]

Name of applicant _____

Name of reference _____

Address of reference _____

Phone (daytime) _____ (evening) _____

Relationship to applicant _____

How long have you known the applicant? _____

In what capacity do you know the applicant? _____

How would you describe the applicant's ability to work with children/youth?

_____

How would you describe the applicant's ability to relate to adults?

_____

How would you describe the applicant's leadership abilities?

_____

How would you feel about having the applicant as a volunteer working with your child?

_____

Do you know of any characteristics that would negatively affect the applicant's ability to work with children/youth? _____. If so, please describe.

_____

Do you have any knowledge that the applicant has ever been convicted of a crime?
_____ YES _____ NO

If YES, please describe _____

Please share any other comments you would like to make.

_____ _____
Signature of reference/phone interviewer (please indicate) Date

(Name of Church)
Incident Report Form
(Please print all information)

Date of incident _____ Time of incident _____

Name of child/youth involved _____
(A separate form should be completed for each child involved in order to keep the information confidential)

Address of child/youth _____

Phone number of child/youth _____

Name of parent/guardian _____

Location of incident _____

Name of person(s) who witnessed the incident

Name _____ Phone _____

Name _____ Phone _____

Name _____ Phone _____

Please describe incident as seen/heard and actions taken

_____

_____

Any additional relevant information, please document

_____

_____

_____ _____
Signature of person completing this form Date

(Upon completion of this form, immediate contact should be made with a church staff member who is responsible for Christian Education or pastoral care.)

This form should be given to staff member responsible for the program and should be filed with the business administrator. [This form may be used to report any suspicion of abuse as well as an accident.]

Outline of a Suggested Training Plan

1. Introductions and getting acquainted
   - Who we are
   - Why are we here
   - How will we proceed in the time together
   - What we hope to accomplish

2. Scripture and other theological grounding
   Suggested passages include:
   Exodus 22:21-23
   Matthew 19:14
   Luke 9: 46-48
   Devotional reading
   Prayer

3. Why we are here
   Protecting the children and the adults who work with them
   Provide information, statistics on incidents of abuse
   Heighten awareness of volunteers and church at large
   History of church's involvement with child advocacy in general and abuse issues to be specific
   Realities about child abuse today (litigious society)
   What is abuse
   Who are abusers
   Impact of abuse on the lives of children
   If you suspect a child has been abused
   What to do when a child reports abuse

4. View "Hear Their Cries" Depending on your time allotted, you can show the first 15 minutes (which includes signs of abuse and religious statements) or the entire video (which is ideal.)

5. Questions and discussion about video information

6. Prevention education for children, things children need to know (*use some of what we have in current resource)*

   STOP…GO…TELL

7. What (name of church) is doing about abuse prevention and screening

8. Hand-out church policy
   Provide application and reference check information
   Discuss urgency of returning application and reference information
   Set up time for interviews
   Assure confidentiality procedures

Questions (Possible questions from volunteer applicants)

Q: Why do I have to do this, I've been around for 10 years?

A: *This is our current church policy; all volunteers will complete the application before working with children/youth.*

Q: Do I have to answer all the questions?

A: If you prefer, some of the more sensitive questions can be discussed in confidence with a staff member. Failure to answer a question does not exclude your work with children.

Q: Why do I have to give references?

A: All volunteers are required to provide the same information.

Q: Why the six-month rule?

A: It has been determined that folks who wish to work with children must be members of this church for six months before working with children/youth.

9. Safety information (includes training in CPR/First Aid awareness, regular safety checks for church buildings, who is available during worship and teaching times in case of emergency, where is nearest phone, etc…)

10. Read together the "Covenant" (suggested enclosed***)***

11. Closing prayer

Study Questions

1. What is your church doing currently to screen volunteers who work with children?

2. Does your church staff complete Criminal Background Checks?

3. What plan does our church have to protect children during church meetings?

4. Does your church have the "two-person" rule?

5. If you have church-housed childcare program, is it licensed? If so, do church staff members meet the background check requirements that are prescribed by state licensing regulations?

6. If you have a church-housed child care program, do you have a covenant or policy that governs space use and other matters that regard shared facility use?

Study Activities

Find Old Testament verses about the treatment of children and of widows and orphans.

Is the rod in Proverbs one of punishment or guidance? (Compare with the rod referenced in the Lord's Prayer.)

Find references in the New Testament (Gospels and letters) to the status of children. Discuss these references in light of the fact that children had no rights at that time in history.

Review the Confessions for references to the treatment of children.

Review the Baptismal vows of the parents and the congregation.

Review the actions of the General Assembly of the PC(USA) regarding children.

Develop a statement of purpose for your congregation concerning its dealing with child abuse.

Covenant Statement

(Suggested)

The congregation of (name of church) is committed to providing a safe and secure environment for all children, youth and volunteers who participate in ministries and activities sponsored by the church. The following policy statements reflect our congregation's commitment to preserving this church as a sanctuary for all who would enter and as a place in which all people can experience the love of God through relationships with others.

In keeping with the covenant of baptism, we have committed ourselves and our resources to the nurturing of our children. We understand that children cannot grow in faith and in wisdom when they are frightened, distrustful, anxious, or depressed. They cannot learn to love and trust God when those who represent God to them are unloving and untrustworthy. We promise our children that we will provide the structure, education, and the policies that will keep them safe from harm and abuse. In that context, we will screen volunteers, train them, and ask that they abide by the policies of our church. We will make sure that no one who has not been a member of this congregation for at least six months is not a volunteer with our children and youth.

As a volunteer working with children in this congregation, I agree to observe and abide by all church policies regarding working in ministries with children and youth, to observe the "Two Adult Rule" at all times, to participate in training and education events provided by the church related to me volunteer assignment, and to report promptly abusive or inappropriate behavior to the church staff member who supervises my work.

_____	_____	_____
Signature of Applicant	Print full name	Date
_____	_____	_____
Signature of Clerk of Session	Print full name	Date

Church Staff

Volunteers with Children

Presbyterian Church Is A SAFE PLACE

Introducing Our "Safe Place Policy"

Safe Place Policy

Since _____, _____ Presbyterian Church has had in place a policy to make sure our church is a safe place for children.

The policy includes assurance that those who work with our children as teachers and advisors are people of moral character and known to us. All volunteers who work with children must complete an application, have a personal interview, and sign an agreement to abide by the church's "Safe Place Policy." Persons who work with children and youth receive training annually regarding the church's policy and how to keep children safe.

Teachers and youth workers serve in teams, so that there is always a second person available to go for help and to provide personal backup should difficulties arise. Other precautions and safeguards are also in place to make the whole environment o f the church a happy, secure one for children.

Parents Can Help

Parents are urged to retrieve their young children from classrooms and other activities themselves. Teachers are instructed not to let small children wander the hallways unattended. Transportation of children outside the church as part of the church's program requires written permission from the parents.

An important part of the policy is the plan for dealing with any incidents in which a child feels threatened. The pastoral staff of _____ Presbyterian Church is available to teachers and parents to discuss any problems that may arise. Child advocates participate in the training of teachers and volunteers around this policy and are available for consultation if teachers or parents feel the need. A process for reporting incidents is available to teachers and youth workers, and the child advocates are equipped to follow appropriate procedures for such reports.

The Christian Education Committee supervises the entire educational program of the church in accordance with the Safe Place Policy. A copy of the policy is available in the church office for your review.

The _____ Presbyterian Church is pleased to have so many adults who give of their time and energy to help our children grow in faith and who care about their physical well being at the same time.