

# Important Steps to Help Prevent Child Sexual Abuse



The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod takes very seriously the duty of care it has to assist congregations and schools with keeping children safe. Jesus describes how important the little children are within God’s Kingdom in Matt. 18:5-6:

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Because of this care that the Church is charged with extending to the children in her midst, convention resolutions in both 2007 and 2010 tasked the Synod with providing “materials and trained individuals to assist districts, congregations and schools in addressing abuse and ministering to the spiritual needs of those struggling with the effects of abuse.” The LCMS Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Task Force has fulfilled these convention mandates by making resources and training available. Information on these resources and training opportunities can be found at [lcms.org/socialissues/childabuse](http://lcms.org/socialissues/childabuse).

## It Can Happen Anywhere

Research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control indicates that up to 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be the victim of sexual abuse before age 18.<sup>1</sup> The frequent nature of sexual abuse cases in the news has highlighted the fact that child sexual abuse is a very real danger in every environment, regardless of location, race or socioeconomic status.

Victimization of children is a danger in faith-based communities just as it is in many other communities. Statistics show that 90 percent of children who are victims of abuse know their abuser.<sup>2,3</sup> In fact, about 60 percent of children who are sexually abused are abused by the people the family trusts.<sup>4,5</sup>

The danger to your church and your children is real. Abuse cases are perennially one of the top five causes of litigation against churches. Beyond that, as caretakers of God’s children we must take action to protect them from the loss of innocence and other harmful effects of abuse. There are both immediate and long-lasting consequences for sexually abused children. They are more likely to experience anxiety and depression, substance abuse, promiscuity and self-inflicted harm, including suicide. When the abuse is inflicted by someone associated with a church, the spiritual harm impacts both the individual and the victim’s family.

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1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

2 Finkelhor, D. (2012). Characteristics of crimes against juveniles. Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center.

3 Whealin, J. (2007). Child Sexual Abuse. National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, US Department of Veterans Affairs.

4 Finkelhor, Characteristics of crimes against juveniles.

5 Whealin, Child Sexual Abuse.

## Take Action

Once you learn the facts, it is imperative that your church or school takes action. Develop an education and training program. Create a plan for prevention. Put a written policy in place to follow when screening new workers. Adopt a policy to follow when abuse is suspected or reported. It is also important, once policies are adopted, that both new and existing employees and volunteers be trained on them.

Be sure to consider the following recommended components of child safety policies:

- (a) a written application for all employees and volunteers;
- (b) a release statement which must be signed to authorize your church to conduct annual background checks and to contact any individuals or organizations listed on the application;
- (c) requiring a minimum length of church attendance (3-6 months) before someone begins volunteering with children;
- (d) conducting a personal interview with each applicant;
- (e) adopting a goal of always having two adults present with children or keeping the door open;
- (f) prohibiting physical discipline;
- (g) restroom guidelines; and
- (h) initial and annual training for those who work with children.

Details as well as additional educational resources are listed below.

Train your church leadership and church workers (including volunteers) on the subject of child sexual abuse. This training should describe appropriate adult/child interactions. Workers should also be educated to avoid potentially dangerous practices. Once initial training is conducted, make this training an annual event.

Best practices may begin with education but must go beyond that to proactively limit opportunities for abuse. Ways to minimize the risk include background checks, reference checks, and continued monitoring of worker/child interactions. Risk can also be reduced by setting up both activities and the environment to avoid isolated one-on-one interaction with a child.

Background checks are essential, but alone they are not sufficient. Cases in the news show that abusers are often unreported, and therefore without a criminal record, until they have victimized several children. Some abuse occurs over a period of several years. For this reason, background checks should be supplemented with both professional reference checks and personal interviews for all church workers.

Take a tour of your facility with an eye toward minimizing opportunities for abuse. Rooms where childcare, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School activities take place should ideally have open doors, half doors, or a window in the wall or door that allows people outside to observe the activity in the room.

Despite the best prevention efforts, abuse may occur in your church. It is best to be prepared with a written policy for responding to allegations or incidents of child sexual abuse. When abuse has been reported is not the best time to be researching proper procedures. Your policy should be reviewed by legal counsel familiar with proper application of state law and any local requirements for mandatory reporters of child abuse in your area. A good resource for state laws in this area is the Policy tab on the website operated by the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. [apps.rainn.org/policy-app/index2.cfm](https://apps.rainn.org/policy-app/index2.cfm). A list of mandatory reporting requirements by state can be found at [apps.rainn.org/policy-state-laws-db/landing-page-children/index.cfm](https://apps.rainn.org/policy-state-laws-db/landing-page-children/index.cfm).

## **Hotlines and Website Resources**

### **LCMS Resources on Child Abuse**

*[lcms.org/socialissues/childabuse](http://lcms.org/socialissues/childabuse)*

The LCMS Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Task Force was charged by Synod in convention with identifying and developing materials as well as offering training on the topic of child abuse. Resources as well as information on training can be found on the synod web site.

### **National Child Abuse Hotline**

Childhelp operates the National Child Abuse Hotline: 800-4-A-CHILD or 800-422-4453. This call center can provide referrals for nearby services or connect the caller to a counselor.

### **National Sexual Assault Hotline**

*[rainn.org](http://rainn.org)*

You can reach the national hotline for those impacted by sexual violence by dialing 800-656-HOPE (656-4673). Calls are automatically routed to the closest rape crisis center. This hotline is operated by RAINN, the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

### **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children**

*[safetocompete.org/SoundPractices](http://safetocompete.org/SoundPractices)*

This national organization's site, [Document2missingkids.org/home](http://Document2missingkids.org/home), provides helpful information, such as Code Adam, and valuable links including a link to Safe to Compete: Protecting Child Athletes from Sexual Abuse, whose website offers an introductory document with lots of practical tip on creating a safe environment for children. Though intended for youth sports programs many of the recommended policies can easily be adapted to school and church situations.

### **National Sex Offender Public Website**

*[nsopw.gov/](http://nsopw.gov/)*

This United States Department of Justice site provides access to search participating states' public information regarding the presence or location of offenders. In addition to the search feature the site contains numerous education and prevention articles covering facts and statistics, talking to your child, recognizing sexual abuse, help and support for victims and more.

### **Darkness to Light: End Child Sexual Abuse**

*[d2l.org](http://d2l.org)*

This nonprofit challenges faith-based organizations to set the standards within their communities. They provide web resources including online training for just \$10 per person as well as offering facilitator-led training sessions throughout the country. You can search by state or zip code to find a session near you.

## **LCMS Group Purchasing Agreement**

### **Protect My Ministry**

*[protectmyministry.com/lcms/](http://protectmyministry.com/lcms/)*

The LCMS has a group purchasing agreement with Protect My Ministry for LCMS member congregations and schools. This organization provides background checks for potential employee and volunteers. You can find additional information about the agreement at *[lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=841](http://lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=841)* or go directly to their website to sign up and view sample policies and other helpful guidance.

## **Additional Resources from Insurance Providers**

Lutheran churches and schools may purchase insurance for their facilities and special events from local or national insurance providers. Insurers are interested in risk reduction and may provide helpful resources for your church or school, including discounts on background checks and other helpful guidance documents. In some instances, completing training offered by your insurance company may even help you qualify for a discount on your insurance premiums.

As an example, Church Asset Management and Lutheran Trust works with a number of insurance carriers, and while no LCMS endorsement of GuideOne is intended, GuideOne does offer a number of free resources on their website, *[guideone.com](http://guideone.com)*. Please look under the tab titled Safety Resources and more specifically for this topic see the Children and Youth Safety Resources page. Some of these resources are free to the public. GuideOne customers can also register and get free access to additional resources through the SafeChurch.com website, *[safechurch.com](http://safechurch.com)*.

Another insurance provider offering safety resources on their website is Church Mutual Insurance. Some of these documents are available to the public on *[churchmutual.com](http://churchmutual.com)* and others are available only to customers. The printable brochure, “Safety Tips on a Sensitive Subject: Child Sexual Abuse,” is available here: *[churchmutual.com/media/safetyResources/files/SafetyTipsSenSubject.pdf](http://churchmutual.com/media/safetyResources/files/SafetyTipsSenSubject.pdf)*.

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