



## 10 COMMON MISTAKES CHURCH LEADERS MAKE REGARDING

# CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION

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Listen, I get it.

You're an incredible leader with a strong pounding in your chest to reach the next generation for Christ. You long deeply for homes to be transformed through Godly parents equipped with passion, understanding, and tools to help lead their families well. You work tirelessly to prepare for every Sunday because you believe in your volunteer team and want desperately to help them succeed.

You didn't get into ministry because you're passionate about background checks and policies.

That doesn't mean child abuse prevention shouldn't be important to you, however. In fact, your church family desperately needs you to care deeply about protecting every child and leader involved in your ministry. The statistics are staggering:

- 1 in 7 kids are abused annually<sup>[i]</sup>
- About 90% of kids who get abused know their abuser<sup>[ii]</sup>
- There are more than 60 million survivors of child sexual abuse in America.<sup>[iii]</sup>

Church programs should be the safest places in the world for kids and leaders. God's love should flow

through caring adults who are completely invested in the emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of all those entrusted to their guidance. Church spaces should be filled with singing, laughter, prayer, and encouragement every time God's people meet together.

All this requires an awesome leader who is willing to build safe boundaries for everyone in the ministry. Child abuse prevention needs a champion at your church. It needs you.

Here are ten mistakes many, many church leaders make regarding child abuse prevention. Avoid these mistakes to be the safety champion your church needs you to be!

### **Mistake #1: Assume Child Abuse Prevention isn't Necessary at Your Church**

*"Policies, training, and all those safety measures aren't really important at my church. I don't think my people would go for it, and besides... I know everyone serving with my kids really well."*

I'm sure you know and love every single person serving kids and students at your church. In fact, the best ministry teams tend to act more like families than coworkers! I pray there is deep love and trust among all who serve together to reach the next generation. However, to those who question whether or not child abuse prevention is necessary, I would ask three questions:

1. If I'm someone with evil plans to harm children, where do you think I'll go? Will I go to the church where safety plans are in place, or will I find the churches and organizations that allow me the easiest access to children?

We hate to think this way, but we all know there are those in our communities who desire to harm kids. These predators need three conditions to carry out their plans: access, privacy, and control. The very best church leaders put measures in place to allow only the finest, most pure-intentioned adults access to minors. They also set boundaries to prevent adults from spending time alone with kids or from gaining opportunities to manipulate children for evil purposes.

2. How are you going to attract young families to your church without demonstrating a commitment to safety?

I haven't met a church yet who isn't interested in attracting young families. We all know we need the next generation to continue the work of the gospel in our communities. Young parents today demand that churches take the safety of their children seriously. As one long-time pastor told me recently, "For young adults, the most important factor for choosing a church is not the music, not preaching; it's the safety of their children. The question each one will ask is, 'Can you keep my kids safe?'"

3. In church families where abuse has taken place, do you think the church leaders saw it coming?

Certainly not, right? More than likely these leaders got caught in a storm they weren't remotely ready to navigate. Please understand me... I'm not telling you to look at all your leaders with suspicion. In fact, a great safety system accomplishes the opposite. When you build a culture of safety in your church programs, you're actually creating space for beautiful ministry to take place in a loving environment.

### **Mistake #2: Believe that Child Abuse Prevention is Only About Protecting Kids**

*"My leaders are going to hate these policies and procedures. They will think I'm accusing them of something, and I can't say I blame them."*

Years ago, I had a great children's minister working for me who was accused of a boundary violation. A little boy said that she took him into a bathroom alone and spanked him. This kind of behavior breaks several rules we have in place regarding appropriate physical touch and being alone with children in a closed space. We took his allegation seriously.

But the children's minister was very easy to clear of any wrongdoing. Why? Because she knew the policies and followed them perfectly. At no time during the ministry program was she alone with any child or out of eyesight of other leaders. Plenty of the adults in the room could verify that fact. We learned later that the child was merely angry and popped off a thoughtless false allegation... as kids sometimes do. In that instance, my wonderful children's minister was protected by the very abuse prevention plan she helped put in place.

Everyone is protected when great leaders build safe spaces!

### **Mistake #3: Rely on Background Checks Alone**

*"My church does background checks. We don't really need to do anything else."*

Background checks are wonderful safety tools. There are some great companies working very hard to provide churches with criminal records on both state and federal levels. Some even search sex offender registries and security watchlists. You should absolutely include background checks in your safety system... but you can't rely on them as the sole precautionary method for adults gaining access to children.

I was deep into my years of family ministry leadership before I learned a few vital facts about background checks. You should know:

- There is no true centralized nationwide criminal records repository that is available to the public. The screening services



children and teenagers. Does your team know how to treat a teenager who is serving in children's ministry? How about a child of a leader who happens to be attending a student ministry event? Clear up all confusion by creating one comprehensive plan for all the minors reached through your church programs.

**Mistake #5: Make A Plan, But Don't Tell Anyone About It**

*"Sure, we've got a safety plan. I can show it to you if you'd like. I just have to remember where I saved the file..."*

Believe me, I know... it takes time to craft a complete policy document that fits the context of your specific church family. It takes careful consideration, long conversations, maybe a little debate over best practices, and several edits. But then what?

The world's best child safety policy doesn't do anyone any good merely taking space on your computer hard drive.

At some point your staff and servant leader team need to know the policies. They can't simply guess how to comply with the standards you've set. You have to tell them. Staff members,

available to churches are private companies with no laws or standards governing the type of records collected, where those records come from, and how often that information is updated.

- National criminal databases contain less than a quarter of nationwide criminal records.[iv]

Even if background checks were more comprehensive, it doesn't mean they would catch all the offenders desiring access to your children anyway. Remember, offenders have to get caught before they have a criminal record. Groomers are often so careful and methodical that they have many targets before ever getting discovered.

Background checks do provide important information and should be a part of your onboarding process, but they can't be your entire plan. Consider adding other steps such as applications, reference checks, and personal interviews before an adult can gain access to children. Many of these measures will prevent predators with harmful intentions from trying to gain

access to your kids from the start. That's a good thing!

**Mistake #4: Don't Think to Include Student Ministry in the Kids' Ministry Safety Plan**

*"I doubt the student ministry cares about our diaper-changing policies. They've got their own thing going on, it doesn't really relate to children's ministry."*

A unified ministry staff speaks volumes to a church family. When a kids' pastor and a student pastor stand together and declare a partnership to create safe spaces for all kids and teens, church families take notice. This matter must be important enough for your family ministry team to band together in a concerted endeavor of prevention.

Where there is no partnership, confusion reigns. You never want your church family to wonder which policy applies to which ministry. Think about how many programs and spaces your ministry operates that includes both



children's leaders, and student leaders need to hear how you expect them to keep everyone safe. Will they ask you tough questions? Probably. Will some of your guidelines make some leaders uncomfortable? Possibly. But we commit to do hard things because they matter. In time, the questions and uncertainty usually turn into gratitude because people appreciate the love and care displayed in safe environments.

Don't keep the policies to yourself. Communicate them!

### **Mistake #6: Fail to Train Leaders on Child Abuse Prevention on an Ongoing Basis**

*"We do annual trainings to get ready for the new ministry year, but most of my leaders don't come. I try to keep the meetings pretty short, so I doubt we will have time to talk about abuse prevention anyway."*

The only way to create a culture of safety at your church is to talk about it. And then talk about it again. And then again. It is a fantastic idea to gather everyone together to learn about the new safety plan you've created, but that can't be the last time your team hears about it. Child abuse prevention must be an ongoing conversation.

Some churches use video curriculum to do annual child abuse prevention trainings. Others meet in person to review their policies and procedures. One Shelter and Shield client chose to add one safety policy reminder to their weekly huddles conducted right before Sunday morning small groups. Whatever you decide is your best practice, make sure your people hear your safety expectations over and over again. A message repeated with consistency will communicate to leaders that it is important to you.

### **Mistake #7: Don't Consider Digital Environments when Creating a Safety Plan**

*"I guess my leaders text the students in their small group. I don't really know. Is that wrong?"*

Sadly, digital environments are just as dangerous for kids and adults as physical space. Every single day kids are groomed online, inappropriate pictures are shared, bullying occurs between kids, and lives are shattered in the digital realm. Just a month before this article was written, a student leader in my hometown was accused of an inappropriate relationship with a teen in her church small group. She denied the relationship, but when the hundreds of texts between the leader and student were evaluated, a clear picture emerged of serious boundary violations.

When writing your policy, digital space must be considered. In reality, your best leaders will want to reach out to the kids entrusted to them. As a pastor or minister, you want these passionate people to serve in your ministry! You want the type of adult who will reach out to a student on Thursday to pray and encourage her when she knows the student has a

difficult test that day. You want the kind of guy who will send his group daily scriptures and links to devotionals they can all do together. It's up to you to specify how those leaders can reach out to their kids electronically, yet keep those interactions safe at all times.

Your digital environment policy should include instructions for safe texting, messaging, emails, social media, and all other forms of communication.

### **Mistake #8: Don't Include Parents and Children in the Safety Conversation**

*"I feel like I've communicated my child abuse prevention policies with my church staff and volunteer team. That should be good, right?"*

It's simple: when everyone knows the rules, your church gets safer. Communicating child abuse prevention policies to parents and kids creates a collective understanding of what is and is not acceptable behavior. It's great if all your camp chaperones understand they are never supposed to be alone in a bunkhouse with a child, but shouldn't the kids know it, too? What if a child finds himself in a compromising situation and a voice in the back of his mind says, "Wait a minute... didn't I hear in the pre-camp meeting that I was never supposed to be alone with a leader?" In cases like this, it is much harder for child predators to employ grooming techniques because everyone has been brought in on the safety conversation.

For parents, consider adding safety information to your church website. Trust me, most parents will absolutely love knowing that your staff takes safety seriously and will likely thank you for working so hard to protect their children. Provide links where parents can download your policy or see a sample of your abuse prevention videos. Give parents ways to contact you if they have any concerns or suspicions.

For kids, consider what policies would be helpful for them to know and how to communicate those boundaries in an age-appropriate way. Shelter and Shield clients have created coloring books, passed out yearly safety cards, conducted pre-camp meetings, and added safety quizzes to program elements. And of course, add any resources you develop for kids to your abuse prevention web page so they may be reviewed and used by parents at home.

### **Mistake #9: Don't Communicate the WHO and HOW for Staff, Leaders, Parents, and Kids to Report Their Concerns**

*"I guess if someone has a concern, they could tell me. Or maybe they could write an email to my boss. I don't know, we'll figure it out when it happens."*

Do people at your church know who to go to when a child discloses



abuse? Do leaders serving in your ministry understand that suspicions of abuse should be reported, even if that suspicion is never confirmed? Is there a way for a concerned member of your faith family to report a witnessed abuse, yet remain confidential?

Two types of reporting must be considered for child abuse prevention: internal reporting and state-mandated reporting. For both, expectations must be clearly communicated and reporting mechanisms must be readily available. You don't want people to wonder what to do with important information when they have it. You want them to move forward quickly with confidence.

In most states, church staff and volunteers are mandated reporters. That means that you are legally required to report suspicions of abuse to state authorities. Churches within these states should include contact information for mandated reporting in their policies and communicate this information to leaders consistently. Even in the few states where reporting isn't specified for clergy or church volunteers, it is still

recommended to contact proper authorities quickly to get kids the help they need. Internally, reporting is very important. You never want church leaders and elders to be caught off guard with vital information from an outside source. There should be specified channels for sharing information and those channels should be clearly outlined in your policies. Consider providing your parents and volunteers multiple avenues for voicing concerns and suspicions and ensuring some of those forms of contact can remain confidential. Online forms, emails, phone lines, and even locked boxes with slots on your premises can be the start of your internal reporting system.

#### **Mistake #10: Aren't Ready with a Plan to Care for Survivors of Abuse**

*"I don't know what to do. I can't believe this has happened here."*

Survivors of sexual abuse continue to suffer long after the crime has occurred. According to Preventabuse.com, they are:

- Three times more likely to suffer depression.
- Ten times more likely to attempt suicide.
- Six times more likely to suffer from PTSD.
- Thirteen times more likely to abuse alcohol.
- Twenty-six times more likely to abuse drugs.

There are also devastating spiritual ramifications to abuse in the church. Young people often quit trusting the church or even quit believing in God. Needless to say, when a child discloses abuse to you, that moment is incredibly important. For you, it might feel like the conversation came out of the blue, but the child has most likely gone through a long emotional journey just to get to this point. You must be present, engaged, and caring as you give the child your undivided attention, no matter how crazy the environment is around you. If possible, grab another trusted leader and usher the child to a quiet place (within line of site) where the child can feel more comfortable to talk.

A great idea is to teach leaders how to respond to kids with empathy as part of your ongoing child abuse prevention training. Leaders can learn to stay calm, listen, comfort, note the facts, and then finally report.

So, as you read the list did you discover a mistake you've made regarding child abuse prevention? If so, that's okay. It doesn't make you a bad leader, it just gives you a starting place to get better. No matter where you are today, you can commit to making your ministries a little bit safer. When churches get safer, God's love and protection is better represented. After all, His love is perfect, and His protection is complete. As the Psalmist reminds us, God is, and will always be our greatest defender.

*"You are my shelter and shield; I put my hope in your word."*- Psalm 119:114 CSB

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