



**Shelter  
& Shield**

# THE PASTOR'S PLAYBOOK



**RESPONDING WELL TO  
SURVIVORS OF ABUSE**

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# STEPPING INTO TRAUMA



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**“DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU; DO NOT BE AFRAID, FOR I AM YOUR GOD. I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU; I WILL HELP YOU; I WILL HOLD ON TO YOU WITH MY RIGHTEOUS RIGHT HAND.”**

## **ISAIAH 41:10 CSB**

WHEN ABUSE OCCURS AMONG A CHURCH CONGREGATION, SURVIVORS OF CHILD ABUSE DESPERATELY NEED TO KNOW THAT GOD PROVIDES NEW STRENGTH, MIRACULOUS HELP, AND DIVINE HEALING. THESE PRECIOUS SOULS, ALONG WITH THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS, WILL BE LOOKING FOR HOPE, TRUTH, AND UNDERSTANDING. PASTOR, ALWAYS REMEMBER IT IS A PRIVILEGE AND HONOR TO BE INVITED INTO SOMEONE’S SUFFERING. ALTHOUGH SUCH HIGH LEVELS OF TRAUMA CAN BE INTIMIDATING TO CONFRONT, YOU CAN BE AN INSTRUMENT OF HEALING THROUGH THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. IN MOMENTS OF CRISIS YOU ARE THE TRUSTED VOICE OF TRUTH, USED BY GOD AS A CONDUIT OF HIS RESTORATIVE POWER.

THE FOLLOWING PAGES CONTAIN INFORMATION AND ADVICE TO HELP YOU RESPOND WELL TO SURVIVORS OF CHILD ABUSE AND THEIR FAMILIES.

# THE MOMENT OF DISCLOSURE



When minors choose to tell you about abuse they are suffering you have the opportunity to be present, focused, and compassionate. Your response is incredibly important for a child in crisis. Remember these five tips to be ready at the moment of disclosure.

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## 1

### STAY CALM

Communicate nonverbally that you are listening, that you care, and that you are a safe person in whom the survivor of child abuse can confide. If you react with your body language or facial expressions that you are shocked or embarrassed by what is said, you may

accidentally convey you aren't a "safe place" for this kind of honest disclosure. The survivor of abuse may pull back from sharing any more with you if they sense any discomfort.

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## 2

### JUST LISTEN

Survivors of child abuse have journeyed a long way emotionally to tell you something deeply personal. It's a big deal that they've chosen to talk to you. It may seem as though the conversation you're having is spur of the moment or ill-timed, but make no mistake—the minor in front of you is showing incredible bravery and trust.

If you were busy before, you aren't any longer. The very best thing you can do is give the child your complete focus. Practice active listening by paying attention to body language, giving encouraging verbal cues, and repeating back what you hear the minor say for clarification.

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## 3

### BE COMFORTING

Groomers need three things in order to perpetrate crimes against children: access, privacy, and control. In order to control victims, child abusers often use manipulative tools like guilt and shame. It's highly probable that survivors of child abuse are believing lies even as they disclose their abuse

to you, such as, "It's really my fault the abuse happened," or, "I'm ruining my loved-one's life by telling you this." Sometimes the most comforting thing a child can hear you say is, "I believe you. It's not your fault. I'm so sorry this has happened."

## 4

### DON'T CRITICIZE

It is important to avoid speaking critically about the actions of the minor or even the accused abuser. It may be tempting to say something like, "I cannot believe your aunt did this to you. She is such a monster!" Remember, a lot of times the one committing the abuse is someone the child loves and trusts. This a very

confusing time for the survivor of child abuse, wrapped up in many emotions. Victims often don't understand everything they are thinking and feeling, so criticism against someone they love can feel like an attack, even if that someone is hurting them.

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## 5

### NOTE THE FACTS

Get the specifics so that you can report to authorities accurately. Some details that authorities will want to know include:

- Name of the minor
- Name of parents and siblings living in the minor's home
- Brief description of the minor
- Where the minor can be located
- Name of alleged abuser
- Where the alleged abuser can be located

- A complete, honest account of what was observed that led to suspicion of child abuse

Remember when collecting facts for the purpose of reporting, it's important to be gentle and encouraging with survivors of child abuse. You are not investigating or interrogating, simply noting facts. Do not press a child to provide answers that cause discomfort, simply collect the information that is readily offered.





# ONGOING CARE

COMMITTING TO SURVIVORS OF  
ABUSE AND THEIR FAMILIES FOR  
LONG-TERM RECOVERY.

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## "WHEN YOU'RE READY."

The most important words when engaging survivors of child abuse in ongoing care are, "...when you're ready." Too often survivors are forced into conversations, confrontations, or mediations that don't serve their emotional or spiritual recovery in any way. In fact, this type of forced engagement can cause emotional, psychological, and spiritual harm. Proper care for survivors of child abuse must be thoughtful, careful, and progress at a pace appropriate for each minor. For continued care, follow these steps:

## CONTINUED PASTORAL SUPPORT

Offer continued support to the survivor of child abuse and his/her family members through the following methods:

- Assign a pastor or staff member to offer ongoing support to the survivor of child abuse and family members through listening, affirming, prayer, and availability. This person should also offer to accompany the family in all matters concerning the abuse such as meeting with Child Protective Services, filing police reports, court appearances, or any other related meetings or hearings.
- Offer financial assistance and guidance in connecting the survivor of abuse with a professional mental health practitioner. This person should have experience treating victims of child abuse and family members. It is a great practice to offer at least three options for families to choose from when suggesting potential counselors.
- Offer public support for the survivor of abuse and his/her family. Although it's important to protect the privacy of all survivors of child abuse, we must acknowledge that victims are often marginalized while church families believe and protect beloved leaders accused of committing the abuse. If a survivor of abuse is ever publicly attacked for alleged abuse or response to alleged abuse, you should, **with the survivor's permission**, make a public statement denouncing such treatment and urge support from the community.

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## LAW ENFORCEMENT COOPERATION

Law enforcement personnel play an important in uncovering facts and administering justice. It should be your goal to cooperate fully with authorities in any abuse investigation. Remember that your role is to pastor, not to investigate. At no time should you, any staff member, or volunteer on your team be enticed to discuss or decide whether or not an allegation is true or false. Allow law enforcement to handle the investigative work. Your role is to provide pastoral care and spiritual guidance for all parties involved.

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## CONFIDENTIALITY

Observe confidentiality for both the alleged survivor of abuse and the accused until advised to the contrary by legal representation.

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## DIGNITY FOR THE ACCUSED

It is important to treat the accused abuser with dignity and support. Remember that all crimes are *alleged crimes* until proven true in a court of law. As a pastor, it is not your role to assign guilt or innocence to any individual. However, the alleged perpetrator should be temporarily suspended from his/her duties until the investigation is complete. If necessary, a *Limited Access Agreement* can be drawn up that formalizes expectations and boundaries for the accused while on church property or among church family.



# TALKING TO SURVIVORS OF CHILD ABUSE



It can often be difficult to know exactly what to say to a person experiencing deep, spiritual pain. Abuse in a church setting or perpetrated by a someone in a church family can stir feelings of anger, hurt, betrayal, and confusion. Here are some tips concerning the language you use when talking to survivors of child abuse:

1

Don't feel the pressure to have all the answers. Pastors often attempt to fill silent, awkward moments with a steady stream of comforting words. It's okay to be quiet. It's okay to sit with a family and simply share their sadness for a time. Some call this the "**ministry of presence.**" Sitting in

silence with hurting people expresses you are not repelled by their pain. You are showing them with your actions that you won't run from their trauma, but instead will stay by their side no matter what. The ministry of presence communicates loving commitment and powerful empathy.

2

When you are ready to share truth, be careful to avoid language that inadvertently blames God for the offenses committed against a minor and family. For instance, though the words God spoke to the Israelites in Jeremiah 29:11 may perfectly express the heart of God for His people, "For I know the plans I have for you"—this is the Lord's declaration—"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you

a future and a hope,"[1] these may not be the most helpful words for people wondering why God didn't protect their precious child from terrible harm. People generally don't need theological debates when in crisis, they need comfort. Three comforting truths you can always share are **God helps, God heals, and God hears our prayers.**[2]

3

Another type of spiritual language to avoid when responding to survivors of

child abuse concerns **spiritual bypassing.** Spiritual bypassing is the

[1] Jeremiah 29:11 CSB

[2] Great verses to use in support of these three truths include Psalm 34:18, Psalm 91:1-2, Psalm 145:18, Isaiah 41:10, and 1 Peter 5:7



use of spiritual terms, cliches, or sentiments in order to avoid dealing with or minimizing deeply painful feelings, unresolved emotions, or suppressed wounds. Survivors of child abuse are left feeling “bypassed” when spiritual leaders offer trite, practiced spiritual platitudes instead of heartfelt, thoughtful counsel. They don’t feel cared for, heard, or understood. Worse, spiritual bypassing can cause trauma victims to feel shame about their own feelings and recovery. For example, pastors might be tempted to tell survivors of child abuse struggling to forgive their abusers they should “pray more” or simply “have more

faith.” Statements like this tragically add to the heavy burden victims experience. Now, instead of dealing with the hard work of healing in a healthy way, survivors must carry the unnecessary guilt of not praying enough, not believing in God enough, or some other thinly veiled agent of blame. Spiritual bypassing does not move someone forward in their recovery journey and should be avoided by all loving pastors. Make sure survivors of child abuse and families under your care feel heard, experience true support, and find the freedom to heal at their own pace.

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## 4

Finally, make sure you help connect all survivors of child abuse and their families with a mental health professional you trust, preferably one with experience treating those who’ve suffered from sexual abuse. Although

your wise, spiritual guidance will be an incredible asset to those under your care, a mental health professional has training and gifts that God can use to help facilitate recovery.





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