

Sexual Abuse of a Minor – Response Plan

** Green print indicates suggestions and/or where you should tailor the plan to your church*

The abuse of children is not only a sin, but it is a serious crime. Reporting suspected child abuse to legal authorities can save a child's life or put an end to ongoing abuse. In contrast, remaining silent perpetuates abuse and emboldens offenders. [NAME OF YOUR CHURCH] requires that all volunteers, attendees, and staff comply with their mandatory reporting obligations and contact authorities immediately when a child discloses abuse, when they witness child abuse, or when they observe signs of abuse.

When abuse is witnessed, disclosed, or suspected, the following shall take place:

Step 1

When you suspect abuse, witness abuse, or someone discloses abuse, it must be documented on the Suspected Child Abuse Incident Form and a report must be made to [fill in your state's reporting agency such as Department of Health and Human Services].

When a child reveals abuse to an adult, the adult should listen carefully and ask open-ended questions. Do not suggest answers (See Supplement 9 of Essentials: "Guiding Principles of Victim Advocacy").

After the conversation, the adult will document the details of the conversation on the Suspected Child Abuse Incident Form. If he or she is uncertain about the details, do not re-interview the child. If the adult needs assistance completing the report, he/she can consult with either the Lead Pastor or the Children's Ministry Director. You should always err on the side of reporting. (Churches should select at least two people as points of contact for this. It's preferable to have one male and one female. This is only a chance to ask for assistance, not a time to "investigate.")

The Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form will be kept digitally (password protected), or in a locked, secure cabinet with access granted only to the Lead Pastor and the Children's Ministry Director. (or whomever your church selects to have access to these files)

Step 2

As described above, the individual who suspects, witnesses, or receives a disclosure of abuse/neglect will report to (your state's reporting agency i.e. DHHS or CPS and/or law enforcement) according to your state's laws.

- a. Before or directly following (church's discretion), an individual making a report needs to make the Lead Pastor or the Children's Ministry Director aware when reporting. (Church can decide whom they'd like to be the contact person here. There should be at least two people selected in case one of the persons is the alleged abuser – also preferable to have one male and one female if possible) It is up to the individual making the report whether they would like the assistance of the Lead Pastor or the Children's Ministry Director (or whomever the church has selected as above) when filing.

- c. At this point, if DHS deems the report ‘founded,’ DHS will conduct its own investigation and may request the help of (My Church).
- d. If an individual who witnesses, suspects, or hears of abuse is unwilling to make a report, and if church leaders or staff believe there is reasonable suspicion that abuse has occurred, the Lead Pastor or Children’s Ministry Director will complete the Suspected Child Abuse Incident Report Form and report to DHS. There is a moral and legal obligation for reporting. It protects children and avoids exposing individuals or the church to legal liability for failing to report.

Step 3

If the alleged abuser is on staff at the church or a volunteer, he/she shall immediately be removed from all ministerial duties until the report is resolved. He/she will be instructed to remain away from the premises during the investigation. He/she will be instructed to have no contact with the victim or witnesses. (See Appendix Communicating with the Alleged Abuser”).

Step 4

The Lead Pastor or Head Deacon (Whoever the church decides here. Should be two people in case the alleged abuser is one of the designated persons.) will contact the insurance company to notify them that a report was made. A copy of the Suspected Child Abuse Incident Form will be given to the insurance company. The date the insurance company was notified will be documented on the Suspected Child Abuse Incident Form.

Step 5

The Lead Pastor (or other appointed leader) will inform the church leadership of the basic information of the report.

Step 6

If the alleged abuse occurred by someone within the church, the Lead Pastor (or other appointed leader) will ask to meet with the victim and his or her family. Inform them a report has been filed and what to expect from that. Recommend any follow-up that would assist the process and recovery. Inform them that the alleged perpetrator will not be permitted on campus (at least until this matter is resolved). Provide a recommendation for the child and/or family counseling outside of the church, appropriate for the situation.

Step 7

If the alleged abuse occurred by someone within the church, two members of leadership will ask to meet with the perpetrator. (Refer to the Appendix: Guidelines for Communicating/Meeting with the Alleged Abuser.)

Step 8

If the alleged abuse occurred by someone within the church, parents of other children participating in those ministry programs at (My church) will be made aware of the report. At this time invite other congregants to come forward if they are aware of any other victims. Communication with the those potentially affected individuals/families should include the action being taken to keep the congregation safe (removal of alleged perpetrator from ministerial role) and that the alleged threat has been addressed. See the Report & Care Sections in the Essentials Curriculum for further information.

Step 9

(My church) will refrain from conducting its own individual review of the abuse occurring within the church unless the following circumstances occur.

Under the following circumstances, (My church) will consult with an outside, independent firm to determine if an independent review should be pursued:

- A. When a suspicion of child abuse is reported to the civil authorities, and they decline to investigate or prosecute the alleged abuses.
- B. A district attorney has not pursued prosecution, however, (My church) staff or ministry leaders believe the individual's behavior might still violate the church policy, be immoral, be inappropriate, or be unsafe.

*If an investigation is deemed necessary, (My church) will retain an organization that meets the following criteria:

1. Completely independent of (My church)
2. Experienced in proper investigation techniques
3. Up to date on child abuse research

Step 10

Continue to care for the victim (Refer to the CARE section of the 'Essentials' booklet and Lesson 5 and Lesson 9 in 'Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused.')

Step 11

If necessary, (My church) will designate an individual or Public Relations firm to speak to the media on its behalf. An accurate statement should be drafted which may include the following:

- We value children and have extensive preventative child protection policies.
- There are times when moral evil evades the best policies, and this grieves us greatly.
- No attempt has been made to hide or cover up what has happened. We are cooperating fully with the legal process but want to protect the privacy of those involved.
- We applaud the courage of anyone, especially a child, who speaks out about abuse.
- We are seeking to love and serve the families affected at this time and would invite everyone to pray for those involved in this process.

Peer to Peer Abuse – Response Plan

The dynamics of peer-to-peer abuse can be very complicated, intertwined, and unknown, and therefore is best left up to professionals if there is any uncertainty.

Steps 1–6

Will be adhered to as mentioned above.

Step 7

If the alleged abuse occurred by a minor within the church, the Lead Pastor and one other member of church leadership will ask to meet with the perpetrator and his or her family. In the case of peer-to-peer sexual abuse it should be considered that the perpetrator may also be a victim of sexual abuse. This will influence the tone and follow-up of this meeting. Due to the nature of this conversation, the parents may be defensive and less cooperative in an effort to protect their child from legal consequences and possibly to protect the adult abuser (if known) involved in the situation.

The Lead Pastor (or designated person) will first place a phone call to the minor / accused perpetrator's parents and inform them of the accusation that has been made (but not the name of the victim) and request to meet with the parents. If the parents refuse this meeting, the parents should be informed that regardless of their choice, a report will be (likely already has been) made to the DHS/CPS and/or law enforcement. It should also be emphasized to the parents that it is the duty of (My church) to ensure the safety of all the children at (My church) and that uncooperativeness likely places many children at risk.

Assuming the parents are willing to participate in this meeting, the purpose of the conversation should be:

1. To discern if their child has experienced any sexual abuse or exposure to sexualized
2. material.
3. To determine if there are settings where their child may have experimented with
4. other children who need care.
5. To advise the parents of wise next steps for them to take (Consult on next steps with counseling experts or child advocacy centers who have experience in sexual abuse).

The Lead Pastor (or designated person) should be careful not to make promises he cannot keep (i.e., "If you are honest with us, you will not get in any trouble."), but rather make honest statements, (i.e., "We are here to find out what happened so that we can get everyone the help that they need. If you are honest with us, then this process will be much easier on everyone.").

Again, take notes on these conversations. If names are given that are not involved with (My church) (i.e., abuse that occurred at the YMCA, school, a camp setting, etc.), then those names should be reported to DHS or law enforcement as well.

At the end of this meeting, the Lead Pastor (or designated person) should provide the family with the same information they provided after the meeting with the victim's family:

- If a DHS report will be filed and what to expect from that.
- Recommend any follow-up that would assist the process and recovery.
- That the alleged perpetrator (child and family) will not be permitted to participate in any children or youth ministries (at least until this matter is resolved).
- Provide a recommendation for child and/or family counseling outside of the church, appropriate for the situation.

Appendix: Communicating/Meeting With the Alleged Abuser

The purpose of this visit is to:

1. Inform the alleged perpetrator of the allegation that has been made.
2. Allow for a time of confession (if guilty and willing to admit it).
3. Inform the alleged perpetrator of the reporting steps that have been taken.
4. Inform the alleged perpetrator of the restrictions that the church will place upon him/her until the matter reaches its legal conclusion. Have the alleged perpetrator sign the agreed-upon plan.
 - a. Temporarily removed from the church premises until further notice but may view services online or have an appointed pastor meet with them.
 - b. No involvement or physical presence in the children or youth ministries or areas will be allowed.
 - c. No attempt should be made to: (1) determine who the alleged victim is or (2) contact that minor/family.
5. Begin the process of pastoral care.
 - a. If confession is made, provide the name of a counselor who will be recognized as an expert during the legal process and is trained to work with perpetrators of sexual abuse against a child. This counseling should not be done by a pastor or counselor affiliated with the church in order to prevent a conflict of interest.
 - b. If confession is not made but his/her response is civil, maintain support during the legal process. If the legal process concludes that the allegation was unsubstantiated, then consulting with the Senior Pastor (or designated person) for the best source of counseling for the trauma of the process should be advisable. Counseling may be recommended in cases of false allegations as well.
 - c. If confession is not made and his/her response is uncivil, then reiterate that the restrictions are expected to be followed, and that the church wants to be supportive during this time.

Listen to the alleged abuser's version of events in a caring, respectful, and thorough manner. Take notes of every meeting.