

## REDUCING THE RISK OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE CHURCH

Adopted by General Conference of The United Methodist Church, April 1996

The Book of Resolutions 1996 (page 384)

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes [a] child... welcomes me." (Matthew 18:5, NRSV). Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God.

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, NRSV). Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state that "...children must be protected from economic, physical and sexual exploitation and abuse."

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. It is real, and appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation within churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma.

Such incidents are devastating to all who 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.

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong. In response to this church-wide challenge, the following steps should be taken to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse.

### Local churches should:

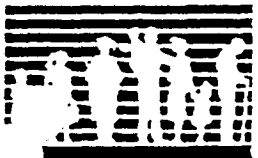
- 1 Develop and implement an ongoing education plan for the congregation and its leaders on the reality of child abuse, risk factors leading to child abuse and strategies for prevention.

- 2 Adopt screening procedures (use of application forms, interviews, reference checks, background clearance, etc.) for workers (paid and unpaid) directly or indirectly involved in the care of children and youth.
- 3 Develop and implement safety procedures for church activities such as: having two or more non-related adults present in classroom or activity; leaving doors open and installing half-doors or windows in doors or halls; providing hall monitors; instituting sign-in and sign-out procedures for children ages ten or younger, etc.
- 4 Advise children and young persons of an agency or a person outside as well as within the church whom they can contact for advice and help if they have suffered abuse.
- 5 Carry liability insurance that includes sexual abuse coverage.
- 6 Assist the development of awareness and self-protection skills for children and youth through special curricula and activities.
- 7 Be familiar with Annual Conference and other church policies regarding clergy sexual misconduct.

### All God's Children Checklist

This fall every local church will report to charge conference using the *All God's Children Checklist*. Item C on the report form is "Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse." Churches must complete #1 and at least one other.

- 1 Develop policies and procedures for prevention of child abuse.
- 2 Hold adult education series on child abuse identification and response.
- 3 Obtain and use age-appropriate abuse prevention curriculum for children.
- 4 Offer parent support groups and parenting classes.
- 5 Provide "safe corridors" for children walking to and from school.
- 6 Sponsor before/after school program that provides safe haven.
- 7 Other: Attend a Summit workshop (see insert).



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### STAFF

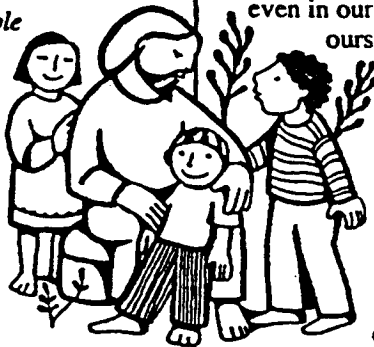
Editor.....Carole Vaughn  
Issue Design Team.....Cindy Lee, Randy McMillen, Leila Morris, Geneala Swink, Sally Taylor, Carol Uzzle  
Mailing Assistance.....Ann Miller



# Top Ten Safeguards for Churches to Reduce Child Abuse

by *Judee Showalter and Ruth Yaple*

1. Develop a "Child Abuse Prevention Policy and Procedures" and educate the congregation about this important policy.
2. Employ the "2 Adult Rule": 2 adults must be present at all times, even when providing transportation.
3. Employ the "6 Month Rule": church membership for 6 months is a requirement for service in children's or youth ministries.
4. Establish guidelines for screening your staff and volunteers.
5. Make classrooms accessible: have windows in classroom doors, use a "floater" to check on classes, and be sure parents know they are welcome to visit.
6. Incorporate safety education for children into your church's education program.
- .. Check your church's liability coverage.
8. Include abuse awareness training as a component in your volunteer and teacher training.
9. Offer parenting education, or invite an area agency to offer classes in your building.
10. Know the child intervention resources in your area, and make that information available in your congregation.



## Children and Abuse: A Reality

(Continued from page 1)

dealing with those issues. We will learn the facts about child abuse and neglect as it exists in our communities — and, yes, even in our own church families. And we will prepare

ourselves to respond in caring and compassionate ways to those who abuse children, stopping the abuse but abandoning neither the child nor the abuser in the process. We will grow in our own understanding that to fail to meet the needs of a child is on some level to abuse that child, and so we will avail ourselves of every tool or resource that enables us to act on behalf of children. The recent study at School of Christian Mission, "Making the World Safe for Children," published jointly by Friendship Press

and the Children's Defense Fund, provides a wealth of material for churches that care about meeting the needs of children. The Children's Defense Fund offers an array of additional resources that are useful to churches. In addition, the Virginia Council of Churches offers "Bread and Stones," (see enclosed brochure) a program that brings church leaders together to assess the needs of children in their community and take steps to meet those needs.

In the end, of course, we cannot meet all of those needs because we cannot know of them all, and because we are human. We will fail some of our children, even some near and dear to us. Our faith teaches us that when we acknowledge our failure and ask God's forgiveness, then that forgiveness is ours. It then becomes possible for us to forgive ourselves because somewhere deep in our hearts we understand that each of us is God's beloved child. Frederick Beuchner writes in one of his novels, "May God forgive us every face we cannot look upon with joy." Whatever — or whoever — diminished us as children, also needs forgiveness. We must take responsibility for our own actions as individuals and as communities of faith, ensuring that each child who asks of us, "Who am I?", hears the clear and grace-filled response — "You are God's beloved child!"

*ABOUT THE WRITER — The Rev. Dr. Judith FaGalde Bennett is Program Associate for the Virginia Council of Churches. One of her many areas of expertise is ministries with children and families.*

Virginia Annual Conference  
The United Methodist Church  
Council on Ministries, Children's Section, ALFM  
P.O. Box 11367  
Richmond, Virginia 23230



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## Toward a policy statement on mentoring and child safety....?

### Some assumptions:

Mentoring programs or other efforts to pair children with caring adults are good things. In fact, we know that at-risk children who beat the odds and "make it" frequently credit their success to an ongoing relationship with an adult outside their family who took an interest in them and their future, and was there "for the long haul."

The movement within the United Methodist Church to reduce the risk of child abuse through the development of careful policies and procedures is also a good thing. It is mandated by the General Conference, supported by resources and events at the general church level as well as increasing actions at annual conference and local church levels.

### A possible dilemma:

There may be a potential conflict between these two assumptions, and the deeply-held values they represent. By encouraging adults to be mentors, to form on-going supportive relationships with individual children and youth, are we running the risk of creating settings where children are vulnerable to abuse? Are we setting up situations where it will be difficult to adhere to our own child safety procedures (such as the "two adult rule")? How do we build in protections both for the children/youth and for the adult mentors? This question has taken on some urgency in light of the fact that, as part of the Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty, the Council of Bishops has urged its members to form personal relationships with individual children and their families, and some bishops are challenging clergy and laity in their area to do the same. No one is interested in discouraging these very positive efforts, but at the same time, we must be faithful to our commitment to procedures that reduce the risk of child abuse.

### Some initial suggestions:

Work through existing programs in the community that have established, supervised mentoring programs already in place, such as Big Brothers or Big Sisters, Y's, Boy and Girl Scouts, public schools, etc.

Provide basic screening of all adults, including clergy, who will be working with children and youth, either in groups or individually. See guidelines in *Safe Sanctuaries* manual.

If a mentoring program is being set up in the conference, district or congregation, establish clear written guidelines for settings, boundaries, environment. Provide training for all adults (or youth, if they will be working with children) who are interested in being mentors. Consider developing a written covenant.

Make it clear that all persons are expected to follow congregation, agency and/or conference guidelines for reducing the risk of child/youth abuse. Make specific suggestions, such as:

- Outings should be to public places;
- Routes, time frames, etc. should be agreed upon in advance, and known to all;
- Whenever possible, plan activities and outings that include several adults and children (such as two sets of mentor and child);
- One-to-one tutoring should take place in a group setting, such as one large room rather than individual room spread through the church building.

## Resources and Contacts

*Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Ages 5-8* by Kathryn Reid, United Church Press (1994)

*Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in Your Church: (study book and leader's guide)* by Hammar, Klipowicz, and Cobble, Church Law and Tax Report (1993)

*Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church* by Joy Thornburg Melton, Discipleship Resources (1998)

*Welcome the Child: A Child Advocacy Guide for Churches* by Daley and Guy, Friendship Press and Children's Defense Fund (1994)

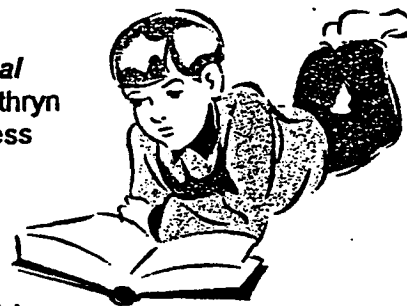
*When Child Abuse Comes to Church* by Bill Anderson, Bethany House (1992)

*National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD*

*Parents Anonymous: 1-800-421-0353*

*Virginia Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-552-7096*

*SCAN - Stop Child Abuse Now: 804-775-1767*





**CHECKLIST**  
**“TO DO’S”**  
**FOR REDUCING THE RISK OF CHILD ABUSE IN THE CHURCH**

By Mary Logan, GCFA General Counsel

Fall 2000

† † †

And Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them;  
for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

Matthew 19:14

† † †

Churches and church organizations often ask “what should we be doing” to reduce the risk of child abuse in the Church. Many resources are available to assist churches in this important ministry. One of the best is Safe Sanctuaries, by Joy Thornburg Melton, available through Discipleship Resources (1-800-685-4370, or [www.discipleshipresources.org](http://www.discipleshipresources.org), order #DR220). Also important is the policy statement, “Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in the Church,” in the *1996 Book of Resolutions*, at page 384.

This checklist provides a quick and handy reference guide for the most important practical steps that need to be taken in this ongoing process. It is not a substitute for reading Safe Sanctuaries or taking the time to develop a comprehensive plan for protecting children and youth.

- ✓ **Implement an organizational policy for the protection of children and youth.**  
At a minimum, the policy should include a brief theological statement, definition of child abuse, a strong statement that child abuse will not be tolerated, a commitment to investigate any and all allegations of abuse, and a place for alleged incidents of abuse to be reported. Also, be sure to check conference policies and procedures.
- ✓ **Implement a process for recruiting, screening and “hiring” workers (paid staff and volunteers) who will work with children and youth.**  
A thorough screening process for staff and volunteers can deter persons who engage in predatory behavior from applying for a position, identify such persons and help show the church’s commitment to protecting children and youth. Again, check conference policies and procedures. Know your state laws on background checks and screening procedures.
- ✓ **Implement the “two adult” rule.**  
Having no fewer than two unrelated adults present at all times during any church sponsored activity/event involving children or youth reduces the risk of child abuse occurring during that activity/event. When it is a mixed gender group, include at least one male and one female adult.
- ✓ **Always check prior employment and references.** The screening process should include an application with information on previous employers, references and church affiliation. Make sure each source is contacted and information on each contact is in the staff/volunteer “personnel” files. Give serious consideration to background checks.
- ✓ **Regular, periodic training and education for all staff and volunteers.**  
All workers should be required to attend regular, periodic training on the church’s policy(s), procedures and expectations for working with children and youth (e.g., handwashing, two adult rule, five year older rule, sign in and sign out sheets, what to do

if an accident occurs, reporting an alleged incident of child abuse, information on state child abuse laws, first aid training, and the like).

✓ **Implement the “five years older” rule.**

All workers, including volunteers, should be at least five years older than the children with whom they are working. And, workers under age 18, if utilized at all, should be required to work with and report to an unrelated adult.

✓ **Make the physical setting safe and conduct periodic safety inspections.**

For example, all classroom doors should have windows or a half door; if an office has no window in the door, the door should remain open during counseling sessions or private meetings; the bathrooms should not be isolated or far removed from classroom/play areas; consider using hall monitors; sign in/out procedures can be helpful, especially for younger children (age 10 or younger); and other aspects of safety should be considered as well to minimize the risk of serious injury when accidents occur.

✓ **Communicate regularly with parents.**

Provide advance notice and full information/disclosure about events and activities, with written permission forms and information on who will be supervising and working with the children and youth; give information to families about the church’s policy and procedures for preventing child abuse; encourage parents to communicate with someone in authority about any concerns, fears or worries about their children and/or a volunteer or staff person; know the church’s families; be prepared for how to handle sensitive and confidential matters with families and concerned church members.

✓ **Maintain adequate liability insurance coverage.**

The coverage must apply to all of the different activities of the church, at and away from church premises, and the church should work with a knowledgeable insurance agent who knows the needs of a church; remember, too, that the least expensive insurance may have significant gaps in coverage. The church should understand what coverage they have for sexual misconduct.

✓ **Be prepared for the worst at all times.**

“This is our church; it won’t happen here” is a naive viewpoint that can create an environment and opportunities for accidents and abuse to happen – while prevention steps are crucial, also be prepared for the worst, and never make assumptions about what might or might not happen in a church; this also means being prepared with a plan for responding immediately to allegations of abuse, including state reporting obligations.

✓ **Always remember that this is a Church!**

Church is a sanctuary, and churches make a commitment to protect children each and every time a child is baptized; churches should be role models in the community for the time and attention given to the care of children and youth.

Additional Reading and Resource Material: [Child Abuse Prevention Primer for Your Organization and Staff Screening Tool Kit](#), by John Patterson, with Charles Tremper and Pam Rypkema, Nonprofit Risk Management Center, 202-785-3891; [Selecting & Screening Church Workers](#), by James F. Cobble, Jr. and Richard R. Hammar, Christian Ministry Resources, 1-800-222-1840

GCFA is not engaged in legal, accounting, or other professional service. If legal advice or other expert assistance is needed, the services of a competent professional advisor should be sought. This checklist is not intended to and does not establish a standard of care for churches or church organizations. Every church and church organization makes its own decisions and determines what is best for it, and this checklist is intended only to provide information that may be helpful.

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