

Tips for Evaluating and Enforcing Safety Standards

Recently, many courageous advocates coming forward to share their stories of surviving abuse within church and para-church settings. These stories are individually appalling, and the sheer number of them are horrific. Having served on staff at four congregations of varying sizes across three states and in various para-church ministries, I have personal experience creating, evaluating, and enforcing standards for ensuring child safety. **The following tips are not comprehensive and should not be taken as a set of safety guidelines.** Instead, they address commonly overlooked or excused situations that enable opportunities for predators to groom or abuse children. Use this tool to evaluate a comprehensive set of standards adapted for your ministry setting.

Remember, standards are written so there is an objective measure for evaluating safety and conduct- once a pastor or children's ministries director bends the rules for a situation, that leader then becomes the arbiter rather than the rules. Decide on a set of safety standards and stick to them.

1. Churches (whole church communities, not just staff or parents) should assume that predators are coming through the doors on a Sunday. Hopefully they're wrong, but build the policies with this assumption. Staff should write and enforce the policies with the assumption that at some point they will take the witness stand in court to testify about how the church took measures to prevent and report abuse. Pray it doesn't happen, but assume it could.
2. Every adult volunteer with children should be background checked and go through child abuse safety training before they are with children. A congregant cannot "just step in", even if they have a child in the class, even if it's last minute. This could mean a class cannot open on a Sunday or a midweek ministry has to revamp its plans last-minute. Don't let inconvenience or unpopular decisions change the standards. Program directors should not be pressured to make unsafe decisions.
3. Churches should designate one or two Sundays a year where they distribute written copies of a summary of their safety procedure. Put it in the bulletin. The most senior leader of the congregation should make a verbal announcement- from the pulpit- that the church takes children's safety seriously and ask the whole congregation to read the safety standards and partner together to enforce them. This deters predators and educates congregants.
4. Parents need to remember that not everyone who comes through the church doors is automatically safe. Kids need to be monitored before and after services- staying in public areas under parental supervision. The number of closets, corners, and other "good hiding spots" in most churches is alarming. Physically walk around your building and take notes of places that are largely hidden and unsecured during ministry times- supply closets, coat closets, corners of church kitchens, empty classrooms, office space mostly utilized mid-week, etc.
5. Child safety guidelines should be posted publicly near children's areas and available in written form for parents and visitors. A permanent folder hanging in the children's area is a great way to accommodate this. Print it on colored paper and hand it to parents dropping off their children for the first time, and pass it out once or twice a year at child pick-up.
6. Every minor volunteering in children's ministry is still a minor and should not be left alone with one adult as the "second volunteer". Even if they babysit; even if they're highly competent. A minor cannot be responsible for reporting abuse, and it puts teenagers in a vulnerable place where they themselves could be victims.
7. Minors (teenagers) volunteering should be trained in appropriate interactions with children and be held to it strictly. They're the highest rate of inappropriate behavior/abuse. This means addressing piggy-back rides, lap-sitting and tickling; teach appropriate forms of affection and play.

8. Married couples should not serve alone together in a classroom. They need a third adult present. They're simply not appropriate accountability because they are too likely to give each other the benefit of the doubt (and can't be required to testify against each other if something happened).
9. Remember that predators don't fit a single profile. They can be men or women, young or old. Do not rely on your "gut feeling" to make decisions.
10. Report anything suspicious such as push-back to a policy or subtle inappropriate behavior to church or ministry leadership. Document the conversation in writing, and send a copy to the ministry leader. Report abuse or allegations of abuse directly to the police.