

CHILD/YOUTH PROTECTION CHECKLIST SUMMARY

Developed by the Virginia Conference

Contact the Office of Children's Ministries and Discipleship at 1-800-768-6040 x138

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, 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., hand washing, 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 hail 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.