

CHILD ABUSE/MOLESTATION

Lawsuits against churches are very common today. Lawsuits involving acts of child abuse in the church are frequently in the news.

Sex offenders often **prey on churches** and often seek to work with minors (all persons under eighteen (18) years of age). Always have **more than one unrelated adult worker** at the same time with minors.

Churches are **uniquely vulnerable** to sexual misconduct and abuse charges because of:

1. **Trust** — Churches tend to be trusting and unsuspecting institutions. Even when questions are raised about a worker's conduct, church leaders may ignore the evidence rather than question the worker's character or motives.
2. **Lack of Screening** — Some churches do nothing to "screen" youth or children's workers. Complete strangers may be accepted to work with children without any investigation.
3. **Opportunity** — Churches provide ample opportunity for unsupervised, close, personal contact between adults and children. This risk increases dramatically for overnight activities.
4. **Access** — Molesters are often attracted to an institution in which they have immediate access to potential victims in an atmosphere of complete trust, such as the church.
5. **Need** — Most churches struggle to get adequate help for children's and youth ministries. Securing workers can be a never-ending task. However, the personnel committee or age division director **must adhere** to the policies of the church regarding employees or volunteers.

Procedures should be established to prevent, as much as possible, any physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse of minors (hereinafter used for babies, children and/or youth **under eighteen (18) years of age**). Such procedures should apply to **all paid staff members and volunteers** who relate to minors.

The procedures should address at least five areas, namely: worker **selection, worker supervision, and security of preschool age children, reporting obligations, symptoms of abuse.**

Managing Worker Selection

All paid employees of the church (including clergy) and volunteers should undergo a thorough screening process before they are permitted to work with minors. Unwillingness to assist in the screening process or unfavorable information discovered during the process are grounds to deny employment or not utilizing the volunteer. Areas of discussion should include Christian experience and church membership, places of previous employment or service, and references. The court has not determined what constitutes an adequate background check. Questions concerning abuse as a child and any criminal records should be asked with discretion.

Never simply ask publicly for volunteers to serve as workers, as sex offenders may use that opportunity to be near minors. Enlist only those you **know well** (and have properly screened) to serve in this capacity. Refer to Illustrations D and E for more information.

The **screening procedure** should involve four (4) different steps as follows:

1. An employment application form should be **required** for all paid employees and volunteers showing previous work references and church references.
2. This form should be reviewed by the senior pastor and/or his designee prior to submitting it to the personnel committee for further study and review. Following general approval by

the personnel committee, the church and work references should be **contacted** and **checked** on all paid employees and volunteers.

The nominating committee would select only those persons who have cleared the screening process.

Completion of a "criminal records" check authorization form should be used when considered appropriate.

Completion of a "credit check" authorization form should be used when considered appropriate.

3. A screening form should be used for those individuals who are **scheduled to work one hour a month or less** in the extended sessions.
4. A **personal interview** should be conducted by two (2) ordained staff members and/or the personnel committee for those individuals who will be dealing with minors in an **overnight event or in unsupervised activities**.

A good "**rule of thumb**" is to **never allow anyone** who has been a church member **less than a year** to work with children or youth. Certainly, exceptions to this policy may be considered with **wisdom and discretion**. Such as, the **written recommendation of a current ordained church staff member** based on prior personal knowledge of the volunteer and/or a **written recommendation from the prior church**. Your attorney is the best source of information regarding the laws concerning the church and sexual misconduct. It is important to seek an attorney familiar with these laws.

Any potential worker who **has been convicted of or pleaded guilty** to either child sexual or physical abuse should **not** be allowed to work in any capacity with minors.

Any potential worker who has been either sexually, emotionally or physically abused while a minor **should not** work with minors until **interviewed and approved** by the senior pastor and/or the personnel committee.

Managing Worker Supervision

The Two Adult Rule:

Two (2) or more unrelated adults should be present during any church educational or training activity on the church premises. The adult should be at least twenty-one (21) years old or more.

If one must leave the room for any reason, another person should be engaged to fill in the few minutes necessary.

This not only protects the children from potential abuse but also protects the adults from potential accusations. In addition, two related adults should not be allowed to work in the same classroom situation.

It is suggested that no teenagers (less than 15 years old) be used with bed babies.

As to one/two year olds, it is suggested that teenagers could assist as long as they are closely supervised by an adult. This means that the teenager should never be left alone without adult supervision at all times. The suggested ratio of adults to children in this age group is one to three. The very minimum would be to increase the ratio to four/five children.

Threes through kindergarten suggested ratio is one to four. The introduction of teens to this mix would then make the ratio one to five/six. Again the teenager should never be left alone with the children.

This same two-adult rule should be followed through classes involving youth to eighteen (18) years of age.