



PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

An Effective Safety System

By Gregory Love & Kimberlee Norris

A SYSTEM BASED ON GROOMING

This article is the second in a series designed to provide ministry leaders with information to better understand the risk of child sexual abuse and take necessary steps to protect children in ministry programs. The [prior article](#) provided analysis concerning sexual abuse risk using the metaphor of a *fence*. This article will develop that metaphor further.

When a ministry gathers children or youth, it becomes an attractive target for the sexual offender. Preferential offenders, abusers who prefer a child as a sexual partner, generally target a child within an *age range and gender of preference*.

In developing an effective safety system, churches or ministries are building a fence: a protective device meant to keep out an unwanted intruder. The type of fence built is driven by what we want to keep out. Accordingly, we must understand how an offender will pursue and harm children. Only through a better understanding of how our children are coming under attack can we understand the type of fence to build. Understanding the ‘grooming process’ of the preferential offender is the key. When we understand the behavior of the offender, we can design and construct effective barriers.

Critical Concepts

We cannot recognize the preferential offender visually; we must recognize the risk behaviorally – *the grooming process*. Because the preferential offender often looks like you and me, visual profiles provide no benefit. The grooming process of the preferential offender involves two significant efforts: *grooming the child* and *grooming the gatekeepers*.

The targeted child is groomed for inappropriate sexual interaction, while *gatekeepers* (parents, ministry leaders, co-workers) are groomed into a belief that the offender is a helpful, responsible and trustworthy individual. The effort aimed at gatekeepers is necessary, as all abusers are working to facilitate *trusted time alone* with a targeted child.

The Grooming Process

Validated by decades of academic studies, the ‘grooming process’ of the abuser is *known* and *recognizable*. The grooming process includes the following steps, with some variation depending on the age of child, gender of child and particular program.

- Gaining access to children within an *age and gender of preference*;
- Selecting a specific child (or children);
- Introducing nudity and sexual touch;
- Keeping the child quiet and the abuse *secret*.

AN EFFECTIVE SAFETY SYSTEM

The purpose of this article is not to simply list elements of an appropriate safety system; rather to provide analysis of the risk and how the risk relates to specific safety system elements. An understanding of the risk drives preventative efforts.

The Elements of a Safety System

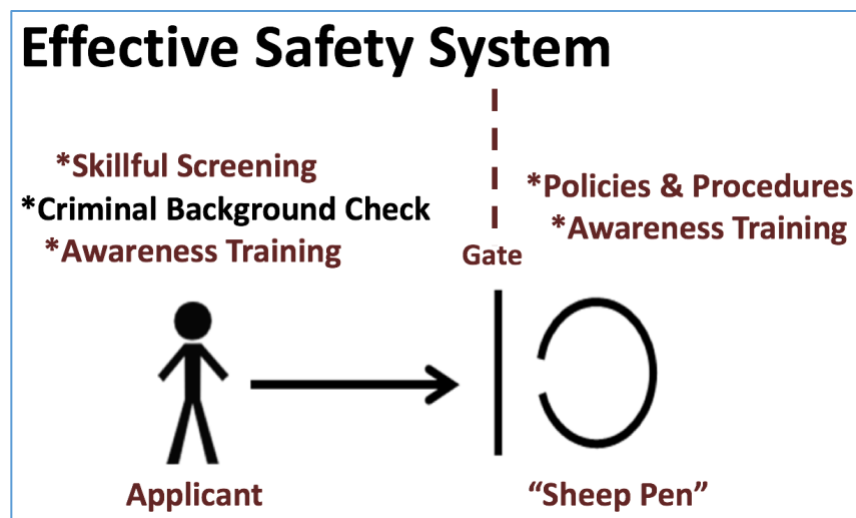
An Effective Safety System must employ the following elements:

- Sexual Abuse Awareness Training
- Skillful Screening (and training)
- Appropriate Criminal Background Check
- Tailored Policies & Procedures
- Systems for Monitoring and Oversight

Each of these elements play a role in a system; no one element solves the problem.

The preferential offender is a wolf who will deceive and manipulate to gain access to the sheep pen with the intention of doing great harm. In every church, there should be a gate through which anyone desiring access to sheep must pass. There must be controls in place to identify those with wolf-like qualities prior to passing through the sheep pen gate. Within the sheep pen, there must be preventative protocols in place to ensure that *grooming behaviors* are clearly identified, addressed in policies, recognized by workers and reported to ministry leaders.

Some elements of an effective safety system occur prior to entering the sheep pen, while other elements function within the sheep pen. To better understand an effective safety system, the following diagram is helpful.



Sexual Abuse Awareness Training

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training is the foundation of the safety system, because we cannot address a risk we do not understand. At the core of an effective safety system is this reality: what we believe shapes what we DO. Sexual Abuse Awareness Training changes what we believe. *Prevention starts with awareness.*

Awareness Training equips staff members and volunteers with a better understanding of abuser characteristics, the abuser's *grooming process* and *common grooming behaviors*. Awareness Training equips ministry workers with 'eyes to see' such that they may recognize abuser characteristics and behaviors.

Critical training topics include:

- Facts and misconceptions
- Common abuser characteristics
- The abuser's 'grooming process'
- Common grooming behaviors
- Peer-to-peer abuse
- Short and long-term impacts of abuse
- Reporting requirements

Further, what we believe shapes what we SAY. When staff members and volunteers are trained to understand grooming behaviors, all are better equipped to receive and report allegations and suspicions of abuse, both internally and to appropriate civil authorities.

Skillful Screening

The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Screening is the process by which ministry leaders gather information about an applicant's past behavior to best develop expectations regarding future behavior. An effective screening process typically includes the following elements: application, reference checks, criminal background check and an interview.

Commonly, ministries screen applicants for fitness for purpose – gathering information about an applicant's past behavior to determine whether the applicant has the skills, abilities and education to fill a particular role. For example, if a school desires to hire a Greek teacher, it is important to gather information to determine whether the applicant has mastered Greek and can effectively teach it. In this example, the school's purpose for screening was related to fitness for purpose (teaching Greek), *not child safety*.

Screening for child safety requires the gathering of information concerning an applicant's past behavior to determine whether the applicant has 'wolf-like qualities'. Where child safety is concerned, an effective screening process includes questions designed to elicit high-risk indicators of the preferential offender (male and female).

Every applicant – paid or unpaid – should be screened before that applicant may enter the sheep pen, gaining access to children. The goal: *keep the wolf out of the sheep pen*-- recognizing wolf-like qualities prior to granting access to children.

Tragically, many ministries are not screening effectively; many churches are not screening *at all*. Because the screening element of an effective safety system is complex, it will be handled in greater detail in the next article.

Criminal Background Check

Most ministries require criminal background checks. For many ministries, background checks are the sole effort to screen for child safety. For many, this is the sole ‘screening’ effort because ministry leaders lack any real understanding of the realities of the criminal justice system and known *limitations* of criminal background checks.

Consider this statistic:

Less than 10% of sexual abusers will encounter the criminal justice system, ever.

Given this reality, if a ministry’s background check system is working *perfectly* (which is unlikely), more than 90% of individuals who have sexually abused children have no past criminal record ... *and know it*. Making a reasonable effort to access past criminal history has become a standard of care, but background checks cannot serve as a stand-alone safety effort.

Background checks *can* be a helpful tool when used effectively. For each staff member or volunteer, the depth of criminal background check should be determined by the extent of direct contact with children. In addition, background checks should be periodically refreshed.

To become informed consumers, ministry leaders have much to learn about criminal background checks. A subsequent article will discuss criminal background checks in greater detail, providing information about often overlooked high-risk indicators revealed by the background check process: plea-down offenses, stair-step offenses, grooming offenses, and more.

Background checks are necessary, but cannot be a ministry’s sole effort to prevent child sexual abuse.

Tailored Policies & Procedures

A Policies and Procedures document is the written expression of what is and is not permissible behavior in the sheep pen. Effective policies are shaped around an understanding of the abuser’s *grooming process, abuser characteristics* and *common grooming behaviors*.

Ministry policies should be tailored to the particular program and population served. While *common grooming behaviors* exist universally, the grooming process will vary depending on the age and gender of child, and the type of program. Because grooming will unfold differently in a Student Ministry than in a Mom’s Day Out, policy provisions will vary.

Through Awareness Training, staff members and volunteers can be trained to better understand the *purpose* of policies, therefore serving more effectively within policy boundaries, and recognizing problematic behaviors *before* inappropriate sexual interaction occurs. As well, when policy ‘bright lines’ are clearly communicated – *this is appropriate, this is NOT* – staff members and volunteers are more likely to notice and communicate when someone steps *over* the ‘bright line’. Written policy should present clear guidelines concerning appropriate touch, talk, boundaries, social media, bathroom use, one-to-one interaction, overnight stays and reporting requirements.

Systems for Monitoring and Oversight

Child sexual abuse is an enormous issue causing incredible harm to children.

For any safety system to remain effective, every ministry must incorporate systems for monitoring and oversight to ensure that *you DO what you SAY you do* in an ongoing manner.

To this end, a periodic review of safety system elements is necessary:
Does the system still fit the ministry?
Are adequate methods of accountability in place?
Is the ministry able to archive evidence of safety system compliance?

Leaders must evaluate new programs for child protection issues, monitor changes in reporting requirements, address ongoing need for policy updates, and include child protection compliance in employee performance evaluations. Periodic review ensures that child protection is not jeopardized by the departure of one or two key staff members or volunteers.

A system for monitoring and oversight provides the framework for the existence of an effective safety system and ensures the system's sustainability.

At MinistrySafe, a safety system is made sustainable through the use of an online Control Panel. To learn more about MinistrySafe's online Control Panel and Systems for Monitoring and Oversight, visit [MinistrySafe.com](https://www.ministrysafe.com).

CONCLUSION

Sexual abusers go to where the barriers are lowest or do not exist. Too often, the Church is where the barriers are lowest. Designing an effective system starts with understanding the behavior of the sexual abuser. When ministry leaders understand the risk presented by the preferential offender, an effective safety system can be put in place, with appropriate efforts on the front-side of the sheep pen gate and within the sheep pen.

Kimberlee Norris and Gregory Love are partners in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of Love & Norris [<https://www.lovenorris.com>] and founders of MinistrySafe [<https://www.ministrysafe.com>], providing child sexual abuse expertise to ministries worldwide. After representing victims of child sexual abuse for more than two decades, Love and Norris saw recurring, predictable patterns in predatory behavior. MinistrySafe grew out of their desire to place proactive tools into the hands of ministry professionals. Love and Norris teach the only graduate-level course on Preventing Sexual Abuse in Ministry as Visiting Faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary.

SEXUAL ABUSE AWARENESS TRAINING

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training is the foundation of any effort to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse. At the core of this training is a description of the molester's grooming process: the process used by an abuser to gain access to a child, prepare the child for inappropriate sexual interaction, then keep the child silent.

This training provides these elements of instruction:

- Facts vs. Misconceptions
- Abuser Characteristics
- Grooming Process
- Common Grooming Behaviors
- Peer-to-Peer Sexual Abuse
- Impact of Abuse
- Reporting Requirements

The abuser's *grooming process* is the focus —allowing child-serving workers to see risky behavior *before* an abuser has harmed a child.

Training Staff Members and Volunteers

We can't address a risk we don't understand. Sexual offenders have no *visual profile*; they look like everyone else. Instead, abusers are characterized by their *behavior*. Sexual Abuse Awareness Training equips staff members and volunteers with a better understanding of abuser characteristics, the abuser's *grooming process* and *common grooming behaviors*.

Critical for Policy Implementation

Nobody likes change if the *need* for change isn't understood.

Without effective training, staff members and volunteers will rarely embrace *change*, even in the form of well-crafted policies. Policies work best when ministry workers are trained to understand the *WHY* behind the policy, particularly if the policy is new.

Opt Out Opportunity

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training should be completed during the onboarding of any child-serving applicant. When a ministry requires training *before* the applicant has access to children, an applicant with wrong motives recognizes that all his or her future co-workers understand the grooming process, common grooming behaviors and the importance of reporting. All workers – paid or unpaid – are equipped to recognize the abuser's attempts to groom children for abuse, with eyes that see, ears that hear and mouths that speak. Awareness Training provides offenders with an opportunity to self-select OUT.

MinistrySafe Training

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training is the cornerstone element of the wide-ranging resources available online at MinistrySafe.com. At present, MinistrySafe's online Awareness Training is being used by over 25,000 churches, 20 denominations, 400 schools, 10 seminaries ... and growing daily. In 2019, MinistrySafe issued its 1,000,000th certificate of completion and continues to train over 35,000 people per month online.