MinistrySafe

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE RISK: WHAT SHOULD CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS BE DOING?

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Child sexual abuse, a reality in our society, is on the rise. Not surprisingly, sexual predators seek access to children in places where protective barriers are low. Today, schools present a prime target for abusers because many schools have few, if any, protective barriers in place. This article addresses the safety measures utilized by *proactive* schools to protect children from sexual abuse.

COMMON SCHOOL PRACTICES

Schools generally have a Faculty/Staff Handbook which addresses a variety of topics, such as medical leave and jury duty. The safety section, however, is commonly limited to fire drills, discipline, violence/weapons, security and first-aid protocols, with some handbooks including provisions related to abuse *reporting.* Unfortunately, the majority of school policies do not address *known facts and risk indicators* related to sexual abuse and sexual abusers.

Any meaningful attempt to address child sexual abuse risk must take these facts into account.

FACTS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND SEXUAL ABUSERS

Fact: Less than 10% of sex abusers will EVER encounter the criminal justice system.

Fact: 1 of 4 girls and 1 of 6 boys will be sexually abused before reaching 18.

Fact: 66% of molestation victims won't tell of abuse until adulthood, *if ever.*

Fact: 90% of child sexual abuse victims are abused by someone they know and trust.

Fact: Sexual abusers *groom* children AND gatekeepers prior to sexual behavior.

Fact: There is NO visual profile for a molester; most look like normal individuals.

When asked what systems are in place to protect students from sexual abuse in school programs, most schools respond: we run Background Checks. Unfortunately, this stand-alone effort is inadequate; consider the following.

BACKGROUND CHECKS

Are Background Checks effective as a 'stand-alone' system?

Background Checks are important—in fact, necessary. But Background Checks should never be utilized as a stand-alone system.

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

As astonishing as it may seem, the great majority of sexual predators will **never** be criminally prosecuted. *Why?* Two out of three kids don't tell, and statutes of limitation pass, making criminal prosecution impossible, regardless of evidence of wrongdoing.

With this fact in mind, schools must grasp that over 90% of sexual abusers *have no criminal record to check*. Many larger schools run Background Checks on employees and volunteers, (and they should). In most cases, the school receives a report which states 'no records found.' Too often, schools interpret this report as: 'This person is not a molester and is safe to work with children,' *This is an error*. Instead, the report simply indicates that the individual checked has no criminal record in the *specific* databases checked by the Background Check company hired by the school.

abusers with no criminal background (more than 90%)

abusers with a criminal background (less than 10%)

Background Checks: More Misconceptions

Many school administrators make two incorrect assumptions. First, '*all those who engage in criminal behavior have criminal records*'. Secondly, '*these criminal records*

are stored in one large information pool-perfectly and immediately accessible by companies offering to perform Background Checks'—usually at an inexpensive cost.[1]

To the contrary, those who engage in criminal behavior - especially sexual abusers - often have no arrest or conviction records because they have not encountered the criminal justice system.[2] Criminal records are NOT stored in one computerized and easily accessible repository. In the United States, each county in every state has a system for law enforcement and criminal prosecution. Some systems are sophisticated, others are not. Because sexual abuse crimes are primarily prosecuted at the county level[3], the majority of criminal records related to child sexual abuse are filed in facilities that house county records.

Computerized background services search databases - collections of criminal data compiled from counties that sell their criminal records information, or make it available to background check service entities. In a perfect world, all counties would employ a computerized, uniform system of record-keeping, which is immediately and constantly updated (without error) and available to background check services. In reality, no such uniform, error-free system exists, nor will it exist any time soon.[4] Many counties continue to keep criminal records typed (or handwritten!) 4x6 index cards. Some counties have no system at all. [5]

School administrators should know what they are buying, and understand the terms used when purchasing a Background Check. For example, some entities sell a 'multi-jurisdictional search (sometimes called 'national' or 'nationwide' databases). No such database, created or administered by 'national' criminal authorities, exists. Instead, a 'national' search is relying on a patchwork of local (county) record sources. This is not to say such a search has no value; it does. Simply put, the user must understand its degree of reliability, given the source. Despite its comprehensive tone, the 'multi-jurisdictional' search is not a silver bullet for the school.

It is outside the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive description of circumstances which give rise to incomplete or corrupted county source records and databases. Here are a few examples of challenges to source reliability:

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[1] Many entities rely on free background check services (i.e. PublicData.com, county and state departments of public safety).

[2] A 2008 study conducted by Imperative Information Group found significant gaps in the Texas DPS database of criminal records; the study describes reasons for the gaps and the many breakdowns inherent in reporting systems, data collection and search capabilities (study can be accessed at www.imperetiveinfo.com).

[3] Occasionally, sexual abuse crimes are prosecuted as a federal offense. This occurs, for example, when a defendant crosses a state line in the commission of a crime against a child. Accordingly, a 'federal search' generally fails to yield information related sexual abuse charges becuase they are non-federal offenses. Child pornography, on the other hand, is usually prosecuted as a federal offense.

[4] The Adam Walsh Child Protection And Safety Act of 2006 was signed into law by President George W. Bush on a large system. The attempt to 'nationalize' a criminal database does not account for or address the inherent weaknesses in the underlying state system being compiled.

[5] Many Indian reservations, for example, are not required to keep criminal data.

- Poor data entry (errors in spelling, dates or birth)
- No data entry (input is never completed, or deferred adjudication end input process)
- Data retained for a limited time, and
- Handwritten or typed data is not input into a computerized (searchable) system.

Again, undertaking a Background Check is necessary, but not a stand-alone safety system. Schools must understand the strengths, weaknesses and types of Background Checks, and the appropriate depth of Background Checks related to a staff member or volunteer's position or responsibilities. In addition, school users should periodically renew or refresh a Background Check.

WHAT SCHOOLS <u>SHOULD</u> DO

In developing a plan to protect children from sexual abuse, schools must find and apply accurate information concerning sexual abuse and sexual abusers. The facts listed at the start of this chapter provide a good starting point. A sexual abuse safety plan should include the following measures:

1. Sexual Abuse Awareness Training for staff members and volunteers
2. Skillful Screening of staff members and volunteers
3. Appropriate Background Checks
4. Tailored Policies & Procedures
5. Monitoring and Oversight

These measures make up an effective Safety System for the school. Each element has value - but ineffective standing alone. Each element of the System has a separate function and particular purpose.

Metaphorically speaking, the school's task is to protect the sheep (children) in its care. Utilizing this metaphor, the following visual tool is helpful.
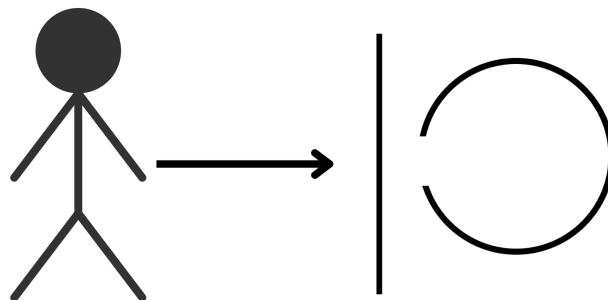
The arrow depicts an applicant entering a school program involving children. The gate represents protective measures meant to determine whether an applicant should work with children in school programs. (These measures address the risk of sexual abuse, and other risk factors as well.) Three Safety System elements are designed to keep

inappropriate applicants *out of the sheep pen*: Skillful Screening, Background Checks and various policy statements. Other elements of the Safety System are designed to protect the sheep from those *already in the sheep pen* (*which may include other sheep - Peer-to-Peer abuse*) Sexual Abuse Awareness Training, Policies and Procedures, and Monitoring and Oversight. Sexual Abuse Awareness Training provides a foundation for both efforts allowing inappropriate applicants to *opt out* of school programs while providing Awareness Training to co-employees and volunteers *already involved in school programs*. Each element of the Safety System should apply to staff members and volunteers.

SEXUAL ABUSE AWARENESS TRAINING

No right-thinking adult would willingly allow a child to be groomed for abuse and sexual assault. Unfortunately, most adults misunderstand the problem. Due to misconceptions and inaccurate information, well-meaning adults fail to recognize grooming behavior and miss warning signs of abuse.

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training for staff members and volunteers creates the foundation of an effective Safety System. This Training introduces key facts about sexual abuse to employees and volunteers who are responsible for supervising children and keeping them safe. When staff members and volunteers understand the *basic characteristics* of a sexual abuser, *the process used by an abuser* to choose and prepare a child for abuse (grooming), and *key indicators of sexual abuse,* they are better equipped to recognize and prevent abuse in school programs. After all, keeping children safe is not solely the responsibility of the administrative staff or principal, but the responsibility of <u>everyone</u> involved in school programs.

Fact: Sexual molesters 'groom' children and gatekeepers before sexual behavior.

Fact: There is NO visual profile of a molester.

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training provides staff members and volunteers with accurate information about predatory behavior. Molesters groom children *and* gatekeepers prior to sexual behavior, working diligently to appear trustworthy, responsible and helpful. Who are 'gatekeepers'? A gatekeeper is anyone responsible for the safety of a child (i.e. staff members, faculty, coaches, volunteers). Molesters must groom the surrounding gatekeepers in order to gain access to a targeted child. Proper Training helps disabuse school staff members of the notion that a 'helpful' person is harmless.[6]

Another key training component addresses misconceptions concerning 'what a sexual predator *looks like*.' Sexual molesters have no visual profile. We are often shocked when a well-respected community member is charged with sexual crimes involving a minor because they look and seem *normal.* Sexual abusers come from all socio-economic demographics, can be married or unmarried, and have no specific *look.*

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[6] When a sexual abuser is exposed, the initial reaction by the community is shock and disbelief - usually because the abuser has convinced his/her peers and colleagues that he/she is helpful, kind and trustworthy.

Effective training equips staff members and volunteers to recognize abuser characteristics, behaviors and patterns. As well, Training instructs employees and volunteers regarding the short and long term effects of sexual abuse and mandatory reporting requirements.[7]

SKILLFUL SCREENING OF STAFF MEMBERS AND VOLUNTEERS

An applicant with inappropriate sexual motives carries with him or her various indicators and life patterns that help identify him or her as one who may not be appropriate in children and youth programming. All hiring personnel should be well-versed in these indicators.

Skillful Screening provides an effective method to evaluate a candidate's past behavior because *the best indicator of future behavior is past behavior.* Interviewers should be provided with information and tools to recognize high-risk responses and high-risk indicators in applications, reference forms, or interviews. Risk indicators might disqualify an applicant for service of employment, or may simply prompt follow-up questions to rule out risk. Skillful Screening Training allows hiring personnel to assess whether a prospective employee or volunteer is a high-risk for children's programming. Schools must embrace the concept that **working with children is a privilege, not a right**.

Effective screening measures act to deter or prevent a molester from having access to children through education programs. Together with the appropriate Background Checks, *effective screening* can encourage a sexual predator to 'self-select out' of children's programming. Put differently, Background Checks and effective screening are designed to 'keep the wolf out of the sheep pin.'

APPROPRIATE BACKGROUND CHECKS

An appropriate Background Check, coupled with Skillful Screening, can be critical in preventing an abuser from assuming the school's mantle of authority as a trusted employee or volunteer. For each staff member or volunteer, the depth of a Background Check should be determined by the extent of direct contact with children and the degree of authority within a school activity or program. For a higher-level employee, or a volunteer staff member with extensive contact with young people, a more comprehensive Background Check may be advisable. A comprehensive check may include an actual county-by-county record search.

Despite its weaknesses as a 'stand-alone' safety measure, an appropriate Background Check is necessary for an effective Safety System. Any individual evaluating Background Checks on a school's behalf should complete Awareness Training and

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[7] A church's Policies & Procedures should also provide instructions to staff members and volunteers regarding reporting responsibilities to supervisory staff and to the authorities.

Skillful Screening Training such that he or she understands *which* criminal charges may be red flags or risk indicators of sexual misconduct.[8]

Are Background Checks at my school renewed or refreshed?

Though less than 10% of sexual abusers will *ever* encounter the criminal justice system, an effective Safety System must include periodic Background Check renewals. An abuser may have no criminal history at the time of hire/volunteer, but be arrested or convicted for subsequent criminal activity or a 'red flag' offense.[9] Every school should require periodic renewal or updating of Background Checks.

TAILORED POLICIES & PROCEDURES

Every school should operate within carefully tailored Policies and Procedures that balance the *mission* of the school with the *risk* inherent in children's programming. For every program or activity, inherent risk must be evaluated and addressed in policies and procedures that reduce the likelihood of harm to children. At the same time, policy manuals can't look like *War and Peace,* or employees and volunteers will not read them.

Policies and Procedures cobbled together from various sources are rarely effective, because 'patchwork' policies are seldom tailored to a school's activities, physical facilities, and special and specific programming risks. Areas which should be included in policy manuals include transportation policies, discipline practices, no 'one-on-one' interaction with children or students, appropriate physical affection, appropriate verbal boundaries, program ratios/adequate supervision, bathroom policies, two-adult rule (where appropriate), inappropriate physical contact (wrestling, wedgies, pinching), provision of alcohol and tobacco, possession of pornography, and functions that involve overnight stays.

The implementation of new or modified policies and procedures is far more effective following completion of Awareness Training. In general, people do not want to change-especially when change involves restriction, limitations or departure from 'what we normally do.' When staff members and volunteers understand the risks and impact of sexual abuse, they are more likely to embrace change and closely follow guidelines.

Tailored Policies and Procedures also speak to a would-be molester. Policy statements should clearly communicate that grooming behaviors will not be tolerated, but *will be* reported and acted upon. Tailored policies tell an abuser that 'grooming' behavior will not be misunderstood or ignored.

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[8] Some sexual abusers have criminal records that require sexual abuse registration; other 'red flag offenses; include indecent exposure, contributing to the delinquency of a minor (alcohol, drugs, pornography), sexual assault of an adult, possession of child pornography, invasion of privacy ('peeping tom').

[9] 'Red flag' offenses, at a minimum, include any sex-related offense, as well as those offenses listed in footnote 9, above.

MONITORING AND OVERSIGHT

Effective Monitoring and Oversight is imperative to the success of any Safety System. Checks and balances include monitoring for adequate supervision of activities and programs, unscheduled drop-ins on programming, and performance reviews which include Safety System compliance. In addition, an effective Safety System includes adequate record-keeping of compliance with training objectives, screening practices and Background Checks. As an added benefit, many insurance companies offer higher coverage limits and premium discounts for *verifiable* compliance with Safety System objectives. Safety Systems should be periodically evaluated to ensure compliance and effectiveness as school programs grow or change.

CONCLUSION

Sexual predators will gravitate to activities in organizations where fewer protective measures are in place. Schools should lead the way in promoting a protective culture that is easily seen, obvious to parents and offenders alike. When a school is unapologetic about protecting children from abuse, predators are encouraged to '*self-select out*' of education programs.

Every school has a vested interest in effectively training its staff members and volunteers to be aware of sexual abuse, recognizing and reporting grooming behaviors. Every school should implement Skillful Screening processes, recognizing risk indicators and life patterns indicative of risk.

Every school should expect all staff members and volunteers to understand and comply with Policies and Procedures designed to prevent abuse. And every school should skillfully monitor the behavior of staff members, volunteers and children.

When a pro-active school communicates effectively, sexual offenders will opt out of school programming, because '*it's just too hard here*.'

MinistrySafe provides tools assisting school administrators with each Safety System element. MinistrySafe members have access to Sexual Abuse Awareness Training, Skillful Screening Training and forms, State-of-the-art Background Checks, Sample School Policies and Procedures and a customized Control Panel that tracks Training completion, Background Checks, applications, interviews and references.

The MinistrySafe's Control Panel is shown below:

MinistrySafe — Organization ID: 6320 — Laura

Manage Users

Add user +

| Search | Active Users ▾ | Filter By Tags ▾ | By Role ▾ | By Type ▾ | 10 ▾ |

User Information				Awareness Training		Background Check		Screening			
Name	Tags	Role	EMP / VOL	Status	Renewal	Status	Renewal	Application	References	Interview	Policies
Abraham, Emily	North Campus, Preschool	trainee	VOL	👤		🚫		✓	✓		✓
Alex, Jane	South Campus	trainee	EMP	✓	11/05/2025	✓✓	11/09/2025	✓	✓	✓	
Anderson, Brittany	Preschool, South Campus	trainee	EMP	✓	11/11/2023	✓✓	01/09/2023	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barton, Amy	Camp 2023	supervisor	EMP	👤		🕐		✓			
Craig, Robert	Nursery	trainee	VOL	✓	10/21/2023	✓✓	05/09/2023	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dawson, Shalee	Camp 2023	trainee	VOL	✓	03/06/2023	✓✓	03/03/2023	✓	✓		
Freeman, Jill	Camp 2023, Nursery	trainee	VOL	✓	07/12/2023	🚫		✓			
Hastings, Laura	Preschool	ssa	EMP	✓	02/15/2024	✓✓	03/14/2024	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jarrett, Chris		trainee	VOL	✓	06/06/2023	✓✓	06/09/2023	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jennings, Lisa	Camp 2022, Preschool	trainee	EMP	✓	09/28/2023			✓		✓	

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Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris are partners at the law firm of Love & Norris, a national litigation practice representing victims of child sexual abuse. In addition, the firm provides legal consultation to ministries concerning legal issues related to child sexual abuse.

Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris serve as directors of MinistrySafe, a consulting organization designed to help churches, schools and Christian ministries understand and address the risk of child sexual abuse. For additional information concerning Safety Systems and tools designed for churches and schools, see www.MinistrySafe.com.