

Church Executive

HELPING LEADERS BECOME BETTER STEWARDS.

A photograph of four children running happily across a grassy field. From left to right: a girl in a white dress with stars, a girl in a yellow shirt, a boy in a red shirt, and a girl in a pink dress. The background is a bright, sunlit area with trees.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN MINISTRY CONTEXTS UNDERSTANDING THE RISK

Presented by:

Love & Norris & MinistrySafe



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

IN MINISTRY CONTEXTS

Understanding the risk

By Gregory Love & Kimberlee Norris

Child sexual abuse risk in ministry contexts cannot be ignored. This statement implies child protection *has* been ignored by some ministries in the past.

For most ministries, however, the challenge is *ignorance of the problem*. Most ministries are doing *something*, but not doing the *right thing*.

Church Executive and MinistrySafe have teamed up to provide ministry leaders with analysis and guidance such that they can understand the risk, properly prepare to meet the risk, and effectively address the risk with preventive protocols. As sexual abuse attorneys, and the founders and directors of MinistrySafe, we have more than 50 years combined legal experience addressing child sexual abuse issues impacting ministries and secular organizations across North America.

Prevention starts with understanding: how does child sexual abuse risk unfold in ministry contexts?

We cannot reduce a risk we do not understand

Prevention starts with understanding.

What does your church do to protect children from sexual abuse?

This question jump-starts any discussion about child sexual abuse risk and preparation.

The majority of ministry leaders typically reference these practices or efforts:

- Criminal background checks
- Child check-in system
- Policies
- Two adult rule
- Six-month member rule
- Video cameras
- Police officer on site (uniformed or plain clothes)

This list, however, is minimally helpful in protecting children from the dozens of abusers featured in media reports across the nation within the past five years. Yet the Church continues to double down on the 'list' as if it were the solution to the problem. Doing so will result in negative headlines for the next 25 years. As civil trial attorneys who deal with standards of care, we stand over scores of 'train wrecks' in Christ-based



environments. In nearly all cases, the ministry in the media cross-hairs employed a variation of the practices listed previously; the problem is that these do not address the *real* risk.

Building the right fence

In any discussion related to child sexual abuse prevention, the concept of a *fence* is a good starting point.

The type of fence built is driven by what it is meant to be kept out. To protect a garden from your neighbor's livestock, for example, the fence might involve metal stakes and barbed wire.

While a barbed wire fence effectively addresses one risk (livestock), it's absolutely worthless related to another (rabbits).

In general, *churches are building the wrong fence*. Ministries are building perfectly functional barbed wire fences, and the rabbits are destroying our gardens. Compounding the problem, churches construct the wrong fence *and believe the problem is solved*.

To effectively address the risk of child sexual abuse, church leaders must understand offender behavior, then *build the right fence*.

Understanding the risk

A church's efforts must correspond to actual risk. To properly protect children in ministry programs, church leaders must understand how the risk unfolds.

Livestock vs. rabbits

To better understand this risk, ministry leaders must be aware of two types of sexual abusers, the *abduction offender* (livestock) and *preferential offender* (rabbit).

Abduction offender

The abduction offender often has little or no relationship to the child or the child's family; this person simply sees an opportunity to snatch a child and does so. The public sees the story on the news, and the outcome is generally awful. Considering the broad waterfront of child sexual abuse risk, the abduction offender only represents 4-5% of the problem.

Preferential offender

The preferential offender might be male or female and may have an age-appropriate partner, but *prefers* a child as a sexual partner. Not just any child; typically, a child of a particular gender and age range. The preferential offender has no visual profile — he or she looks like you and me. Jerry Sandusky and Larry Nassar, for example, are preferential offenders; neither was identified as a risk by a visual profile. The preferential offender represents over 90% of the problem. This explains a commonly accepted statistic: that 90% of children are victimized by someone they know and trust.

The preferential offender *is* the problem in ministry contexts, but ministry protocols related to child sexual abuse risk are designed to protect children from the abduction offender — the *snatch and grab* scenarios. Because the preferential offender has no visual profile, he or she must be recognized by *behavior*, known as the grooming process.

“Sadly, most ministries continue to build the wrong fence. For the sake of our children, it’s time to get to work building the right fence.”

The grooming process

The grooming process of the preferential offender involves two significant efforts: *grooming the child* and *grooming the gatekeepers*. It includes patterns of identifiable behavior, including:

- 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 to ensure secrecy

Grooming the child

Grooming of the child will vary depending on the child’s age, gender and situation. When the targeted child is a teen male, common grooming behaviors will include pornography, alcohol, marijuana and horseplay. If the targeted child is a teen girl, common grooming behaviors will include texting, social media communication and sexual discussion. If the targeted child is under 8, common grooming behaviors will include tickling and forms of playful touch, gravitating toward places of isolation.

Grooming the gatekeeper

A gatekeeper is anyone responsible for protecting a child: parents, teachers, youth

workers, coaches or babysitters. The preferential offender works hard to appear helpful, trustworthy and responsible to disarm a child’s gatekeepers. Why? Molesters are looking for *trusted time alone* to groom a child for sexual touch.

Both Sandusky and Nassar were effective at grooming children *and* gatekeepers. Neither had past criminal convictions, both would have passed a criminal background check, and neither had a visual profile. Conversely, if program leaders had understood the grooming process of the preferential offender, both Sandusky and Nassar would have been identified as a serious risk several years — and several victims — earlier.

What now?

For any church leader, the first step in addressing child sexual abuse risk is self-critical analysis. Ministry leaders must shake off the delusion that this is an insignificant issue or someone else’s problem, or that this risk is effectively addressed by criminal background checks and a child check-in system. Conservative studies indicate that less than 10% of sexual abusers will encounter the criminal justice system, *ever*. The child check-in system will not negate or identify the behaviors of the preferential offender. By clearly understanding the *actual risk*, ministry leaders are better prepared to protect children in their care.

The next article will explore the grooming process of the preferential offender, and describe an effective safety system addressing the risk of child sexual abuse in ministry programs — the foundational elements of *the right fence*.

Is there any good news in this? Yes. The offender’s grooming process is predictable — and what is predictable is *preventable*. **CE**

Next Article: CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN MINISTRY

The Grooming Process and an
Effective Safety System

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://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.

Why *‘the list’* fails

Criminal Background Checks — No Silver Bullet

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

More than 90% of abusers have no record to find; and they know it.

Further, *getting and understanding* criminal records that do exist continues to challenge ministry leaders.

Child Check-In Systems

The effectiveness of a child check-in system can only be evaluated when ministry leaders understand the difference between the abduction offender and the preferential offender. A ministry’s child check-in system might be effective related to the abduction offender, who constitutes 4-5% of the risk. Generally, a child check-in system is useless as it relates to the preferential offender — who represents over 90% of the risk.

Further, the child check-in system is completely ineffective in reducing the risk of peer-to-peer sexual abuse.

Policies & Procedures

Policies are what you *DO*, not what you *SAY* you do. Policies and procedures are the written expression of what *is* and *is not* appropriate behavior in a ministry program.

If a ministry leader does not understand the preferential offender, it is unlikely that he or she is familiar with the *grooming process* of the preferential offender.

To effectively address child sexual abuse risk, policies must clearly identify and prohibit grooming behaviors within the ministry program.