

Making a Difference:



CHILD ABUSE

Preventing and Dealing With

Child abuse is a global problem. In 2010, more than 3.3 million reports of child abuse were filed in the United States, involving nearly six million children.¹ It is estimated that 27 children under the age of 15 die from physical abuse or neglect in the U.S. every week!² The actual global child-abuse statistics are difficult to determine due to varying reporting measures, laws pertaining to child abuse, and cultural or social norms. However, the World Health Organization estimates that 40 million children below the age of 15 are abused each year.³

Recognizing the Forms of Child Abuse

Child abuse is generally committed by a person in a position of trust or author-

ity: a parent, family member, guardian, teacher, or caregiver. Less than 10 percent of incidents in the U.S. involve strangers. Child abuse occurs at every socioeconomic level, across all ethnic and cultural lines, within all religions and at all levels of education, and is seldom accidental.⁴ Typically, abuse fits into the following categories:⁵

- Neglect/maltreatment—failure to provide appropriately for a child’s welfare, nutritional needs, shelter, clothing, medical care, adequate supervision, or educational opportunities.
- Physical abuse—corporal punishment or physical injury inflicted due to the willful acts of another person.
- Sexual abuse—engaging a child in sexual activities that he or she cannot comprehend and that violate social norms, laws, and moral standards.
- Psychological maltreatment—behaviors that convey that a child is

worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, or only of value in meeting another person’s needs.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides a helpful fact-sheet that can help adults recognize key indicators of child abuse:⁶

- **In the child:** sudden changes in behavior or school performance; learning problems or difficulty in concentrating; anxiety that something bad will happen; lack of adult supervision; overly compliant and passive; withdrawal; coming to school early, staying late, and not wanting to go home.
- **In the parent or guardian:** lack of concern for the child; failure to seek help for the child’s physical or medical problems that have been brought to the parent or guardian’s attention; denial of, or blaming the child for, problems

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in school or home; asking teachers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves; seeing the child as evil, worthless, or burdensome; or demanding a performance level that the child cannot achieve.

- In the parent and child: rarely touching or looking at each other; viewing their relationship negatively; or a stated dislike for each other.

Child Sexual Abuse

While abuse in any form can severely affect the child's life and welfare, sexual abuse is perhaps the most devastating.

- Of all reported cases of sex abuse in the U.S. in 2010, child sexual abuse accounted for 9.2 percent.

- One in four girls and one in six boys under the age of 17 is sexually abused by an adult.

- The peak age for abuse is between 7 and 13.

- In more than 90 percent of cases, the victim knew the perpetrator in some way,⁷ but fewer than 10 percent reported the abuse.

- Only three percent of offenders are apprehended.

- In more than half the cases, adults knew about a crime and failed to report the situation to law-enforcement authorities.⁸

- Girls are more likely to be abused by family members, and boys by friends of the family.

Adventist Schools and Child Abuse

The Seventh-day Adventist Church operates the second-largest Christian school system in the world, with more than 7,800 schools and colleges in more than a hundred countries. Adventists are proud of their heritage of providing Christ-centered education, and many denominational employees are graduates of Adventist schools. Because of this, it is easy for us to live in a world of denial.

Adventist educators must be alert to the possibility that our students may be targets for abuse. We must take proac-

“Every child, whether male or female, is to be affirmed as a gift from God. The Bible condemns child sexual abuse in the strongest possible terms. It sees any attempt to confuse, blur, or denigrate personal, generational, or gender boundaries through sexually abusive behavior as an act of betrayal and a gross violation of personhood.”

tive measures to protect children from abusive situations and report suspected cases of child abuse in accordance with local laws. This is a difficult challenge, but it comes from Jesus Himself: “If you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Matthew 18:6, NLT).⁹

In 1997, the Seventh-day Adventist Church issued the following position statement addressing child sexual abuse:

“Child sexual abuse occurs when a person older or stronger than the child uses his or her power, authority, or position of trust to involve a child in sexual behavior or activity. . . . Sexual abusers may be men or women of any age, nationality, or socio-economic background. They are often men who are married with children, have respectable jobs, and may be regular churchgoers. It is common for offenders to strongly deny their abusive behavior, to refuse to see their actions as a problem, and to rationalize their behavior or place blame on something or someone else. While it is true that many abusers exhibit deeply rooted insecurities and low self-esteem, these problems should never be accepted as

an excuse for sexually abusing a child. Most authorities agree that the real issue in child sexual abuse is more related to a desire for power and control than for sex.

“Every child, whether male or female, is to be affirmed as a gift from God. The Bible condemns child sexual abuse in the strongest possible terms. It sees any attempt to confuse, blur, or denigrate personal, generational, or gender boundaries through sexually abusive behavior as an act of betrayal and a gross violation of personhood. It openly condemns abuses of power, authority, and responsibility because these strike at the very heart of the victims’ deepest feelings about themselves, others and God, and shatter their capacity to love and trust.”¹⁰

Children normally make their decision to accept Christ as their Savior and to be baptized at about age 9 to 12, and they are often led to that step by teachers, pastors, and other adults who mentor them in the essence of Christian faith and life. Is it any wonder, then, that early childhood is often the time boys and girls become victims of sex abuse by people they may have trusted and thus eventually may fall prey to Satan’s plot to separate them

from the church? Warns Ellen White: “Too much importance cannot be placed on the early training of children. The lessons that the child learns during the first seven years of life have more to do with forming his character than all it learns in future years.”¹¹

Protecting the Adventist Campus

Operating a large system of education from preschool to university level poses tremendous challenges in the area of preventing and dealing with child abuse and related liability claims. Every Adventist school administrator, therefore, must craft a child-abuse prevention plan. The first step is to identify potential areas where child abuse might occur on campus. Proactive assessment and planning to prevent child abuse requires that the school administration create policies that do the following:

- Ensure appropriate and adequate supervision at all times;
- Prevent situations where a student is alone with a teacher/other school personnel in order to lessen likelihood of inappropriate contact;
- Make it clear that inappropriate jokes, comments, and personal conduct with students will not be condoned or permitted;
- Instruct school employees to carefully avoid improper forms of touch when interacting with students;
- Have glass panels installed in all classroom areas, and keep them uncovered at all times;
- Minimize one-on-one out-of-school interactions with students by school personnel;
- Monitor and control the use of social media communication between school employees and students;
- Do not allow individual students to be transported alone in an employee's or volunteer's vehicle;
- Provide adequate supervision for off-campus school-sponsored trips;
- Ensure adequate lighting throughout the campus; and
- Conduct background checks on all employees and volunteers.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has published a very useful guide, *Preventing Child Sexual*

Abuse Within Youth-Serving Organizations, which includes a planning tool for child sexual-abuse prevention.¹² This document provides a comprehensive risk-assessment process that you can implement in your school. Once you complete the assessment, you will be better equipped to begin developing the appropriate risk-mitigation strategies, policies, codes of conduct, training, and safeguards to ensure a safe campus environment.

What About Higher Education Risks?

The 2011 child-abuse scandal that rocked the campus of Pennsylvania State University should serve as a warning that all schools, regardless of size or grade level, are vulnerable to child abuse and its related claims. Many times, administrators of institutions of higher education seem oblivious to the risk that child abuse may affect their institutions. The 267-page special report on the Penn State case points out: “The most saddening finding by the Special Investigative Counsel is the total and consistent disregard by the most senior leaders at Penn State for the safety and welfare of . . . child victims. . . . Four of the most powerful people at the [University] . . . failed to protect against a child sexual predator harming children for over a decade. . . . They exhibited a striking lack of empathy for [the] . . . victims by failing to inquire as to their safety and well-being.”¹³

Could the same type of situation arise at an Adventist college or university?

Higher education campuses are filled with numerous intersections between minors and adults. The 2012 report *Managing the Risks of Minors on Campus*, published by Arthur J. Gallagher & Company, identified numerous activities that involve children on campus beyond the more obvious exposures in academic areas like education, child development, social work, psychology, and nursing. The report encourages all colleges and universities to assess carefully their interaction

points with students: “Many institutions that inventory their youth serving programs find more programs than they expected. . . . One university thought it had two programs that involved minors. When a full risk assessment was done, it discovered it actually had 166.”¹⁴ Here are just a few times when children could be at risk of abuse, and adults could be threatened by false allegations: traveling on school buses or in private vehicles, student teaching, work experience, academy visitation days, music camps, invitational athletic events or clinics, mission trips, research studies, housing for school field trips, community outreach programs, summer education programs or day camps, and daycare for students’ or employees’ children, just to name a few. The school has a responsibility to prevent abuse of children and youth by other students as well as by employees/volunteers and strangers on campus.

Counting the Costs

The estimated annual cost of child abuse and neglect in the United States for 2008 was \$124 billion for legal defense and indemnity costs.¹⁵ The impact has been felt across faith-based communities. From 1950 through the mid 2000's, Catholic institutions reported they had paid out in excess of \$2 billion, and the resulting financial disruption has caused the bankruptcy of six dioceses in the United States.¹⁶

The Adventist community is not immune from abuse-related costs. Adventist Risk Management (ARM) administers the claims for denominational organizations in North America. In the past two decades (1992-2011), more than 400 claims were made in the United States, involving more than 525 child victims. The incurred cost to the church, in the U.S. alone, has exceeded \$30 million. ARM routinely handles 15 to 20 reported claims in the U.S. each year.¹⁷

The number of victims and the dollars spent represent only the “numerical” data. The true cost of child abuse and its impact on individuals involved, as well as the church and its institu-

tions, including schools, goes far beyond monetary costs. For the victims, there is the loss of innocence, the emotional pain and/or physical injury that last a lifetime. For the school, allegations of child abuse create a community perception that the organization has failed to protect vulnerable children, which can result in a loss of respect as well as decreased enrollment. The church and the school administration therefore need to address these areas:

- Harm caused to the lives of individuals impacted by the abuse—victims and their family members, as well as the alleged perpetrators and their family members;
- Effect on the personal reputation of those affected;
- Risks and fallout connected with false allegations;
- Loss of confidence in school administrators and school board leadership in handling incidents;
- Potential enrollment loss (both current and future students);
- Potential loss of financial support from alumni or other donors;
- Negative and time-consuming impact on the school's mission of providing Christian education to the faith community; and
- Reaching out to victims and their families to communicate sincere commitment and to help restore their spiritual and emotional well-being.

Putting Integrity First

Each school has a responsibility to protect its employees, volunteers, and students from charges of abuse. Since such allegations may be real or false, all reported incidents must be thoroughly investigated. Alleged perpetrators should not be allowed to return to the campus until the inquiry is completed. Incidents should be reported promptly to legal authorities, the conference office of education, and the school's insurance carrier. Engaging legal counsel with experience in handling child-abuse cases may provide valuable assistance in understanding the law as well as guidance with the school's internal investigation. Remember: The personal life and professional reputation of the

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accused and the future of the victim are at stake.

When child abuse is alleged, this raises immediate concern about how the school should handle the situation. People tend to hope that if they simply ignore the situation, it will go away or be handled by someone else. However, the allegations concerning child abuse are very serious and must be handled promptly and appropriately, in accordance with the local child-abuse reporting laws. Ignorance about what to do is not an excuse.

In 18 U.S. states, every adult is considered a mandated reporter for suspected incidents of child abuse. Most jurisdictions provide some form of immunity from liability for persons who in good faith report possible child abuse or neglect. Immunity applies as long as the report is not made maliciously or without reasonable grounds.¹⁸ A review of the local child-abuse reporting laws and training on how teachers and school administrators must respond should be included in mandatory in-service seminars each school year for all employees and volunteers. Schools should invite representatives from local law-enforcement agencies to participate in this training.

In most jurisdictions, educators and clergy are considered mandated reporters of suspected cases of child abuse. Failure to report can result in

criminal actions against the teacher or pastor. Monsignor William Lynn, the secretary for the clergy in the Philadelphia Archdiocese recommending priest assignments and investigating abuse complaints, was convicted in June 2012 on charges of child endangerment and sentenced to three to six years in prison. "I think this is going to send a very strong signal to every bishop and everybody who worked for a bishop that if they don't do the right thing, they may go to jail," said Reverend Thomas Reese, at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University.¹⁹

For a variety of reasons, child abuse is often not reported. The abused child may feel threatened that disclosure will cause further physical harm either to himself or herself or to another person. The child may be afraid of what others will think if abuse is revealed, or ashamed and feel he or she is to blame. Many children would rather continue in the abusive situation than go through the trauma of reporting the abuse, which could result in their losing the security of home and love of parents. "For this reason [feeling traumatized], most abused children decide not to tell anyone. Those who do disclose an abusive experience are displaying courage despite their fears and feelings."²⁰

But what about the potential for false allegations? Those do occur, and they can have a devastating impact on

the lives of everyone involved. Nevertheless, it is not the administrator's responsibility to determine whether a child is lying or embellishing the facts. Instead, he or she has the legal duty to report suspected abuse to authorities and let the child-protection agencies determine the truthfulness of the allegations.

When a child has the courage to confide his or her story to a trusted adult, this becomes a critical intersection in the child's life—a sign that he or she is reaching out for help. Listed below are key elements for protecting children and for crafting a respectful response.²¹

1. If you suspect that the child is in danger, immediately call the police.
2. Keep control of your emotions. Reaffirm the child and offer reassurance that whatever happened, it was not his or her fault.
3. Stay calm and listen carefully; take notes if possible.
4. Believe the child; expressing disbelief may limit full disclosure.
5. Do not interrogate the child; just get the essential facts and then notify the parents or guardian, if appropriate.
6. Show support and provide encouragement that the child is doing the right thing.
7. Do not promise to keep the information secret. Tell the child what will follow next; provide reassurance that you are there to provide support.
8. Promptly file an official report with law enforcement or a child-protective service in accordance with reporting laws in your jurisdiction. Record the name of the person you spoke with as well as the date and time of the report. Keep a copy of the report on file.
9. Cooperate with the investigation.

Oftentimes, the educators and pastors fear that the mere allegation of child abuse will destroy the school or church. This is never the truth. With thousands of pages written on the Penn State child abuse story, one lesson is clear: "Protecting the institution should always come second to doing what is

right. Ultimately, that will be what protects the organization."²²

The Use of Corporal Punishment

The use of corporal punishment can create a high liability risk for educators in Adventist schools. At least 106 countries do not prohibit the use of corporal punishment in schools.²³ In the United States, 20 states still allow some form of corporal punishment. Corpo-

ral punishment is defined under human-rights laws as "any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort." There is no comprehensive definition under U.S. state or federal law.²⁴ Corporal punishment in schools has been banned in Canada, most of Europe, Japan, South Africa and New Zealand.²⁵

Publications

- **Child Maltreatment 2010**, © 2011 – U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#can
- **Choose With Care: Building Child Safe Organisations**, © 2001 – ECPAT Australia, South Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: <http://www.ecpat.org>
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- **The Season of Hope, A Risk Management Guide for Youth-Serving Organizations**, © 2002 – Nonprofit Risk Management Center, Leesburg, Virginia: <http://www.nonprofitrisk.org>

Helpful Websites

- Adventist Risk Management, Inc. – <http://www.adventistrisk.org/Prevention/ChildProtection.aspx>
- Canadian Center for Child Protection – <http://www.protectchildren.ca>
- Childhelp Centre – <http://www.childhelp.org>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway – U.S. Department of Health & Human Services: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/programs/types/sexualabuse.cfm>
- ECPAT Australia – <http://www.childwise.net>
- FaithTrust Institute – <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org>
- International Center for Assault Prevention – <http://www.internationalcap.org>
- Nonprofit Risk Management Center – <http://www.nonprofitrisk.org>
- Prevent Child Abuse, America – <http://www.preventchildabuse.org>
- Public Health Agency of Canada – <http://www.publichealth.gc.ca>
- Reducing the Risk – *Christianity Today*: <http://www.reducingtherisk.com>
- UNICEF – <http://www.unicef.org>

Educators may be held criminally liable for their actions if excessive physical force is used in disciplining students. School administrators should determine the legality of using corporal punishment within their country or local community. Adventist Risk Management supports a prohibition on the use of corporal punishment in church institutions and believes that other non-physical means of student discipline should be used. This will minimize any potential liability against the school employee or volunteer, and protect children from injury and emotional trauma.

Creating a Child Abuse Awareness Culture

Creating a safe, abuse-free campus requires teamwork and proactive effort. School administrators must be willing to develop a “zero tolerance” policy when it comes to child abuse. This policy should be written and clearly communicated to every teacher, volunteer, student, and parent, as well as to school constituents. This message must be clearly communicated: *We place the safety of our students first!*

One of the emerging child-abuse trends is students physically and sexually abusing other students. Child-on-child abuse incidents can occur when children and teenagers are left unsupervised during school or church activities. These types of incidents often begin as bullying and escalate from name calling to more serious forms of physical or sexual abuse, including cyberbullying and rape.²⁶ Adventist Risk Management received six claims from schools and churches in the United States in 2010 alleging incidents of child-on-child sexual abuse. These types of incidents can result in negligent supervision liability lawsuits being brought against Adventist schools.

One of the key elements of a child-protection policy is a code of conduct for both adults and students. Child abusers, especially sex offenders, use specific strategies in identifying the children they will abuse. First, they win the child’s confidence and trust through a grooming process that may

take many months or even years, often even befriending the child’s family. They slowly violate the boundaries by making the child comfortable through playful acts. Corey Jewel Jensen, co-director of the Center for Behavioral Intervention in Beaverton, Oregon, says: “In addition to the tricks they use with children, they also know how to keep other adults from discovering their crimes or reporting them to the police. They say they present an image of ‘morality and respectfulness’ and they make people think ‘that I am not the kind of person who would do something like that’; they act ‘helpful and polite.’”²⁷

A well-developed code of conduct should succinctly and clearly articulate boundaries and behaviors as well as appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Clear definitions ensure that everyone knows the rules and the consequences for acting outside of the boundaries.²⁸ Having a clear code of conduct and strictly enforcing it protects children from abuse and adults from false allegations.

Background Checks

Most jurisdictions in the United States require teachers and school personnel to be fingerprinted and undergo a criminal background check before being issued licenses or credentials. School administrators should be sure all employees’ personnel files are up-to-date and in compliance with the policies of their conference and local state or county. School volunteers should also be screened. The conference may use a specific service provider or a law-enforcement agency to conduct criminal background checks for volunteers. Schools must follow the proper procedures in order to guard employees’ and volunteers’ privacy and to comply with disclosure laws, which can vary among jurisdictions.

Schools outside North America should consult their legal counsel or local law-enforcement agency to comply with the background screening re-

quirements in their jurisdiction. In areas with no specific regulations, school administrators should implement the following measures before allowing volunteers to interact with students: (1) checking the volunteer’s personal references; (2) requiring a two-adults-with-a-child rule at all times; and (3) requiring a six-month probationary/orientation period to observe the volunteer’s behavior, during which he or she receives training regarding appropriate conduct between adults and students.

Shielding the Vulnerable

The 2010 General Conference Session added significant new child-protection language to the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*. These protections include requirements for volunteer screening, criminal background checks, a two-adult-with-children rule, and a six-month waiting period before adults are placed in positions of leadership involving children.²⁹ In 2011, the North American Division adopted Working Policy FB 20, which requires all conferences and institutions to provide child-abuse prevention training and to conduct criminal background checks on all volunteers who work with children.³⁰ Schools in other parts of the world should consider implementing similar policies.

In order to provide resources to comply with these new policy mandates, the North American Division launched the “Shield the Vulnerable” child-protection program in the summer of 2012. This program provides dynamic interactive resources that can help minimize the risk of child abuse at churches and schools. The program is available to all conferences in the North American Division and provides a criminal background screening service and online child-abuse prevention training for employees, volunteers, and students at a nominal cost.

To support the church’s child-protection initiative, Adventist Risk Management has developed a series of online resources via its Website, <http://www.adventistrisk.org>, which includes sample policy statements, video

clips, and PowerPoint presentations, which can be customized for use by the local church or school.

The Seven Campaign

Recognizing that child abuse is a global issue, Adventist Risk Management has developed the Seven Campaign, which aims to create a grassroots movement intended to mobilize our 17 million church members to become proactive in child-abuse prevention. Online resources at <http://www.thesevencampaign.com> include a digital media kit with flyers, posters, talking points, video clips, and other items to help churches and schools develop their own child-abuse prevention program.

You Can Make a Difference

As an Adventist educator, you have the responsibility to create a Christ-centered school environment where students are loved and valued and can develop a sense of self-worth. Keeping students safe from the harm of child abuse is an important step toward that goal. ☞



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