

Preventing Child Abuse

Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches

Recommendations Concerning the Development of a Church Policy for Child Abuse Prevention and A Child Abuse Prevention Sample Policy

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(A document to encourage local churches to develop and implement a Child Abuse Prevention Policy. Please give this matter careful and prayerful consideration.)

PREAMBLE

Churches must exercise caution and diligence in the selection and supervision of persons involved with children's and youth ministries within their local congregations. This is necessary not only to protect the children and youth who have been entrusted to their care, but also to protect the witness and ministry of the local church.

Children are very vulnerable to the abuse of power and position. We must recognize that these conditions may exist within the context of church ministries. The sexual, physical or emotional abuse of children/youth in the church is a reality with which we must deal - it **can** happen in any church. No organization and no church is immune.

Churches need to understand that there are people who prey on children and they do not look any different than anyone else. There are also people who simply are not suited for work with children or youth who may respond to everyday situations inappropriately. In either case, the church has a responsibility to protect the children and youth to whom it ministers and to offer an environment that is consistent with the Word we are proclaiming.

As societal standards and expectations concerning the proper discipline of children change, those who work with children and youth need to understand their role, and the boundaries associated with that role, very clearly.

THE CHURCH AS A TARGET FOR PREDATORS

As other agencies and organizations who work with children and youth (such as Girl Guides and Boy Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, minor sports organizations, etc.) tighten up their screening policies, churches may unwittingly provide relatively easy access to children for paedophiles, those with sexual addictions, or others who would abuse children.

Because of a lack of intentional preventative policies, most churches are extremely vulnerable to any charge of abuse, whether it proves to be true or not.

WHY ARE CHURCHES VULNERABLE?

- **Trust:** Churches generally strive to provide an atmosphere of trust;
- **Lack of screening:** Often we allow individuals who have only very recently come to our churches and who we know very little about to be involved in children's or youth ministries. Because some churches struggle with getting adequate help and often experience high turnover in youth workers, they may not screen potential volunteers as carefully as they ought.
- **Opportunity:** Unsupervised nurseries, children's time, and youth events (especially overnight events), are all potential risk situations.

THE NEED FOR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Policies and procedures around child safety are vitally important - every reasonable effort must be made to make the church facilities and church programs places of safety for all children. It cannot be overstated that **clear policies and procedures will serve to protect not only the children and youth, but also those who work with them and the church as a whole.**

The devastation that follows an allegation of abuse is multi-layered, regardless of whether or not the allegation proves to be true. Clearly, **prevention** is the best defence! However, in the event that an abusive situation occurs - despite every effort to prevent it - the existence of, and adherence to clear policies and procedures will be an important factor in determining whether or not **due diligence** was exercised.

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION POLICIES

An effective child abuse prevention policy will aim to:

- protect children/youth from abuse;
- protect church staff and volunteer workers from any false allegations of abuse;
- inform the congregation about child abuse and its devastating consequences (thus providing possible avenues of service and ministry to victims);
- limit the extent of a church's legal risk and liability due to allegations of child abuse.

DEVELOPING A CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION POLICY IN YOUR CHURCH

We contend that every church needs a "Child Abuse Prevention Policy". We recommend that this policy be clear and concise and that, once adopted, it be USED. Again, may we remind you of the following key points:

- child abuse can happen in your church;
- one incident (or even one allegation of an incident), can devastate a child, a family and the church;
- the legal liabilities can be enormous;
- church leaders may be held liable; and
- a prevention program can reduce risk through relatively simple procedures.

This document is intended as a brief introduction to this issue. We recommend that the leadership of the church inform themselves and their congregations about child abuse. The video, "Reducing the Risk" is an excellent tool for this purpose.¹

Some churches have made viewing the "Reducing the Risk" Video, part of their screening policy - that is, everyone who wishes to work with children/youth must watch the video as part of his/her "application". Other elements which should be included in your church's Child Abuse Prevention Policy include:

- authorization for a police check (upon request) for anyone working with children/youth;^{(2) (3)}
- an interview with the pastor(s) and other church leaders;
- candidate must have been a church member for at least six months prior to working with children/youth;
- character references should be required and consulted;

- where possible, a team approach to children's/youth ministry is recommended so as to reduce the likelihood that an adult is working alone with children/youth - sensitivity to gender issues should also be considered;
- at no time should an individual worker be alone in a totally enclosed space with a child or youth (i.e. there should be a window or an open door permitting surveillance of the room);
- necessary adjustments should be made to the physical structures within which Children's/Youth ministries occur so as to reduce the risk of abuse - for example, all classrooms or other areas should have a window and/or the door should never be shut;
- the Church should have appropriate parental consent forms for use with the Children's/Youth ministries and such forms should be used diligently.

WHAT HAPPENS IF AN ALLEGATION IS MADE?

In the event that an allegation of the abuse of a child or youth is made, it **must** be reported **immediately** to the appropriate police authorities. If the allegation involves someone other than the pastor, the pastor should also be informed immediately and will most likely be involved in any subsequent investigation.⁽⁴⁾

Once an allegation of abuse has been made, meticulous care should be given in documenting all discussion and intervention. The pastor should either do this him/herself, or delegate this responsibility to someone who understands the importance of this task. It may also be necessary to contact the Church's insurance company and legal counsel.

It should be noted and stressed that, in Canada, individuals have both a **moral** and **legal obligation** to report any suspected incidents of child abuse. It is important to understand that this legal obligation is based on "reasonable grounds" and that the individual making the report in good faith will not be punished or held accountable for making a report, even if the conclusion is that no abuse occurred.

Any allegation of the abuse of a child or youth must be taken seriously. Once an allegation has been made, the onus is on the church (through its representatives) to respond appropriately to **all** parties involved: the accused, the alleged victim, and his or her family. This requires a lot of wisdom and sensitivity, and quite possibly, resources beyond the local church. The whole situation should be bathed in prayer, as the church navigates its way through very turbulent waters!

The unfortunate reality is that child abuse **does** happen and **has** happened for generations. It is a crime which has often gone undetected, yet has left tremendous hurt and pain in its wake. When an allegation of abuse is made, and it proves to be true, the church may be in a position to reach out to the victim and his or her family at a critical time. And, when dealing with abuse issues, one should be prepared for the possibility that one allegation may lead to others, perhaps extending back in time.

It should also be noted that, when an allegation is made, the person accused of the abuse should be suspended from ministry until the issue has been thoroughly investigated. Such a suspension, however, should be handled with dignity and sensitivity. Whether the allegation proves to be true or not, the church's response to both victim and accused should reflect the love of Christ.

It is critically important throughout this whole process, to **maintain confidentiality**. This should not be confused, however, with a "head in the sand" approach and the individuals involved will need to guard against either covering up or going along with a temptation to deny that such a thing could happen.

CONCLUSION

Every church and every ministry situation is unique in some respects. We realize that it may not be possible to have a "one size fits all" approach to developing a Child Abuse Prevention Policy for all churches within our Convention. However, we feel that this document will help you to understand the urgency of this issue, and will give you sufficient information to "get started".

Please do not delay. We are attaching a [Sample Policy for Child Abuse Prevention](#) which has been devised and adopted by one of the churches in our Convention.⁽⁵⁾ You will note that it is quite concise. Other churches, no doubt, have developed more extensive, detailed policies. You will need to decide what course of action is most appropriate for your church.

Finally, our prayer is that pastors and churches within our Convention will understand the need for a Prevention Policy and for a procedure to use in the event that an allegation is made. As a leader in your congregation, we urge you to move quickly to ensure that these policies and procedures are developed and that they are understood and applied.

ENDNOTES:

¹This resource may be obtained directly from www.reducingtherisk.com or through Pioneer Clubs Canada (1-800-465-5437).

² Procedures for conducting a Criminal Records Check may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. To find out the particulars for your area, simply call the local detachment of the RCMP or City Police.

³This could include a qualification that anyone working with children or youth must be bondable.

⁴If the pastor is accused of abusing a child or youth, the Area Minister should be informed and care should be taken that the procedures outlined in the Moral Failure Document be followed.

⁵We are indebted to Lambert's Cove United Baptist Church, the Social Action Commission of the Southwestern Association, the Alberta Area Executive of the Baptist Union of Western Canada, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, for the documents they have prepared and shared on this issue.

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