



ABUSE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE GUIDE





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"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." 1 PETER 5:2-3

Sexual abuse is widespread and permeates every aspect of our society. The CDC estimates that one out of three women and one out of four men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact. While these statistics may seem staggering, they only begin to tell the story. Actual incidences of sexual abuse far exceed the number of reported incidences because most survivors never report their abuse. And out of every 1000 incidents of sexual abuse, only 25 abusers ever face incarceration.

Churches are not immune to these statistics. But our church leadership is often overwhelmed by the scope of the problem and unsure how to implement best practices surrounding abuse prevention, abuse response, and survivor care. How can you develop policies to better protect your most vulnerable members? How can you screen and train your employees and volunteers to improve the safety and security of your ministries? What do you do when someone discloses abuse to your church leadership? How can church leaders shepherd victims through the devastation of abuse?

While the answers to these questions are complex, this guide is designed to provide general principles that can be a starting point for church leaders who are working to implement effective abuse prevention and response policies and practices.

(NOTE: The information contained in this guide is general in nature and is not intended to provide legal advice. Oklahoma Baptists encourages each church to consult with legal counsel when implementing local policies and practices.)

**PLEASE CONTACT OKLAHOMA BAPTISTS AT 1-833-942-3030 FOR ASSISTANCE
RELATED TO ABUSE PREVENTION, ABUSE RESPONSE, OR SURVIVOR CARE.**

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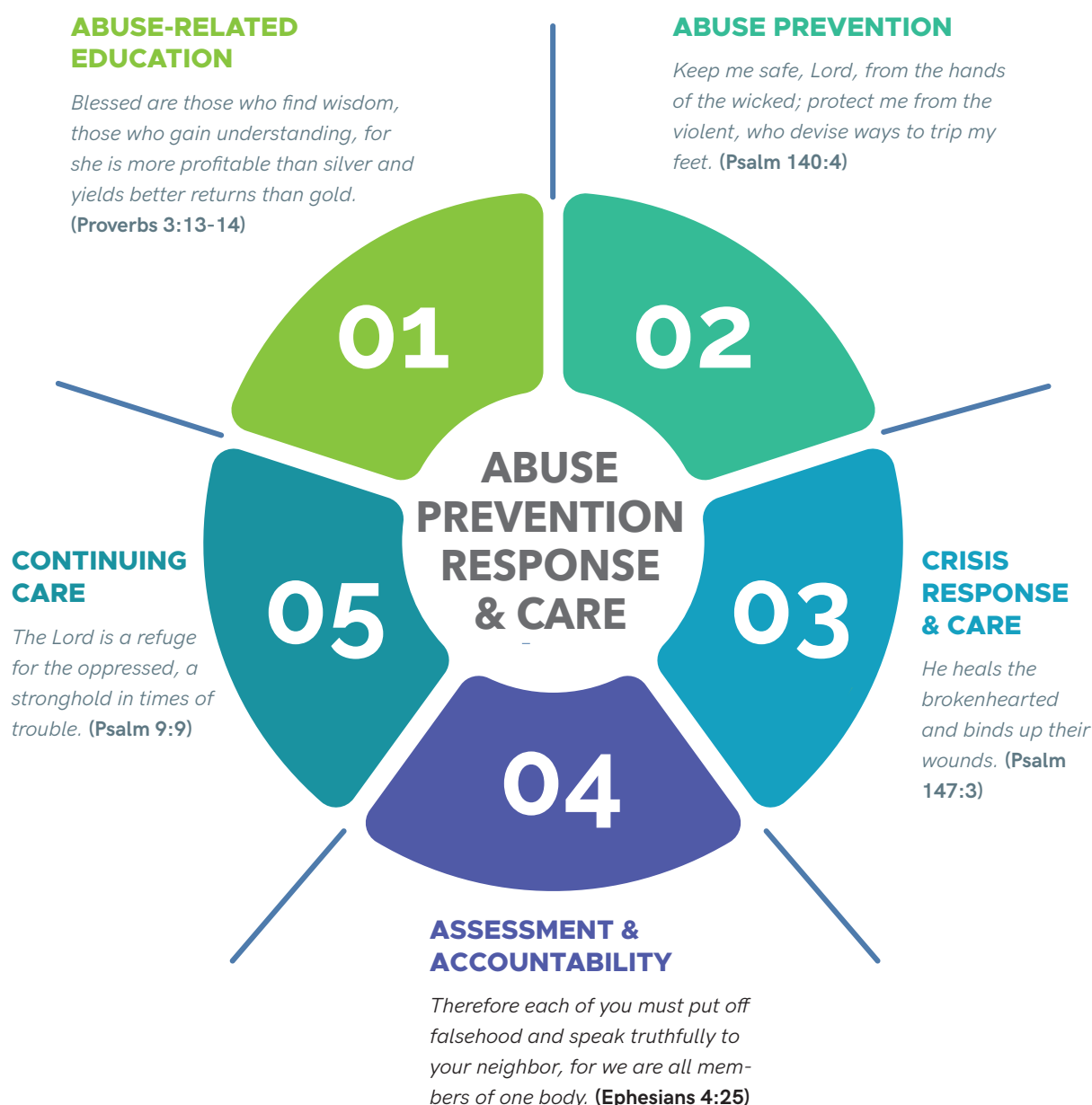


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To make our churches safe from abuse, we must be **proactive**. Developing policies and procedures ahead of time, training and educating staff and volunteers, as well as partnering with abuse experts will set your church up well to be a safe place for your community. It is up to the pastors and leaders of a church to lead this charge. Here are **Five Essential Action Steps** to begin to protect your church from predators who seek to prey on the vulnerable among you and to care for victims and survivors of abuse:

THE FIVE ESSENTIALS

"But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless." PSALM 10:14



STEP 1: PROVIDING EDUCATION ON RECOGNIZING AND PREVENTING ABUSE

"Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you."
PROVERBS 2:11

It is essential to prepare your church to help prevent abuse before it occurs. Below you will find resources to help educate your staff, leaders, and volunteers on the signs of abuse and how to protect against it, along with improving your church's safety policies and practices. The welcoming environment of most churches and the church's need to rely on volunteers to run its ministries makes many churches "soft targets" for predators. If employees, volunteers, and congregation members are not trained to recognize and prevent abuse, and if safety policies and practices are ignored, churches can be exploited by those seeking to abuse the vulnerable.

A great place to begin with our churches is to turn to Scripture and remember that caring for the vulnerable and exploited people is biblical ([SUPPLEMENT 07 - Church Response to Abuse is Biblical](#)).



A. TRAINING ALL STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

It is imperative that all church employees and volunteers be required to attend periodic training on how to prevent and identify sexual abuse ([SUPPLEMENT 08 - Helpful Definitions](#)). The safety and protection of the children and vulnerable members of your congregation are well worth every penny and hour devoted to equipping your staff and volunteers.



There are many excellent ministries and local agencies that are willing to train your employees and volunteers. Although in-person training is recommended, as it allows participants to personally engage and ask questions during the training, there are also many excellent online training resources.

Sample In-Person Training Programs

All of these programs have a fee for participation in the training.

- MinistrySafe: Oklahoma Baptists will reimburse the cost of an annual subscription to the MinistrySafe website thanks to donations from men's and women's ministries. For more information visit oklahomabaptists.org/ministrysafe.



- GRACE Safeguarding Initiative
- Darkness to Light's Stewards of Children Training
- Safe Hiring Solutions
- Zero Abuse Project's Keeping Faith: Empowering Faith Communities to Recognize and Respond to Child Abuse & Neglect Sample Online Training Resources

B. PROVIDE CONGREGATION-WIDE MANDATORY ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

In addition to training employees and volunteers, it is wise to equip every member of your congregation with tools to empower them in personal safety. This not only acts as a barrier for predators who look for soft targets or easy access to children, but it also allows for more people in the community who are watching out for any signs of grooming or child sexual abuse and who know the policies and procedures set in place by your church. Training allows staff and volunteers to hold others accountable to the policies and to speak up and act quickly if someone is in violation of a policy. Further, when senior leaders participate in the training, it provides a signal to the entire team that the topic is important and a priority for the ministry.

Many liability carriers require training on a one to three-year basis, but consistent training even in shorter modules will reinforce the church's priority of abuse prevention and child safety.

Abusers often mislead their victims by exploiting an imbalance of power to pressure their victims. Educating people, especially children, youth, and vulnerable persons, on personal safety diminishes an abuser's power and helps bring abuse into the light.

Personal safety training is not sex education. Instead, it teaches people what is appropriate and inappropriate touching and behavior, and when and how they should report inappropriate behavior if it occurs, no matter what the setting – church, home, school, or work. Additionally, it protects people from the spiritual harm that goes together with sexual abuse. When abusers seek to twist Scripture and theology to justify their abuse, congregation members will have a framework to recognize these lies for what they are.

There are many excellent ministries and local agencies that are willing to come in to train your congregation. Although in-person training is recommended, as it allows participants to personally engage and ask questions during the training, there are many excellent online training resources as well.

Sample Online Training Resources

Although we recommend in-person training for every church, these resources are helpful

for supplemental training or for staff and volunteers who are unable to attend an in-person training.

- **Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused:** This training curriculum of a handbook, an introductory video, and 12 lesson videos brings together top experts from various fields to help leaders understand and implement the best practices for handling the variety of abuse scenarios at church, a school, or a ministry.
- **Darkness to Light Online Training Modules:** D2L has six different online child abuse training modules. There is a fee but you can access them at any time.
- **Darkness to Light's Two Minutes for Prevention:** 25 videos that are two minutes each.
- **Darkness to Light documentaries:** These two documentaries provide a deeper understanding of the experience of child sexual abuse survivors in a way that is educational. They provide insight on child sexual abuse through the voices of the survivors.
- **2019 Caring Well Conference Videos:** The ERLC hosted a Caring Well Conference to provide teams with the opportunity to listen to survivors, learn from experts, and be equipped with an understanding of the full spectrum of abuse issues.
- **Freedom for the Captives 4-hour training:** This free training can be used by any church (they simply have to fill out a form on the FFTC website). A viewer can take the videos at their leisure, and each video has an online test so that a church can be sure a volunteer staff member working with students has completed the video and understood the basic information.
- **GRACE's Valued Conference Videos:** On the GRACE website, there are several videos from the Valued Conference addressing child abuse in faith communities and anyone can link to them and use them in training.
- **MinistrySafe:** Online Sexual Abuse Awareness training program
- **Sacred Spaces' Ten Things Every Faith Community Should Know:** On the website of Sacred Spaces, which works to address abuse within Jewish communities, there is a helpful video of Victor Vieth teaching at a synagogue providing basic child abuse information.
- **Sacred Spaces' Four Things Parents Should Know About Protecting Children:** Also on the Sacred Spaces website, there is a workshop by Dr. Shira Berkovits directed at parents and giving them some basic information about keeping their children safe.
- **Safe Hiring Solutions Training on Church Safety**
- **Safe Ministry Online Training Program**

C. BE AWARE OF GROOMING PRACTICES

It is difficult to believe someone you know would abuse a child or that it would happen at your church, but that mindset can be problematic. Churches and youth-serving organizations attract offenders. According to statistics available 90% of child sexual abuse victims know their abuser. One study also found that 93% of abusers self-identified as religious. Churches, specifically, are easy targets because there tends to be a high level of trust, as well as a great need for volunteers to ensure that programs for children and students operate smoothly. Churches should indeed be institutions with a high level of trust, but also with a high level of accountability.

Offenders can use relationships, positions of authority, and the trust of parents and organizations to groom children and those who care for them and to find opportunities to be isolated with their victims. This creates an environment where they can do harm and keep their victims compliant without using actual, physical force. Here are several grooming practices to watch for:

- Gifts or special attention given to a specific child
- Attempts to get a child alone
- Increased physical touch of a child
- Helping a child break rules
- Keeping secrets with a child
- Shaming or blaming a child
- Inappropriate communication with a child in person, by phone, or online

Learn more about the Profile of an Abuser ([SUPPLEMENT 10 - Profile of an Abuser](#)).



D. PROVIDE PERSONAL SAFETY TRAINING FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

Children's safety and protection should never rest on their shoulders. It is up to parents and adults in authority to protect them. However, it is wise to give children tools to empower them in their own safety. Educating children on personal safety diminishes an abuser's power to keep the abuse hidden and to use misleading power dynamics and theology to confuse and trap their victims.

Personal safety training is not sex education. It instead teaches a child what is appropriate and inappropriate touching and behavior, and when and how they should tell an adult if it occurs. This not only protects a child from abuse within the church or parachurch setting, but it also prepares children to understand when they may be experiencing abuse in other settings—including at home or school. Additionally, it protects children from the spiritual harm that goes hand-in-hand with sexual abuse. When abusers seek to twist Scripture and theology to justify their abuse, children will have a framework to recognize these lies for what they are.

When implementing child safety training, it is wise to seek professional help to conduct the training or recommend curriculum. Those who seek to groom children and their communities are often expert manipulators conditioning those around them to trust them and seeking to normalize behaviors that give them unsupervised access to their victims.

Another potential sign of grooming occurs when a volunteer or staff member constantly pushes the boundaries of your set policies. Is there someone in your congregation who continually needs to be reminded of safety rules and continually pushes past or ignores them?

The best defenses against grooming are adequate training and rigid, enforced policies. When you have volunteers who are on alert for the signs of grooming, and safety policies that are applied across the board to everyone in your ministry without exception, it will be much more difficult for a predator to gain the access they need to exploit a victim.

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STEP 2: ABUSE PREVENTION

*Keep me safe, Lord,
from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent,
who devise ways to trip my feet.*

PSALM 140:4

A. IMPLEMENT CHURCH-WIDE SAFETY POLICIES AND PRACTICES

All churches should formulate policies for employee and volunteer behavior that seeks to protect against potential abuse.

- Formulating good policies, requiring practices that match those policies, and responding well to violations of policies are all ways to protect and shepherd your congregation.
- Policies are often seen as a way to protect an organization from future liability. Sometimes churches avoid creating a written policy for fear that any deviation from the policy could be used against it. However, as God's people we should prioritize protecting the vulnerable over risk management; people over the organization.
- Liability should not be our motivation in creating or avoiding good safety policies and practices. We must change this mindset and understand that good policies are a way to love and care for people well by keeping them safe from harm.
- Making and following good policy for abuse prevention is God-honoring and a way to protect the individuals within your church, not just the church itself. And in protecting individuals, we are also protecting the church.

Safety Policies and Practices

When determining specific policies and practices, it is important to understand the church's increased responsibility when working with children, youth, and vulnerable populations. We recommend, at a minimum, that churches meet the [national standards](#) recommended by the CDC for youth-serving organizations.



In addition to CDC minimum standards, some additional safety policies and practices include:

- **Children Check In/Out Policy** – Ensure children are only allowed to leave with an approved adult.
- **Hall Monitor Policy** – Designate a volunteer to circulate throughout the building during service times to ensure that no adults are alone with a child, youth, or vulnerable persons.
- **Two-Deep Policy** – Require at least two adults to be present when a child, youth, or vulnerable person is present in all circumstances. Volunteers under the age of 18 do not count towards this rule because background checks cannot be efficiently conducted.
- **“Know Your Church” Policy** – A volunteer should be known to your church for a specified length of time and by a specified number of leaders in order to be eligible to volunteer. However, this rule should not be used as a substitute for adequate screening.
- **Respect for a Child’s Privacy Policy** – Ensure that children, youth, and vulnerable persons are guaranteed privacy when they are changing or going to the bathroom. This applies to giving them privacy from both adults and minors. Not only should privacy be maintained in the church setting, but also at off-site activities like retreats and church camps.
- **Open Doors Policy** – Have an open-doors policy at your church (unless the door is outfitted with a full window). This applies to all doors, not just doors in the children and youth areas. This prevents private areas that could easily be utilized for abuse while still allowing for confidential, but not secluded, conversations.
- **No Sexual Jokes or Behaviors Policy** – It is never appropriate to permit anyone to engage in sexual jokes, innuendo, or behaviors. This is just one more avenue that predators can use to groom and begin to break down the defenses of the community.
- **Transportation Policy** – It is important to establish a policy with respect to transportation to and from church events to prevent one-on-one settings and opportunities for predators to gain access to victims under the guise of being “helpful” and offering rides.
- **Online/Social Media Policy** – Social media policies should include all online and mobile platforms and should specifically address all forms of communication involving minors or vulnerable adults. These policies should be published, clearly communicated, and updated regularly as online and social media options change. For examples of several church policies, visit churchmarketinguniversity.com/social-media-policies-churches-ministries.



- **Overnight Policy** – The two-deep policy should be followed for all overnight activities. Additionally, chaperones should be provided for each gender and, if possible, children, youth, and vulnerable persons should not share a bed with an unrelated person.
- **Further church resources, including sample policies and procedures, can be found at www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/publications/guidelines-for-ministry-workers/guidelines-for-ministry-workers/.**



B. FORM A SAFETY TEAM TO DEVELOP, REVIEW, AND IMPLEMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

No matter the size of your church, it is helpful to put together a safety team to help develop, review, and implement safety policies and practices to prevent abuse.

- The team should include both male and female members.
- The team should be made up of both church employees and church members whose background could contribute expertise or a unique perspective to the area of abuse prevention. For example, consider members of your congregation with backgrounds in law enforcement, social work, counseling, law, or education.
- It would also be good to consider a church member who is an abuse survivor and is far enough along in their recovery for this team to be a healthy experience for them.
- All team members should go through a screening process and abuse training prior to serving on the team.

If your church needs advice in forming a safety team, or if your church does not have adequate resources to form a team, please contact the Oklahoma Baptists for assistance at 1-833-942-3030.

C. SCREEN ALL CHURCH EMPLOYEES AND VOLUNTEERS FOR POTENTIAL RISK

It is critical that churches have a methodical process for recruiting and screening employees and volunteers to ensure they are suitable for service and compatible with the church's safety policies and practices. Best practices around recruitment of employees and volunteers will lower the risk of abuse and increase safety for everyone within your church.

In today's climate, it is not sufficient to select employees and volunteers because they are "known" within the church or to skip screening steps in a hurried effort to quickly fill open positions. Instead, a formal screening process should be used for all employees

and volunteers, regardless of personal connections or length of church membership. Depending on the position, a formal screening process could include a combination of the following:

1. Written Application: A written application allows you to gain a lot of information about a person in an efficient manner. The application should contain the standard questions necessary to run a background check. See Written Application guidelines ([SUPPLEMENT 01 - Written Application Guidelines](#)).



2. Background Check: Background checks must be conducted on all employees and volunteers on a regular interval (for example, every two years). Background checks are critical, but they are never a guarantee that a person is safe. When choosing a background check provider, it is important to choose a provider that requires several points of information. See Background Check Guidelines ([SUPPLEMENT 02 - Background Check Guidelines](#)).



3. Reference Check: Reference checks are one of the most important tools when screening for new employees or selecting volunteers. However, references are not helpful unless you follow through and talk to the references. A reference check should always occur prior to hiring or volunteer service. See Reference Check Guidelines ([SUPPLEMENT 03 - Reference Check Guidelines](#)).



4. Interview: An interview is a time to be face-to-face with the potential employee or volunteer. Direct questions about prior jobs and volunteer service may be helpful. It is also a time for you to educate the applicant about your church, ministry areas, and safety policies and practices. You should ask the potential employee or volunteer if they have any questions or concerns about the safety policies and practices. The applicant's reaction may be a helpful indicator of the level of buy-in the applicant has regarding the safety policies and practices. See Interview Guidelines ([SUPPLEMENT 04 - Interview Guidelines](#)).



5. Internet Check and Social Media Review: In an era in which most people have an online and/or social media presence, it is helpful to review an applicant's social media history for concerning content that could indicate improper behavior. Red flags that are often found on social media are inappropriate pictures, suggestive or even explicit comments, and excessive commenting and interest in children or students by someone older. You may find some of these red flags, or you may come across other information that indicates this person is not a good fit for ministry service. See Internet Check and Social Media Review guidelines ([SUPPLEMENT 05 - Internet and Social Media Check Guidelines](#)).



D. CONCLUSION

While being thorough in our hiring of staff and volunteers for children's and youth ministries requires effort—it takes seriously the duty of the shepherd to protect the flock. It also heeds Jesus' words in **Matthew 18:6**, *"but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."*

Increasing our levels of awareness and consistency for abuse-related prevention will not only help us in hiring staff or volunteers but also in making it much more difficult for abusers to have access to children. Screening staff and volunteers, especially those who work with children, teenagers, and vulnerable adults should go beyond a simple background check. We should also require an application process, reference check, interview, internet and social media search, and orientation and training. Working with children, teenagers, or vulnerable adults is not a right. There may be potential volunteers who walk away and don't go through the process because of the added hassle, but we must do our very best to secure access to those who are susceptible to abuse and ensure their safety.

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STEP 3: CRISIS RESPONSE AND CARE

*He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.
PSALM 147:3*

Church leaders are often called to the difficult and sensitive task of shepherding victims through the devastation of abuse. This section of the guide seeks to aid church leadership among Oklahoma Baptists with a biblically-grounded, victim-centered approach to responding to disclosures of alleged sexual assault, abuse, and/or domestic violence.

Learn more about how to best practice Victim Advocacy ([SUPPLEMENT 12 – Guiding Principles of Victim Advocacy](#)).



AT ANY TIME, IF OUR OKLAHOMA BAPTISTS OFFICE CAN BE OF ANY ASSISTANCE IN THESE EFFORTS, PLEASE CONTACT US AT: (405) 942-3800.

A. SAFETY FIRST: REPORTING ABUSE WHEN THE VICTIM IS A CHILD, TEENAGER, OR VULNERABLE ADULT

While pastors have the responsibility to protect and ensure the safety of victims regardless of the age or capacity of the person being harmed, the responsibility they have to the civil authorities changes depending on the age of the victim. When the victim is a minor or vulnerable adult, the following guidelines are critical.



Learn more about a Profile of a Victim ([SUPPLEMENT 09 – Profile of a Victim](#)).

**IF YOU SUSPECT
ABUSE OR
NEGLECT, TAKE
THE FOLLOWING
ACTION:**

**Contact the Oklahoma
Child Abuse Hotline:
1-800-522-3511**

**If the child is in
imminent danger,
contact 911 or local
law enforcement.**

1. Reporting to Civil Authorities

Reporting to civil authorities is **mandated** in Oklahoma when the victim is a minor or vulnerable adult.

Who Must Report?

- Every staff member or church leader who has reason to believe, has observed, or has been told that a child or vulnerable adult has been abused is mandated by law to report suspected abuse.
- Failure to report is a misdemeanor.
- A person reporting in good faith will not be held criminally liable.
- The name of the person reporting can be kept confidential.

When to Report?

- A report should be made when there is reasonable cause to believe that a child or vulnerable adult has been abused, neglected, or is in danger of being abused.
- A report of suspected abuse is only a request for an investigation.
- These investigations are handled by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS).
- When determined that a crime may have been committed, OKDHS will work with law enforcement.

Facts About Reporting to OKDHS:

- Understand that it is the law to immediately report any allegation of abuse.
- It is not the church leader's responsibility to determine the validity of the claims.
- Church leaders often hesitate to report allegations of abuse for fears of damaging relationships with members of the congregation or making a false report. Neither of these concerns should prevent individuals from following the law and putting victims or potential victims first.
- When OKDHS is notified of the alleged abuse, the church leadership can immediately shift its focus to victim care and the safety of the church body.

2. Reporting to Oklahoma Baptists Abuse Liaison and Oklahoma Baptists Abuse Response Team

Abuse Liaison Responsibilities:

- Abuse liaison confirms that all reports of abuse have been made to OKDHS if applicable.
- Abuse liaison may assign members of the team to your victim's particular case according to her needs.
- Abuse liaison, in cooperation with designated Oklahoma Baptists leadership, will

determine if the alleged abuser meets the “credible criteria” for reporting to the SBC Alleged Abusers List.

- Abuse liaison works with the team to submit reports to the SBC “Ministry Check” website or to help churches, church staff, or victims submit their report.

EXAMPLE OF HOW TO RESPOND IF SOMEONE REPORTS AN ALLEGATION OR REPORT OF SEXUAL ABUSE AGAINST A MINOR:

Reply: “Thank you for having the courage and integrity to come forward with this information. A member of our Abuse Response Team will contact you and ask that you put what you have seen and/or heard in writing so we can take the proper pastoral care steps that are needed in addition to legal reports. You have done a good thing that allows us to ensure that the children in our care are safe and protected. Thank you.”

Action Step: Record the name, phone number, mailing address, and e-mail address of the person giving the report.

(From Brad Hambrick’s “Response Plan for Sexual Abuse Against a Minor in Church”)

Oklahoma Baptists Abuse Response Team:

- This team consists of both male and female church members from Oklahoma Baptist churches.
- These professionals have specific areas of expertise that will aid the church leadership in the care of the victim(s) and the family of victim(s).
- Recommended background and experience of those on the Team include at least one member from each of these areas: social work, early childhood education, legal profession, medical background.
- The Team members serve for a stated number of years and on a volunteer basis.
- The Team works with abuse liaison to submit reports to the SBC “Ministry Check” website or to help churches, church staff, or victims submit their report.
- NOTE: The members of a victim’s personalized team will not be employed by the church directly involved in the allegations nor should the members of the team attend the church noted in the allegations.

B. CARING FOR THE VICTIM(S) OF ABUSE IN THE MOMENT OF CRISIS

1. Receiving a Disclosure Regarding a Minor or Vulnerable Adult

- Affirm the victim’s choice to tell you about the abuse.

- Communicate that what has happened to the victim is not ok.
- Let the victim know you are required to share with someone who can help.
- Do not prod or investigate further.
- A report to OKDHS must be made in all cases involving a minor or vulnerable adult. If an able-bodied adult makes the disclosure, encourage them to file the report themselves or offer to do it together.
- A report can be made anonymously.
- Assure the adult or minor that it is not necessary to remember every detail or to provide proof or to file a report.

2. Select a Church Liaison for the Victim and Victim's Family

- Consistent and transparent communication between the church leadership, response team, the victim, the abuse liaison, and the authorities (if applicable) is essential.
- Church leadership should select a trustworthy member of their body, preferably one trained in victim advocacy and ministry safety, to be the primary contact for the victim and family of the victim.
- This designated individual needs to keep the victim informed of all the church leadership's actions prior to and during all steps of the process.
- This victim's liaison should not be a spokesperson for the victim, but a source of communication to and from the church leadership.
- The liaison will also communicate updates regarding the victim's progress, and how the victim's needs (both spiritual and practical) are being addressed.

3. When possible, meet with the alleged abuser and communicate clear rules and expectations for attendance, participation, and communication. When determining a policy for how to deal with an accused perpetrator, it is crucial to remember our first priority is always to the survivor of abuse and protecting potential victims. It is wise for us to receive all disclosures as credible until outside professionals demonstrate otherwise.

In order to protect survivors and the congregation, churches should consider immediate action to set strict and immediate boundaries when dealing with accusations of child sexual abuse, including:

- Restricting access to church property and events during the deliberative process. Our standard of access should be at least as strict as a school's standard would be during this period.
- Assigning the accused a church leader to act as their liaison to the church.
- Encouraging the accused to listen to sermons online and send prayer requests through their liaison (take church to them).
- It is wise to have law enforcement and other local experts help you make these types of decisions.

NOTE: When a victim of domestic violence has a Victim Protective Order (VPO) in place,

it is inappropriate for the alleged abuser to be at church or church-related events.

For more, see Meeting with the Alleged Abuser Guidelines ([SUPPLEMENT 11: Meeting with the Alleged Abuser](#)).



C. ASSESSING AND REPORTING ABUSE FOR ABLE-BODIED ADULT VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE OR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

While there are many types of domestic abuse including verbal, emotional, spiritual, and financial abuse, this guide deals primarily with illegal domestic abuse.

**Recommended Resource on how to handle other types of domestic abuse: Strickland, Darby A. Is It Abuse? (New Jersey: P&R Publishing: 2020).*

Adult victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence usually disclose to church leadership because of a pre-existing relationship, an expected level of trust with her or his church, and the need for support and care. We must be good stewards of this trust and responsibility.

Reporting Domestic Abuse:

- Reporting abuse to law enforcement is the able-bodied adult's choice.
- Allowing the able-bodied adult victim to choose to report or not restores the victim's voice.
- The decision to take legal action against an abuser is difficult and one that should be made under advisement from a counselor or abuse advocate who has experience with abuse cases.

The most dangerous time for a victim of abuse is when they are considering separation for safety and the time period just after they leave.

Regarding Disclosures of Sexual Abuse:

- Victims have most likely been threatened not to tell.
- Victims often experience great shame.
- Victims fear what they will have to endure if they tell someone.
- Victims fear that they won't be believed.

Disclosures of Domestic Violence:

- Victims often bring their story to a pastor or church leader they trust only after seeking counseling repeatedly, reading every marriage book, and praying fiercely for change and relief (see Strickland, Is it Abuse?, 105).
- Victims know something is terribly wrong but may fail to even recognize that the oppression they have experienced is abuse.
- Victims may even defend the abuser and blame themselves.

An Important Note about Counseling: Best practices are not to begin with marriage counseling but rather to individually help each person work on their own issues with separate counselors. In marriage counseling the healthier spouse will be self-reflective and accept personal responsibility for her personal failures. This becomes problematic when abusive behaviors are going on. Why? Because oftentimes the victim is blamed for the abuser acting out both by the abuser and sometimes by the counselor or pastor (see *Hambrick, Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 110-112).

For more detailed instructions about reporting domestic violence see Reporting Domestic Violence ([SUPPLEMENT 13: Reporting Domestic Violence](#)).



DO NOT Investigate the Allegations; Believe the Adult Victim:

- You may find it hard to imagine what the victim is alleging—especially if the alleged abuser’s public presentation is deceptive.
- The victim may even tell an incoherent story and use language that is not normally used in a church setting.
- Regardless of your underlying assumptions, a victim’s small disclosures should sound a warning signal.

Do not underestimate the danger facing a victim and a victim’s children. You must take the abuse seriously, taking care not to put anyone in the path of more danger.

After Disclosure, Avoid Unintended Revictimization of the Adult Victim:

- After an initial disclosure, church leadership should in no way investigate, question, or seek to find any other information from the victim.
- Church leadership should not request or require the victim to disclose to a different audience (elders, other church members, police, etc.). Again, it is the able-bodied adult victim’s choice whether or not to report.
- The victim has disclosed something very sensitive, and questioning can often infer disbelief or blame.

After a disclosure, a church leader should become a **comforter** and **protector**.

For more information, see Developing a Safety Plan for Domestic Violence Victims ([SUPPLEMENT 06: Domestic Violence Safety Plan](#)).



"A common and potentially lethal mistake is a church leader who decides to take matters into his or her own hands and investigate or confront the abuser. This is unwise and dangerous in so many ways—it puts the victim in great danger and may negatively impact a criminal investigation."

SAMANTHA KILPATRICK

D. FURTHER STEPS WHEN THE ACCUSED IS A PASTOR OR CHURCH LEADER

1. If the abuse is against a minor or vulnerable adult, the abuse is illegal. Report to OKDHS immediately. Contact the Oklahoma Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-522-3511.
2. All allegations of abuse to a minor or vulnerable adult should also be turned over to Oklahoma Baptists when a pastor, a church employee, or volunteer is accused.
 - a. Contact the Oklahoma Baptists Resources Line at 1-833-942-3030.
 - b. Oklahoma Baptists will discern if a report to Southern Baptists Convention is necessary with the help of the response team.
 - c. The most updated database of alleged abusers is public and can be found at sbcec.s3.amazonaws.com/FINAL+++List+of+Alleged+Abusers+-+SBC+REDACTED.pdf.
 - d. The SBC Hotline for reporting abuse by pastors, church employees, or church volunteers can be reached directly at: 202-864-5578 or SBChotline@guidepostsolutions.com.
3. Access resources provided by Oklahoma Baptists to help guide you in caring for the victim(s).
4. Put the minister, employee, or volunteer on a leave of absence. Though every person is "innocent until proven guilty" in our legal system, when reports of abuse are levied against a church leader, that person should be placed on a leave of absence until the legal process is complete.
5. Confiscate church technology from the alleged abuser immediately. Though private property cannot be confiscated, any technology owned by the church can be reclaimed. This step prevents altering or deleting any of the information relevant to the investigation. Law enforcement may want to review these items as well.

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT ONLY 3-9% OF ABUSE REPORTS ARE FALSE

"Bear in mind that false accusations are incredibly rare, and if you fail to heed this warning, you will not only do incredible damage to the survivor, but may in fact facilitate the abuse of others yet unharmed."

RACHEL DENHOLLANDER

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STEP 4: ONGOING RESPONSE ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

*"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body."
EPHESIANS 4:25*

Our churches should be taking the right steps to prevent abuse because it is the right thing to do for any organization; and following proper reporting procedures when abuse occurs because it is required by law. Churches have a biblical responsibility to go beyond the minimum required. Churches are called to be institutions of both a high level of trust and a high level of accountability.

"The church is called by God to tend his lambs. We are not called to protect our institutions nor do we protect the name of the God of truth by covering up sin and/or a crime. To do so is to 'protect' the cancer—and cancer kills. We honor God by caring for the wounded and by dragging sin to the light and calling it by its right name."

DIANE LANGBERG

Our final two steps take us past the immediate point of crisis and helps us develop habits of continual assessment and care for survivors of abuse. The primary goals of Step 4 are to ensure each of the following responsibilities are addressed on an ongoing basis:

- Maintaining safety and care of the victim(s) and family
- Ensuring the safety and care of the church body
- Communicating about the abuse inside and outside the church body

A. MAINTAINING SAFETY AND CARE OF THE VICTIM(S) AND FAMILY

- 1. Continue to consider and care for the needs of the survivor.** Each survivor has walked through a unique nightmare. Some may need ongoing medical or mental

health attention. Others may simply need a listening ear as they process what has happened to them. Some may need help discerning their legal options for reporting and holding their perpetrator accountable. Others may need to take further steps to protect them from a still dangerous situation.

NOTE: If you are talking with an adult who was abused as a child, a question that needs to be raised is, "Does your abuser have any access to minors or vulnerable adults at this time?"

- 2. Be diligent to protect the survivor's confidentiality.** Protecting the identity and story of the survivor is paramount. A survivor should always be consulted about who they want to be told about their abuse. Although it is important to communicate with the congregation when abuse occurs (see below), it is not necessary to identify the survivor or break their trust by divulging their identity. Include only those people who are necessary and have been welcomed by the survivor.

B. ENSURING THE SAFETY AND CARE OF THE CHURCH BODY

Abusers are master manipulators and are often able to abuse many victims before getting caught. Because of this, there may be other victims in your church body who have not reported their abuse. See Profile of an Abuser ([SUPPLEMENT 010 - Profile of an Abuser](#)).



On average, a child molester will have 50-100 victims before getting caught (Hambrick).

Action Steps to Take Within the Church

- Examine the list of roles held by the alleged abuser and determine if he or she had access to any other potential victims.
- If the alleged abuser had access to any other children, consider having members of the response team (with at least one church leader present) help facilitate communication with the parents of other children in the church.
- Give an overview of what happened without mentioning names.
- Give helpful ideas of how to talk to children.
- Explain the response plan of the church.
- If other abuse victims come forward, initiate safety planning and care alongside the response team.

- Inform OKDHS of both the plan to contact other victims and the results of these interviews.
- If there are any parachurch or other organizations that are affiliated with your church body (for example, Celebrate Recovery) make sure that the abuse allegations are also shared with them.

C. COMMUNICATING THE ABUSE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CHURCH BODY

Communication Protocols: Be Transparent with the Church Body

- As with any situation within an organization, it should be expected that some awareness will leak into the congregation and can cause unnecessary grief and added victimization.
- The church leadership should decide what needs to be communicated to the church body at large or possibly smaller segments of the church body.
- This information should be communicated to involved staff, the victim's family, and the alleged abuser's family at a minimum before anything is communicated with the full congregation.
- A statement should be prepared and made available to any involved staff, even if it is decided that no statement is made to the entire church body.
- The congregation should hear only truth while showing evidence of caring for the victim, the alleged perpetrator, and the congregation members (many who will have their own abuse histories).
- It may be prudent to prepare a media statement. An individual should be designated by the church leadership to speak on behalf of the church to the media. All staff should be advised to direct any media enquiry to the designated person.

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STEP 5: CONTINUING CARE FOR SURVIVORS AND OTHERS AFFECTED BY ABUSE

*THE LORD IS A REFUGE FOR THE OPPRESSED,
A STRONGHOLD IN TIMES OF TROUBLE.
PSALM 9:9*

Ministry to all who are affected by an abuse situation will be a long and challenging process. One of the hardest realities our churches must face is that survivors of sexual abuse and abuse-related trauma will likely carry wounds their entire lives. Thankfully, through Christ's love and strength, survivors can experience levels of comfort and healing that only God can give. This makes the responsibility of the church to offer care even more important. We must continue to walk alongside victims, survivors, and all who are affected by abuse for as long as God gives us opportunities.

"When a congregant shares the deep wound of abuse, she will need to hear that she is clean and covered because of the blood of Jesus (Heb 10:22). She will need to hear that Jesus was a man of sorrows and is acquainted with the deepest grief (Isa 53:3). She will need to hear that she can draw near to the throne of grace and receive mercy and help in her time of need (Heb 4:16). She'll need to be reminded that Jesus and God, the Father, love her."

TRILLIA NEWBELL

A. Important Statistics on Survivors of Abuse:

- Adult women who were sexually abused as a child are more than twice as likely to suffer from depression as women who were not sexually abused.
- Adults with a history of child sexual abuse are more than twice as likely to report a suicide attempt.
- Females who are sexually abused are three times more likely to develop psychiatric disorders than females who are not sexually abused.
- Among male survivors, more than 70% seek psychological treatment for issues such as substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and attempted suicide (*Caring Well*).

B. Continued Follow-Up with the Victim and Church Integration:

As shepherds of the congregation, it is the church leadership's responsibility to care for the victim and the victim's family. One of the most important tasks of a shepherd is to keep track of the sheep.

- Long-term ministry to survivors of abuse should involve more of a church's resources than just the work of paid staff.
- The church leadership, the victim's liaison, and the response team should be in constant contact with one another and the victim.
- It is advisable to have weekly check-ins and written communication between all involved.
- All involved should offer consistent prayer support, both in personal prayer times and with all involved when appropriate.
- A trustworthy and compassionate brother or sister in Christ (of the same gender as the victim) should check in regularly on the person's levels of sleep/rest, eating habits, exercise, overall mental health, spiritual life, and spiritual practices.

C. Providing Education and Maintaining Protection Protocols Long-Term

The 5 Essential Steps must be followed in our churches for as long as we exist. As a result, we must maintain our commitment to these regular routines of ministry:

1. Renew backgrounds checks and training certifications at least annually.
2. Participate in and provide additional abuse-related training on a regular-basis when offered through Oklahoma Baptists or other trustworthy providers.
3. Consider organizing a "Care Team" for the purposes of:
 - a. Continually walking alongside victims/survivors within the church.
 - b. Continually assessing the church's strengths and weaknesses in abuse prevention and care.

NOTE: This team should be made up of both men and women to provide a broad range of perspectives. Members of the team should include church staff but should also include church members who work in counseling, mental health, medical professions, elementary or secondary education, law, or other related fields whenever possible.

4. Utilize trustworthy local partnerships when possible. This might include local trauma-informed mental health providers, counselors, physicians, social workers, law enforcement resources, child services, domestic violence advocacy groups, or others with expertise in abuse prevention and care.

REMEMBER: The goal of the church's response to abuse is to care well for the victim(s) and ultimately, to integrate the victim(s) into the church body for continued healing, growth, and the glory of God.

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LINKS TO SUPPLEMENT GUIDES:

[SUPPLEMENT 01 – Written Applications Guidelines](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 02 – Background Check Guidelines](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 03 – Reference Check Guidelines](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 04 – Interview Guidelines](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 05 – Internet and Social Media Check Supplement](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 06 – Domestic Violence: Developing a Safety Plan](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 07 – Church Response to Abuse is Biblical](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 08 – Helpful Definitions](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 09 – Profile of a Victim](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 10 – Profile of an Abuser](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 11 – Meeting with the Alleged Abuser](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 12 – Guiding Principles of Victim Advocacy](#)

[SUPPLEMENT 13 – Reporting Domestic Violence](#)



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