



Stop It Now![®]

Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children

PREVENTION TOOLS

Have questions?

Need resources?

Get Help Now!

Call the Stop It Now! Helpline:
1.888.Prevent
or visit: <https://www.stopitnow.org/help>

Stop It Now![®] prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention for Faith Communities

Faith communities offer children wonderful opportunities to develop spiritually and to be part of a larger, caring community. Close caring relationships with adults are an important protective factor for children. Families who are struggling often particularly need the friendship and informal mentoring opportunities provided by faith communities. Unfortunately, as in all organizations where adults and older youth interact with children, faith communities can unintentionally provide opportunities for inappropriate sexual behaviors towards children.

What faith communities need to know

Every faith community needs to think about prevention

No faith community is free from the risk of children being harmed by sexual abuse. Although there has been a lot of news coverage about the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, child sexual abuse happens in all racial, age, and ethnic groups, and at all socio-economic levels and, yes, in all faith communities as well. People who sexually abuse children are of all ages, gender, sexual orientation, occupation and religious affiliation. **There is no such thing as a “typical” sex offender.**

Protect your faith community by speaking out

Openly addressing the potential risk of sexual abuse taking place within your faith community can protect both children and your community. Some people think that simply by talking openly about the potential risk of sexual abuse occurring within the community, they are sending a message that children are not safe there. The opposite is true. Child sexual abuse thrives in an atmosphere of silence and denial. Shining a light on the subject protects children.

Criminal background checks: an important first step

Criminal background checks are an important tool. Many faith communities have followed the lead of other youth- and child-serving organizations and require staff and volunteers who work with children to complete a criminal background check. This makes it clear to everyone that your organization takes seriously its commitment to keeping children safe, and that it is taking action to prevent anyone with a criminal sex offender background from working or volunteering in the community.

Limits of background checks

However, criminal background checks will only bring to the surface people whose sexual abuse was reported to authorities, and who were prosecuted and convicted with a criminal sexual offense. Law enforcement estimates that 88% of sexual abuse is never reported to authorities. This means that nine of ten people who have sexually abused children will not have a criminal background.

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Comprehensive policies are needed

In addition to background checks, comprehensive policies and practices can be your best protection against children being harmed in your faith community. These policies make it clear that your organization is committed to creating a safe environment free of sexual abuse. See the links below for information on creating a policy for your faith community.

Faith communities' role in keeping people at-risk safe from abusing children

A faith community can provide the support and stability that may keep someone who has offended, or might be at risk to offend, from harming a child.

People who sexually abuse children can change

People who sexually abuse children can change and go on to live a healthy lifestyle free from abuse. Specialized treatment for people with sexual behavior problems¹ is an important tool to prevent future abuse of children. And, treatment works. National studies have shown that of people who complete treatment, less than 15% will sexually abuse again.

Accountability and support

Accountability and support are important tools for keeping someone who has sexually abused children from abusing again. Some people who have sexually abused children compare their journey to healthier choices as similar to that of a recovering alcoholic. The likelihood that they can successfully change behaviors and stay on top of the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs that led them to harm a child in the first place, is much greater when they are supported and held accountable by their family, friends, and very often, by their faith communities.

Being sorry and promising it won't happen again are not enough. Faith communities often struggle with their beliefs about confession and repentance. It can be tempting to believe that someone who is genuinely remorseful can control themselves and stop harming children on their own. Too often this is not the case without outside help, particularly professional help. People who have been sexually inappropriate or abused a child benefit from specialized treatment, which helps them to understand why they harmed a child and how to prevent themselves from harming children in the future. They also benefit from being part of a system that holds them accountable for their behaviors.

Accountability and support require someone who has sexually abused to be honest about their past, to discuss openly the signs that they may be at risk to behave inappropriately, and to stay away from situations that put them at risk to behave inappropriately. People who have sexually abused benefit from having people "in the know" who will call them on inappropriate behaviors. Faith communities can provide this type of caring but tough support.

Why reporting abuse is important

Reporting sexual abuse can mean both the person who behaved inappropriately and the child who may have been harmed get the help they need. While it may be tempting to handle a situation within your faith community, one needs only look at the recent sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church to be reminded that ignoring concerns won't make them go away.



Sometimes adults don't report their concerns to authorities about someone who has behaved inappropriately or illegally towards a child, because they don't want to cause harm to that individual. Too often, this decision leaves other children vulnerable, and sends the damaging message that the adults are more concerned about the person who hurt the child than they are about the child who was hurt.

What faith communities need to do to keep children safe from sexual abuse

Don't wait for a child to be harmed; create policies and practices that reduce the risk that children will be harmed.

Policies to reduce risk and protect children

Many faith communities are developing policies to respond to situations where children have already been abused. Urge your faith community to look at practices and develop a prevention policy. For example, it is good practice to have a "two adult rule" that prohibits one-on-one contact between an adult and a child. It is also good practice to prohibit one-on-one meetings with children and youth when others can't see or hear the interaction. If a child is in need of spiritual counseling, it would be appropriate to have a policy that any touching between an adult and a child should take place within sight and hearing of others.

Question confusing or uncertain behaviors

Create an atmosphere that encourages people to question confusing or uncertain behaviors and practices. Nobody wants to accuse someone they know of inappropriate sexual behavior or sexual abuse. By initiating discussions about inappropriate behaviors and modeling how to talk about concerning situations, your faith community can create a safe atmosphere that encourages people to take action before children are harmed.

Respond to inappropriate behavior

Practice responding to inappropriate behaviors that are not illegal. Preventing sexual abuse means taking action before you have proof that a child has been harmed. It also means taking action as soon as you see behaviors or hear comments that concern you. Speaking up about your concerns is not the same as accusing someone of sexual behaviors, and it can prevent someone from escalating their behavior.

Reduce risk in the physical environment

Inventory your physical environment and modify it to reduce risk. Look at your physical environment from the viewpoint of someone who may want to isolate a child. Consider locking or limiting access to closets and other rooms that are not in use while children are at your facility. Consider adding windows to rooms where children and older youth or adults may be gathering.

Plan for sex offenders in your community

Decide ahead of time how you will handle having a "sex offender" in your community. People who have sexually abused often need the support of a faith community. Your faith community can also provide the accountability needed to ensure that this person continues to make safe choices. Creating your response now will make you better able to face an actual situation calmly and with forethought.



Learn More

- Balancing Acts - Keeping Children Safe in Congregations, by Reverend Debra W. Haffner, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, Safe Congregations (<https://www.uua.org/safe>) Manual available at: <https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/balancingact.pdf>
- Faith Trust Institute, Multi-faith organization addressing the issues of sexual abuse and domestic violence, <https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-Serving Organizations, Guidance on developing policies and strategies to prevent sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingchildsexualabuse-a.pdf>