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# *10 Things*

YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT  
**CHILD PROTECTION**

# CHILD PROTECTION AND HOW IT APPLIES TO YOUR MINISTRY

We hope you find these risk management tips to be useful as you work to protect the young people in your ministry. A local attorney can also be a helpful partner in this effort, reviewing your policies, helping you to understand specific laws, and identifying potential blind spots.

## BACKGROUND SCREENING

More than once, ministries have placed people in positions of trust without looking for red flags that might disqualify them from service. For example, you might consider the charismatic young person you just hired to be a great youth leader—until a friend tells you that he was fired from a previous job for inappropriate conduct with students. If you had checked references, you might have learned that before inviting him to join your team.

Background screening is your first line of defense for protecting young people against harm. By screening all employees, volunteers, and applicants, you can make a more educated decision on who to appoint to positions of trust. The process should include the following steps:

### • WRITTEN APPLICATION

Use an application to gather basic background information. If state law allows, it's a good idea to ask if the applicant has a criminal history, has been involved in sexual misconduct or abuse, or has been accused of offenses against children.

### • CRIMINAL HISTORY CHECK

Obtain a person's written permission before checking their criminal records. Perform a review that includes Social Security number verification, checks of national criminal databases, national sex offender registries, county criminal records, and applicable child abuse registries, as well as any additional checks related to the position. For example, you would want to look at a candidate's driving record if they'll be driving ministry vehicles. For best results, work with a comprehensive background screening firm that has a good reputation. If state law doesn't list offenses that would disqualify a candidate, consider following the local school district's hiring standards. Finding a criminal record doesn't necessarily rule out a candidate. Weigh the seriousness of the record, the time that has passed since the offense, and the relevance of the offense to the position's

requirements. Please note that a criminal history check cannot alert you to offenders who have never been caught, but they're a vital tool for identifying those who have.

### • REFERENCE CHECK

Ask for at least two references from people who are not related to the applicant—preferably one from a ministry setting. Make sure to actually contact the references provided. References can provide firsthand insights into how the applicant has performed in previous roles.

### • PERSONAL INTERVIEW

The interview is an opportunity to learn more about the applicant and ask about any concerns or strengths that have emerged during the screening process.

All volunteers who will be working with children, youth, or vulnerable adults, as well as all employees, should undergo the ministry's background screening process. Remember to re-screen everyone in accordance with local law, retain and protect documents, and update your screening process as laws change. A locally licensed attorney can help you create a policy that is feasible and complies with local laws.

## WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Watch the free webinar, *Background Screening: Creating a Culture of Transparency*, on [BrotherhoodMutual.com](http://BrotherhoodMutual.com).

## STAFFING PROCEDURES

No ministry is immune to the problem of child sexual assault, regardless of size, location, or denomination. Since criminal history checks only alert you to past convictions, how can you protect children against an offender who's never been caught? Provide outstanding supervision. It's a powerful deterrent, because most offenses happen when no one else is around.

Superior supervision also helps volunteers and staff better manage how youth interact with one another. Not only that, but extra hands can help leaders with snacks, crafts, sports, games, and other things, such as providing first aid when someone gets hurt.

Typically, every youth and children's activity needs at least two adult supervisors, but you may need more. How many more? It depends on the situation. Following these principles is a good place to start:

### • THE TWO-ADULT RULE

At least two screened, unrelated adults should supervise each classroom, vehicle, or other enclosed area during an activity involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults. The "two-adult rule" provides accountability and deters misconduct by ensuring that no children or youth are left alone with a volunteer, leader, or other supervisor. Teen and pre-teen helpers don't qualify as "adults" under the two-adult rule. If a minor requests a private discussion, only agree to do so if the meeting is held in view of a second adult.

### • THE RULE OF THREE

When it isn't possible to support the two-adult rule, consider following the "rule of three." This rule can be used for supervising children who are old enough to provide some accountability—no younger than age five. The "rule of three" requires at least three people to be present during ministry activities involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults. One of the three people must be a screened adult. The other two people could be a youth helper and a participant or two activity participants.

### • PROPER ADULT-CHILD RATIOS

Consider implementing the following adult-child ratios, with one adult for every:

- 2 infants (0-6 months)
- 3 crawlers (6-12 months)
- 4 toddlers (12-18 months)
- 5-6 walkers (18-36 months)
- 6-10 preschoolers (3-5 years)
- 10-12 kindergarteners (5-6 years)

If you run a licensed daycare, preschool, or elementary school program, your state may require different ratios. Check with an attorney for your state's rules.

Train all employees and volunteers who work with minors to follow these guidelines. An occasional re-training session can help to refresh their memories, too.

### LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Download the *Improving Child Safety* edition of *The Deacon's Bench* safety newsletter—it's full of helpful tips to help you protect the children and youth you serve.

## MANDATED REPORTING

Have you ever felt in your gut that something wasn't quite right, but you weren't sure what to do about it? Mandated reporting laws are designed to help you respond appropriately when you think a person may be at risk of abuse or neglect. Many who work in ministry, school, or camp settings are required to report their suspicions immediately to state or local authorities.

It's critical to train people who work with children or youth about what to look for and what to do if they see something troubling. Stress the importance of reporting unconfirmed suspicions, because failing to report could lead an offender to continue harming the suspected victim—and others. To help people understand and follow these laws, consider taking these actions:

- **DETERMINE WHICH SITUATIONS WARRANT REPORTS**

The circumstances that must be reported vary by state. Check with a locally licensed attorney to find out what your state's mandated reporting laws require. Generally, child abuse and neglect must be reported, and ministry workers should also understand how to respond to suicide threats and threats to the well-being of others.

- **DEFINE WHO QUALIFIES AS A MANDATED REPORTER**

In some states, everyone is considered a mandated reporter of child abuse and neglect. In other states, only specific professions are considered mandated reporters of these behaviors. These professions typically include medical and school personnel, counselors, social workers, peace officers, and clergy. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services provides an article, *Clergy as Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect: Summary of State Laws*, that lists which states recognize clergy as mandated reporters.

- **UNDERSTAND 'REASONABLE CAUSE'**

Some may hesitate to file a report unless they have indisputable evidence of abuse. In many cases, such evidence is unavailable, making it difficult for reporters to discern when they should report their suspicions. Many laws require that mandated reporters file a report

when they have "reasonable cause," or a reason to believe that abuse is occurring. It's best to evaluate all of the facts, including the context of the situation, and err on the side of making a report when determining if there's reasonable cause to file a report.

When in doubt, immediately seek a written opinion from a locally licensed attorney. Many states require that the report be made within 48 to 72 hours of learning of suspected abuse. Even if the attorney advises that the situation does not warrant a report, it's a good idea to complete and keep on file an incident report describing the accident, the injury, and communications among the people involved.

- **TRAIN MINISTRY PERSONNEL ON PROCEDURES**

Ministry leaders, with the help of an attorney, should develop a policy for reporting abuse. Define who is a mandated reporter, the behaviors that warrant a report, and the proper reporting procedures. Train ministry staff and volunteers to follow this policy. When laws change, update your policy and retrain personnel to correspond with any new requirements.

By providing clear direction about mandated reporting, you can help your workers and volunteers protect the young people they serve.

### LOOKING FOR MORE HELP?

Visit the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' *Child Welfare Information Gateway*.

## NURSERY SANITATION

You can't eliminate all sniffles from the nursery, but simple precautions can reduce infection rates. Here are a few steps you can take to help keep illness from spreading:

- **WIPE DOWN ALL SURFACES WITH A DISINFECTANT**

This includes changing areas, counters, tables, chairs, swings, cribs, and activity saucers. Sanitize weekly if your nursery is used only on Sundays. Do it more often if your nursery is used during the week.

- **SANITIZE ALL TOYS**

Books, dolls, and anything battery operated or mechanical should be wiped down with disinfectant weekly and allowed to dry. Everything else should soak in disinfectant at least 15 minutes to overnight. Sanitize toys more often if your nursery is used during the week.

- **AVOID STUFFED ANIMALS AND SOFT DOLLS**

Germs can live for a long time in the fur of stuffed animals and the fabric bodies of dolls. Even doll clothes could innocently pass germs from one child to another. Allow children to bring their own blankets or stuffed animals, but don't let them share.

- **DON'T ALLOW CONTAGIOUS CHILDREN IN**

If children have had a fever in the past 24 hours or have contagious diseases, consider keeping them away from the nursery until they are symptom-free. Toys used by ill children should be quarantined until they can be sanitized.

- **REQUIRE HAND WASHING**

Wash children's hands as they enter and before they leave the nursery. For convenience, you can use antibacterial cleansing lotion instead of soap and water, if parents say it's okay.

- **USE RECEIVING BLANKETS**

Infant swings and activity saucers have fabric seats that are difficult to clean. Place a fresh receiving blanket down before inserting each child to keep germ transmission to a minimum.

Nobody wants a child to get sick from spending time in the nursery. That's why it's important to keep your nursery as clean as possible.

### HAVE THREE MINUTES?

Watch our [Church Nursery Sanitation video](#) on [BrotherhoodMutual.com](#).

## CHECK-IN/CHECK-OUT PROCEDURES

Churches, schools, daycare centers, and preschools can become the site for conflicts between parents arguing over who gets custody of a child. If your ministry doesn't follow procedures to ensure that children are released to an authorized person, your volunteers could unknowingly place children in dangerous situations.

There are many ways to check children in and out of classrooms, but all share the same goal: Make sure each child leaves your ministry with the right person. Here's how to do that:

### • DEVELOP A POLICY

Determine the best way to check children in and out of classrooms, and train all volunteers to follow your procedures. Explain your check-in and check-out procedures to all parents and guardians. Communicating how you care for children helps avoid confusion and frustration.

### • ASK PARENTS FOR INFORMATION

On their first visit to the nursery, ask parents or guardians to complete a child care form listing their name, their child's name, address, and contact information. Ask about allergies or special instructions the parents may have for their child, as well as who is authorized to pick up their child. Take care to protect this information. For tips, read [Protect Ministry Data and Computers](#) at BrotherhoodMutual.com

### • GIVE PARENTS AN ID TAG

Providing matching identification tags for the parents and the children is the best method to make sure the right person collects a child. ID tags keep a volunteer from making a judgment call when releasing someone, because parents aren't allowed to leave with the child unless they have a matching tag. If someone doesn't have the proper identification but insists on removing a child, workers should call a children's ministry leader or police. You also may want to train childcare workers on [how to verbally resolve conflicts](#).

### • UPDATE INFORMATION REGULARLY

Train someone on your staff to regularly ask parents to update or reconfirm the names of adults who are allowed to remove their child from the nursery.

### • KEEP AN ATTENDANCE LOG

Require volunteers in every classroom to keep an attendance log at each service, noting which children were placed in the room.

By consistently following check-in and check-out procedures, you can help protect the families that trust your ministry.

### NEED A FORM?

Download our sample [Child/Nursery Health Information Form](#) from BrotherhoodMutual.com.

## PLAYGROUND MAINTENANCE

Playgrounds provide an atmosphere for fun and exercise, but they also can be the scenes of serious accidents. Skinned knees aren't always avoidable, but you can reduce the risk of emergency room visits with proper playground design and equipment care. Consider these tips:

- **USE EQUIPMENT DESIGNED FOR PLAYGROUNDS**

Don't design your own equipment. Instead, buy from a manufacturer that adheres to strict industry standards. Your manufacturer should follow guidelines set by ASTM International, one of the largest developers of standards in the world. The guidelines are designed to reduce the likelihood of injuries on playgrounds.

- **HIRE PROFESSIONAL INSTALLERS FOR NEW EQUIPMENT**

Do-it-yourself installation increases the likelihood of mistakes and your ministry's liability if a child is injured on the structure.

- **USE PROPER SAFETY SURFACING**

Falls are the primary cause of playground injuries. The material underneath and around playground equipment should be soft and shock absorbing. Outdoors, this typically means sand, gravel, wood chips, or rubber mats. Indoors, appropriate mats and rubber flooring are needed. Check regularly to make sure the prescribed amount/depth of loose materials are still in place— these materials can be easily moved around by weather or playing children.

- **ANCHOR PLAY EQUIPMENT**

Make sure equipment is firmly fixed to the playground floor or ground.

- **REMOVE HAZARDOUS EQUIPMENT**

If you notice certain pieces of play equipment causing an unusual number of injuries, remove the equipment from the playground.

- **CLEAN PLAYGROUNDS REGULARLY**

Regularly inspect for hazards such as broken glass or sharp metal objects. Dirty equipment is an indication that you may not have kept up with routine maintenance and repair. Walkways should be clear of trash and clutter to prevent tripping.

- **REGULARLY INSPECT PLAY EQUIPMENT**

Here's what you should watch for:

- Worn or missing parts
- Loose bolts
- Sharp edges or points
- Damaged "s" hooks
- Torn or frayed safety netting
- Torn or frayed rope equipment
- Loose sewing connections in cargo webbing
- Torn or frayed and exposed components that could trip, pinch, or crush someone
- Improperly lubricated moving parts
- Splintered or cracked wood

### NEED A CHECKLIST?

Download our [Playground Safety Checklist](#) from [BrotherhoodMutual.com](#).

## ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION AGREEMENTS

Accidental injuries send thousands of people to emergency rooms every day. When they happen during a ministry activity, you could be held responsible for them. To limit your ministry's liability during activities that could lead to injuries, give each participant an activity participation agreement, so they know what to expect and can agree to take responsibility for any risks. Here's what a well-written agreement does:

- **COMMUNICATES THE RISKS**

An activity participation agreement ensures that participants understand the risks associated with a particular activity and that they accept those risks. To protect your ministry from liability, have participants sign an agreement before they engage in any activity that has the potential to cause physical injury. This would include anything from playing basketball at the church to going whitewater rafting.

- **ESTABLISHES AN EXCHANGE**

An activity participation agreement does not waive a minor's rights. However, an agreement can ask parents/guardians to waive claims against the ministry, such as medical costs that result from the activity. An agreement also can ask parents/guardians to accept responsibility for their children's injuries and actions. A well-written agreement establishes a contractual exchange: "In consideration for allowing my child to participate in the ministry activity, I agree to hold harmless the ministry from any liability that may result from the activity." Your agreement also could explain the procedure you'll follow if someone is injured during the activity. A common practice is to attempt to contact a parent or guardian to inform them of the situation and ask how they would like you to proceed. If the ministry is unable to reach a parent or emergency contact, the participation agreement could give ministry personnel the authority to seek professional medical care.

- **COVERS ONE ACTIVITY (GENERALLY)**

As a general rule, obtain separate signed participation agreements for each activity. For instance, if you're taking

the youth group on a whitewater rafting trip this month and playing paintball next month, you should provide two separate participation agreements. If multiple high-risk activities will take place during one excursion, you can use one agreement to cover the excursion, as long it describes each high-risk activity.

- **ADDRESSES REPEAT PERFORMANCES**

For recurring activities that pose little risk of injury, you may be able to use one participation agreement to cover the activity for a certain period of time. For instance, if your group goes bowling once a month, you may want to use one agreement for that activity instead of asking each participant to have a signed release every time you go bowling. Never rely on an activity participation agreement for more than one year—have participants turn in a new signed agreement each year.

Before using your activity participation agreement, be sure to have a locally licensed attorney review and approve it.

### NEED A FORM?

Download the sample [Activity Participation Agreement](#) from [BrotherhoodMutual.com](#).

## SAFE YOUTH MINISTRY GAMES

Coming up with creative, fun games to play at youth group every week can be challenging. Sometimes, it's tempting to opt for something even more outrageous each time to keep young people coming back. But whenever you have a group of students playing games, there is a chance for the activity to quickly go from fun to chaos. Follow these steps to help make sure no one gets hurt:

- **PERFORM A RUN-THROUGH**

If a game seems safe enough to try, play the game yourself before introducing it to the youth group. A run-through with youth workers can reveal safety issues and help you modify the game to avoid injuries. It also helps other youth workers understand the game and how best to chaperone it.

- **LAY OUT THE RULES**

Before the game starts, clearly outline the rules and behavior expectations for the game as well as the consequences for violating them. Handle discipline respectfully and consistently.

- **SUPERVISE PROPERLY**

Whenever the ministry sponsors an activity involving children on or off premises, always have at least two adults supervising each room, vehicle, or other enclosed space. More supervisors will be necessary if the group is large. Be sure that everyone plays the game the way it was meant to be played—alterations could lead to injuries. Step in quickly and stop the activity if things start to get out of control.

- **BE CAREFUL WITH CONTACT**

Make games optional. For safety's sake, match up people of similar ages and sizes, and never insist that those uncomfortable with the activity participate. Also, if a game includes throwing or swinging objects toward someone else's face, pick a different game.

- **REPORT MISHAPS**

Require supervisors to report all injuries and disciplinary actions to the event leader, and contact parents as soon as possible. Seek immediate medical attention if a child becomes seriously ill or injured during an activity.

Choosing and supervising safe games is essential to protecting your ministry and its members. Follow these guidelines to help your church or ministry continue to offer rewarding activities while keeping young people safe.

### NEED A CHECKLIST?

Download the [Supervision and Discipline Checklist](#) from [BrotherhoodMutual.com](#)

## DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Anyone who talks to teenagers knows that digital, social, and mobile platforms generally are their favorite communication tools. Parents, teachers, and youth leaders often find that texts are more likely to be read than other messages. Digital communication offers great opportunities for interacting with students, but it also creates new complications.

To help keep digital communication safe for everyone, it's important to create a written policy with parameters that provide accountability for all staff and volunteers. The policy should spell out your ministry's expectations regarding digital communication. Items to address in the policy include:

- **STATE LAWS**

Ministry staff members and volunteers should know their state's laws on sexting and distributing digital content. Caution them against sending any text or pictures that could damage the ministry's reputation or invite criminal charges.

- **TRAINING REQUIREMENTS**

Train ministry staff members and volunteers to follow the communication policy, and require them to sign a consent form agreeing to follow it. Provide staff members and volunteers with educational material that reinforces the policy.

- **PRIVATE COMMUNICATION**

Encourage ministry youth workers to send messages to a group rather than to individuals. For example, leaders should copy a parent and another ministry leader in all digital and online communication. This approach ensures no one-on-one contact exists in text, social media, or other forms of online or digital communication.

- **MOBILE DEVICE USE DURING MINISTRY ACTIVITIES**

Outline when people can and cannot use their mobile devices. It's best to discourage students from using devices during defined periods of time where you want their full attention. This will help avoid distractions and improve participation.

- **EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES**

Inform youth group members of the dangers of abusive behaviors in the digital space, including bullying and sexting. These behaviors are not only emotionally damaging, but under some state laws, young people could be charged with crimes related to their communications.

As with any new policy, ask a locally licensed attorney to review and approve your digital communication policy before putting it into practice.

### LOOKING FOR A SAMPLE POLICY?

Download the *Sample Youth Ministry Communication Policy* from [BrotherhoodMutual.com](http://BrotherhoodMutual.com).

## OFFSITE YOUTH EVENTS

Supervising youth activities can be unpredictable, especially when the activities take place outside your facility's walls. When youth ministry takes you away from your home base, remember to take these safety precautions:

- **RESEARCH THE VENUE**

Before agreeing to send your youth group off-site, visit the destination to look at the venue's condition, safety features, and staff. Ask questions about child protection policies and staff training. It's also a good idea to ask for referrals from colleagues at other ministries who have sent youth groups to the facility.

- **ARRANGE SAFE TRANSPORTATION**

Driving may be the riskiest activity your ministry participates in. One accident could cause vehicle damage, injuries, or worse. If you take a ministry-owned vehicle, make sure your drivers are at least 21 years old and have gone through a [background screening process](#) that includes a review of their driving record. If you decide to charter a bus, which is likely the safest approach for longer journeys, be sure to choose a reputable company.

- **REQUIRE PARTICIPATION AGREEMENTS**

Before you hit the road, obtain signed activity participation agreements from the parents/guardians of each person going on the trip. Learn more about these agreements on page 7.

- **BE AN EXTRA PAIR OF EYES**

Even if the venue supplies lifeguards, camp counselors, or other types of supervisors, there's nothing wrong with having your ministry's youth workers keep an eye on off-site activities. Your workers can verify that safety policies and procedures are being followed, and speak up if something doesn't look right.

Off-site activities can help students create memories and have fun in new environments. When parents trust your ministry to protect their children, take care to keep safety at the forefront.

### WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Download the free [Vehicle Inspection Checklist](#) from [BrotherhoodMutual.com](#).