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IMPROVING CHILD SAFETY

EVEN IN A SMALL CHURCH, YOU
CAN MEET HIGH STANDARDS

Requiring at least two screened adults to supervise child and youth activities greatly improves your ability to protect children from harm.

Lori Rush faced an issue. Some volunteers had urged her to improve child safety at their church, but it seemed impossible to make the changes they wanted. As children's ministry director at Oakbrook Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Rush was paid to work only five hours a week. She didn't have the time, money, or resources to revise child protection policies, recruit new workers, and train more than 75 volunteers on new procedures.

The church already required all volunteers to undergo a criminal background check before serving in its children's ministry. Enforcing stricter rules would create conflict, Lori feared. It might even drive families away. That could be devastating to a 250-person church that had recently lost its pastor.

Then a situation arose that she couldn't ignore: A volunteer who had passed a background check was charged with sexual abuse. The allegation didn't involve the church, and the charge was later dropped, but it caused church leaders to view their child safety plan with new eyes. The volunteer had been serving with preschoolers.

"It just made us stop and say: We're operating under assumptions here, and we haven't provided the level of security that we really should," Lori said.

That's when Lori began exploring whether a small church like hers would have what it needed to follow best practices for child protection.

Getting Started

Initially, Lori didn't know where to begin. Although she led the church's children's ministry, her training was in leadership development, not childcare. So she called her insurance company. Jim Greer, one of Brotherhood Mutual's senior risk control specialists, took the call.

Jim listened as Lori explained her situation. While the church required two workers to be present in all children's classrooms on Sundays, the second person was often a youth helper, not an adult. During midweek activities, the church relied on teen volunteers.

"He was very helpful and gracious and patient," Lori said. But she felt overwhelmed as Jim stressed the importance of having two screened and trained adults supervise all children's activities.



"It just made us stop and say: 'We're operating under assumptions here.'"

**—Lori Rush
Children's Ministry Director
Oakbrook Church**

"There's no way we can do that," Lori said. "What else can we do?"

Jim offered empathy, but he didn't lower the standard. Instead, he offered her some help getting started. Lori felt discouraged as she hung up the phone.

Enlisting Support

The children's ministry director knew that she couldn't make such massive changes alone. For this idea to survive, she'd need support from both church leaders and volunteers.

So Lori met separately with the teams supervising the nursery, preschool, and elementary areas of children's ministry. She invited the youth pastor and his volunteers to join the conversation, as well.

After reading aloud the current policies and sharing the checklists Jim had provided, Lori encouraged each team member to think and pray. Then, she typed every question team members raised and sent them to LegalAssistance, a free service Brotherhood Mutual offers ministries.

Soon, attorneys responded to every question Oakbrook Church had asked. After reviewing the recommendations, Rush and the church's youth pastor reached an agreement: If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right.

Asking the Right Questions

Oakbrook Church asked many of the same questions other ministries do. Hundreds of churches contact LegalAssistance each year to ask about child protection policies. Most questions revolve around screening volunteers (page 3), supervising children (page 4), and taking care of people with special needs (page 6).

While Brotherhood Mutual's attorneys strive to provide helpful information, they always encourage ministries to consult a local attorney for advice. Here are some questions churches commonly ask about child protection measures.

- **Do we need to run background checks?**

Carefully screening all people who will interact with children or youth lies at the foundation of a church's child protection plan. Typically, this includes four elements: a written application, reference checks, a face-to-face interview, and a criminal background check. This process applies to both paid and volunteer positions. (See below.)

- **Why does Brotherhood Mutual recommend the two-adult rule?**

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. Brotherhood Mutual recommends that two screened, unrelated adults supervise every classroom, vehicle, or other enclosed area during an activity involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults. Following this rule also reduces opportunities for someone to falsely accuse a leader of misconduct.

CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECKS: DO WE HAVE TO FINGERPRINT GRANDMA?

When screening people who work in your ministry, it can be tempting to make exceptions.

You may think about how long certain staff or volunteers have served, how honest they seem, or how much money you could save by not running a criminal background check on everyone.

This line of thinking can leave holes in your child protection plan. Unfortunately, the traits that make churches great—faith, love, and trust—also make them vulnerable. Some offenders will go from church to church, looking for an easy way to be near children.

Searching criminal records can help you make informed decisions about who you allow to work with children, youth, or vulnerable adults. It's a key part of the background screening process, which also involves reviewing an application, contacting references, and conducting a personal interview.

Here's how to get the best results:

1. Use a good service. A dependable provider will obtain county, state, and federal criminal records from accurate, original sources.

2. Check everyone. Run a criminal history check on all workers, paid or not.



3. Get permission. Employers must have an applicant or employee's written permission to run a criminal background check. It's federal law. Most screening providers will provide the necessary forms.

4. Double check. Mix-ups happen. Compare Social Security numbers and addresses to make sure the results belong to your candidate.

5. Make a decision. If you see convictions, determine if they're the type that would make that person unfit to work with children. If you're unsure, look into your school system's screening standards or talk to a local attorney.

• **Can we use teen volunteers?**

Teens and pre-teens can be great helpers, but they shouldn't be left in charge of children's ministry rooms. They don't qualify as "adults" under the two-adult rule. It's best to require at least a five-year age difference between a youth volunteer and the children being supervised. For example, a 16-year-old would be more effective in a classroom of 11-year-olds than of 15-year-olds. You can screen teens by using applications, reference checks, and in-person interviews. Criminal background checks aren't helpful, since most minors' records are sealed.

• **What if we can't follow the two-adult rule?**

When it isn't possible to support the two-adult rule, a church should follow the "rule of three." This rule 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. The object of this rule is the same as the first: Leave no child alone with a supervisor. The goal is to promote accountability and decrease opportunity for misconduct.

• **Are there any exceptions to the rule of three?**

The rule of three may not provide enough supervision in preschool or nursery settings. Here's why: If there's only one adult in a room, the children being supervised must be mature enough to alert a parent or leader if they see something that makes them uncomfortable. In some cases, a child may also need to testify in court. That's why the two-adult rule is recommended for nursery and preschool settings, instead of the rule of three.

• **Can we use video cameras for supervision?**

Video cameras can document a theft or help locate a missing child, but they're not the best option for child supervision. Cameras aren't always monitored in real time, and they can have blind spots, depending on their placement. Also, they can't help another volunteer comfort a crying child, change a diaper, or break up a fight. Nor can they stop a supervisor from hurting a child. Having at least two screened adults is best.

• **Can a hall monitor replace a second adult?**

Having one or more hall monitors can help a ministry maintain supervision ratios, especially when a volunteer must leave a classroom for a moment. Consider assigning a hall monitor to walk through the children's area while services are in session. These people can assist with bathroom breaks, first-aid requests, and other issues that might reduce staffing levels in a classroom. They also provide an added layer of supervision when following the rule of three.

• **How should leaders handle restroom breaks?**

It's best to have a screened worker escort two or more children to the restroom and wait outside until the children are finished. To follow the rule of three, one child would require two workers.

TOO MUCH HELP? NO SUCH THING!



While every children's room needs at least two adults, you may need more. Anyone who's tried to comfort five crying children knows that one set of arms holds only two kids. Consider following these adult-child ratios:

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.*

Getting it Right

Despite having limited time, staff, and resources, Oakbrook Church adopted every practice the attorneys recommended.

Today, the church boasts a new child protection policy, 50 percent more adult volunteers, and a mandatory child safety training program. It also has placed walkie-talkies in every classroom, so volunteers can radio a hall monitor for restroom or first-aid assistance.

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Now, Lori is developing a process for conducting criminal background checks on volunteers every few years, instead of just in the beginning. "There are pieces I'm still revising, but it's a happy journey we're on," Lori said.

Engagement Made the Difference

Getting everyone involved caused this effort to succeed when similar efforts had failed, Lori said.

"It wasn't just the children's ministry director or the pastor saying: This is what we're going to do." she said. "It was

really getting all of our team on board, in the beginning, and saying: We want to set the standard where it should be."

By encouraging everyone who worked with children to join the discussion and recommend solutions, the rewrite of the child safety policy went far more smoothly than Lori thought it would. In the beginning, she had expected stricter policies would divide the church. Instead, they brought unity.

"I got a lot of thank-yous for making our church a safe place for our children," Lori said. 🏰

WHOOPS! WRONG KID. SORRY.

One of the best gifts you can give parents is the assurance that their children will return to them safely when church services end. There are many ways to check children in and out of classrooms, but all share the same goal: Allow no child to leave a classroom with the wrong person.

Why is this an issue? Fewer than half of American kids live in homes where both parents are still married to one other, according to the Pew Research Center. The rest live with divorced, remarried, or unmarried parents. If a volunteer releases a child to a parent who doesn't have custody, the ministry could be legally responsible. Here's how to keep that from happening to you.

1. 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.

2. 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.



3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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. 🏰



SERVING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Parents of children with disabilities face a number of challenges that can leave them tired and spiritually drained. Leaving their children in the care of volunteers while they attend a church service isn't always an option.

Fortunately, many churches are developing programs that allow them to serve children with special needs. These programs take on a variety of forms, including:

- One-on-one "buddy" programs
- Special-needs Sunday school classes
- Respite programs for parents

Planning a Special Needs Ministry

Starting a special needs ministry takes careful planning.

- **Enlist dedicated, qualified program leaders.** People with backgrounds in education can be especially helpful in setting guidelines and procedures, thanks to their experience in teaching and caring for children. They also can be instrumental in training volunteers. Just as importantly, program leaders should have a heart for ministry and a desire to make a positive impact on people with disabilities.
- **Establish guiding policies.** Allow plenty of time to think about the policies that will guide your program. Then, write down every procedure you'll follow, from check-in to check-out. You may find it helpful to develop a Special Medical Needs Agreement, which allows parents to explain conditions, symptoms, and any medicine or medical equipment that will be left with you. Consult a local attorney when drafting these policies, and have your attorney review and approve any policy changes.
- **Screen all workers.** As with any ministry program, people working on behalf of the church—volunteers or paid staff members—should be properly screened. Application forms, personal interviews, reference checks, and background checks are all pieces of a thorough screening process.
- **Train workers.** Once your policies are approved, make sure paid staff members, volunteers, and participants understand and follow them. An initial training session is essential for workers and volunteers, and regular re-training can address any new issues that volunteers discover in the course of serving. It's a good idea to include first aid and medical emergency response training, as well.
- **Engage church leadership.** When ministry leaders understand and support your program, it's more likely to thrive. Pastors and church elders can be key recruiters in finding volunteers to staff your program, and it doesn't

hurt to request a time during Sunday services to tell the congregation about opportunities for them to help. The leadership team also may need to contact the ministry's insurance agent to make sure that the program is properly covered.

Putting Your Plan into Practice

It's critical to understand that no two people are affected by disabilities in exactly the same way. For example, some autistic children may love to participate in musical activities, while others find the noise overwhelming. With that in mind, accommodations should be tailored to each person. It may help to sit down with the parents of a child with disabilities and learn about the child's strengths, challenges, interests, and aversions. A registration form also can provide space for parents to include a diagnosis of their child's special needs. This can help in planning appropriate activities that will include the child and help in his or her growth.

Issues to think about in special needs ministries include:

- **Individual attention.** Because the effects of disabilities are so wide-ranging, children with special needs may benefit from a "buddy" program. In it, a trained volunteer "buddy" gives a child one-on-one support during church activities. Ideally, a volunteer assists the same child regularly. This fosters understanding, social familiarity, and consistent care.

- **Structure and routine.** Depending on the disability, it may make sense to introduce children gradually to their new surroundings or schedule. Children joining the special needs ministry might benefit from sitting in their new classroom by themselves at first. This way, they can get acclimated to their surroundings before classmates arrive. It also helps to clearly lay out the day's schedule in advance, so children know what to expect.
- **Positive reinforcement.** Like most children, kids with special needs crave positive reinforcement. Encouragement and congratulations promote good habits and motivate children to build on successes.

Covering Your Bases

Consult with your ministry's attorney and insurance agent before starting any formal special needs ministry programs. They can make sure that the program complies with relevant federal and state laws and any child care standards that may apply, and that the program is properly insured.

Churches should be places where everyone feels welcome, regardless of disability. By forming a special needs ministry, your church can become more welcoming to more people—expanding your outreach and improving more lives. 🏛️

Legal Assistance

Have a legal question? Get an answer—free—from Brotherhood Mutual's experienced legal staff. Just visit [LegalAssistance at BrotherhoodMutual.com](http://LegalAssistance.atBrotherhoodMutual.com) to submit your request.

While there, learn the answers to common ministry questions, link to other legal resources, or get a referral to a licensed attorney in your state.

Our attorneys can provide general information about liability, insurance, risk management, or a potential lawsuit against your ministry.

If you have a legal issue involving other matters, we would be glad to provide contact information



for attorneys in your area who are members of the Christian Legal Society, the nation's largest Christian legal association.

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the Deacon's Bench

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CHILD SAFETY

Gold Standard: Require two screened adults.

BACKGROUND SCREENING

Everyone means everyone, including Grandma.

WHOOPS! WRONG KID

Compare ID tags to ensure the right match.

MEETING SPECIAL NEEDS

Starting a new ministry takes careful planning.

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