

Child Protection

Every church should have its own child protection plan in place. If your church does not have a plan or doesn't enforce the one it has, implementing a child protection plan must be your first task. We live in a world where evil exists. Part of this evil includes people who want to exploit and harm our children. We like to think of our churches as being safe. But sexual predators will go to any lengths to harm our children, even in our churches. There are churches of all sizes around the country that share this heart-breaking reality.

Below are some steps you should consider taking if your church has no child protection plan:

1. Ask the church leadership and pastor to meet to discuss this issue.
2. Have your church consult with its own attorney. The information provided here is only to encourage churches to develop a plan. *In no way does the information given constitute legal advice. Awana® assumes no responsibility in child protection issues, but believes this to be the full responsibility of each individual church.*
3. With the help of your attorney, seek out available resources to assist you.
4. Develop a child protection plan with the church's attorney and insurance company.
5. Implement the child protection plan and make sure your Awana program adheres to it completely.

Here are **some additional steps** you can take if your church already has a child protection plan in place:

1. Make sure you and all your leaders have a copy of your church's child protection plan and understand it fully. This may require that a child protection training session be held. If you have questions, ask the pastor or church leadership.
2. Check to see if the child protection plan is being followed and enforced in children's and youth ministries. It's not uncommon for churches to have a plan but to not fully enforce or follow through on it. Sometimes doing so is not seen as a priority.
3. In your position of leadership you need to, with the help of the pastor, implement and enforce your church's child protection plan.

What is Child Abuse?

Child abuse is generally broken down into categories: physical, emotional, sexual and neglect. By law, child abuse must be reported to governing agencies like the police or child protective services. In order to be more effective in this responsibility, all Awana leaders should be trained in what abuse is and in what the indicators (signs) of any form of abuse are.

Definitions of Abuse

Physical Abuse occurs when someone harms a child's body, resulting in scrapes, bruises, welts, broken bones or other physical injuries.

Emotional Abuse occurs when someone harms a child using critical words, threats or demeaning terminology. Neglect, such as abandonment, is also included in this category.

Sexual Abuse occurs when someone violates a child's sexual privacy in any way.

Neglect is when a parent or guardian fails to provide for the basic needs of a child, such as food, shelter or medical attention.

Signs and Indicators of Child Abuse

The following signs may be indicators of abuse:

- Shifts in personality – sudden or abrupt
- Regression to earlier behaviors
- Bodily complaints related to stress
- Unexplained welts, bruises or burns
- Sleeping problems or nightmares
- Overly aggressive or withdrawn behavior
- Depression
- Inappropriate sexual behavior with peers or use of sexually-explicit language
- Reluctance to be alone with someone or clinginess to others
- Running away
- Substance abuse or eating disorders
- Suicidal gestures or self-mutilation
- Family history of violence

Leaders all need to be trained what to do if they see any of these signs and indicators or if a child approaches them and tells them about any kind of abuse.