

know risk

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A child safe church

In recent years, the church has suffered a loss of respect within the secular community through allegations of misconduct and abuse claims. All leadership positions within the church, whether minister of religion, youth leader or voluntary worker, carry a heavy responsibility.

Whilst there is a tendency to concentrate on the issue of child abuse, it should be remembered that wherever there is a position of trust established, there exists the potential for abuse of this position. It is important to adopt practices within your church to protect your employees and volunteers by training them to recognise situations which may frighten or even intimidate those to whom they minister.

All churches need to have in place a strategy to minimise the opportunity for abuse to occur. Legislation alone isn't enough to protect children. A caring community and effective workplace practices will also help to ensure that children and young people have a safe environment, free from the risk of abuse.

Adopt a policy statement on safeguarding the welfare of all with whom you have contact

A policy statement demonstrates the seriousness with which you view this subject and allows you to draft a framework to guide your actions in the future. It will also provide you with a document

you can present to all new workers (paid or unpaid). Many of the following points should be incorporated into your policy statement.

Document the way in which staff are selected

In an ideal world, all applications for any position would be screened. The following procedures are recommended for positions that involve working with or caring for children:

- Have all applicants complete an application form.
- All applicants should be interviewed by people with experience at employing people.
- Ask for referees from the applicant and check them out.
- Get the applicant to sign a document authorising the Church to obtain details of any criminal activity from the Police and Community Services.
- Carry out a Police and Community Services Check.
- Do not allow people, who have been worshipping at the church for less than 6 months to supervise, care for or work with children or young people.
- Make all positions (paid or unpaid) subject to a probationary period. This will allow you to terminate the role should there be any concerns about behavioural irregularities.

Reduce the risk through sound supervision practices

However remote, we must recognise that there is a risk of abuse occurring, even a risk of a first offence being committed.

There is a need to create an environment where the opportunity for abuse is reduced:

- Always have two adults present when supervising children. No adult, other than a child's parent should ever be left alone in a room with a child. If it is necessary for an adult to work one-on-one with a child, it should be done in a room which can be observed easily by others.

- Train staff to recognise the signs of abuse. Supervisors should be on the look out for signs of exploitation within the group. An individual being highly favoured, or being treated unduly harshly, may be a signal that the relationship between the church worker and the individual concerned is one in which abuse may be occurring.
- Leaders should avoid one-on-one counselling with members of the opposite sex. It is preferable to have another person present.

Have an appropriate response plan

Whilst it is to be hoped that your church never has to deal with an allegation of sexual abuse, it is important to have in place a response plan so that from the moment an allegation first surfaces, your people know where to turn.

- Use a standard reporting procedure/document for any allegation of abuse.
- Treat each allegation seriously. Do not attempt to deny the allegation or minimise its impact on the alleged victim. Do not sweep the matter under the carpet.
- Appoint an independent person to deal with any allegation. If your church is linked to a denomination, this person should be a denominational appointee. Independence is most important. The name, address and contact telephone number should be freely available to all leaders within the organisation.
- Advise the authority with the statutory responsibility to investigate these matters.

Expert advice is available to assist your church to develop its own Policy Statement. Sexual abuse is a community problem and we can all do our part to reduce the opportunity for such offences to occur.

Consider utilising a program like ChildSafe to help you manage and monitor these activities. Visit www.childsafe.org.au for more information.

This material is for information purposes only. It is not intended to give specific legal or risk management advice nor are any suggestions, checklists or action plans intended to include or address all possible risk management exposures or solutions.