

Youth Protection Measures for Religious Organizations

As a spiritual safe haven for people to come and worship and learn, it is your organization's duty to protect the safety of its youngest members. To achieve this, you need to ensure that your environment is fully secure by implementing policies with children's best interests in mind. This should reduce and help to prevent adult misconduct while also protecting your staff and volunteers from unsubstantiated accusations.

Selecting Employees and Volunteers

All employees who may potentially work with children at your facility should undergo the following screening process:

- **Implement a Waiting Period** – Volunteers wishing to work with children should be members of your organization for a determined minimum period of time (six months, one year, etc.), so the individual can be evaluated by current staff members.
- **Application for Employment** – Have all potential employees and volunteers fill out an application requiring information about their previous experience working with children, previous organizational affiliations, references and criminal convictions (if any).
- **Interviews** – Conduct in-person interviews to discuss open positions and the applicant's background.
- **Check References** – Before hiring anyone, check at least three references for each applicant, preferably those from organizations where the applicant

worked with children.

- **Conduct Criminal Background Checks** – Require a criminal background check for all applicants and volunteers who will engage in the following activities: involvement with day care and/or schooling; chaperoning overnight activities with children; counseling minors; involvement in youth mentoring programs; and potential for sporadic encounters with minors, such as driving youth groups to activities off-site.

By implementing policies at your organization with children's best interests in mind, you are taking a large step toward reducing and helping to prevent adult misconduct.

Applicants should be dismissed from the selection process if the following offenses are evident on a background check:

- Violence
- Dishonesty
- Illegal substance use
- Indecency

Youth Protection Measures for Religious Organizations

If an applicant does not reveal an offense in the application for employment, he or she should also be dismissed from the application process.

Guidelines for Teen Workers

Your organization may want to hire teen employees to serve as child care providers during religious services, for programs, etc. Consider the following policies when hiring workers under age 18:

- Workers must be at least 14 years old.
- Workers should be screened the same way as older volunteers and employees.
- Workers must be supervised by an adult employee at all times.

Guidelines for Parents

With regard to all activities involving children, require that a parent or guardian checks the child in and out of the activity by signing a check-in log.

Restroom Guidelines

Employees should escort children to the restrooms in groups. Before allowing children to enter the restroom, the employee should check the bathroom to make sure it is empty. Once the children go inside, the employee should wait in the hallway for the children to congregate again. If a child requests assistance from an employee while in the bathroom, the employee should prop the restroom door open and then leave the stall open while providing assistance to the child.

Consider requesting that parents take their children to the restroom before religious classes, programs and activities.

Counseling Recommendations

If members of your staff will be counseling young children, your facility should institute guidelines for these employees as well. These precautions will safeguard against negligent counseling, clergy malpractice, abuse of

authority, breach of confidentiality or fiduciary duty, sexual battery and unnecessary inappropriate influence. Consider the following guidelines:

- Create a counseling contract with the employee outlining the scope of the counseling sessions (length and duration), confidentiality issues and dispute resolution protocol.
- Limit counseling to only that of a spiritual context. For those children who wish to discuss abuse, mental health issues and/or addiction, request that they see a professional counselor outside of your organization.
- Consider only allowing male counselors to work with males and vice versa.
- Limit the time, duration and number of sessions allowed for counseling for each individual. If further guidance is needed, request that the parishioner visit a professional counselor.
- Hold counseling sessions in highly visible areas of the facility while keeping confidentiality in mind. Consider installing a video camera in the counseling room with the audio capabilities turned off.
- Maintain confidentiality in all counseling sessions unless employees learn of illegal activity. In that event, the employee should consult your organization's legal representation for further guidance.
- Warn employees that the following activities are strictly forbidden:
 - Personal conversations and questions with the counselee of an extremely intimate nature
 - Physical contact and greetings that go beyond handshakes
 - Fantasizing about an inappropriate relationship with the counselee

Youth Protection Measures for Religious Organizations

- Seeing counselees outside of the counseling sessions, such as giving him or her a ride home

Responding to Allegations of Child Abuse

For the purposes of establishing a policy at your organization, consider the following acts constituting child abuse:

- Physical abuse that is not accidental (beating, burning, biting, etc.)
- Emotional abuse in which a child is not nurtured or made to feel secure, such as extreme criticism, teasing, etc.
- Sexual conduct between an adult and a child (or between a child that is at least four years older than another child). Conduct may include pornography, incest, fondling, exhibitionism and intercourse
- Depriving a child of essential survival needs, such as food, water, shelter and adequate medical care

In the event that one or more of the abuses described above have occurred at your organization, consider the following actions:

1. Contact the child's parent or guardian.
2. Place the accused employee on leave immediately until an investigation is complete.
3. Contact the insurance company and fill out an incident report.
4. Comply with state laws regarding abuse reporting to law enforcement.
5. Cooperate with the authorities during their investigation.
6. Contact your organization's legal representation for guidance on how to address the media and the congregation.

7. Terminate the employee if he or she is found guilty of the abuse.

By establishing policies to ensure the safety of your young members, your organization is taking the necessary precautions to thwart inappropriate and illegal behavior. For more information on implementing a Youth Protection Policy and for insurance solutions to protect your organization, contact Peabody Insurance Agency today.