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Help Them!: Protecting Our Children from Abuse

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HELP THEM!

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN FROM ABUSE

The sacredness of children is a common theme throughout scripture. We are taught that “children are a gift from the Lord” (Psalm 127:3), and that the “kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). God sets children apart as unique and valuable individuals. In addition, we are warned that a person would be better off if “a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones” (Luke 17:2). Again, there are clear and heavy repercussions when precious treasures are not cared for. Yet in the US, where over 60% of the population is Christian, according to the Pew Research, it is estimated that 1 of every 7 children (anyone under the age of 18) has experienced abuse or neglect in the past year (www.cdc.gov).

The focus of this article is on safeguarding our children. We'll discuss what abuse is, why this topic is needed, possible warning signs, and some techniques and resources to help keep kids and teens safe. While we will share many resources with you, just reading this article will not help prevent abuse. The way to effect change is to share this information with others, to change our policies and structures to make abuse less likely, and to hold others accountable for their actions. So, we are asking that you not only read this article, but take a step (or two) to do something in your church or community to advance this work. As His children, we must be the city on the hill that cannot be hidden, giving light to everyone in the house (Matthew 5:14) to prevent abuse and to help those who have suffered, so they can recover from it.

by Melissa Ponce-Rodas

Design by Elennie Ramirez

What are child abuse and neglect?

The bible warns us not to harm children, but what exactly is harm? According to the Center for Disease Control, child abuse and neglect are “any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent, caregiver, or another person in custodial role that results in harm, or threat of harm to a child” as well as a “preventable act.” It is important to note that this definition includes both things we do (acts of commission) and things we neglect to do (acts of omission). The people responsible for children are not just parents, but can be caregivers or anyone who takes care of children (e.g. grandparents, siblings, school teachers, Sabbath school teachers, Pathfinder or Adventurer staff, camp counselors and others). Because of this, anyone and everyone who works with children needs to know what abuse and neglect are, how they can prevent it, and how to intervene if they find out about it. The definition states either the threat of harm, or harm itself must follow. Harm can happen in many ways, but the main types are the following:

- **Physical abuse** is the intentional use of physical force that can result in physical injury. Examples include hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, or other shows of force against a child.
- **Sexual abuse** involves pressuring or forcing a child to engage in sexual acts. It includes behaviors such as fondling, penetration, and exposing a child to other sexual activities. Please see CDC's Preventing Child Sexual Abuse webpage for more information.
- **Emotional abuse** refers to behaviors that harm a child's self-worth or emotional well-being. Examples include name-calling, shaming, rejecting, withholding love, and threatening.
- **Neglect** is the failure to meet a child's basic physical and emotional needs. These needs include housing, food, clothing, education, access to medical care, and having feelings validated and appropriately responded to. (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fast-fact.html>)

All of these are happening in our communities, in our churches, and even in our homes. Some children experience multiple types of abuse. While this information can be hard to process at times, we need to know that this is the result of living in a sin-filled world. The good news, however, is that much of this can be prevented, and interventions can help children (and adults) heal.

Action opportunity: Educate others! How many people in your congregation, school, or club know what child abuse is? You could choose child abuse as your topic for End It Now Day, the violence prevention day of emphasis that our church sponsors. Find local training opportunities - check with your local school district, your local child and family services department, advocacy center, or a psychologist or social worker you may know.

Educate children about their bodies and safety

We are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14), yet most of us (adults and children) don't know all of our body parts. We often study nature as God's creation, but we sometimes forget that humans are His crowning design. Not knowing enough about our divine design, and not teaching it to our children, is actually a risk factor for abuse. I can't tell you how many times I am told that “things happen down there” or “my flower is itchy” or “he touched my weewee or cookie.” Most professionals agree, based on the research there is, that children who can name their genitals and private parts are less likely to be abused and more likely to report it if something happens. Recently, Goldfarb and Lieberman conducted a meta-analysis reviewing three decades of research on sexual education programs, and found that early, consistent education efforts protect against various types of abuse. That is promising news! The article also says that education works best when it happens in multiple areas, such as school and home. Again, if parents aren't comfortable naming body parts or differentiating between good and bad touch, kids can't learn what they aren't taught. Let's work on our own education, and then share it with our children. God's design is amazing and nothing to be ashamed of.

We need to remember that anyone can be abused. Male or female, young or older, any religion, nationality, developmental stage – anyone. Abusers look for opportunity. So, we must protect all of our children. The rates for both males and females are almost the same now, for all types of abuse. One of the worst sexual abuse stories a social worker shared with me was of a 3-4 year old boy who had been so severely abused by his grandfather, that he needed a colostomy bag before the age of 5. I was told that story over 15 years ago, and it had happened 30 years before that. Children with special needs or disabilities are at greater risk for abuse. Adolescents are also at higher risk of sexual abuse and sex trafficking. This is why we must educate all of our children... not just once, but throughout their lives about their amazing bodies, and how to keep them safe or get help if they need it.

Action opportunity: Find an advocacy center, teacher, psychologist or social worker who can teach kids about their bodies. Make it an annual celebration at your church or school. Have posters in the bathroom with the correct names and pictures of private body areas. Remember, education needs to be ongoing.

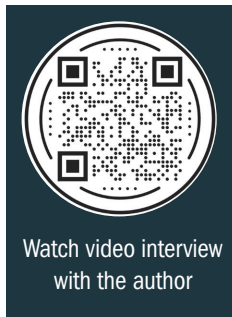


Unsplash Photo by: Jaroslav Devia

Who are the abusers?

While researchers have tried for decades to find a “profile” of who is more likely to abuse, the reality is that it can be anyone. For child abuse, the abuser is usually someone the child knows, and someone who has access to the child. Yes, sometimes it is a stranger, but more than 65% of the time, the abuser is someone the child already knows and has a relationship with.

While the abuser is often an adult, we are seeing an increase in child-aged abusers. Therefore, in order to protect our children, we need to know everyone who is around them and anyone who may have access to them – whether in private or in public (e.g., playgrounds, swimming pools, camps). Children should always be supervised by an adult. Doors should be left open whenever possible. Anyone who works with children, should have a background check. This protects both the children, and those who work with them. Currently, the NAD uses Sterling Volunteers both to educate about abuse, as well as to run a background check. Check with your local church about their use of this system. Knowing our children are among the most vulnerable, yet also the most precious, we need to be willing to take this step to safeguard them.



Action opportunity: Who in your children’s ministries has had this assessment? It should include children’s ministry leaders, club volunteers, school volunteers and anyone who works with children. While this is not a perfect system, it has lowered rates of abuse since the policies have been instituted. Check with your department leaders and encourage this step.

Grooming

While all abuse tends to escalate from smaller offenses to bigger ones, sexual abuse often starts with “grooming” or “manipulative behaviors that the abuser uses to gain access to a potential victim, coerce them to agree to the abuse, and reduce the risk of being caught” (<https://www.rainn.org/news/grooming-know-warning-signs>). A common progression of grooming is outlined as:

- *Victim selection: Abusers often observe possible victims and select them based on ease of access to them or their perceived vulnerability.*
- *Gaining access and isolating the victim: Abusers will attempt to physically or emotionally separate a victim from those protecting them and often seek out positions in which they have contact with minors.*
- *Trust development and keeping secrets: Abusers attempt to gain trust of a potential victim through gifts, attention, sharing “secrets” and other means to make them feel that they have a caring relationship and to train them to keep the relationship secret.*
- *Desensitization to touch and discussion of sexual topics: Abusers will often start to touch a victim in ways that appear harmless, such as hugging, wrestling and tickling, and later escalate to increasingly more sexual contact, such as massages or showering together. Abusers may also show the victim pornography or discuss sexual topics with them, to introduce the idea of sexual contact.*
- *Attempt by abusers to make their behavior seem natural, to avoid raising suspicions. For teens, who may be closer in age to the abuser, it can be particularly hard to recognize tactics used in grooming. Be alert for signs that your teen has a relationship with an adult that includes secrecy, undue influence or control, or pushes personal boundaries. (<https://www.rainn.org/news/grooming-know-warning-signs>)*

Grooming can happen in person and online, to both children and adults. It is a technique used to gain access and trust, to keep the abuse a “secret” and allow continued access to the child. Knowing the progression and warning signs, can help us prevent and intervene early.

The effects

People who have been abused (as children or as adults), are more likely to have physical problems (such as high blood pressure and heart attacks) as well as mental health problems (such as depression, anxiety and suicide attempts). Our Designer knows that we are meant to be cherished, not harmed. We need to continue to learn about abuse, educate others, enact better policies to deal with abusers, and create safe spaces for our children to grow and thrive.

Melissa Ponce-Rodas is an assistant professor of psychology at Andrews University. She and her husband, Segundo, have twin boys, Samuel and Jonathan. Her research and advocacy revolve around the intersections of religion and domestic violence.

There is help

To learn more, or if you or someone you know needs help, you can contact these agencies:

In an emergency, you should always call 911.

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 24/7: (1-800) 4-A-Child or (1-800) 422-4453

RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network): (800) 656-HOPE End It Now: Adventists Say No To Violence www.enditnow.org

Indiana Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline: 1-800-800-5556

Illinois Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline: 1-800-252-2873

Michigan Abuse and Neglect Hotline: 1-855-444-3911 Wisconsin: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/reportabuse>