

## **Emergent or Urgent Situations for the Pastoral Counselor: Mental Health Emergencies and ABC's of What to Do First:**

### **Part 4: Child Abuse and Neglect**

This segment focuses heavily on prevention of abuse and neglect for the most vulnerable populations, building awareness of risk factors by church members, developing support systems within the church. Some attention is also given to preventing abuse within the church itself.

The pastoral counselor is in a position to be the eyes and ears for the little child who has no ability to report things that are wrong or neglectful. The church can be a resource for prevention of child abuse problems. Starting with pregnant girls or women, offer any support you can to help them not keep their pregnancies a secret, which often leads to infant abandonment or infanticide. Make a policy of Safe Haven in your ministry, consistent with laws in your own state or country.

With pregnant women or girls who are using drugs and alcohol, immediate intervention is required to prevent the unborn child from suffering brain damage or other birth deformities. The single biggest cause of mental retardation in the U.S. is fetal alcohol syndrome, which can occur with a single usage of alcohol, often before the woman is even aware that she is already pregnant. Such women need immediate education and help to cease any drug and alcohol use for the protection of the unborn.

With poor pregnant women lacking in adequate nutrition or prenatal care, the risk for problems is much higher for their infants. For women who continue to smoke tobacco during pregnancy, the risk for low birth weight, premature birth, or other problems is also increased. There are women in your church who have been very successful mothers who can provide immeasurable preventive help and support to pregnant women and young mothers, and thereby helping to extend your capabilities for spiritual care and guidance as their good shepherd. In the Aramaic, "good shepherd" means "skilled shepherd," so we are called upon to develop the skill base to help our flock.

There is also a high risk of severe injury or fatalities in babies in the first year of life due to shaken baby syndrome. First-time parents are unaccustomed to the loss of sleep and the constant demands and may lack frustration tolerance or the skills to deal with a crying infant. Sometimes babies cry for no apparent reason. The time frame of 3-6 months is an especially vulnerable time for shaken baby syndrome, which may leave a child permanently brain damaged or worse.

If the mothers are living with young men with no past experience in caring for infants, such as a first-time father, or a boy friend who is not the father of the child, and they are relying on them for child care during work hours, the risk for abuse is high. Such

young parents should be offered help and support by older, wiser parents in your congregation who are spiritually mature. This is especially needed where young parents do not have supportive extended families who can help with child care and offer them occasional respite from the stress.

Single parents – usually the mothers – may be under stress from their multiple and unrelenting responsibilities. Support groups in the church for such parents can go a long way toward helping young parents learn needed skills, find someone to listen, to trade babysitting, learning practical and spiritual parenting. Those young parents whose own parental role models were not the best can be inspired by additional, more positive role models to whom they can look up. It is the child under age 5 who is at greatest risk for neglect or abuse where s/he is “under the radar” and goes undetected because s/he is unable to complain effectively. Most child deaths or permanent injuries from abuse and neglect are in this age group.

Child sexual abuse can occur at any age, but it is more common in school-age children and adolescents. Most perpetrators are someone known to the family, if not an actual household member or extended family member. But there are predators who seek out victims beyond the family. Be aware of who comes and goes in your group because predators have been known to seek out church settings where they may quickly gain trust of congregants. People in a parish should be taught to use common sense in how quickly or frequently they allow people even within the church to have unmonitored access to their children.

Within the church, there are some people who seek leaderships roles whose social skills are limited. They may sincerely wish to serve children and may not have ever consciously had any intention of abusing a child, but who become molesters. They are often more childlike or immature, relating to children more as their peers than as adults. Churches should routinely have two or more adults working together – preferably a male/female team, a married couple if possible – to share responsibilities for working with children’s or adolescents’ groups. No church worker, lay or ministerial, should be spending time with an individual child apart from a group or joint family activities. For a church worker to take an individual child to the movies, to a theme park, or to sleep in the same bed or tent with him/her on overnight trips reflects a loss of boundaries.

The best criterion for selecting good workers with children in the church is the adult who has well-established adult/peer relationships with persons of both genders. A person who is most comfortable around children and less comfortable with and/or deriving few of his/her own needs with other adults is at risk for becoming too emotionally involved with children. Such individuals seem to be more at risk for drifting into molestation. Ask the prospective children’s Sunday School teacher or youth leader, *“Who is your best friend?”... “Who are your closest friends?” ... “Across your lifetime, what is the best relationship you have ever had with anyone?”... “How much of your*

*time do you like to spend with children?"* Look at their social and recreational activities and ascertain whether they are adult-centered or child-centered: for the single person who is not yet a parent, they should already be adult-centered.

### **What to Do:**

- The most effective responses are made by church communities who already have designated people in place who have thought through in advance what the church can realistically offer, and who are also aware of community resources to which they can turn. If there are professionals in the church community with expertise, use them as consultants to develop your standard operating procedures. It may be appropriate to develop a standing committee to help develop procedures and to identify needed agencies and their addresses and phone numbers.
- Churches can advertise their willingness to help families in their own church bulletins and with leaflet handouts. Such leaflets can provide how to get appointments, how to ask for help, and perhaps a list of local agencies or resources. Such written sources should include a statement about confidentiality in some situations such as Rite of Reconciliation, but obligation to report abuse, neglect, or risk of harm in other situations.
- In all situations, make a judgment about the current risk of harm. For example, if a parent confesses to abuse years ago and there are no minors currently in the home, then risk would be viewed as low. If a parent confesses to ongoing and current domestic violence or child abuse, part of penance will be to develop a viable plan of safety and putting resources in place for both continued accountability and support.
- If an issue of possible abuse or neglect has been raised by a child *brought to you by a parent*, try to talk with the child without the parent in the room. Depending on the age of the child, ask as few "leading questions" as possible. "*I understand something happened that you did not like (that hurt you, that scared you). Can you tell me what happened?..." "Tell me more about that."... "And then what happened next?"*
- If you have access to the child or a non-abusing parent or guardian, ascertain whether the parent is capable of protecting the child from the abusing individual. Some parents are themselves too threatened by the other parent to be able to keep him/her safe. In some cases, suggest to such parent that arrangements be made for the child to stay temporarily with a responsible extended family member, neighbor, or other church member while the issue is sorted out. If there are other children, they too should be removed.

- In making a report of abuse where you've taken these preventive steps, inform CPS or police of what you've already done and where the child(ren) are currently located.
- If both parents appear to be involved in neglect or abuse, or neither appears to be cooperative in or capable of developing a safety plan, then report directly to Child Protective Services or the child abuse hotline in your county. Inform them of your failed efforts, as this will get the case more attention than it might otherwise draw.
- Neglect or failing to meet the necessary needs of a child often falls under the radar of awareness especially with children age five and below. Where young children or babies are left alone or unsupervised, are not adequately fed, or lack needed medical care, then the parent has neglected the child. Do everything you can to enlist the help of others to stand in the gap to help the parent fulfill his/her responsibilities. Check on their status frequently, if possible, in person and in the home. Either you or a trusted person in the church can observe the child or children and the condition of the home. Is there adequate food in the house? Are conditions adequate for the safety of a young child? Is there evidence of reasonable organization and attending to daily chores? What about sanitary conditions? Are there any problems that need immediate resolution? (Utilities turned off, lack of running water, lack of suitable food for the child(ren)). Obviously, in any family with young children or babies, there is a certain degree of chaos that is inherent where children take precedence over chores. A single mom with five children under age ten shouldn't be held to the same standard as a mom with a responsible partner and only one child.
- If *another child in the church reports* to you that a young peer is being abused, encourage the reporting child to tell the peer to come forward and to bring him/her to speak with you. If you then can identify a responsible non-abusing parent, ask the child to allow you to bring in the parent to help in making decisions about what to do. A child who is reluctant to directly share such information with a parent will usually be relieved that you are willing to help.
- Make a report in the state/jurisdiction where abuse was alleged to have occurred. Be prepared, if at all possible, to give the following information: Name of child, date of birth, gender, race, present home address or location of the child, and any siblings plus their ages. Name, address, and phone of the child's school or preschool. Name, date of birth, gender, race, home address or location; home, cell or work phone numbers of the parent(s), and any similar information known about the alleged perpetrator if s/he is not a family member. Be prepared to tell the agency what the child said happened (if child made a

statement), or your observations of any bruises or injuries, whether a physician was seen, and what the adult(s) said.

- It is not your place to investigate the validity of an abuse allegation before reporting. If you are a mandated reporter in your state, and any priest, deacon, or minister working with families is, then you are required to report. However, you can add your own impressions and concerns at the time you report.
- In working with families where abuse is alleged, be careful to leave the doors open with all family members, not rushing to judgment, so that you can be an agent of healing.
- If you feel that the parent may not be able to protect the child and the parent has not allowed the child to be temporarily moved from a risky situation, this information should be relayed to the authorities when you make a report.
- If the perpetrator was not a member of the child's immediate family, the reporting authority should be the police (U.S. procedure, check your own legal authorities if you reside in another country.) If the perpetrator was a parent or other member of the child's household, the Social Services Agency (which goes by different names in different U.S. locales, e.g. Public Social Services, Children's Services, etc.). If a hotline is available, call the hotline and they will make a determination of where the information should go.
- Prevention of escalating violence/homicide: If you determine that an adolescent, particularly a male, is being abused chronically by a parent figure, precautions should be taken to prevent future violence toward the parent. Sometimes the child will complain of unpredictable behavior on the part of the parent, such as intoxication or abuse toward the other parent or siblings. The abuse may not necessarily appear to be extreme, e.g. resulting in need for medical care, and often, it has not been reported to authorities. It may not be so severe as simply unrelenting. Some adolescents may complain of extreme control and denial of age-appropriate levels of freedom where you may need to make a judgment about how far out-of-bounds this seems to be. Is the mother also under similar constraints? Typically, boys have reached a level of physical size and maturity where they begin to feel capable of challenging the abusive parent, most often the father or stepfather. Girls often enlist the help of a boy friend. Usually, the choice of weapon is a gun. They often disclose to one or more peers about his/their plans, and may enlist one or more peers to assist them in some way. Experience and research have shown that from the time such a youngster first voices the desire to kill a parent, it is likely to be carried out within two or three weeks. *Always take such threats with the utmost seriousness.* Do everything you can to temporarily remove the adolescent from the situation. If there has been a specific threat, inform the police of the intended victim, and allow authorities to

inform such person of their risk. The minor needs to be taken into another family at least temporarily, but you need to go through the appropriate legal channels in your community.

- Teach adolescent groups that *it is never appropriate* for them to keep information confidential if a peer has talked about committing suicide or killing a family member. The same teaching and same window of time pertains to adolescents who threaten school violence. Very often, only peers have been told and typically they never disclose to a responsible adult until it is too late. They may report that they felt the youth was joking. Or they feel that they are “ratting out” their friend, when, in reality, they may be saving two lives – that of the friend being saved from a lifetime of incarceration as well as the intended victim being spared injury or death.

### **Local Phone Numbers for Reporting Abuse**

Abuse must be reported within the state in which it occurs. When seeking to report abuse, remember these points:

1. Not every state has a reporting hotline.
2. Not every hotline is 24-hour accessible.
3. If the state does have a hotline, it may only be accessible within that state. You can call information and ask for the number for reporting child abuse in your local county or township.
4. Should you need to report in another state or the particular state does not have a hotline, you may need to contact the out-of-state reporting number of the specific county in which abuse occurred. The Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline can provide these numbers for you:

<http://www.childhelpusa.org/child/report.htm#co>

### **Assisting Families Where Reports of Child Abuse Have Been Made**

Part of the spiritual growth process of working through abusive behaviors may involve reconciliation and reparations both with God and the aggrieved parties. Where such acts must come to the attention of authorities, as a part of the legal disclosure process, the minister/priest may be able to facilitate the person’s participation in needed therapeutic or parenting programs that will assist him/her in regaining control of his/her behavior. Try to frame the necessity of your making a legal report as an opportunity to obtain help and support.

For example, in many cases of more minor incidents, Social Services will place a parent under an “informal supervision” program, where they are required to attend counseling, e.g. domestic violence classes, therapy, substance abuse classes or AA/NA, participation in Parents Anonymous or similar organizations, parenting classes. This is especially true if a responsible person in the church has offered support and oversight.

Obviously, it depends somewhat on the “luck of the draw” of county personnel as to whether your family will get the help they need. Ask the family to sign a release of information so that you can maintain communication with the social worker – if someone is serving as an advocate for the family who is trying to work with the county, they are more likely to pay attention to their needs. The squeaky wheel always gets the grease. This kind of consistent follow-up can be carried out by a Deacon or other dedicated lay member of your congregation. It also helps to keep the system honest and accountable.

If a child is removed from the home, church members can come forward and be screened to serve as visitation monitors, thus helping the family to maintain more frequent contact with the minor. Social workers’ loads are so heavy that visitation could be limited to an hour a week or less, so the parent/child bonding can be substantially damaged, especially with babies and very young children. Another important role that church members may play is to become qualified as foster care providers, so that children can remain with people they already know who will try to facilitate family reunification where appropriate.

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Key Words: [adolescent killers](#), [child abuse hot line](#), [child abuse prevention](#), [child abuse reporting laws](#), [child visitation monitors](#), [Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline](#), [fetal alcohol syndrome](#), [first-time father](#), [first-time mother](#), [foster care providers](#), [informal supervision](#), [low birth weight](#), [matricide](#), [pastoral counselor](#), [patricide](#), [premature birth](#), [prenatal care](#), [shaken baby syndrome](#)