

# Creating Protective Environments: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in Faith Communities

## Whose Role is it to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse?

This may seem like a simple question with a simple answer – everyone has a role to play when it comes to preventing child sexual abuse. The truth is in fact more complicated: people who hold more power have an increased responsibility to prevent violence in their communities. The Cambridge Dictionary defines power as: the ability or right to control people and events, or to influence the way people act or think in important ways. In our efforts to end child sexual abuse, it's important to identify who holds power. In our society, adults hold power over young people. Adults often have the ability to influence many aspects of children's lives, from what they are provided to eat to what they are able to watch on television. Despite this, child abuse prevention efforts are often targeted at young people. Many schools and youth serving organizations bring in educators to teach children how to identify harmful behaviors and set effective boundaries. This kind of educational program is incomplete and places to responsibility

primarily on young people who have little control of their environment. A comprehensive program that trains educators and caregivers to create environments that protect young people against abuse shifts the responsibility for protection to adults and institutions.

This approach guides the content of this resource. It is intended to help adults in faith communities learn about their role in the prevention of child sexual abuse. We will examine the types of social norms that uphold the power structures contributing to and causing child sexual abuse. We will address ways in which adults can challenge and shift the power structures, attitudes, beliefs, and norms that contribute to child sexual abuse. Everyone's goal is to prevent child sexual assault and build healthy environments for healthy spiritual development and physical safety. We can do this together.



# Why Faith Based Communities? + What is Child Sexual Abuse?

## Why Faith Based Communities?

The term faith communities will be used throughout this resource to refer to religious communities and congregations. It is important that we acknowledge that communities of faith are not a monolith, and that they represent diverse cultures, beliefs, and practices. This publication is intended to resonate with religious communities in the United States.

Faith communities have made lasting contributions to families' and individuals' spiritual wellbeing, financial welfare, and emotional upliftment. They provide a space for communities

to engage in spiritual learning, fellowship, and support. On the other hand, faith communities have the potential to distribute power unevenly, and apply judgment to marginalized populations. As a result of unchecked and centralized power, individuals and families are vulnerable to abuse of power. Across institutions, communities, and families, power disparity continues to contribute to the pervasiveness and normalization of sexual violence. Faith communities are part of this systematic and individualized issue: they are not immune to the risks of power disparity and child sexual abuse.

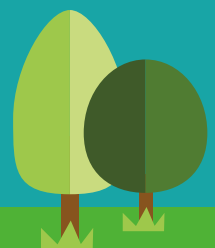
## What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse (CSA) occurs when someone engages in a sexual act with a minor (under age 18). Child sexual abuse can include behaviors such as sexual touching, penetration, and sexual acts such as flashing, masturbation, peeping, or exposure to pornography that may not involve touching. Child sexual abuse can be perpetrated by older youth as well as adults. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse may engage in behaviors that are not legally defined as criminal. In fact, abusers usually rely on coercion, manipulation, secrecy, and acts of trust building in their grooming efforts. Grooming is intentional and is generally aimed at the child and the child's caregiver and family.

The majority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are someone the child or family knows. According to RAINN, as many as 93 percent of victims under the age of 18 know the person who abused them.<sup>1</sup> They could be an older sibling or peer, family member, teacher, coach, instructor, caretaker, or the parent of another child. Because a perpetrator does not need to be an adult to harm a child, our prevention efforts cannot be limited to equipping young people with the skills to recognize when adults are engaging in inappropriate or abusive behavior. In order to adequately address child sexual abuse, young people also need to be able to understand how to respect their peers and what is considered abusive or inappropriate behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> RAINN: <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens>



# Responding to Disclosures + Victim Blaming

## Responding to Disclosures

Healing is possible for children who have been sexually abused. Adults can provide support to child survivors in the following ways:

- Believe the child: tell them you believe them and that you are glad they told you.
- Address immediate safety: is the child safe from further victimization? Do they need medical care? Who are other safe people they can identify? Creating a support network helps with both physical and emotional safety.
- Ask the child what they need and want to feel safe: give power back to the child by giving them the space to define safety. Ask them what resources and supports they need and want to heal.
- Reach out for support: The survivor may need additional support. Community Sexual Assault Programs are available to provide advocacy and crisis intervention services. To find a local program go to [wcsap.org/help](http://wcsap.org/help).
- Continue the conversation: continue to learn about CSA prevention and root causes of sexual violence. You can share what you learn with others in your faith community. For example, you can incorporate CSA prevention topics and resources into your casual conversations, sermons, in newsletters, and bulletin boards.

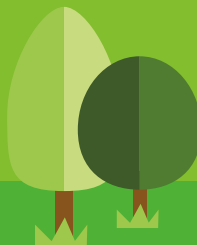
## Victim Blaming

Anyone who has experienced sexual assault or abuse likely knows how painful victim blaming can be. Unfortunately, when someone discloses abuse, it can be a pretty common occurrence for the conversation to turn to why they were there, what they did to “invite” the act of violence, or why they didn’t fight back more. This narrative serves to dismiss the perpetrator’s act of violence and makes survivors of sexual abuse less likely to come forward because they fear that they will be blamed.

In order to address victim blaming, it can be helpful to understand why it’s so common. Many psychologists have researched victim blaming and found that it can serve as a way for people to protect their own worldview and sense of safety.

When a person experiences sexual abuse, others who live in the same neighborhood or attend the same church may be faced with a situation that suggests that their environment might not be safe. They are reminded that their friends, their children, or perhaps even they themselves can become a victim of sexual abuse. In order to avoid altering their worldview or sense of safety, people often focus on what the victim could have done to avoid experiencing abuse rather than the perpetrator of violence who often remains in the community.

When someone comes forward and discloses abuse, it’s important to avoid victim blaming attitudes and acknowledge that no matter what someone does, no one should experience abuse.



# Privacy + Insularity

## Privacy

Church communities have varied values and rules around privacy and information sharing. Often, congregation members will attend confessional or disclose sensitive information to clergy. This can include information about wrongdoing and personal struggles for which they require spiritual or welfare assistance. Church leadership with formal clergy education are held to ethical and legal standards. However, some religious leaders have not attended a seminary and may not have training on privacy. This becomes problematic in situations where congregation members put trust in their spiritual leader and have expectations that their information will not be shared.

In other situations, privacy is incorrectly defined to mean silencing and isolating groups of people.

“Privacy” can be defined to mean that the church congregation as a whole, does not talk openly about sexuality, sexual violence, or sexual health. This misinterpretation can lead to secrecy that lacks accountability and safety.

Church communities can create an environment where integrity leads to conversations, and confidentiality and privacy are interpreted in ways that prioritize children’s safety. Faith leaders can model privacy and confidentiality with young people by obtaining permission from them to share information with parents. This assures a young person that their information is protected. It promotes clear and effective communication, in addition to appropriate boundaries and protecting confidential information.

## Insularity

Faith based communities are often very effective at taking care of their congregants. Many churches have welfare programs and structures in place to provide assistance to their members. In many church settings, this pendulum can swing to insularity. On the one hand, resources from within can be a community-building experience. On the other hand, insularity can lead to isolating young people further, who already experience an inherent power disparity. This happens when young people are discouraged from learning about or reaching out to resources outside of the faith community. Insular environments halt growth and learning by further isolating individuals from supportive resources, information, and ideas.

Faith communities can partner with community based organizations whose mission includes CSA prevention, sexual education, and establishing boundaries. Clergy can sponsor classes, workshops, and even individualized consultations to learn from trainers and experts in the field of child sexual assault prevention. Clergy and faith leaders can still provide their expertise in spiritual wellbeing and learning, while “staying in their lane” to provide space for community based advocates and experts. These community relationships can provide a powerful wraparound effect for congregations and clergy to expand their wellbeing and prevent child sexual abuse.

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# Hierarchy + Body Autonomy

## Hierarchy

Our society's building blocks are fundamentally hierarchical, from the way we hold positions of power in the workplace, to the way that family structures play out. In a church community setting, power can take various forms: weight in decision-making, authoritative meaning-making, and scriptural interpretation. Sometimes faith communities perpetuate ideas that promote hierarchical power disparity. One example of how this manifests is when children are taught to be obedient to parents and authority, as a matter of spiritual guidance and virtue. When children are taught to do what they are told as a matter of principle, they are unable to practice autonomous decision-making. Furthermore, this puts children in a place where they are less likely to know how to identify boundary violations, unhealthy power dynamics in their relationships, and red flags that lead to sexual violence.

In what ways can faith communities reorganize their structures to share power more broadly? This begins with identifying where power is going unchecked, and getting honest about the harm this has caused and has the potential to cause. Faith communities can bring marginalized members to the center of decision making processes. Adults can validate the feelings, needs, preferences, and contributions of children and youth. Church leaders, who have a powerful impact on their congregation's attitudes and beliefs, can promote this type of power sharing.

## Body Autonomy

In our efforts to create environments that protect against child sexual abuse, it is crucial to respect a child's right to say no and make choices about their body. When young people are pressured to ignore their own feelings and submit to unwanted affection, it sends the message that their own boundaries do not matter and they do not have control over them.

Children should not be pressured to hug, kiss, be held, sit on the lap, or be tickled by adults. Instead, adults should encourage young people to decide

how they want to show affection to older people, and provide them with the knowledge and skills to assert boundaries.

When a community has ceremonies, rituals, or customs that require young people to be touched by or be affectionate with adults, we encourage them to find ways to incorporate consent into these activities so that young people are given the opportunity to set boundaries and make decisions about how they do or do not want to be touched.

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# Gender + Sexual Development

## Gender

People tend to use the terms “sex” and “gender” interchangeably. While our understanding of gender may begin with the assignment of our sex, it doesn’t end there. In our society, many of us abide by certain norms or rules when it comes to gender – those who identify as men are expected to act masculine, and those of us who identify as women are expected to act feminine. While there are many positive attributes of traditional views of masculinity and femininity, these constructs can also serve to limit people’s ability to express their authentic selves. For example, when men are expected to be stoic and not emotional, it can severely impact their willingness to seek medical care or address mental health issues. When women are expected to be docile and passive, they can be discouraged from setting boundaries and being assertive.

It is important that faith communities understand how narrow definitions of gender can negatively impact their members, and how they can mitigate this by supporting people’s freedom to express themselves regardless of their gender. In addition, for transgender survivors of sexual abuse, their identities – and the discrimination they face surrounding those identities – often make them hesitant to seek help from clergy, police, hospitals, shelters or rape crisis centers, the very resources that are essential to healing. Transgender individuals experience high rates of sexual violence; 47 percent of transgender people are sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> To learn more about welcoming congregations for transgender people, you can use your search engine to find the resource “Human Rights Campaign: Gender Identity and Our Faith Communities: A Congregational Guide for Transgender Advocacy.”

## Sexual Development

While many people believe that sexual health is an inappropriate topic for children, pediatricians and psychologists suggest otherwise. Medical Professionals and Sexual Abuse Prevention Professionals encourage that we teach young people the correct words to identify their genitalia as an important component of teaching consent and preventing sexual abuse. Learning how to correctly describe anatomy helps young people to communicate about their medical issues or identify when someone engages in inappropriate or abusive actions.

As young people grow older, they experience puberty and their bodies develop quickly. It is often around this time that their curiosity about

sex increases. Even if we think they may be too young to engage in sexual activity, it is important for young people to experience evidence based sexual health education and learn about puberty, reproduction, abstinence, contraception and condoms, relationships, and sexual violence prevention. Withholding information about these topics can put youth who decide to engage in sexual activity at risk of unplanned pregnancies, unhealthy relationships, and/or sexually transmitted infections. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that not talking to young people about sexuality sends a message that it is embarrassing to talk about, and reinforces a culture of secrecy and silence that perpetrators of child sexual abuse often rely on.

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<sup>2</sup> HRC: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>

