



# SAFE TO COMPETE

An Introduction to Sound Practices for Keeping Children Safer in Youth-serving Organizations



[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)



NationalCenter  
ForMissingAnd  
ExploitedChildren



@missingkids

## Introduction

Youth-serving organizations offer a variety of vital services for children and their families, from scholastic improvement to sports programs. Although each organization may have a different mission, they all share a common goal: providing safe and healthy environments in which youth may learn, play and grow. The key to achieving this goal is the consistent implementation of comprehensive policies and procedures. Nowhere is this more critical than when working to protect youth from sexual abuse and exploitation.

Many national youth-serving organizations and child advocacy groups have developed resources addressing this issue. However, combining these resources into a cohesive and effective child sexual abuse prevention program can be overwhelming for affiliate organizations and their administrators. To that end, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® offers this document as a framework which youth-serving organizations can use to guide the development of their sexual abuse prevention program. It is intended to complement—not replace—existing resources for implementing effective policies and procedures.

It is the first of many steps NCMEC is taking in partnership with youth-serving organizations across the nation to help prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. NCMEC also is committed to assisting youth-serving organizations by:

- Acting as the national clearinghouse for information and resources aimed at helping youth-serving organizations protect children from sexual abuse.
- Offering background check technical assistance through 1-800-THE-LOST® (843-5678).
- Encouraging and facilitating conversations between youth-serving organizations at both a national and local level.
- Developing resources to help youth-serving organizations engage parents, educate youth participants and empower bystanders to act.

Visit [www.SafeToCompete.org](http://www.SafeToCompete.org) to access more resources and to share your thoughts about how we can all better protect our children.

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## Child Protection Checklist

In March of 2013, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and the Cal Ripken, Sr. Foundation hosted over 50 of the nation's largest youth-serving and youth-sports organizations, as well as child development and prevention experts, to discuss strategies for protecting children from sexual abuse. The following components were identified as being essential to youth-serving organizations' efforts to develop comprehensive sexual abuse prevention programs:

- ✓ Organizational Self-Assessment
- ✓ Child Protection Policies
- ✓ Employee/Volunteer Screening
- ✓ Employee/Volunteer Training
- ✓ Response and Reporting
- ✓ Community Engagement and Empowerment

## Organizational Self-Assessment

Before making significant changes to a current child sexual abuse prevention program or starting a new one, organizations should perform an assessment. Not only will this help identify areas of weakness, but it also will highlight effective policies that should be continued. An assessment should take into account:

- Major issues/challenges from past dealings with allegations of sexual abuse
- Organizational culture and attitude toward child protection
- Input from affiliate organizations (e.g., are organizational policies clear? easy to follow?)
- Who is responsible for implementing which policies
- Factors unique to the organization, including
  - size and location
  - available resources (e.g., number of staff)
  - activities offered (e.g., soccer, gymnastics, mentoring)
  - age and gender of participants
- State and federal laws

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### **Self-Assessment Resources**

- *Assessment Questionnaire*. Canadian Centre for Child Protection. Commit To Kids: Helping Organizations Prevent Child Sexual Abuse. [http://www.commit2kids.ca/app/en/assessment\\_questionnaire](http://www.commit2kids.ca/app/en/assessment_questionnaire)
- Saul, J. & Audage, N. *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures*. Atlanta (Ga.): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2007. pp. 35-38. <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/PreventingChildSexualAbuse-a.pdf>

## **Child Protection Policies**

Organizations should strive to create environments that are hostile toward potential offenders. Clearly stated and consistently enforced child protection policies demonstrate that neither inappropriate behavior nor abuse will be tolerated. A sound child protection policy should:

- Affirm the organization’s commitment to child protection
- Identify who is expected to adhere to the policy (e.g., employees, volunteers, youth participants)
- Define and prohibit forms of misconduct (e.g., emotional, physical, sexual)
- Address specific concerns, such as
  - Youth supervision (e.g., adult-to-child ratios)
  - Internet communication (e.g., texting, social media, email)
  - Privacy (e.g., locker rooms)
  - Travel (e.g., chaperones, number of adults and athletes in a car)
- Outline procedures for responding to and reporting policy violations
- Be frequently examined, re-evaluated and updated to fit the organization’s changing needs

In order to be effective, all of an organization’s participants should be made aware of the policies. Consider creating a simplified code of conduct for each participant group—employees/volunteers, youth and parents—which outlines organizational policies and expectations.

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### ***What about zero tolerance?***

Having zero-tolerance policies can help an organization clearly communicate its intention to take child protection seriously. However, these policies should also take into account the realities of youth-adult interactions. For example, a ban on all physical contact may be ignored by concerned adults attempting to comfort a crying child. Instead of banning all touch, adults must be given guidance in determining appropriate boundaries.

### ***Resources for Policy Development***

- Safe Sport Program. United States Olympic Committee.  
<http://safesport.org/>
- Duncan, R. *Creating the Right Relationship Between Coaches and Athletes*. National Federation of State High School Associations.  
<http://www.nfhs.org/CoachingTodayFeature.aspx?id=4477>

## **Employee/Volunteer Screening**

One of the best ways to protect children is to surround them with adults who are concerned for every child's welfare and safety. The first step in doing this is to set up a comprehensive screening process for applicants. A comprehensive screening process consists of:

- Criminal background checks
- In-person interviews
- Reference checks
- Ongoing observation

### ***Criminal Background Checks***

#### **1) Nationwide and State Criminal History Checks**

In the U.S., there are two sources of criminal history information: law enforcement agencies and private companies. Law enforcement agencies may be limited by state law to provide criminal history checks only to qualified entities. Upon request by a qualified entity, law enforcement agencies can search the FBI's National Crime Information Center database using an applicant's fingerprints. The search results will include information entered into NCIC by all states, and

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typically include arrests, convictions, dismissals, outstanding warrants, aliases and sex offender registry status. Results can vary. Although some states permit a name-based search, it is limited to that state's criminal database.

A list of the State Identification Bureaus is available on the FBI Criminal Justice Information Service's website <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/background-checks/state-identification-bureau-listing>.

Private companies maintain databases that typically contain records from courts, correctional facilities and some state criminal databases. The searches conducted by these companies are not based on fingerprints. They are based on name, date of birth and social security numbers. Because not all states provide their criminal records to private companies, the search results will not include criminal records from every state, even if the company's search report states it is a "nationwide" check.

Nationwide fingerprint criminal history checks through NCIC are preferable as they are more accurate in confirming identity than name-based checks. Fingerprint-based checks are important because they can reveal criminal records that an applicant may have under a different name or date of birth and will catch those who are trying to avoid detection from state to state. If an NCIC request is not possible, it is important to submit criminal database requests to each state where an applicant has lived or worked.

## 2) Search of the State and National Public Sex Offender Websites

Every state has a website with information about registered sex offenders. The National Sex Offender Public Website is a resource that provides the public with the capability to search and access sex offender data nationwide. NSOPW is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Justice and state, territorial and tribal governments. In addition to searching for applicants on NSOPW ([www.nsopw.gov](http://www.nsopw.gov)), organizations should also conduct a separate search of the registry in each state where an applicant has lived or worked. A list of the state websites is available on [www.nsopw.gov](http://www.nsopw.gov). Note that the offenses requiring sex offender registration vary slightly among the states and not all registered sex offenders appear on the public registry. A sex offender registry search is not a substitute for a fingerprint-based criminal history database search.

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### 3) Search of State Child Abuse Registries

A search of child abuse registries should be requested for each state where the applicant has lived. Not all states permit disclosure of this information, and the information provided varies among states. Contact the state department of human services or child welfare to request a search of this registry. A list of state agencies is available at

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/confide.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/confide.cfm).

### ***Beyond Criminal Background Checks***

Not all people who abuse children have criminal records. Therefore, developing effective policies and procedures to protect children from sexual abuse is a multi-layer process. In-person interviews, reference checks and ongoing observation are key components to the screening process. During an in-person interview or while conducting reference checks, certain types of questions may reveal areas of concern or raise “red flags.” After an applicant is hired, his or her interactions with children should be monitored. Continued observation of interactions between adults and the children in their care can encourage a culture of transparency and accountability.

### ***Screening Resources***

- Patterson, J. *The Staff Screening Toolkit, 3rd Edition*. Nonprofit Risk Management Center, 2004.  
<http://www.selective.com/WebApplications/EDS/PublicSite/Client/PDF/Staff%20Screening%20Tool%20Kit.pdf>

## **Employee/Volunteer Training**

All employees and volunteers who routinely come into contact with children should receive training on how to recognize, respond to and report suspicions of child sexual abuse. At a minimum, an employee training program should:

- Review the organization’s child sexual abuse policies
- Define child sexual abuse and other types of misconduct
- Help employees identify child sexual abuse and recognize disclosures by children

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- Explain the organization’s system for reporting inappropriate behavior and/or suspicions of child sexual abuse
- Evaluate employees’ understanding of their organization’s policies

Trainings on child sexual abuse prevention should be ongoing and updated to reflect any changes in the organization’s policy.

### **Training Resources**

- Protective Behaviors, an online training by the Special Olympics.  
[http://resources.specialolympics.org/protective\\_behaviors\\_training.aspx](http://resources.specialolympics.org/protective_behaviors_training.aspx)
- Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment, an online training by the National Federation of State High School Associations.  
<http://www.nfhslearn.com/index.aspx>

## **Response and Reporting**

Organizations should have clearly defined, step-by-step procedures explaining how and when to report suspicions of child abuse and misconduct. It should also be made clear to staff that it is not their responsibility to determine whether an action is criminal. They should report *without hesitation* all actions which violate an organization’s code of conduct. This may allow concerning or inappropriate behaviors to be addressed before they evolve into something more serious.

All stakeholders—staff, parents and youth participants—should be made aware of these policies, and management must continually reinforce them at regular intervals through trainings, educational materials and other internal communications. At a minimum, a response and reporting system should:

- Clearly define *when* reports should be made
  - In response to policy violations
  - If sexual abuse is suspected
  - In accordance with state and federal laws
- Clearly define *how* reports should be made and provide more than one method of reporting (e.g., via phone call or email)
- Clearly define to *whom* reports should be made
  - Management
  - Law Enforcement
- Provide protection for “whistle-blowers”

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- Require reports to be documented

Before developing a reporting protocol, organizations should consult with legal counsel to ensure they are complying with state and federal laws.

### ***Reporting Resources***

- Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/mandated.cfm>

## **Community Engagement and Empowerment**

Child sexual abusers rely upon the silence of victims and the inaction of bystanders. While it is important to educate children about sexual abuse and encourage them to speak up if they are uncomfortable, preventing and responding to child sexual abuse is ultimately an adult responsibility. Therefore, an environment must be cultivated where the topic of child protection and adult responsibility is openly discussed and encouraged. Youth-serving organizations should communicate with parents and guardians about:

- Reporting suspicions of misconduct or sexual abuse
- Identifying subtle signs of possible child sexual abuse, including employees/volunteers who:
  - Single out a child for gifts or special privileges
  - Try to spend excessive one-on-one time with a child
  - Create opportunities to be alone with a child outside of the program (e.g., invitations to sleepovers, sporting events, movies)
  - Are overly harsh in disciplining a particular child

All individuals in an organization should be prepared to take action if they have concerns about the behavior of an adult or the welfare of a child. As empowered bystanders, they will make a true difference in protecting children from sexual abuse.

### ***Community Engagement Resources***

- A Parent's Guide to the Little League Child Protection Program  
[http://www.littleleague.org/Assets/forms\\_pubs/Parents-GuideTo-ChildProtection-11.pdf](http://www.littleleague.org/Assets/forms_pubs/Parents-GuideTo-ChildProtection-11.pdf)

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