



Safety Reminder – Youth Protection

Few issues associated with the operations of a youth-serving organization are as critical as youth protection. Organizations have the responsibility to ensure that all children in their care are both properly nurtured and safe. Child abuse causes harm to individuals, staff and the organization when it occurs. Sound risk management programs include procedures to prevent child abuse, protect youth in our care, protect staff from false accusations and educate families. Organizations can also serve the greater good by bringing, youth, families and the community in efforts to prevent abuse.

Policies - A thorough and comprehensive abuse prevention program must be in place in order to protect youth, families, community and the organization itself. A youth protection and/or [abuse prevention policy](#) should be in effect that has been reviewed and adopted by the Board of Directors. This policy provides direction for the ongoing efforts of the organization. Abuse prevention efforts should be evaluated each year to better understand their effectiveness and to adapt to current trends.

Training – Abuse prevention training is necessary for all employed and volunteer staff. A policy overview should be included in the orientation that is provided to all policy volunteers. Training should help staff understand, recognize and report abuse, as well as learn practices that can protect youth, staff and the organization from harm. Documentation of initial and annual refresher training and a signed copy of a [Code of Conduct](#) should be included in all employee and volunteer personnel files. The “Code” should outline acceptable standards for behavior including limiting contact with youth outside of the organization.

Screening - Thorough screening procedures are a crucial part of youth protection efforts. While it is true that many potential abusers have no criminal records, a thorough screening process can assist supervisors in selecting qualified staff and discouraging potential abusers from applying. Organizations should follow proven screening practices for all staff (employed and volunteer) that include a signed application form, criminal background check, [documented reference checks](#) (at least three) and personal interview(s). Other techniques would include group interviews and carefully monitored position performance and/or interaction with children.



Supervision - Supervision of staff, youth and key facility areas is important. Organizations should ensure that facilities are secure, storage and maintenance areas are not available to the public and that several layers of regular supervision exist at all times. Organizations should implement [supervision strategies](#) like the “Rule of 3”, “Two-Deep Leadership” and/or no one-on-one in all youth programs. Supervisors should be familiar with methods that encourage compliance with protection procedures by staff. Staff to youth ratios should be designed to comply with regulations, be age appropriate and gender sensitive. No program participant should ever be alone with a single staff person where they cannot be observed by another staff member.

Awareness - Abuse prevention activities should not cease with employees, program volunteers and the Board. Organizations should provide awareness activities or programs for youth and parents. These activities would include making parents and the community aware of the organization’s policies, reporting procedures and abuse prevention efforts. All youth programs should include regular age-appropriate activities that enforce prevention behaviors and/or raise awareness. These activities might include discussion, roleplay, arts or games that cover topics such as “Stranger Danger”, good touch/bad touch, Internet safety and bullying prevention. Community events can be tied into [National Child Abuse Prevention Month \(April\)](#) and also include other community-service groups such as schools, law enforcement and advocacy agencies.

Current Trends - Thankfully the stereotypical idea of an adult white male molesting a young child is far from the most common form of abuse that occurs today. Organizations must still protect children in their care with the procedures discussed previously in this document, but they must also adapt to the changing times and include new strategies in their prevention efforts that are aimed at the more prevalent issues of today. The cyber-world is here and many issues associated with the Internet, cell phones and digital communications have great potential for causing harm to youth. Staff should be discouraged from interacting with youth participants through the Internet, on social networking sites and by instant or text messaging. Training should include topics on [Bullying](#) and prevention of peer-abuse. While neglect remains the most common form of child abuse in the US today, the landscape is ever-changing and organizations must adapt to these changes. Policies, training and supervision components of an organization’s youth protection efforts must be reviewed on at least an annual basis to ensure that the most recent information and effective prevention strategies have been considered.

More information on youth protection and child abuse prevention is available in the [Safe-Wise Consulting Online Resource Library](#)