

Classroom Safety

by Rebecca J. Bennett

Your main job as a teacher is to teach children about God. But along with that privilege comes the responsibility to keep children as safe as possible while in your care.

Let's take a look at four areas all churches should plan for—just in case! These few lines cannot deal extensively with each issue, so consider the ideas as beginning points.

Health and First Aid

Allergy Awareness. Know children's food or other allergies. Keep a record of these in the classroom.

Personal Hygiene. When taking children to the restroom, encourage them to take care of their own personal needs. Hand washing can be fun, as well as necessary.

Sick-Child Policy. Draw up guidelines regarding attendance by children who may be ill. Distributing such policies before a problem occurs will make it easier to deny admittance to a child who may be contagious. Parents will appreciate the protection and be more willing to cooperate when their own children are sick. Promote thorough hand washing to cut down on germs.

CPR and First Aid. Your local Red Cross chapter will be happy to set up CPR classes for your teachers and interested parents. Do you have first-aid kits? Are they well stocked and easily accessible to all teachers? Do you have incident report forms available for use? Check with your church's insurance company for forms they require to be used if accidents occur when children are in your care.

Handling Body Fluids. Treat every body fluid incident with appropriate precautions. If a child is bleeding, vomiting, or has diarrhea, remove him from the other children. Keep surgical gloves in your room to be worn by teachers when cleaning up vomit, cleaning a wound, or attending to a child with a runny or bloody nose.

Security

Tagging. You need to know who all your children are, especially guests. Each child can wear a laminated clip-tag that tells the child's name, parent or guardian's name and location, and an emergency ID number.

Have a way to identify parents or guardians when they come to pick up their children. This is especially important for substitute teachers. You may know all of the parents on sight, but what about that week when you are on vacation? Teachers should never be embarrassed to ask a parent for identification. Remember, you are simply protecting the child.

Limited Access. Check your building layout to see how you can limit the access to your children's area. Put name tags on teachers and other workers so strangers are easily recognized. Never be afraid to ask someone his business. A simple "May I help you?" may deter someone with improper intentions.

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Abuse Prevention

Two-Adult Policy. The first policy to establish is the two-adult rule. This rule simply states that two adults will be in a room with children at all times. This means that if children have to be assisted in the restroom, two adults are present, while two more remain in the room with the other children. This rule not only protects the children, but the workers as well. If a child ever makes an unfounded accusation, the worker has a witness of his or her actions.

Background Checks. Unfortunately, we know of incidents in which trusted workers have abused children. For this reason many churches are adopting the six-month rule, which simply states that no one can teach a class of children until he or she has attended or been a member of the church for at least six months. Have all potential workers fill out an information sheet that includes his or her social security number, and run a background check with a law enforcement agency. Always obtain the potential worker's permission to conduct such a check. This simple request alone may turn away a potential abuser from your children's ministry.

Train Your Teachers. Children need to be protected and so do workers! There have been cases in which children have accused perfectly innocent people of abuse. The results can be devastating, both to the teacher and to the church. Train your teachers how to conduct themselves in the classrooms, restrooms, and other situations, for their own protection.

Safety

Fire and Storm Plans. Examine your building, consult the experts, and draw up a plan for any natural disaster you might have. Periodically, practice the plan with the children. Post instructions inside each classroom for substitute teachers. An emergency kit that includes a walking rope and a flashlight is a must for each classroom.

Inform Parents. Perhaps your biggest problem in an actual emergency will be the parents who are trying to retrieve their children. Inform parents of your procedures so they will know exactly where their children will be should there be a loss of electricity, a fire, or a storm.

Emergency Procedures. Do all your teachers know what to do in an emergency situation? Do they know where the nearest phone is if they need to call 911? Have you implemented a way to contact parents in an emergency (other than running into the auditorium yelling "Help!")? The last thing you need during an emergency is panic. The best way to prevent panic is to be prepared.