

# Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Member Care Committees,  
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,  
and others who provide pastoral care  
in unprogrammed Friends' meetings.*

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## How Can Meetings Protect Children from Sexual Abuse?

By Christel Jorgenson

*Author's note: I have been active for years in helping to develop policy and procedures for the prevention of child sexual abuse for both my monthly and yearly meetings. If we were in a room together for a workshop or seminar, we might have a go-round where people express why they've chosen to be present. Writing this article, I have tried to imagine the questions and concerns that you would be bringing to such a gathering of concerned Friends.*

*"Why is this topic important for pastoral care givers?"*

Various forces are bringing the abuse of children to meetings' attention: publicity about abuse of children in church settings, changing legal requirements in caring for children, and new requirements from insurance providers. Religious communities of all kinds, including Friends, are compelled to consider child abuse prevention. It is an emotionally charged issue that needs a spiritually grounded sensitivity from those involved in pastoral care.

*"People in our meeting think it won't happen here. I feel alone in my concern."*

Sexual abuse of children can happen in a Quaker meeting and it has, with devastating consequences, both for the individuals involved and for the meeting community. Our small and close-knit communities, our emphasis on honesty and compassion, our peace testimony—all these give us a strong foundation for a healthy environment, but they are not a guarantee.

We must be aware of the broader scope of the problem. Studies show some disturbing statistics—that ten percent of boys and twenty percent of girls have ex-

perienced sexual abuse before the age of 18—and some studies show an even higher percentage.

Since I personally have a hard time accepting that anyone in my community would harm a child, I have had to rely on the stories and statistics shared by others. I've read books, attended a training and spent hours in discussion. To raise awareness, we used a video segment from *reducingtherisk.org*, a website that produces training materials specifically for worship communities.

Although we had some resistance to what might be thought of as "churchy" material, it served our need for something visually engaging, using actual cases and real people. Through this, we came to realize that we *could* know the victims and perpetrators; taking precautions then became more compelling.

*"But won't a child abuse prevention program breed a sense of distrust? Meeting relationships and pastoral care are based on trust. How can we build, not erode, trust in our process?"*

The feared outcome, mistrust, may emerge when people do not feel engaged or their feelings respected. For caregivers and others involved in considering how to protect our children from potential abuse, much gentle engagement and careful listening need to precede any action. Meetings need time to think about the issue before members are ready to decide on what steps to take. Although a small group, perhaps drawn from pastoral care, education, ministry or oversight committees, will probably do the most research and drafting of procedures, the best outcomes result when the whole meeting is



Christel Jorgenson

involved on some level.

You can convey a sense of confidence that the direction will remain a loving, positive one. If the entire pastoral care committee and other leaders agree to be screened, for instance, it will convey to others that we treat childcare workers equally—whether they have been in the community six months or a lifetime. (More about the screening process on p. 4.)

If we take time and care in selecting and training workers, if we discuss classroom situations and how we can become more careful caregivers, we give recognition to the value of this work. If we keep the focus on the children, many concerns diminish.

*"We're already overloaded. We're strapped for time and money. How can we handle one more thing?"*

A weary sense of "one more duty" will not provide power for the long haul. Busyness and scarcity of resources haunt our meetings at every turn, with all kinds of projects, not just this one. But surely, we need to be open to God's leading for increasing child safety.

We hope that this article will spark your concern and will begin to lead your meeting to action. When you are ready to begin, prayer is essential. Hold up your children and your love of them.

The wisdom, strength, and creative inspiration that you need to begin and sustain the work are a gift from God. Anyone can be a pray-er in this process. Prayer should be a backbone of any discernment sessions you conduct.

Below are some steps to take in bringing this concern to your meeting and creating safety for both children and adults.

## **EDUCATING YOURSELF AND YOUR MEETING**

There are few shortcuts for developing interest and awareness. Your meeting needs this awareness to discern what changes to make in how your meeting works with children.

### **1. Put this concern on the Pastoral Care agenda**

You may wish first to gather a small group of adults who have an abiding interest in the children in order to identify the first steps. Spend some time together in prayer and discussion.

### **2. Have a positive vision**

It is not just the big, "impersonal" churches that have experienced abuse, nor is it mostly from strangers or "suspicious looking" persons. With good practices in place, you could succeed in discouraging someone who is looking for easy, unsupervised access to children. Heightened awareness and good supervision also can reduce the likelihood that older children will act inappropriately with younger ones.

You may not be able to predict the effect on your meeting. For instance, your meeting may need to enlist

more adults to participate with the children to ensure a safe level of supervision. While this might be seen as a burden, it also could lead to a spiritual enrichment as more adults spend more time with the children of the meeting.

Keep the image of God's gift of children as a source of Light for the path. This process can bring joy from a greater sense of community and from the enhanced focus on the children and their wellbeing.

### **3. Check with your insurance provider**

Many insurance carriers require clear procedures for sexual abuse prevention as a condition for providing liability insurance. Learn what your provider's requirements are and what guidance they can offer. Even if your provider does not have specific requirements, your meeting will benefit from well-designed procedures to enhance child safety.

### **4. Develop a program for informing and engaging the meeting**

Once you have gathered your material and educated yourselves, bring that information to the meeting. Put it on the monthly meeting agenda or plan a special education session. Consider inviting a presenter from outside the meeting. Even before you are ready to start an educational process, let the meeting know you are working on this concern for the care and nurture of children in the meeting.

In my experience with my meeting, I realize now that our working group probably should have brought the meeting along more gradually. We wanted to be clear before we made any presentations, but that postponed the involvement of the whole meeting and sometimes

meant we had proposed changes before the meeting was ready.

### **5. Educate the working committee**

Order materials that can help get you started. A comprehensive package is available from [reducingtherisk.com](http://reducingtherisk.com), produced by Church Ministry Resources. The 20-minute introductory video of *Reducing the Risk* could be an effective springboard for your group and/or your meeting. The material is clear, comprehen-

sive, and user-friendly. Legal concerns are included, without taking the focus off the children.

For about fifty dollars you get a training manual, a DVD with two hours of training, and a year's subscription to a web site where your members could do on-line orientation and training. The on-line option seems particularly helpful if you have limited time for gathering together and need to orient/train workers more than once a year.

Attend yearly meeting workshops and use yearly

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## *One Meeting's Experience*

# 'So that Children Can Trust the Meeting' is Friends' Goal

*By Roger Walmsley*

*West Australia Regional Meeting*

In recent years, instances of child abuse in churches have received intense news coverage worldwide and have elicited strong reactions ranging from disbelief to outrage. Since the safety of children is a primary concern of any community, the National Council of Churches in Australia strongly recommended that its members put child safety policies in place in their churches.

In our meeting in West Australia, some felt that child abuse was a remote issue that did not concern us, while others felt that it must be dealt with as soon as possible. Some felt that having a child safety policy would imply that we no longer trusted one another. They were sure that no incidents of abuse would occur in our meeting. Others felt that pressure from the insurance industry and the state government was distasteful and it was not in the Quaker tradition to conform to it. Police checks, in particular, represented state interference in the life of the meeting. The priority in creating a protection policy would be the safety of the children, and the requirements of the insurance company would have to be compatible with that.

As our meeting began consideration of whether to create procedures, two individuals courageously acknowledged their own experience of abuse as children. Relevance as an issue became moot.

A small committee (the elders, as it happened) was asked to make the necessary inquiries and draft a document. It was important to proceed deliberately, involving the committee of oversight, the parents, children's interest group and the those providing child care, in order to ensure that the final result would have the active support of the entire Meeting.

An article was put into the monthly newsletter and everyone in the meeting was invited to give his or her thoughts and suggestions to the committee.

After making inquiries among government departments, daycare centers, sports clubs and churches it became evident that Quakers in Australia were among the last to give attention to the issue of child safety. The state of Western Australia was preparing legislation requiring all such institutions to have a protection policy. Churches would be among the first to be required to conform to the law.

Equipped with information about insurance company requirements and the policies of several organizations, we wrote several drafts, soliciting comments and suggestions from meeting members and attenders as we went along. Everyone was encouraged to read the final draft placed in the library.

The committee gave an oral report on the whole process at a meeting for business and gave notice that the question would be considered the following month. By that time there had been so much consultation, information and discussion of the policy that, when the time came to decide, it was adopted and minuted with little discussion.

Simply having a policy in a filing cabinet does not protect children. There must be a commitment to an ongoing process of implementation of the policy, allocation of responsibilities, and a structure of oversight and accountability.

These matters were addressed by the policy and are currently being put into practice. By far the most

*(Continued on p. 6)*

meeting resources. Talk to other churches in your community. What are they doing? How did they start? What have been their challenges? Do they conduct any trainings that you might participate in? Do they have policies you might review?

Unitarians have created comprehensive policies, screening, and training for more than ten years and have developed a packet of materials that contain samples of congregation and district policies and brochures. (See resources, p. 6, for links to this and other materials.)

The first priority should be increasing the awareness of the entire meeting. Keep the goal—mindfulness about risks and supervision needs—always in your view.

#### **FOUR VITAL RISK FACTORS**

The web site *reducingtherisk.com* lists four factors that influence the safety of children. They should be held as guides in the planning for good practices in your meeting.

- 1. As isolation increases, risk increases.**
- 2. As accountability decreases, risk increases.**
- 3. As the differential in power and control increases, risk increases.**
- 4. As risk increases, supervision should also increase.**

##### **1. Decrease isolation:**

- Put windows in doors of rooms used for childcare or for classes.
- Use more than one adult for each group, or have a “floater” who can check in.
- Make clear with children and adults what rooms are “off limits” (i.e. storage, etc.).
- When age appropriate, send children to the bathroom in pairs.
- When transporting children, don’t create a situation where it is just one child and an unrelated adult.

##### **2. Increase accountability:**

- Ask all adults who currently work with children to go through the screening process.
- Pair adults for teaching and activities, for accountability and mutual support.
- Make teaching and activity assignments clear, along with behavior expectations.
- Institute training for all meeting members, but especially for those persons who have direct supervi-

sory responsibilities with children.

- Create a written process for reporting any suspected abuse or improper behavior and make sure teachers and parents are aware of it.

##### **3. Decrease power and control differentials (an abuser will strive to maintain power and control over victims):**

- Keep parents informed of all policies and processes and welcome their involvement.
- Empower children with training about unsafe touch and how to speak up to adults.
- Listen to the children, in all the ways they express themselves.
- Increase the number of adults involved to avoid over-reliance upon one or two people.
- Avoid pairing children with a wide age difference (five years or more) for unsupervised time.

##### **4. As risk increases, supervision should also increase:**

- When planning supervision, consider the degree of isolation, accountability, and power and control differentials.
- Supervision can be increased through increased training, more (screened) adults involved, change of physical surroundings and more reporting (formal and informal).

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As you work through this planning process, remember that the policies and procedures your meeting establishes are legally binding. The final product should satisfy legal requirements and be a document the meeting can fully support. Some elements are best stated in general terms. For example, “Every teacher and child care worker shall be screened” rather than the specifics of the process. The specifics should be part of a set of recommendations that you then act upon.

#### **SCREENING AS DIALOGUE**

Screening describes a process in which candidates submit information and references in order to be considered for paid or volunteer work with children. This process along with educational programs can offer ways to talk meaningfully about our hopes for our children and becomes a way to support teachers and childcare helpers.

The interviews that Friends Meeting at Cambridge conducts for screening are now called “dialogues” be-

cause two-way communication is the norm. Questions might cover motivation for volunteering, work and volunteer history, past religious affiliation, experience working with children, any criminal convictions, and whom to contact for references.

When this process is complete, the meeting's representatives should feel assured of the candidate's appropriateness to work with children and would be aware of any additional support the candidate may need to be successful. The candidate should feel better acquainted with the meeting's expectations and what strengths and questions he or she might bring to the work.

A criminal background check on any staff or volunteers who work with the children is recommended in safety literature, and sometimes required by insurers. This is probably the most controversial aspect of any screening process. If you volunteer or work at a school or social service provider, criminal background checks are routine. At Friends Meeting at Cambridge we continue to seek unity about this part of our process.

Criminal background checks actually filter out only a very small subset of abusers (although potentially the most dangerous). Nevertheless, Friends General Conference, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, and the American Friends Service Committee all have gone through processes of discernment and have created child protection procedures. All have included some form of criminal background checks in their screening processes. (Check the Resources box on p. 6.)

In Massachusetts, background checks are not a mandatory requirement for churches unless the program primarily deals with children, like a childcare center; however state laws can change. You should become informed about what your own state requires.

Once you have determined your state's legal requirements, research the other basic screening methods, such as written applications, formal references, and interviews. Though such practices may seem overly formal, they provide a uniform process for those you know well and, also, for those you might not know as well.

In assigning caregivers to groups of children, it is best, as often as possible, to have one person who is well known to the meeting, experienced in working with children, and well known to the meeting's children. A person with less than one year in the meeting should work with someone better known to Friends. Similarly, a person with little experience with children and/or less well known to the children should work with someone more experienced with children.

## **"EEK!"**

Instituting changes in the way your meeting does things can seem difficult, if not overwhelming. A potentially traumatic topic typically induces avoidance, denial, forgetfulness, and fatigue among those who are wrestling with the problem. It can be like moving through a thick cloud, hard to be clear, hard to proceed in a linear way.

Please know that this resistance is part of the process. Be patient and gentle when it emerges in yourself and others. Let others know that it may affect them. It need not stop you. Think of ways to work with it—keeping accurate records to avoid forgetfulness, taking small steps to accommodate fatigue, for instance.

Any progress on increasing the safety for our children is a step in the right direction, and the time to do it is now, rather than when an emergency arises.

## **CONCLUSION:**

It may be that we can never totally eliminate the possibility of harm coming to children under our care, but we can take precautions that will increase their safety. Starting with small groups and bringing the concern and training episodically to the meeting can reduce the sense of being overwhelmed.

Since change generates discomfort, don't take discomfort alone as an indication that there is something wrong with your process. Friends have honed important skills over the ages: listening to the "still small voice" and then articulating a concern that had been unspoken; dialoguing across differences; deep listening to pain and despair without judgment and without retreating; reaching out for reconciliation and most important, having a willingness to listen for the Spirit.

We will need to forgive each other and ourselves for our mistakes and shortcomings, returning as often as needed to the Source until a way opens.

Paying attention to process as well as procedures will help develop the deep roots we need in order to be sustained and renewed, so that we can keep our children's safety a priority far into the future.

*Christel Jorgenson is a member of Friends Meeting at Cambridge, New England Yearly Meeting. She served as the NEYM Youth and Education Secretary and has written for FGC Resource, Friends Journal, Quaker Life, and in the Christian Education Newsletter which she edited for NEYM, where some of this material was first published.*

## Australian Meeting Faces Challenge

(Continued from p. 3)

important part of the implementation, however, will be to maintain a caring awareness for *all* members of the meeting, both children and adults. All will be informed of the arrangements and encouraged to discuss any concerns they might have with the appointed contact person. Such discussions will be subject to strict confidentiality. The experience of addressing the issue of child safety in our meeting was sobering and, at times, difficult and tedious.

The challenges it presented, however, led us to a more honest and comprehensive understanding of who we are and what is required of us in order that our children are able to trust the meeting.

### Questions for Reflection

1. What plan does your meeting have for reacting to the possibility that a member or attender might abuse a child under the meeting's care?
2. What measures can the meeting put in place that make it easier for victims to bring abuse to the attention of the meeting's leadership?
3. How would you assist meeting members who cannot imagine that children in your meeting might be vulnerable to abuse?
4. Many meetings deny or postpone dealing with difficult issues. How can you help your meeting to focus on creating a set of procedures for child safety?
5. What has been done to make meeting members aware of existing state law about child care providers, or insurance requirements for child safety policies?

## Resources on Child Safety

### Friends General Conference, [www.fgcquaker.org](http://www.fgcquaker.org)

*FGC: Policy on Abuse Prevention*, FGC Quaker Friends General Conference of the Religious Society of Friends ([fgcquaker.org/connect/summer05/child\\_abuse\\_policy.htm](http://fgcquaker.org/connect/summer05/child_abuse_policy.htm) - 8KB - 29 July 2005

*Dealing With A Child Abuser in the Meeting Community: The Experience at Rochester (NY) Meeting*, Approved by the Meeting, 14 May, 1995; revised July, 1995, Rochester (NY), FGC website, Friends Monthly Meeting Resources for Fostering Vital Friends Meetings, Quakers and the Shadow Side

*Meeting Safety: A Code of good practice for volunteers working on children and young people's activities and events*, FGC Library

Duncan-Tessmer, Christie "Where Might Jesus Stand?"  
Perch, Liz "Creating Loving, Safe Communities"

*FGConnections* Summer 2005 Friends & Safety issue

Thomas, Anne "Merciful Jesus" Canadian Yearly Meeting, first printed in *Quaker Life*, May, 1994

### Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, [www.pym.org](http://www.pym.org)

*Procedures for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in PYM Youth Programs and at PYM-sponsored events*

To access several pages of additional materials, enter topic "sexual abuse" in the search field on the website [www.pym.org](http://www.pym.org).

### Additional web sites:

Reducing the Risk, [reducingtherisk.org](http://reducingtherisk.org) (geared specifically to worship communities)

Child Assault Prevention (New Jersey site),  
[www.njcap.org](http://www.njcap.org), 856-582-8282

Prevent Child Abuse America,  
[www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org)

Universalist Unitarian Association, [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org),  
search for "Safe Congregation Resources"

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