

# Church Executive

HELPING LEADERS BECOME BETTER STEWARDS.



## PEER-TO-PEER CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE RISK: Protecting Children from Other Children

*Presented by:*

**Love & Norris & MinistrySafe**



# PEER-TO-PEER CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE RISK: Protecting Children from Other Children

By Gregory Love & Kimberlee Norris

**Where child sexual abuse is concerned, peer-to-peer abuse provides the curveball of sexual abuse risk.**

**To recognize and address it properly, a ministry must be watching for it.**

## Common fact patterns

Peer-to-peer sexual abuse — children molesting or abusing *other children* — unfolds in predictable patterns.

Some years ago, we were asked to assist a church in correctly responding to a child sexual abuse scenario. This ministry served very young children in a horseshoe-shaped building with a fence across the top of the horseshoe, creating a courtyard. The fenced area contained a playground for children surrounded by windows looking into the play area. In the center of the playground was a play structure with panels near the base, creating a box-like cube. One Sunday, while two staff members sat 20 feet away, a 7-year-old boy enticed a 4-year-old girl into the cubed play structure and sexually molested her there.

Later that day, the little girl shared with her parents — in a vague and inarticulate manner — what she had experienced that morning in the play structure. The girl's parents believed her (which doesn't always occur) and contacted a ministry supervisor. Ministry leaders, in turn, contacted our firm.

In assessing the situation, we interviewed the two staff members who supervised the playground, who were present on the day in question.

During the interview, these staff members were courteous and concerned but became defensive when asked about the *possibility* of sexual abuse occurring on the playground several days before, saying, "That's not possible." When asked why they were convinced that sexual abuse couldn't occur on the playground, they replied, "We have a fence." In this circumstance, these conscientious ministry workers believed sexual abuse could only originate from *outside the fence*.

What these ministry workers did not grasp is that the majority of sexual abuse risk arising in a ministry context occurs *inside the fence*. These staff members had received minimal sexual abuse training: from



**"US Department of Justice reports indicate that one out of three reported cases of child sexual abuse are peer-to-peer abuse allegations."**

their standpoint the risk of abuse, to the extent it existed *at all*, came from *outside the church*. They had no training or understanding regarding the preferential offender (see prior article at [www.churchexecutive.com/archives/stop-sexual-abuse-2](http://www.churchexecutive.com/archives/stop-sexual-abuse-2)) or peer-to-peer sexual abuse: sexual abuse occurring at the hands of *other children*.

Where child sexual abuse is concerned, *we cannot reduce a risk we do not understand*. This truism is particularly apt in addressing and preventing peer-to-peer sexual abuse. In our experience, peer sexual abuse is the least understood and expected risk likely to be encountered in ministry contexts: the *curveball*.

Peer sexual abuse is not prevented by a background check, child check-in system or six-month member rule.

What about the two-adult rule? In the fact pattern above, two adult staff members supervised the playground — the church was following the two-adult rule. Unfortunately, these two adults had no real understanding of the risk of peer sexual abuse, much less how to prevent it. Peer sexual abuse is shockingly prevalent: offender studies indicate that convicted male abusers begin their predatory behavior, on average, at 13 or 14 years of age. The majority of convicted male abusers admit their first offense occurred *before* reaching 18 years of age. US Department of Justice reports indicate that *one out of three* reported cases of child sexual abuse are peer-to-peer abuse allegations.





## Peer Sexual Abuse: Sexually harmful behavior between children involving an aggressor and a child who does not seek or want the sexual interaction.

What's more, peer abusers tend to take opportunities where they find them; where they spend time anyway — school, sports, camp, younger cousins or siblings, and church. Children who have been sexually abused tend to act out in a sexual manner with other children. Even very young children can act out in a sexually harmful context.

So how should a ministry act to reasonably address this known risk? Ministry staff members must be trained to understand and recognize scenarios where this risk is higher: anywhere *clothes come off*, for any reason (e.g. the restroom), any location on your church campus which is *less easily seen* (e.g. play structures) and any activity *less easily supervised* (e.g. *any activity involving swimming or group play*). Effective training must define peer sexual abuse, address where it is more likely to occur and how to correctly respond.

### Responding to an allegation

Responding correctly to peer sexual abuse allegations requires an exercise of judgment, and ministry leaders must avoid two common misconceptions.

Error: No sexual behavior between children is harmful — simply indicative of curiosity or *play*.

Error: *All* sexual behavior between children is dangerous and harmful.

Some childish behaviors are predicated upon natural sexual curiosity. In the course of normal human development, children commonly engage in harmless sexual curiosity or play. This behavior, though innocent, should always be redirected.

### What constitutes harmful sexual behavior between children?

*Any adult sexual behavior that children should have no knowledge of or experience with* should be reported to child protective services. This is because these behaviors are typically learned behaviors resulting from interaction between an adult (or older child) and a child, and the abused child is replicating these learned behaviors with other children. The purpose of a report is to get appropriate resources to the children impacted, redirect the harmful behavior and determine where the sexual conduct *began*: generally at the hands of an *adult* who has abused a child.

Clearly, any coerced or forced sexual behavior is harmful. In most jurisdictions, criminal prosecution of peer sexual abuse requires three elements: an *aggressor*, a *non-aggressor* and an *imbalance of power* favoring the aggressor. The imbalance of power is typically age, but size, mental acuity or the existence of a disability can create the imbalance. In most states in the US, a three-year age gap between children creates a *presumption* of an imbalance of power.

One indication that sexual behavior between children is something other than simple curiosity or play is when the behavior is hidden or accompanied by a sense of shame or culpability. When a child is hiding behavior or enticing another child into a closet or other unseen area, the conduct is problematic.

### Peer sexual abuse must be reported

Although peer sexual abuse constitutes *one third* of all reported sexual abuse in the US, peer abuse tends to be underreported. One reason it isn't reported is the belief that mandatory reporting requirements do not apply to children who sexually abuse other children. Untrue: mandatory reporting requirements are driven by the age of the *victim*, not the age of the abuser.

### Peer sexual abuse fire drill

Peer abusers are opportunistic — they take opportunities where they find them and where they spend time *anyway*, including church programs. While on church property or participating in church programs, children must be safe and protected — sometimes from other children. Church staff members are responsible for the safety and welfare of *each* child participating until that child is returned to a parent or caregiver.

Like fire, peer sexual abuse is a foreseeable risk. Where this risk is concerned, a church's primary protection is *effective training* coupled with intentional supervision.

Many ministry workers believe that peer sexual abuse won't happen in their church or ministry. This illusion is dangerous to both the ministry and the children it serves. Because peer abusers are opportunistic, greater opportunity exists in church programs staffed by workers who don't understand or acknowledge the reality of this risk.

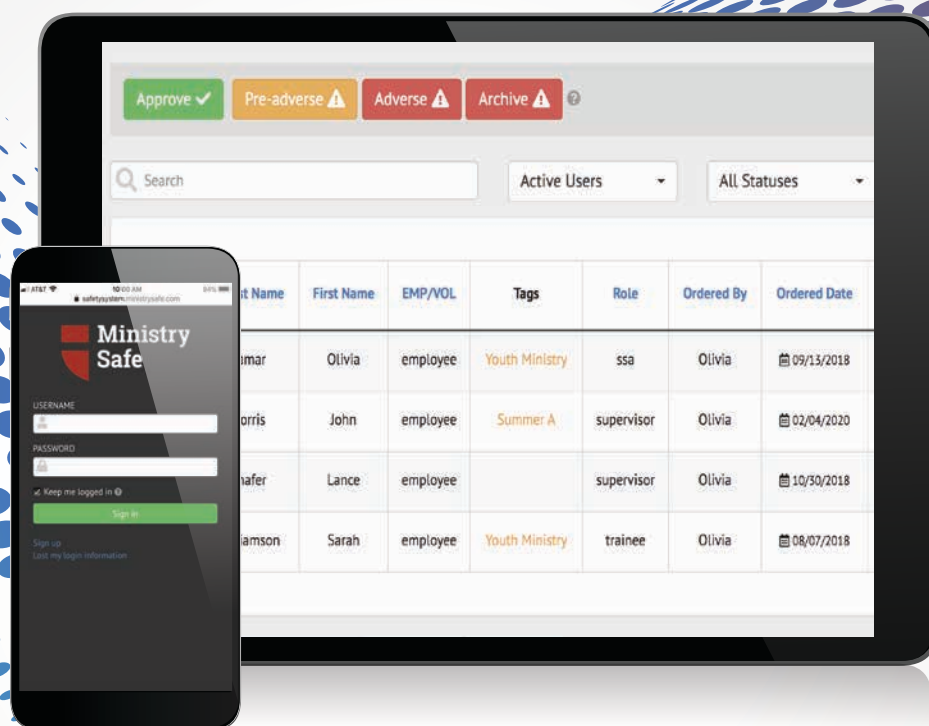
The first step to a better understanding of this risk is effective training: when staff members learn the facts, they are better equipped to protect children in their care. **CE**

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**Kimberlee Norris & Gregory Love** are partners in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of Love & Norris [ [www.lovenorris.com](http://www.lovenorris.com) ] and founders of MinistrySafe, providing child sexual abuse expertise to ministries worldwide. After representing victims of child sexual abuse for more than two decades, Love and Norris saw recurring, predictable patterns in predatory behavior. MinistrySafe grew out of their desire to place proactive tools into the hands of ministry professionals. Love and Norris teach the only graduate-level course on Preventing Sexual Abuse in Ministry as Visiting Faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary.

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