

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Developing Children's Ministry



**SESSION 13**

The Church: A Safe Environment

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# The Church: A Safe Environment

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**Beginning with the Nursery**

**Safety Beyond the Nursery**

**Safe and Attractive Spaces**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand what a safe environment looks like.
- understand potential legal and ethical issues.
- understand important components of the structure of a children's ministry facility.

# The Church: A Safe Environment

## INTRODUCTION



There is nothing that tells parents you love their children more than being concerned about the safety of their children. Even though initially some parents may be resistant to clear guidelines for children's ministry, gentle explanations and consistency will help both parents and the ministry team feel confident that a safety-first policy is in everyone's best interest.

Child safety represents one of the basic tenants of children's ministry. Frankly, leaders find it difficult to talk about God's love to and for children when the church maintains an unsafe environment. Dean G. Blevins and Mark A. Maddix, in *Discovering Discipleship: Dynamics of Christian Education*, note the following:

One of the key concerns in any physical setting, whether in the church building or other settings, rest with the issue of safety. This often includes the quality of the building, its cleanliness, and security measures. Children and parents need assurances that the learning environment includes durable, age-level appropriate furnishings. They need to know that any harmful resources are kept out of reach of children or youth. Children need to be kept safe from infection and disease as much as possible through cleaning toys and rooms between usages. Today similar concerns rise with children's snacks due to food allergies and the cleanliness of bathrooms. Christian educators need simple but effective guidelines addressing how to act during dangerous weather, fire or other disaster. Historically ministers remain vigilant with designated children's areas; however, they often overlook the same concerns in other parts of the building where children often wander with their parents. The very safety measures needed in the children's section should govern other public spaces such as fellowship halls, church foyers, and church buses. These same considerations need to be given during the use of homes, businesses, and other public spaces as well (222).

Steve Alley, in *Growing a Healthy Children's Ministry*, lists a number of categories that require safety policies:

- Health concerns (including cleanliness and bodily fluids procedures)
- Sick children
- Protection in congregational facilities (check-in and check-out procedures, as well as providing a safe environment)
- Adult-child ratios
- Emergency procedures
- Child abuse prevention and protection

## BEGINNING WITH THE NURSERY



### NOTES

Leaders often focus on the nursery as a safety-sensitive site. A safe nursery is important, but an attitude of keeping our children safe must be cultivated at all ages and in all areas. Leaders can begin by setting a high standard for the nursery environment and use this standard as a frame of reference for other age levels.

Physical safety is a primary concern. Look for small or dangerous objects, such as pins, buttons, coins, hot beverages, and broken toys. Look on the floor, on shelves, and under furniture. Any object smaller than a fist should be inspected for safety. Any object smaller in diameter than a large coin should be removed from the infant/toddler nursery. Make sure all of the electrical outlets are covered. Do not assume this is the case—check every week. It is possible that someone recently used a radio or vacuum and did not replace the cover. Check the windows and screens to be sure they are fastened. Do not leave any cleaning supplies out. All cleaning supplies should be kept in a locked cabinet, even those you use in the diaper-changing area. Make sure gates and doors can be secured. These devices must be working for each session. Look for “finger pinchers.” Rocking chairs, drawers that pull in and out, and toy boxes with lids can be dangerous to little fingers.

Make sure your equipment meets current safety standards. For example, North American standards for crib slats state they should be no more than 2 3/8” apart. Look for protruding edges and sharp corners. Make sure there are no dangling cords or anything with which a baby could become tangled or be choked.

### *Diaper Changing Policies*

Diaper changes are an opportunity for one-on-one care for children. This time allows workers the opportunity to praise God for the wonderful bodies the babies have, so diaper-changing policies should include healthy attitudes as well as healthy practices. Here is a sample changing policy to post at the changing area:

- Cover the changing area. Obtain all supplies from the diaper bag before taking the child to the changing area.
- Cleanse hands or use clean gloves for changing each baby.
- Return the child to a coworker. Note: Always have another adult present.



- Remove the changing table cover and discard it. Disinfect the area immediately.
- Remove gloves and wash hands before handling any other babies.

There are several methods for communicating these policies to adults, including popular changing songs. Teach these methods to the workers and post copies next to the changing table. Have a supply of toys babies can play with during changing times. After changing the baby, immediately put the toy in a container for disinfecting after class.

#### *Well-Baby Policy*

Leaders need a strong policy concerning sick babies. It is important for parents to provide loving care for a sick baby at home. This policy protects other babies from infection. Sometimes babies develop symptoms of illness very quickly, and parents don't realize their child has become ill. It is each worker's responsibility to watch for signs of illness including:

- Fever;
- Nasal discharge that is either thick or dark in color;
- Vomiting or diarrhea; and
- Uncharacteristic lethargy (slow responsiveness or failure to engage with others)

If children arrive with or develop any of these symptoms while in the nursery, parents should be advised of the well-baby nursery policy. A sample policy might include the following:

We are sorry your child is not feeling well today. For the well-being of all babies, we want to make sure your child gets the individual care he or she needs at home. We are not allowed to keep a child in the nursery if he or she:

- Has or has had a fever above 99 degrees in the last 24 hours;
- Is vomiting, has diarrhea, or has had diarrhea within the last 24 hours;
- Has nasal discharge that is either thick or dark in color; and/or
- Is showing signs of physical distress such as being lethargic or in pain (such as ear-pulling).

Be sure of our prayers. Please call the church office if you need extra support while your child is ill.

 **NOTES***Injuries*

In spite of our best efforts, children can be hurt in the nursery. One child might accidentally hit another child with a toy. New walkers often trip and fall. Some children bite another child. Keep a supply of ice packs and washcloths to wrap them in for such an event. (Remember never to hold a frozen item directly against a baby's delicate skin. Never hold a cold object against a baby's skin for longer than a count of five.)

Whenever a child experiences an injury that causes pain, redness, or possible bruising, you should document it with an injury report to the parents. If there is bleeding or immediate swelling, the parent should be called on for immediate advice.

*Parent Call Systems and Pick-Up Procedures*

Children's ministries employ many ways to communicate with parents during service times. beepers, numbers flashed discretely on screens located in the sanctuary, even a system that uses the parent's cell phones. Greeters, ushers, hall monitors, or designated volunteers can be paged or signaled. Choose the system that will work best for your church. This is the only way to ensure that the nursery attendants will never have to take care of a hurt or sick child at the expense of neglecting or endangering the rest of the children.

In the past, many small churches didn't worry about who delivered or retrieved children from the nursery. Everyone knew everyone else in the church. Today, however, the size and fluid nature of many congregations have changed the circumstances. The reality of divorce, remarriage, and blended families makes it hard to identify who should be picking up the children. In addition, many communities are now tragically aware of the tragedy of abused children. Congregations find themselves forced to become more protective of the young children in their care. Open, trusting, congregations are targets of troubled parents and dangerous predators. Even when everything seems perfectly fine, it is better to model safety than face the consequences of making a mistake. Some procedures churches should use include the following:

- When a child is dropped off, require the parent to designate who the pick-up person will be.
- Exchange a token such as a pin or beeper. Give the item to the parent at drop-off and require it back to release the child.
- Require that only a parent may pick up a child.



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- Have the parents sign a standing release form that lists several people who may pick up the child. Do not release the child to anyone not on the list. Require picture ID for anyone the worker does not know by sight.

*Nursery Worker Requirements*

Another health-related issue for church nurseries is the number and qualifications of the workers present. All workers should be screened, but there are some additional concerns with nursery attendants, particularly if they are paid workers. Ideally, someone who is CPR and Safety Certified should be in the nursery each week. If that is not possible, a designated children's leader may need to keep current certification.

In the infant nursery, there should never be only one worker. While state guidelines vary, the number of adults in the infant nursery should never be lower than two adults with a one- to-three ratio after that. For example, you are fine with two workers until you have five babies. You should add one worker for six to nine babies, and one additional worker for every three babies thereafter. In the toddler nursery, the same rules apply with a ratio of one adult to every four toddlers. When possible, some children's pastors like to schedule one worker for every three to four infants or toddlers, with one person as a greeter/changer for each session.

All workers should wash their hands frequently and always after wiping a nose, drool, or any bodily fluid (as well as after wiping their own noses). A bottle of hand sanitizer can be kept out of babies' reach for emergency use.

## SAFETY BEYOND THE NURSERY



### NOTES

Moving beyond the nursery, children's leaders must address a number of safety concerns. Many churches, particularly in North America, respond out of a fear of legal repercussions. However, creating a safe environment rests with our theological convictions as well as our legal responsibilities. Blevins and Maddix, in *Discovering Discipleship*, place our responsibilities in the law of love as well as civil obligations when they write:

Faithful discipleship includes creating a safe place where all human persons are respected and valued. When ministers or Christian educators transgress natural human boundaries they violate the very essence and nature of the Triune God. Human beings reflect the Triune God when they co-exist in relationship with each other. When leaders use their position of power to control, neglect, or abuse others, they violate the theological foundations of the Triune God. Holy living consists of loving each person completely, regardless of age, gender, or nationality. Civil law is provided to protect people from those who violate the very law of God—the “love of neighbor.”

The church, bound both by the law of love as recorded in Scripture, and the civil laws established by the government, provide Christian educators with guidelines to uphold the dignity and respect of human persons. When leaders violate the law of love it harms the community of faith. Often legal guidelines necessarily protect people from those who may bring harm. In both cases, they reflect the biblical principle of love and care for each person as created in the “image and likeness” of God. When harm occurs, congregations must “speak the truth” by investigating and revealing the perpetrator (334-335).

The greatest legal risks that pertain to children's ministry include the following:

- **Negligent Selection of Church Workers:** Negligent selection suggests carelessness or a failure to exercise reasonable care in choosing workers.
- **Negligent Retention of Church Staff:** A church is legally responsible if it fails to respond to credible information suggesting either a church employee or volunteer represents a risk of harm to others. Initiate a thorough investigation into any credible allegation, and impose appropriate restrictions on any proven wrongdoer.
- **Violation of Employment Laws:** Churches can be held responsible for wrongful termination and discrimination. In certain situations, church leaders should seek the assistance of an attorney when considering the termination or discipline of any employee.


**NOTES**

- **Negligent Supervision of Staff and Activities:** Churches have been sued on this basis in several contexts, including child molestation, injuries during church-sponsored events, and injuries in a church nursery. Churches can take several precautions to reduce this risk. For example, in off-site activities, ensure an adequate number of adults are present. Also, adopt a two-adult policy, specifying that no minor is allowed to be alone with an adult during any church activity. This rule reduces the risk of child molestation and accusations of molestation.
- **Failure to Report Child Abuse:** In many settings, ministers are “mandatory reporters,” meaning they can be criminally liable for failing to report evidence of child abuse. Check local, state, or territorial laws several times each year, since this is an area of law that changes often.

A church’s response to these risks should be three-fold:

- **Prevention:** For example, all child caregivers must go through the screening application and approval procedures.
- **Reporting:** For example, if an accident or abuse occurs, church leadership should immediately take whatever civil steps are required.
- **Responding:** For example, if the accused perpetrator serves as a leader or volunteer, they should be removed from the position until allegations are cleared or substantiated. Respect the rights of the accused as well as those of the accuser, but priority must be given to the safety of children in the care of the church.

If the children’s leader does not handle questionable situations properly, he or she jeopardizes the senior pastor, the church board, and the reputation of the church, not to mention the safety of children in the church. However, “due diligence” in the areas of prevention, reporting, and responding can protect everyone in the event of a true problem.

Risk is always present, but risk management becomes an issue of both competency and faith. We do our best to be diligent, and we trust the Lord to help us as we act responsibly. Some specific steps include the following action items.

First, establish emergency procedures and policies. Have an evacuation plan posted in each place children gather. It is wise to plan periodic reviews of this plan with the children. As part of your annual routine, conduct periodic “drills” for the types of emergencies in your geographic area. Maintain emergency contact

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information for each child on record and make these accessible to leaders (even on trips). Include contact information for parents and doctors as well as warnings about allergies, medications, and general health and insurance information. The most important aspect of this information may be the parent's signature to obtain medical treatment in case of emergency.

Second, be proactive in building safety. Basic steps will be listed later; however, a professional safety audit is one way to insure your building is in top shape. A local fire marshal can help determine whether there are areas or items that should be repaired. Be sure to set aside adequate resources to fix anything the fire marshal might mandate.

Third, provide adequate adult coverage for each event. The "two-adult" rule is a wise policy at every age. The policy prevents anyone from having to leave a group of children unsupervised in an emergency. This rule also protects from allegations of wrongdoing. A ratio goal for a preschool class is 1 adult to 6 children, 1 to 8 for early elementary, and 1 to 10 for upper elementary. If these ratios prove unrealistic for a church setting, plan to have a back-up person wandering from class to class, watching for needs as they arise. Provide supervision during transition times as well as during class or worship. Even though elementary children are more self-reliant than younger children, they still need adult monitoring and support. Some of the most difficult disciplinary situations occur during transition times. We don't want children running into traffic areas after having been dismissed to meet their parents. Our responsibility to children does not end until the designated adult has picked up the child and assumed responsibility for the child's care.

Fourth, insist on volunteer screening and selection. The biggest issue in protecting the children from abuse is screening and training workers. Many churches operate out of a simple trust rule. It goes something like this: These persons seem nice; they claim to be Christians; they seem to know what they are doing. "Sure, they can work with the children!" This attitude is extremely dangerous. In most cases, our instincts will be correct. However, on those occasions when we are wrong, immeasurable damage can happen to a child, his or her family, and the entire church community. It only takes one incident to scar a child for life. Therefore, do not hesitate to ask any individual to go through a screening process. Remind existing workers that their participation serves an especially crucial role, since they provide examples to other people and future volunteers of the seriousness of safety in the local church. Some basic steps in the screening process:


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- Make it official that everyone who has contact with the children will go through the same screening process.
- Provide each person with an employment or volunteer application.
- Have the person fill out a screening form.
- Ask for references, and check the references.
- Conduct a criminal records check.
- Make a copy of a photo ID and keep it on record.
- Any individual wanting to work with children (except for the children's pastor) must attend church for at least six months before applying to work with the children.
- Conduct a personal interview.

The only exception to the criminal record check occurs when someone can document that their records have already been checked (such as a certificated teacher, child-care provider, or foster parent). These individuals, however, should go through the rest of the selection process. The message sent to everyone reminds them the church takes seriously the responsibility of protecting its children. Most people will appreciate the dedication to protecting both the children and themselves. One note of caution: Most child predators do not have criminal backgrounds; they are very careful to keep their records clean. So don't rely only on criminal background checks to clear potential workers. There are excellent training programs for helping workers spot potential abusers; consider have your workers undergo training. Help can be found at <https://ministrysafe.com/nazarene/>.

Fifth, provide volunteer training and behavior standards. Volunteers must be aware of the potential of abuse. Basic safety policies should be put into place to protect the workers as well as children. Have observation windows for all classrooms or require an open-door policy for rooms with children above preschool age. Maintain the policy that adults should never be alone with one child. A husband and wife working together cannot be considered part of the "never alone" policy. They must be joined by a third unrelated partner. When a child leaves the classroom to go to the bathroom or other designated location, observe the "buddy system," sending another child with him or her. Establish clear discipline policies and clearly define what disciplinary measures are unacceptable in the ministry. All workers must be given very clear, written guidelines about reporting potential abuse and responding to abuse that they observe, as well as to violations of the church discipline policy. Any concerns should be reported immediately to leadership including the pastor.

## SAFE AND ATTRACTIVE SPACES



### NOTES

The general set-up and environment of a church classroom and other children's areas helps establish a safe and comfortable climate. These settings need to be checked regularly for potential danger. The general design of safe spaces should insure that children have adequate space and resources to feel personally safe. The way we structure the classroom influences behavioral responses. Safety means more than avoiding problems; we must act proactively for children in a number of ways.

#### *Table and Chairs*

The size of the chairs and tables in a children's classroom should be age-appropriate. Comfortable seating (feet on the floor, arms at comfortable work level) is very important. Use the space in to advantage. Remove unused furniture. Arrange the furniture so the students can move easily from one activity to the next. The arrangement should promote what you are hoping will occur. A North American measure of floor space for children encourages maintaining 25–30 square feet per learner. For group activities, one might place chairs around a small round or semi-round table.

#### *Noise Protection*

If you have to raise your voice to talk over noise from other rooms, or students are continually distracted, consider noise reduction options. Carpeting can absorb sound and even enhance the use of floor space for certain activities. Installing ceiling panels can assist in noise reduction. Creative arrangement of classrooms and scheduling should result in keeping groups from hindering each other.

#### *Lighting*

Low light can cause a strain on children's eyes. Lighting influences the moods of children. Changing the wattage of the bulbs can change the atmosphere. Opening curtains or adding additional fixtures are two solutions to a dimly-lit room. A dimmer switch can reduce the energy level for storytelling.

#### *Temperature*

Test the temperature at different height levels to assure comfort for the children. For example, a thermostat at an adult's eye level is measuring the temperature at that height in the room, not down on the floor where children spend their time.

**NOTES**

It may be comfortable for adults but cold for children. Cold flooring may require rugs or carpeting. Consider the differences in room temperature without the children in the room and when the room is full of children.

### *Colors*

Bright, lively colors welcome children and stimulate them. Lighter colors reveal dirt and grime for cleaning. Use paints that are child safe and washable. If classrooms are dark or dreary, a coat of paint will brighten the room and indicate a greater level of care and consideration.

### *Visuals*

Pictures, posters, drawings, and charts stimulate children. If placed at eye level and updated at least once a month, they can draw children into the lessons. The walls should not be busy, but simple and varied. For fun, hang a visual from the ceiling from time to time. Be careful if using tacks or other sharp objects to display materials.

### *Storage*

Most children enjoy taking responsibility for their own materials. Shelving that is low and labeled with names can help teach children responsibility. If more than one group uses the room, leaders can establish a resource room where teachers check out materials before class.

All of these suggestions have implications for learning outcomes as well as for maintaining a relationally-safe environment. Think about these environmental characteristics, and use safe spaces as a serious part of the educational experience.

The safety of children takes precedence over other concerns. Children's leaders and workers often struggle when confronted by the level of oversight needed for a safe environment. Leaders must be vigilant in educating congregational members in their responsibility to avoid patterns of negligence. Even simple steps can energize a congregation to act proactively. Workers must be given clear written guidelines about reporting abuse and responding to abuse. Provide some case studies and examples for the workers to respond to in order to provide some experience. Some helpful exercises might be to ask the workers to respond to the following:

- What are 5 times that a child might be unsupervised in the church?
- Name 5 places that a child might be kept from sight.

**NOTES**

- Are there unsupervised doors that an intruder could use to remove a child in 5 steps?
- Name 5 places that adults and young people mingle together.

Looking at these questions not only helps discover potential problem areas but also gives the workers some experience in analyzing child safety issues. Simple responses to these problems will energize leaders to take additional measures. Child safety is a theological issue, one in which the church can act proactively out of love and legal responsibility for the sake of children.



## APPLICATION

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**NOTES**

1. Create a “safety audit” from this lesson and use it to evaluate the nursery facility and nursery policies in your church, or ask leaders to go through a “Take 5” audit of the church.
2. Investigate resources for child safety in your community and through online resources.
3. Discuss with leaders how child safety policies are instituted and maintained in your ministry setting.

## EXAM

**NOTES**

1. The issue of child safety is overrated in the church today.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
2. Child safety includes:
  - A. Health.
  - B. Facilities.
  - C. People.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.
  
3. Safe nurseries are the primary—and perhaps the only—area that needs special attention.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
4. Sick children should be kept out of the nursery.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
5. Never hold a cold cloth to a child's injury for more than a count of five.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
6. A worker-to-child ratio should be:
  - A. One to one.
  - B. At least two workers should always be present.
  - C. Three to one.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.
  
7. Churches often get in trouble due to:
  - A. Poor selection of volunteers.
  - B. Reporting instances of abuse.
  - C. Lack of supervision.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.



8. Church responses to child safety should include:
  - A. Prevention.
  - B. Insurance.
  - C. Reporting abuse.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.
  
9. Volunteer screening and training must be mandatory.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
10. Churches can take quick, initial steps to start a child safety program.
  - A. True
  - B. False

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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### NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Why is child safety a theological as well as a legal problem for the church?
2. How do we address child safety as a key aspect of children's ministry?
3. If we discovered someone abusing children in our church or ministry setting, what steps should we take?
4. If we want to raise the issue of child safety in our church, where should we start?

*Review your answers with your mentor, then respond to the following:*

*How many responses focus on supporting children (particularly in areas where they are not yet fully self-reliant), and how many answers focus on empowering children?*

*Which of these answers support the goal of living Christlike relationships? Why?*

*What do we need to add to our list to make our approach more comprehensive, more faithful? Which do we need to incorporate into the role of the children's leader as one who both supports and empowers Christlike relationships with children?*