

# **MINISTRYSAFE**

# **SKILLFUL SCREENING PROCEDURES**

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***Skillful* screening procedures, overseen by trained individuals, are an important element in the creation of a safe environment for children's programs and services.**

An effective screening process is meant to address areas of risk, including the risk of hiring or accepting as a volunteer an applicant whose motive is inappropriate.

**Below are some basic facts concerning child sexual abuse.**

- According to multiple broad-based studies, **one out of four girls and one out of six boys will be sexually abused before they reach the age of eighteen.**
- Almost 90% of child sexual abuse cases involve a perpetrator that the child **knows and trusts**, such as a care provider, family friend, coach, student leader, or ministry volunteer.
- According to the U.S. Department of Justice, over 700,000 registered sexual offenders live in the United States.
- **Convicted** child molesters abusing girls have an average of **52 victims** before criminal prosecution and conviction. Men who molested boys have an average of **150 victims** before criminal prosecution and conviction. Experts estimate that **fewer than 10% of perpetrators are EVER criminally prosecuted**, because of the passage of time, legal time limits, adults who minimize an outcry from a child, or kids who **never tell**.
- In one nationwide study, 66% of children did not tell of sexual abuse from an adult until they were adults themselves, most over the age of 30.
- Approximately 31% of women in prison were sexually abused as children.
- Approximately 95% of teenage prostitutes have been sexually abused.
- Adolescents with a history of sexual abuse are much more likely than their peers to engage in promiscuous sexual behavior that puts them at risk for HIV infection and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Young girls who are sexually abused are three times more likely than others to develop psychiatric disorders or abuse alcohol and drugs in adulthood.
- Among adolescent girls and boys, a history of sexual abuse greatly increases the risk of eating disorders such as bulimia, anorexia or the use of laxatives to avoid weight gain.

## SEXUAL ABUSER CHARACTERISTICS

Sexual abusers can be **preferential**, **situational** or **psychopathic**.

A **preferential** abuser has an exclusive and longstanding sexual and social preference for children, and actually *prefers* a child for a sexual partner. This abuser generally has an *age and sex of choice*.

A **situational** abuser molests a child due to emotional and psychological stress, but *prefers* an adult of the opposite sex as a sexual partner. Because none are 'available', he or she accepts a child as a sexual tool or partner.

A **psychopathic** sexual offender exploits any available victim, without regard for the age or sex of the victim.

Unfortunately, child molesters have no uniform 'profile' that might allow us to identify them. But we do know some of the common characteristics among **convicted** male and female sexual offenders.

### MALE MOLESTERS

**Almost 90% of convicted sexual offenders are male.** This figure may not provide an accurate indicator concerning the entire abuser population, as female abusers are less likely to face criminal prosecution than male abusers.

According to studies, convicted **male offenders** have some common characteristics. A convicted male molester is likely to have a poor self-image, and unrealistic beliefs about children. He may describe children as 'pure', 'innocent', or 'clean'. A male molester needs power and control over his environment and the people in his environment. He is rarely a team player, and has poor self-discipline and impulse control. He can be easily frustrated.

It is common for a male molester to move frequently and abruptly, with an unstable work history because of these frequent relocations. He may be over qualified for a position in his education, credentials or work history, but takes the job anyway. He may not care how much the job pays, because his primary aim is to gain access to children. He prefers interaction with children rather than adults, and has limited social interaction with people of his own age.

He may have a pattern of dating single moms.

It is common for a convicted male sexual offender to have been physically or sexually abused during his own childhood.

A male molester chooses hobbies which attract children, such as video games, arcades, amusement parks, or hanging out in the mall. He has 'toys' that are attractive to kids, like the latest video games and equipment, television and stereo equipment, motorcycles, a ski boat, or other such possessions. He is constantly scheduling activities with kids, and these activities are usually with children of a **specific age or gender**, such as pre-pubescent boys or young girls.

A molester may be an avid 'shutter bug', photographing and videotaping children any chance he gets. He may describe children as 'possessions' rather than individuals.

He sets up one-on-one interaction with children when it's possible to do so. He has difficulty setting limits, and he bends or breaks the rules to look 'cool' or create one-on-one access to a child. He allows special privileges in order to make a child feel special or chosen.

He may be unwilling to accept his role as an adult, and may describe himself as a 'big kid'. He identifies with children rather than adults, but is skillful at gaining the trust of both children and adults.

## FEMALE MOLESTERS

There is no uniform profile for **female molesters**, but some common characteristics exist among **convicted** female sexual offenders.

A female child molester may have illogical or bizarre thinking patterns. She probably performed poorly in school, and is unemployed or under-employed. She is easily angered or impatient, and has a negative attitude and demeanor. She lies to avoid conflict.

She may be socially isolated and probably married as a teen. She is usually married, while a male convicted sexual offender may remain unmarried, or may marry a single mom to have access to her children.

It is common for a female offender to have been sexually abused in childhood, and to have been raised in a very strict home where she did not receive tenderness from her father. She may have grown up in a zealously religious home, with an abusive, hyper critical and unapproachable father. She may have been raised with a strong religious teaching that all sex is 'sin'.

In a sexual relationship with a child, she is seeking affection from **children**, rather than risk rejection in adult relationships. She may be sexually naïve or immature. A female offender is more likely to **seduce** than **coerce** sexual activity, and she will blame the child for the sexual activity, or claim the child initiated the sexual behavior.

Finally, a female molester may be a **caregiver** for the abused child, and may utilize extreme discipline for minor misbehavior with children.

## SKILLFUL SCREENING OF EMPLOYEES & VOLUNTEERS

**Skillful** screening procedures are an important element in the creation of a safe environment for children's programs and services. Skillful screening encourages the inappropriate applicant to 'opt out' of the program **before** he or she has harmed a child or student **during the screening process**. The process is relatively simple, once learned, but very effective.

### **Skillful screening procedures include:**

- An appropriate criminal background check,
- An application specifically authorizing appropriate background investigation, providing work and personal references, and
- An application and interview process including questions designed to expose *known* risk indicators.

### **Principles of Skillful Screening:**

- Use the **same** screening process for each applicant.
- Make reasonable and diligent effort to access evidence of **past criminal behavior**.
- Get a release signed in the application process, allowing you to investigate appropriate background information. Use application questions to reveal areas of potential risk.
- Use the applicant's references and information from prior employers or past volunteer supervisors to help create a more complete picture of applicant's qualifications.
- Build in opportunities for the applicant to 'opt out' on his or her own. (Example: don't 'chase' an applicant who is not calling *you*.)
- Remove applicants from the applicant pool when you determine they are not qualified or appropriate for the position.

## ALLOWING APPLICANTS TO ‘OPT OUT’

**A skillful screening process encourages high-risk applicants to “opt out” and look elsewhere for access to children.**

1. Give all applicants opportunities to “opt out” with grace.
2. Communicate to all applicants that your organization screens to provide a safe environment for children. The screening process will include open access (through a signed release) to past supervisors where applicant worked or volunteered with children’s organizations and programs.
3. Communicate to all applicants that your organization takes abuse of children very seriously, and all outcries or reports of abuse are reported to police or Child Protective Services (CPS).
4. Tell an applicant that your organization has adopted Policies and Procedures specifically created to safeguard children in its programs.
5. Communicate to all applicants that contact/interaction with children in all program contexts will be *randomly monitored*.
6. Tell an applicant that all volunteers and staff at your organization undergo Sexual Abuse Awareness Training designed to teach staff and volunteers how a molester gains access to children.
7. Communicate to all applicants that your organization fully complies with requests from authorities who investigate child abuse.
8. Have all applicants read and sign a **code of conduct** for children's programs.
9. Have all applicants sign a statement confirming that the applicant has never abused a child.

## **EFFECTIVE CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECKS**

An appropriate criminal background check is an essential element of the skillful screening process. A criminal background check does not guarantee that a person is safe with children, but can provide information disqualifying an applicant for service as a volunteer or employee. Further, the requirement of an appropriate background check communicates to a would-be abuser that his background will be checked, and encourages an abuser to go elsewhere rather than risk detection.

Separate background checks are performed depending on whether a person is applying to be a volunteer or an employee, and whether the position involves interaction or supervision of children. In some cases, an effective criminal background check may require a records check in the county of the employee or volunteer's residence, as well as prior counties of residence.

## **RISK INDICATORS IN STAFF AND VOLUNTEER APPLICATIONS**

### **Look for:**

- Unstable work history (short durations/abrupt departures)
- Gaps in work history
- Gaps in dates of residence
- Unclear reasons for leaving previous employment
- Overeducated for job or position
- Inaccurate or incomplete information on application
- Pattern of volunteer or work history around a particular age or sex of child
- Difficulty with authority (rebellious stance or attitude)
- Prior supervisors not listed as references
- Prior peers in children's programming not listed as references
- References do not know applicant in the context of children's work or volunteer opportunity
- Defensive/angry/evasive responses (particularly to questions about being a molester)
- Applicant regularly gaining access to children of a specific age and sex
- Contradictory information
- Learned of position with no relationship to organization (no reference, no relationship to program or program participants)
- Answers to questions on application which reveal an unrealistic belief that children are 'vulnerable', 'clean', or 'innocent'
- Accepting a lesser-paying job ("money isn't important to me.")
- Portions of application left blank
- Short length of relationship with personal references
- Maverick attitude; not a team player

## **CHILD SAFETY APPLICATION FORM: HIGH AND LOW-RISK ANSWERS**

### **Why do you want to work with children?**

*High-risk:* I think little children are so innocent and sweet, I just love being around them. They make me feel good, just being with them!

*Low-risk:* I'm a parent of a first grader, and would like to work with my child's class.

### **Do you have a preference concerning the age group or sex of children or students with whom you would like to work?**

*High-risk:* I've always enjoyed working with young teen boys. I feel I can really relate with them and they seem to like me. My hobby, playing video games, seems to be something that appeals to boys of this age. (I'm really just a big kid....)

*Low-risk:* I'd prefer to be with my son's class, but I would consider elsewhere, if there is a need.

### **Have you had any other volunteer or vocational experience working with children or students?**

*High-risk:* Yes. I lead a teen Boy Scout troop. I volunteer for Big Brother/Big Sister, with two boys. In the past, I worked at Christian camp with student ministry. In college, I lifeguarded at a local Boys Club.

*Low-risk:* Yes, with my daughter's soccer team, as a coach. I also served as 'room mom' for two years in her elementary school.

### **What is your policy concerning re-direction or discipline of children?**

*High-risk:* I think heavy discipline is almost never needed. Love and kindness always work better, to help a child.

*Low-risk:* I guess it depends on the context. In my home, we take away privileges, but I'm not sure how that would work here. I'm willing to follow the organization's guidelines about how to discipline in this setting.

### **When you are unhappy, angry or emotional about a person or circumstance, what do you do?**

*High-risk:* Hard question! I'm really never angry.

*Low-risk:* When I'm angry, I try to stay calm and reasonable, and work out the problem.



**Have you experienced any significant physical or emotional stresses within the past year, such as a loss of a parent, spouse or child, extreme ill health, or any emotional or physical crisis?**

*High-risk:* No, never. I recently lost my remaining parent, but I'm doing fine.

*Low-risk:* I was divorced ten years ago, and it was very difficult but I got some counseling help and came through it okay.

**Do you consider yourself to have been sexually abused as a child?**

*High-risk:* That's none of your business.

*Low-risk:* No.

**Have you ever physically or sexually abused a child?**

*High-risk:* Why would you ask *me* such a question? Child abuse just sickens me!

*Low-risk:* No, I never have.

**Has someone ever accused you of abusing a child?**

*High-risk:* I'm not sure what you mean by that.

*Low-risk:* No, I haven't.

## INTERVIEW INSTRUCTIONS

**A skillful screening procedure should *always* include an interview by a trained, competent interviewer who is familiar with *known* high-risk responses.**

Throughout the screening process you will be gauging the qualifications and fitness of the applicant to participate in your organization's programs. An effective interview helps you determine and weigh individual experiences, ethics, attitudes and abilities that determine whether the applicant meets standards for employment or volunteer service.

Make the process as comfortable as possible for the applicant, while remaining professional. An interview with a comfortable applicant supplies a more accurate final assessment.

The interview should last one half hour to one hour in time, and should take place in an environment where neither you nor the applicant will be interrupted.

### **Principles for the Interview Process:**

- **Write down** the applicant's responses during the interview.
- Always use a prepared list of questions for an interview; never interview "off the cuff", or without preparation.
- "Going with your first impression" is *never* an ideal method of determining the best candidate.
- It is unwise to screen less and hire on a 'trial basis'.
- Be aware that applications often contain false information.
- An applicant's degree of education does not determine suitability for the job.
- Several interviewers meeting with one candidate can provide varied input from several different perspectives.
- Good interviewing can be taught.

## ‘NON-ANSWERS’ TO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions designed to identify high-risk applicants focus on the same question: what is the likelihood that this person might abuse a child?

Because human beings maintain a **pattern of behavior**, interviewers attempt to learn whether an applicant has abused a child *in the past*. Past behavior may forecast future behavior. Direct questions are most helpful when the interviewer is familiar with responses that indicate truthfulness, and responses that indicate deception.

**Example: Have you ever abused or molested a child?**

***Does the applicant give you a straightforward or evasive answer? Evasive answers often indicate deception.***

### **Direct Answers:**

No, I have not.

No, never.

No.

No, I have never abused a child.

### **Non-Answers:**

To me, the answer is “no”.

I don’t believe that I have.

What do you mean by that?

I don’t appreciate you accusing me of that.

Are you accusing me of abusing a child?

I’m not the kind of person who does that.

How are you defining abuse? [Nowadays it seems like *anything* can be called abusive].

Why would anyone do anything like that?

How could I do something like that?

I can’t say that I have.

I can’t say I remember ever doing something like that.

I would never abuse a child.

***If an applicant gives an evasive answer, ask follow-up questions.***

## FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- Have you ever mistreated a child?
- Have you ever touched a child inappropriately?
- Have you ever been accused of abusing a child?
- Has anyone ever accused you of abusing a child?
- Were you ever wrongly accused of abusing a child?
- Have you ever been questioned by a law enforcement official about child abuse?
- Have you been falsely accused of abusing a child?
- Have you ever been accused of molesting a child?
- Have you ever been arrested for any mistreatment of a child?
- Have you ever been questioned by a representative of CPS (Child Protective Services) due to a report of child abuse?

***A series of evasive answers is cause for concern and additional follow-up.***

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE OF REFERENCES

### REFERENCES PROVIDE:

- Information about an applicant from a third party.
- Assessment of the applicant's skills with children or students, as well as general work skills.
- Information from a third party about the applicant's risk level.
- Information from a third party about other work or volunteer positions.
- Information about other references. (Example: relationship between reference and applicant)

### ASK FOR:

- A professional reference (current or former supervisor, supervisor of volunteer activities, co-worker, person in the same field)
- A personal reference (friend, pastor, teacher, coach)
- A reference from a family member
- A reference from a person of the opposite sex.

Additional professional references may be submitted if deemed helpful by applicant in allowing the organization to assess an applicant's fitness for the position. An applicant with **no** compensated work history may submit references from volunteer work or additional **personal** references. If an applicant with no compensated work history elects to provide only personal references, only one family member/relative may be listed.

### REFERENCE PROCEDURE:

References should be contacted **after** a face-to-face interview with the applicant. Individuals who conduct reference checks must be trained in effective methods for checking references and responses that could indicate risk. A reference check form should be completed indicating every reference checked. Each reference question form should be asked and answered in writing. All references must be completed before an **employment** position is filled.

## REFERENCES PROCESS:

1. Discuss the list of references with the applicant during the interview process. Make sure he/she has told each reference that you will be contacting them.
2. Tell the applicant that he/she is responsible for asking the references to speak freely with you and provide an informed reference.
3. Give the applicant time to call the references, but a deadline for doing so. Give the applicant responsibility for informing you when all references have been contacted. (This is an 'opt out' opportunity.)
4. Check the list of references with applicant to confirm all phone numbers are current.
5. With applicant, confirm the nature of relationship between the applicant and each reference (social friend, co-worker, former boss, co-volunteer, family member, etc.)
6. Complete a reference form for each reference. Focus on specific experiences between that reference and applicant.
7. Be friendly, respectful and professional. (Use last names and professional titles.)
8. Take notes during the call.
9. Review notes immediately after the call.
10. Write out “red flags” or unanswered questions to be addressed with other references or the applicant him/herself.
11. Note any contradictions from information offered by applicant. (Example: length of relationship, nature of relationship, etc.)