

SAFETY AND SECURITY IN SUNDAY SCHOOL

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Keeping kids in your Sunday school ministry safe and secure is one of your biggest priorities—but how do you do that? Regardless of the size of your ministry, there are things you can do to ensure your policies and practices reduce liability, increase positive perception for parents, protect kids, and give families additional comfort at church. These things can even benefit you directly, because if you know the kids in your care are safe, it'll be easier to focus on connecting them to Jesus.

SECURITY AS A PRIORITY

Safety and security begin with your approach. Begin by working with your children's ministry leaders, church leaders, and safety professionals (if you have them) within your congregation to develop security policies and guidelines. This collaboration will provide the foundational reason and structure behind your specific procedures, and the resulting

well-documented policies can set a positive tone and communicate to families that keeping their children safe is a priority.

Once you establish policies, don't make exceptions. "Just this one time" or "Of course we can trust that volunteer to be alone with a child" can turn into situations regrettable for everyone involved. A policy applies to all volunteers and must be enforced uniformly.

In addition to adult-to-child ratios (see "Chapter 1: Building a Strong Sunday School Foundation"), pay close attention to the following areas.

Create a security team. Consider working with your church to create a security team. This doesn't have to be a paid team or a sophisticated secret-service type of group. You can tap resources already in your congregation; for example, law enforcement officers, medical professionals, and emergency responders. Their expertise can be incredibly valuable as you create and implement policies and guidelines. They can also help you identify holes in the safety of your facility or procedures.

When creating your security team, don't advertise for it. Keep this group's formation private, and invite only people your church knows and trusts as members. Personally get to know those on the team, because they're your #1 resource in the event of an emergency. Once you have your security team established, you can give them and other key leaders two-way radios so they can communicate with each other quickly and efficiently on Sundays when they're serving.

Secure your facility. Walk through your church and consider how you can increase security in each area. Invite your local fire marshal and police teams to tour your church to offer recommendations on how to make your environment safer for kids and families. Think about the layout and location of your Sunday school rooms, and how to effectively keep threats out. For example:

- Move Sunday school rooms to areas with high traffic that are highly visible.
- Keep the doors to your Sunday school rooms and area open during Sunday school meeting times. Put baby gates in the doors where younger kids will be.

- Train your team on how to handle a threat that comes into the building while classes are in session, using your security team's recommendations and the advice of your local fire marshal or police.
- Ensure two adults are always in the room, and make this a ministry-wide, no-exceptions policy.
- Limit access to Sunday school rooms. Ideally, each room will have one main entry and exit point so your team can easily monitor who's coming in and going out.

Work with your safety team, fire marshal, police officers, and team to create an emergency plan with clear directives. This plan needs to be detailed enough so that everyone knows what to do in the event of a fire, natural disaster, medical emergency, on-campus threat, or abduction. Communicate the plan to your volunteers and staff, and practice it on a regular basis.

Make a plan for and practice the following scenarios:

- Fire threat
- Tornado or hurricane
- Facility lockdown (for lost or missing children or violent situations)

Check the availability of safety items (first-aid kits, radios, flashlights, defibrillators) around your facility. Then train your security staff, key leaders, and volunteers on where to locate them. Do monthly checks to ensure all the items are in place, stocked, and in working condition. Also, have your team trained on how to work utilities in your facility in an emergency. Here are basic key things your team needs to be able to locate and use.

- First-aid kits
- Gas and water shut-off valves
- Electricity breaker switches

Finally, keep laminated lists of numbers that may be needed in an emergency, such as church leaders' personal contact information and local utility companies. Also, train your security team and all team members on how to contact emergency responders, especially if they must dial out of your phone system or if you don't have phones in each room.

ALLERGY AND MEDICAL ISSUES

Food allergies in children are on the rise, and therefore, so are medical concerns. It's extremely important to be aware of potential issues. You can consult medical professionals in your church family or community so you know how to respond in an emergency. It's also a good idea to implement a system to keep track of and quickly identify which kids have allergies or medical conditions and what'll trigger them; for example, an extreme allergy to peanuts. Your registration forms for all kids should collect this information and should include a note for parents to contact you if their child has an allergy or develops one. If you learn that a child has an allergy, contact parents personally to learn the best ways to handle it and what to do in an emergency. Note these details on the child's information, and inform teachers.

You need a process so parents can easily communicate any allergy or medical concerns regarding their children. Many electronic children's check-in solutions track this information and clearly identify children with allergies and medical conditions both on name tags and within the system. Tracking allergies and medical needs isn't just an option—it's a key aspect of keeping kids safe in your ministry.

Help all people know their roles in communication regarding allergies and medical needs, as this really helps streamline the process.

- **Parents** are responsible for communicating the information to the church and your Sunday school team.
- **Key leaders** are responsible for keeping teachers informed and making pertinent information available to other team members.
- **Teachers and volunteers** are responsible for knowing what action to take in specific situations; for example, how to identify and treat common allergic reactions and how to treat known allergies that specific children have in a Sunday school group.

Here are additional tips to consider as you create your plan.

- Ensure a first-aid kit or other medical supplies are easily accessible.
- Document incidents in writing and photos, and communicate them

with the child's guardian immediately. (This includes bumps and scrapes that happen while kids are in your care.)

- Proactively avoid severe allergic reactions. For example, never serve a snack with nuts unless you've personally cleared it with every parent. Check ingredient lists prior to meeting with kids. Even if a snack doesn't have nuts, it might've been processed in a facility that handles nuts, and this can be fatal to a child with severe allergies.
- Get medical releases from parents allowing you to seek emergency medical treatment, and ensure you can easily access parents at all times the child is in your care.

ABUSE PREVENTION

Abuse prevention begins with having updated policies and practices in place. Whatever your role in ministry, make a big deal about establishing child abuse protection. This protects your children and volunteers. And create this protection policy by considering the worst-case scenarios. Seriously. It's not fun, but it'll help you soberly strengthen safety before something bad happens. Being tough up front can help prevent a lifetime of heartache. A firm policy also tells parents and volunteers that you're proactively pursuing prevention. Here are rules to consider adding to your policies and practices.

- Ensure that a child is never alone with one adult. Even if this is inconvenient, it's imperative.
- Evaluate the physical environment of each room; open up hidden areas and secure private spaces, such as closets, so an adult cannot be alone and out of sight with a child.
- Never allow children to be unattended in your facility. This will help prevent one child from abusing another. Even the children of pastors, teachers, or volunteers need to be supervised. Create a designated game room or similar location where the children of volunteers and employees can play under supervision following programming.

VOLUNTEER SCREENING

Volunteers are your most important asset in child safety and security. Because they're your first line of defense, you need consistent volunteer screening policies to protect your kids and reduce liability should an inappropriate situation occur.

Before you recruit new volunteers, establish guidelines for screening each person. Even if you really need more volunteers, don't take shortcuts. Take the time to ensure your new volunteers are quality, trustworthy people. Consider creating a waiting period before a person can volunteer; someone may initially seem like a safe volunteer, but time may prove otherwise. You need to ensure volunteers are already dedicated to your church before you entrust them with your most precious responsibility: children.

Without a doubt, your church must have a background check plan. As you establish your background check policy, consider the following.

- Establish who will have background checks. In some ministries, everyone is required to have one. At the minimum ensure that every person who has any contact with children is checked, and strongly consider requiring checks for all people who serve.
- Establish when and how often you'll do background checks on each individual. (I suggest consistently—for example, annually.)
- Establish what information you need to obtain from your volunteers to conduct the background check.
- Establish who'll review the results of the background checks and how you'll handle concerns. See “The Scoop on Background Checks” sidebar near the end of this chapter for more information.
- Consider creating a committee or leadership team to make the decisions about who can and can't serve in your Sunday school ministry. This creates a system of checks and balances and spreads the decision across a team. It also reduces liability. Restrict the committee to a smaller number of leaders to increase volunteer privacy and allow quicker decision-making.
- Once your church establishes such guidelines, don't deviate or make exceptions. Even letting one person have special privileges can create a

liability issue. Consistency among everyone helps establish that your church has done everything possible to prevent abuse.

CHECK-IN SYSTEMS

A good check-in system can strengthen the safety and security of your Sunday school ministry. It can track attendance and room ratios, improving overall security. For example, volunteers can easily check that only authorized guardians are picking up children. And in emergencies, your volunteers can account for all kids.

Look for these features in your check-in system:

- Attendance checking for legal records. Should an incident arise, these records will help you account for any missing children. Good records also decrease your liability by showing your records track all children in your care by date.
- Regular updates to ensure children's records are kept accurately.
- Identification and communication of those allowed (and not allowed) to pick up children in your care. Some electronic systems will even manage copies of legal documents, such as divorce decrees or restraining orders.

THE SCOOP ON BACKGROUND CHECKS

Here are key things to remember when it comes to background checks, according to Bob D'Ambrosio of Church Volunteer Central (churchvolunteercentral.com).

Get consent. You must have the applicant's written consent to perform a background check. Some systems still use paper forms while others have gone to digitally encrypted, secure systems. If you use paper, keep all consent forms in a locked file (they contain sensitive personal data). If a legal issue arises, you may need to prove that you had the person's consent to obtain a background check, so hold on to all paper consent forms. A digital system will store them for you. It's also a good idea to keep physical copies of background checks in a secure location, and ensure that only the necessary people have access to these files.

Know what to look for. Most organizations provide a grading system that'll tip you as to whether a person's check is clear, raises potential concerns, or has red flags. A clear check indicates that the service found no discrepancies in identification data or convictions. A potential concern typically means there's either an identification issue or unclear/incomplete data on a conviction. A background check that raises red flags means the service has found identification issues and/or convictions. And remember, any background check you get is confidential and should be viewed only by the people in your ministry who "need to know."

Have a plan. What do you do when a background check comes back with potential concerns or red flags? Potential concerns may be as simple as a Social Security number entered incorrectly, so work to identify any typos or mistakes. Ask the applicant for clarification on other questionable issues. These background checks are easy to resubmit, and a simple data correction may be all that's needed to get the all clear.

Conversely, a check that sends up red flags is your signal that the applicant has a history that won't mesh with assisting in your ministry. Create a plan for how you'll handle these conversations before you have to have them. Additionally, determine with your leadership team whether you'll invite someone with red flags to serve in any other volunteer capacity in your congregation where there's no contact with children.

ELECTRONIC CHECK-IN SYSTEMS

Let's be honest: It's easier and more reliable to manage all the information you need to if you do it electronically. And electronic check-in systems are set up solely for that purpose, bringing overall ministry security to a whole new level. Consider these features of an electronic check-in system.

- Displays photos of authorized and unauthorized guardians.
- Uses unique matching security codes on child name badges and guardian receipts which function as a lock and key for child pick-up.
- Records allergy and medical information.
- Offers tools such as text messaging and email to make communication between your Sunday school volunteers and parents simple and easy.
- Keeps communication with parents simple.

An electronic check-in system is definitely something to consider, but if you simply can't make it work financially, focus on using the resources you do have to take attendance, track where kids are, record allergy and medical information, and note who's approved to pick up children. Regardless of the check-in system you use, get your entire team trained and involved in using your check-in system correctly. While check-in systems improve security and create a more pleasant experience for families, keep in mind that your check-in system is only as effective as the people serving in your ministry.

- Verification that people are who they say they are. Some electronic systems will manage photos of parents.
- Communication so volunteers and leaders are aware of allergies or medical concerns.
- New guest information and prompts.
- Room capacity management.
- When it comes to parents, there are several benefits of having a good check-in system. It shows them that security is a priority and that you know where kids are at all times. It also gives parents peace of mind that you're focused on all their children's needs—and not only the spiritual needs.

Safety in Sunday school begins with your approach. Proactively set a positive tone with internal teams and parents. You have the opportunity and responsibility to work with your broader church team to implement

changes that increase safety and security for your Sunday school children. Taking these steps will ensure that your Sunday school is a safe and positive experience for all.



ALEX SMITH is CEO of KidCheck (kidcheck.com), provider of secure children's check-in solutions for churches and childcare professionals. KidCheck is committed to delivering easy-to-use, reliable, and secure check-in systems backed by expert personal service and support. Alex is a data security and child-safety expert, church safety team leader, and former police officer.