

# Preventing and Responding to Abuse

*This document summarizes current Church policies and guidelines on abuse. All priesthood and Church organization leaders should be familiar with and follow them to help protect God's children.*

## WHAT IS ABUSE?

Abuse is the mistreatment or neglect of others (such as a child or spouse, the elderly, or the disabled) in a way that causes physical, emotional, or sexual harm.

Abuse causes confusion, doubt, mistrust, and fear in the victims and sometimes inflicts physical injury. Most, but not all, allegations of abuse are true and should be taken seriously and handled with great care. Abuse tends to become more severe over time.

The Lord condemns abusive behavior in any form—including neglect and physical, sexual, or verbal abuse. Most abuse violates the civil laws of society. (See First Presidency letter, “Responding to Abuse,” July 28, 2008.)

## TEACHING DOCTRINE

Stake presidencies and bishoprics should ensure that what they say about abuse is based on Church doctrine. In particular, they should teach the following:

- The doctrine of the Church commits all leaders and members to protect each individual (see Matthew 18:6; Ephesians 5:25, 28–29; “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” ChurchofJesusChrist.org).
- Abuse in any form is sinful, tragic, and in total opposition to the teachings of the Savior (see Doctrine and Covenants 121:37).
- The Savior extends succor, healing, and strength to victims of abuse because of His infinite and eternal Atonement (see Alma 7:11–12; 34:10).
- Those who commit abuse in any way are accountable to God (see Doctrine and Covenants 101:78). Heavenly Father and His Son offer forgiveness to those who have committed abuse when they change their behavior and fully repent (see Mosiah 14:4–12; Doctrine and Covenants 58:42–43).

- The principles in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” are vital for all members to understand and will help everyone avoid the evils of abuse (see Gordon B. Hinckley, “Save the Children,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 52–54).

## The Abuse Help Line

For some years, the Church has operated a free and confidential abuse help line (1-800-453-3860, ext. 2-1911), established for bishops and stake presidents in the United States and Canada. In other areas, bishops who learn of possible abuse should contact their stake presidents, who will seek guidance from the Area Presidency. (See *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 38.6.2.1, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.)

The following information will help bishops and stake presidents use this help line:

- This help line is available for bishops and stake presidents to call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, when addressing situations involving any type of abuse.
- The bishop or stake president should promptly call the help line about every situation in which he believes a person may have been abused or neglected or is at risk of being abused or neglected.
- When bishops or stake presidents call the help line, legal and clinical professionals will answer their questions and provide instructions about how to assist victims, comply with local laws and requirements for reporting abuse, and protect against further abuse. For more information, see *General Handbook*, 38.6.2.1.

## KEY MESSAGES

### How Can Abuse Be Prevented?

#### AT HOME

Church leaders should do the following to help prevent abuse in the home:

- Encourage couples and families to live the gospel in the home. They should establish patterns of kindness, respect, and open communication so that all family members are comfortable discussing sensitive matters (see “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” ChurchofJesusChrist.org).
- Encourage parents to teach children information and skills appropriate to their age and maturity so they will know what to do if faced with abuse.
- Make members aware of Church resources.

#### AT CHURCH

Church leaders should follow these guidelines to help prevent abuse at Church:

- A person must not be given a Church calling or assignment that involves working with children or youth if his or her membership record is not in the ward or if it has an annotation for abuse (see *General Handbook*, 38.6.2, 12.5.1).
- When adults are teaching children or youth in Church settings, at least two responsible adults should be present. The two adults could be two men, two women, or a married couple (see *General Handbook*, 12.5.1).
- Where it may not be practical to have at least two adults in a classroom, leaders should consider combining classes.
- At least two adults must be present on all Church-sponsored activities attended by youth or children.
- When a brother participates in a ministering visit to an individual woman, he should go with his companion or with his wife.
- When a member of a stake presidency or bishopric or another assigned leader meets with a child, youth, or woman, he or she should ask a parent or

another adult to be in an adjoining room, foyer, or hall. If the person being interviewed desires, another adult may be invited to participate in the interview. Leaders should avoid all circumstances that could be misunderstood (see *General Handbook*, 12.5.1).

- On Church-sponsored overnight activities, a child or youth may not stay in the tent or room of an adult leader unless the adult is his or her parent or guardian or there are at least two adults in the tent or room who are the same gender as the child or youth (see *General Handbook*, 12.2.1.3).
- If adult leaders and children or youth share other overnight facilities, such as a cabin, there must be at least two adults in the facility and they must be the same gender as the children or youth (see *General Handbook*, 12.2.1.3).

### Responding to Abuse

(See *General Handbook*, 38.6.2.1.)

Church leaders and members should follow these guidelines when responding to abuse:

- When abuse occurs, the first and immediate responsibility of Church leaders is to help those who have been abused and to protect vulnerable persons from future abuse. Members should never be encouraged to remain in a home or situation that is abusive or unsafe.
- Church leaders and members should be caring, compassionate, and sensitive when working with victims and perpetrators and their families.
- Church leaders should never disregard a report of abuse or counsel a member not to report criminal activity to law enforcement personnel.
- Church leaders and members should fulfill all legal obligations to report abuse to civil authorities.
- Priesthood leaders should help those who have committed abuse to repent and cease their abusive behavior (see Isaiah 1:18; Doctrine and Covenants 64:7).

- Professional counseling may be helpful for the victims and perpetrators and their families. It is almost always advised in cases of serious abuse.

## TEACHING STAKE AND WARD COUNCILS

Stake presidencies and bishoprics should present this information in stake and ward council meetings. Members of stake and ward councils should then discuss this material in their respective presidency and leadership meetings and with others, as needed:

- Members of stake and ward councils should teach the key messages in this outline and invite discussion from adult priesthood and Church organization leaders. As part of the discussion, they might begin by watching the video “Protect the Child: Responding to Child Abuse,” found under “How to Help” on the Abuse page of Gospel Library. Because this information is sensitive, they should seek the guidance of the Spirit as they teach.
- Often a report of abuse will come to a trusted teacher or adviser. Members of stake and ward councils should help leaders, teachers, and members take proper steps in preventing and responding to abuse, including reporting the abuse to appropriate civil authorities.

## POLICY AND LEGAL ISSUES RELATING TO ABUSE

The following guidelines will help Church leaders handle policy and legal issues relating to abuse:

- Immediately call the help line at 1-800-453-3860, ext. 2-1911, when addressing situations involving any type of abuse.
- For guidelines on handling situations involving abuse, stake presidents and bishops should refer to *General Handbook*, 38.6.2.1.

- For guidelines on handling confession, restitution, investigation, communication with aggrieved victims, and confidentiality in situations involving abuse, stake presidents and bishops should refer to *General Handbook*, 38.6.2.2.

- For guidelines on handling Church discipline in situations involving abuse, stake presidents and bishops should refer to *General Handbook*, 38.6.2.
- Church leaders should not testify in civil or criminal cases involving abuse without first conferring with the Office of General Counsel at Church headquarters (1-800-453-3860, ext. 2-6301). For specific guidelines, see *General Handbook*, 38.6.2.1.

## OTHER RESOURCES

- “Abuse (Offender’s Needs),” ChurchofJesusChrist.org
- Articles of Faith 1:12
- Doctrine and Covenants 121; 123
- Gordon B. Hinckley, “Personal Worthiness to Exercise the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 52–59
- Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking about Us?,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, 70–72
- Dallin H. Oaks, “Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2005, 24–27
- Richard G. Scott, “To Heal the Shattering Consequences of Abuse,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2008, 40–43
- “Abuse: Help, Healing, and Protection,” Abuse Help, ChurchofJesusChrist.org
- Family Services courses Strengthening Marriage and Strengthening the Family