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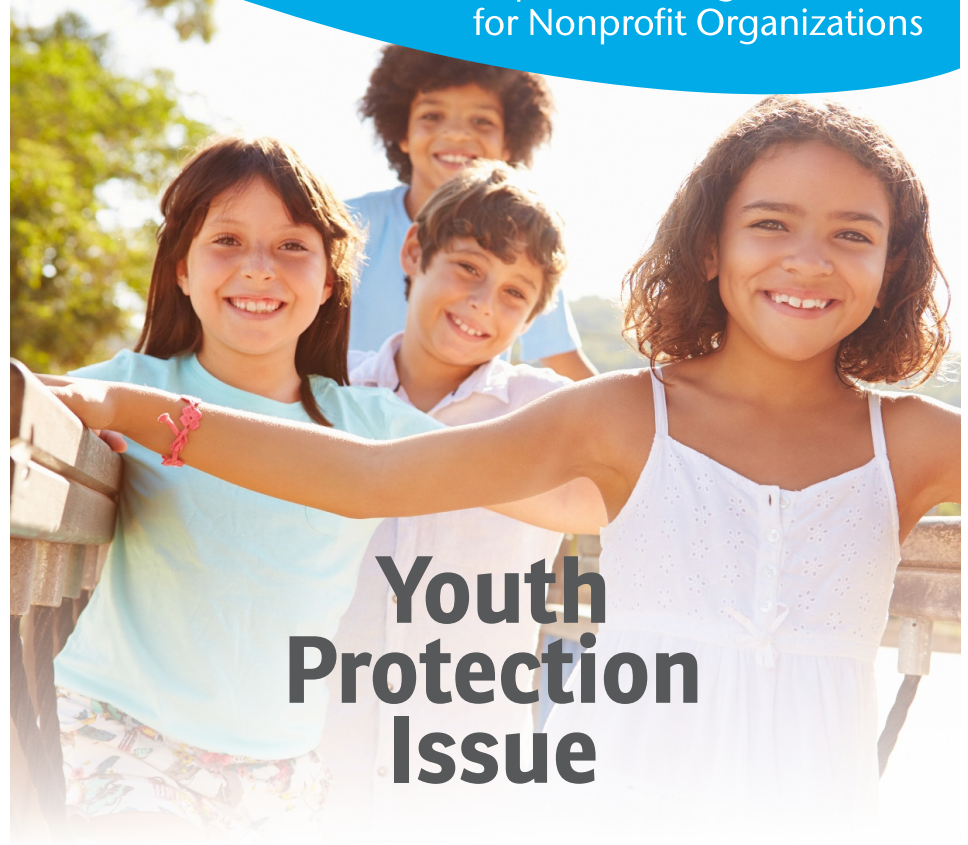
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## Youth Protection Issue

## Cyberbullying & Cyber Threats to Young People

By Lexie Williams

In August of 2009, a nonprofit college preparatory day school in Los Angeles was sued for \$100 million dollars by a student's parents following a case of on-site cyberbullying. The incident occurred when nine students accessed another student's personal website from school computers and

left death threats. The lawsuit alleged negligence committed by the school, as well as assault with death threats and hate crimes, invasion of privacy, and conspiracy. The victim's parents blamed the school for failing to protect their son, and for failing to punish the bullies. This type of cyberbullying case—

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## Cyberbullying & Cyber Threats to Young People *continued from page 1*

stemming entirely from actions that take place online—is not uncommon, and with society’s increasing reliance on technology, cyberbullying incidents are becoming more prevalent. Cyberbullying not only poses a risk for schools, but also for any youth-serving organization and certainly for the vulnerable children and teens served by these agencies.

### Cyberbullying and the “Real World”

For many individuals, a disconnect exists between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, or harm that occurs in the physical world. Nonprofit leaders may wonder, “how could online bullying and cyber threats really affect my nonprofit, if the events only take place online?” Alas, liability can arise no matter where a violation occurs—in the physical world or the digital dimension. Even when cyberbullying or cyber threats transpire away from your nonprofit’s facilities or program sites, they can significantly impact relationships within your organization, and potentially lead to lawsuits and other consequences if you fail to take the appropriate steps to prevent or stop the bullying. In the Los Angeles prep school case, the bullying students could have chosen to progress to bullying the victim in person on the school premises. In turn, the victim could have been physically harmed, and the bullying may have affected students other than the initial victim (e.g., witnesses, additional victims, etc.). In response to being physically or publicly bullied, the victim may have chosen to act out against his bullies, and potentially cause them harm in return. In this type of situation, the school would face countless consequences such as reconciling with devastated or enraged parents, providing care to frightened youth and

compassion to the victim’s family, and enduring hawk-like public scrutiny and negative press, not to mention lawsuits and other financial consequences. Any number of underlying conditions could create an environment in which cyberbullying is more likely to occur or to transform into physical bullying. Fortunately, in this case, cyberbullying was the sole offense, and the victim responded appropriately by immediately notifying his parents. Imagine this type of situation occurring at your organization—how would you respond? Armed with an understanding of the cyberbullying and cyber threat landscape, you can prepare to protect your young service recipients in the digital dimension: a place where today’s youth spend considerable time, often alone or unsupervised, and with little caution or regard for their own privacy and safety.

### Cyberbullying versus Cyber Threats

Due to our constant use of technology and the growing risk of liability stemming from cyber crimes, you have likely heard the terms *cyberbullying* and *cyber threats*, but you may not be able to distinguish between the two. According to the i-SAFE Foundation ([isafe.org](http://isafe.org)), an organization dedicated to protecting the privacy of youth (partly by educating them to safely and responsibly use information and communications technology), **more than one in three young people have encountered cyber threats online.** A *cyber threat* is defined as any form of intimidating online material suggesting that the author or perpetrator may commit an act of violence, suicide, or self-harm. The Cyberbullying Research Center ([cyberbullying.org](http://cyberbullying.org)) attests that more than half of youth and teens have been cyberbullying victims, and around

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...it is estimated that fewer than 20% of young cyberbullying victims notify their parents that they have been bullied.

10% to 20% experience cyberbullying regularly. Phones are a popular cyberbullying channel due to their popularity and high-usage rate amongst teens, and it is estimated that fewer than 20% of young cyberbullying victims notify their parents that they have been bullied.

### Understanding Cyberbullying

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains [stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov), which is designed to provide education and resources to prevent bullying behaviors. On the site, *cyberbullying* is defined as bullying that takes place using electronic technology such as social media websites, text messages, chat tools or other types of websites. Common cyberbullying tactics include:

- **Flaming**—writing content intended to evoke responses of fear, rage, humiliation, or other negative emotions.
- **Harassment**—creating and sending offensive, vulgar, or insulting messages on a continuing basis.
- **Denigration**—spreading or posting information about a person intended to damage his or her reputation.
- **Impersonation**—posing as someone other than yourself or using someone else's identity to break into an account that does not belong to you, with the intent to cause harm to another's reputation or well-being.
- **Outing and Trickery**—coercing someone to share private information or images with you and then sharing this information online or via text message without consent for the purpose of embarrassing the individual.
- **Exclusion**—directly or indirectly sending a hurtful message to a target victim implying that they are not being included in social activities, or are disliked or should be ostracized by others.
- **Cyberstalking**—repeatedly sending intimidating messages to a target victim or threatening to harm the safety of the victim or someone to whom they are close.

### Risk Factors

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, there are several risk factors that can help responsible adults identify youth who may be more susceptible to becoming bullies or to being bullied than other children. Young people who have difficulty interacting or connecting with others in-person are often the most likely to engage in risky online behavior; thus, children who display some of the following attributes may be more likely to bully others:

- Easily frustrated or impulsively angry/violent

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## Cyberbullying & Cyber Threats to Young People continued from page 3

Nonprofits looking for a quick preventative measure should consider writing *behavior contracts* to distribute to youth and teens who are served by the organization.

- Obsessed or very interested in discussing violence or violent behaviors
- Difficulties at home, or low parental involvement in their lives
- Frequently berate peers and other youth
- Have difficulty following guidelines and rules for acceptable behavior
- Question authority or act defiantly toward adults or other authority figures

Children who are the victims of bullying often possess one or more of the following risk factors:

- Seen as somehow different from their peers (e.g., 'nerdy,' immature, irritating, attention-seeking, etc.)
- Prone to low self-confidence or mental health challenges such as depression or anxiety
- Perceived as weak or incapable of standing up for themselves
- Tend to isolate themselves from others
- Have mental, physical, or learning disabilities
- Identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)

### Enhancing Your Organization's Preventive Measures Against Cyberbullying

According to the Juvenile Justice Information Exchange ([jjie.org](http://jjie.org)), establishing a 'zero tolerance' policy for bullying is not enough to combat this pervasive issue. These types of policies have been linked to higher school dropout rates and increased incarceration rates, sometimes with little effect on the issue they actually mean to address. Advocates from the Teaching Tolerance Project ([tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org)),

recommend using one of two techniques to manifest a culture of acceptance and to limit cyberbullying: *reparative justice* or *behavior contracts*.

*Reparative justice* approaches rule violation by aiming to repair the relationships between all individuals impacted by the misbehavior (including the perpetrator) instead of assigning blame. This mediation method requires organizations to make careful selections of adults who are assigned to intervene. These caretakers must have good listening and communication skills, impartiality, and patience. While time-consuming, this unconventional technique allows all parties involved to move forward in a mutual fashion. If effective, this technique could aid not only a cyberbullying victim, but it could also aid the bully and reduce the likelihood that the bully will act out again.

Nonprofits looking for a quick preventative measure should consider writing *behavior contracts* to distribute to youth and teens who are served by the organization. The contract should define your organization's policy on technology use, explain how misconduct will be handled, and require each participant to sign in agreement to the policy, prior to being allowed to use the Internet or technology during their time at your nonprofit. To make behavior contracts more effective, continue offering training and supervision (as appropriate), to youth who are using your technology resources. For example, youth may find it easier to understand and follow your protocols if they are offered refresher training on the technology use policy, or other guidance on safe uses of the Internet. Using behavior contracts or implementing reparative justice techniques will help bring your

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## Cyberbullying & Cyber Threats to Young People continued from page 4

nonprofit one step closer to a culture of acceptance, inclusion, and proactive youth protection.

Fortunately, your organization can take even more preventative measures to avoid becoming the next big 'cyber no-no' headline. Some of these measures include:

- Establishing consequences for youth who misuse technology (e.g. loss of technology use privileges), and creating a process by which parents are informed in these situations.
- Reassuring the youth within your organization that being bullied is never their fault, and providing training on what to do when you are the victim of bullying, or what to do when you see another youth being bullied (e.g., reporting, bystander intervention training, etc.).
- Informing new youth participants of your nonprofit's rules on the use of technology and your commitment to ensuring that all individuals are treated respectfully at all times, including online.
- Keeping computers and other technology in a shared area where staff and volunteers are able to monitor computer use.
- Organizing a viewing of cyberbullying movies such as *Cyberbully* and *Submit the Documentary: The Virtual Reality of Cyberbullying*.

To start creating a cyberbullying policy and training program for your young participants, try out the following ideas:

- Emphasize the effects of cyberbullying on not only victims, but also the perpetrators.
- Encourage youth and teens to save or take pictures of cyberbullying

(or other types of bullying) as proof that it occurred, in case the organization, parents, or authorities need to get involved.

- Inform youth and teens that they should never reveal social media or Internet passwords to anyone aside from a parent or trusted adult. Written copies of passwords should be stored in an area where they are unlikely to be found by unauthorized individuals.
- Reiterate to youth and teens that they should not share anything through text or the Internet that they would not want to be made publicly known. Remind youth that the people they communicate with via technology may not be who they say they are, and that electronic messages are not always secure.
- Convey the importance of protecting personal information online, and explain the risks related to meeting an online acquaintance in person.

For more information about cyber risks and creating an effective program to protect your young participants from harm, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) tip sheet ([www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ea-tipsheet-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ea-tipsheet-a.pdf)) on protecting children from online aggression, or visit the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' [stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov) website to find statistics on bullying, and to learn about implementing bullying education and prevention techniques at your nonprofit. ■

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Lexie Williams was a 2015 Summer Risk Management Intern at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Questions about the topics covered in this article can be directed to [info@nonprofitrisk.org](mailto:info@nonprofitrisk.org) or 703.777.3504.



## Key Principles in Youth Protection: Considerations and Action Steps

Nonprofit leaders often seek ‘best practices’ or standards for excellence for which to aim or surpass at their own organizations. Yet the complexity and variations in service models of youth-serving nonprofits makes it difficult to standardize youth protection practices throughout the sector. While many organizations are eager to implement and exceed what they view to be minimum standards, the process of developing a youth protection program must be nuanced, rather than rote. Rather than simply applying a set of minimum standards, a youth-serving nonprofit should instead aim to transcend those standards by tailoring its youth protection program to the unique elements of its mission and the needs of its clientele. Though youth protection practices may be distinct amongst diverse nonprofits, in the Center’s experience, all youth-serving organizations share a commitment to

inspire and support youth, and avoid causing harm.

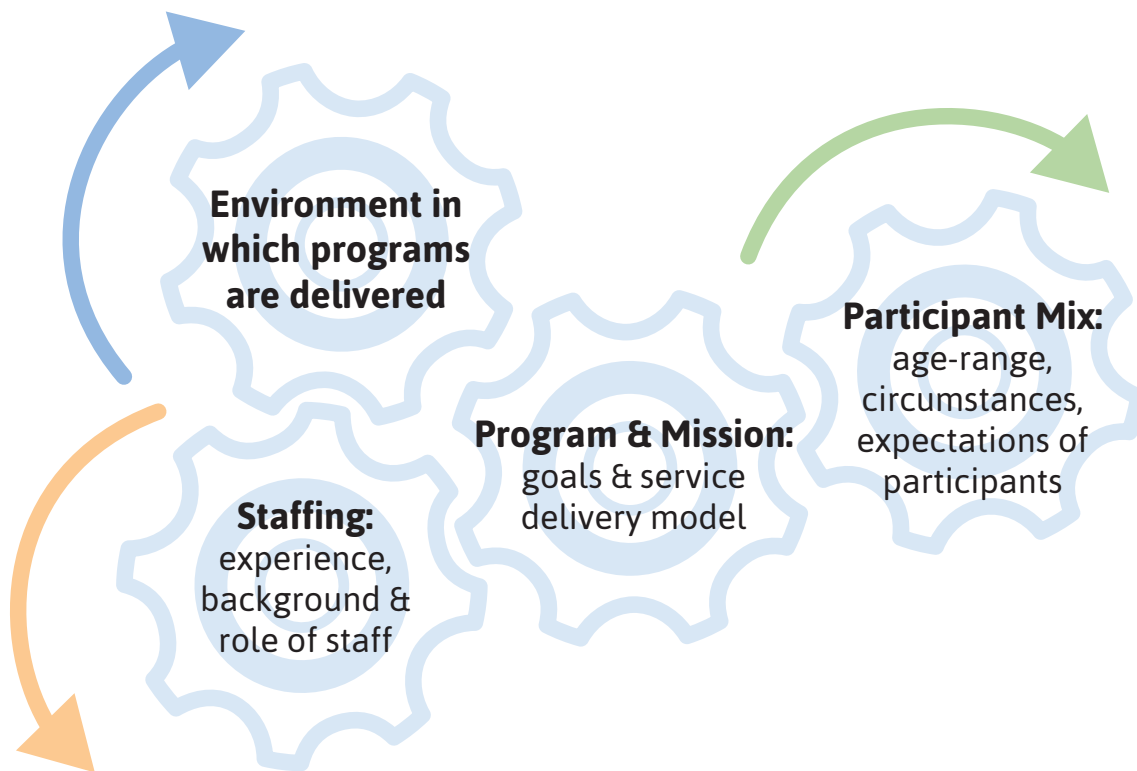
### *Four Considerations*

There is no single framework, checklist or standard for youth protection to which all organizations must be held. The Center’s view, therefore, is that youth-serving organizations must thoughtfully consider a number of key factors in designing and implementing youth protection measures. The diagram on the next page offers a reminder of the interlocking considerations worthy of discussion before designing youth protection policies and strategies: staffing, participant mix, program and mission, and the environment in which programs are delivered. In the Center’s book, *The Season of Hope*, and its predecessor, *The Child Abuse Prevention Primer*, we referred to these interlocking factors as the “4 P’s: Personnel, Participants, Program and Premises.”

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*(NOTE: This article includes excerpts from Chapter 6 of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center’s book, EXPOSED: A Legal Field Guide for Nonprofit Executives-2nd Edition. The Center is deeply grateful to Mark E. Chopko for his valuable contributions to this article and EXPOSED. To order a copy of the book, visit: [www.nonprofitrisk.org/store/pub\\_detail.asp?id=225](http://www.nonprofitrisk.org/store/pub_detail.asp?id=225))*

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1. **Staffing** – Staffing issues are related to the three other considerations in that some youth-serving programs should be staffed by individuals with advanced degrees, while others may be staffed by mature teens and young adults. For those that offer direct services to the children and youth in the programs, supervision is a critical factor to the safety of service recipients.

*Example: Confirmation classes at a community church are taught by an ordained minister, while Vacation Bible school activities are led by teenage members of the church.*

2. **Participant mix** – While some youth-serving nonprofits offer single-sex programs and others deliver services to participants that fall within a narrow-age range, most youth-serving nonprofits work with a diverse mix of young children as well as teens, some of whom have special

needs and are at increased risk. The participant mix shapes the risks facing the organization, thereby shaping the approach to youth protection, which effects decisions about staffing, programs, and the program environment.

*Example: A youth-serving organization's day-care center is staffed by one teacher for each small group of 4-6 year old children. The organization's after-school adventure program, involving multiple teens between the ages of 13-17 who take afternoon hikes, is staffed by two adults.*

3. **Program and mission** – The mission of an organization and the nature of its programs and services are vital considerations in developing youth protection measures.

*Example: A mentoring organization matches responsible adults with children who lack great adult role*

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*models. The organization encourages the pairs to attend cultural events, educational events, and spend time nurturing the interests and life goals of the child. The mission of a small charter school is to nurture the intellect of its students, as well as their interest in science. All school activities are held in classrooms in the school, or on the school grounds. The mentoring organization might focus on intensive screening and youth protection training for its mentors, who interact with children one-on-one, whereas the charter school might focus on enforcing organization-wide youth protection policies to ensure that employees practice only authorized photography, appropriate forms of physical contact, and 'two-deep supervision' (having two adult supervisors present at all times).*

- 4. Environment in which programs are delivered** – Youth participate in activities sponsored by nonprofits in an extraordinary range of environments. From camping trips to rural areas, to rides in homebuilt aircraft, to mission trips overseas, there are far more differences than similarities in the environments where children learn and grow. While recognizing the risks that are attributable to the venues in which programs are conducted, it's also important to recognize that all programs and activities offer access to children. A child molester (or a person with the proclivity to abuse children) can use a nonprofit program to gain access to children, and then try to form relationships that offer opportunities for out-of-program contact with children (e.g., contact that occurs outside the sanctioned/supervised activities conducted by the nonprofit).

*Example: A school serving deaf and hard of hearing students rejects an offer by a teacher to take students for rides in his private airplane. An association of aviation enthusiasts promotes its program providing rides for children in four-seat and two-seat airplanes, some of them homebuilt aircraft.*

Although it is impossible to guarantee a safe environment or promise parents that their children are immune from harm, the public rightly expects that community serving organizations will take time to understand the risks that arise from the organization's mission, and respond promptly to complaints of misconduct. Yet no system of prevention will be perfect and eliminate the risk of harm.

### 4-Step Youth Protection Action Plan

The following action steps are relevant for most youth-serving organizations. However, they must be addressed against a contextual backdrop that reflects the four considerations previously discussed.

- 1. Consider the risks facing your organization.** First, examine the risks associated with your mission and services, and your service recipients. Begin by reflecting on the past experiences of your organization along with the experiences of your peer organizations. Also consider common concerns expressed or felt by your stakeholders, including staff, management, board members, parents, donors, etc. Last, brainstorm about potential risks that you have not yet identified or that you have not fully acknowledged. What risks might lie on the horizon? What do you keep pushing 'under the rug' in favor of addressing other, more immediate concerns? Consider these questions

in light of your service recipients' needs and your organization's existing culture, capabilities and resources. Your organization should strive to implement youth protection practices, but must also adopt a pragmatic approach that is truly effective and sustainable given your context.

- 2. Adopt a written policy.** The time and attention required to write organizational policies dealing with prevention and response to abuse are well worth it. The worst thing that can happen to an institution is to have a crisis—a complaint of active abuse in the organization—and have administrators scrambling to decide how to respond. This policy should state the organization's commitment to providing a safe environment for those entrusted to its care, simultaneously disclosing that no institution is immune and no policy is failsafe. The policy should be both proactive and reactive.

For example, the policy should address issues such as the screening and checking of backgrounds for employees and volunteers and any additional education and training either for staff or for those served. An issue that frequently arises in this context is whether every individual associated with the organization must submit to a background check. For example, if a private school required all parents to submit to a background check to be an occasional driver for school field trips, there would be a large increase in fees and expenses. Some parents will not share these duties in these situations because it's either too much trouble, because they're concerned about privacy, or for other concerns. Some institutions have resolved this issue by insisting that

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only full-time employees, other staff and volunteers whose tasks include regular (as opposed to occasional) contact with children are subject to a rigorous screening process. Additionally, there are numerous low or no cost tools that can be used for screening individuals in contact with children. For example, sex offender registries are accessible for free online. Moreover, organizations should not be overreliant on background checks. Supervision and monitoring interactions between staff and children is much more important. Appropriate supervision is another key youth protection practice that warrants clear, written policies.

Every organization is different—they have different needs, resources, services, responsibilities, funding, cultures, demographics, etc. Therefore, each situation of abuse is different. Policies should stress that they are only guidelines and each situation is different; therefore for good reasons that will be documented, the guidelines can be departed from in particular circumstances. For example, if a policy requires an automatic suspension on notice of a complaint, what happens if the accuser recants?

Organizations should review their youth protection policies regularly to be sure that they reflect the newest legal developments in the state and account for any changes in programs and activities. Certainly one of the most important tasks an organization can undertake is a review after it has had a claim to determine what can be learned from the situation. For example: was training adequate? Was the screening of staff adequate and fair? Did we follow the law? Did we

interact properly with the community through media and through public authorities? A commitment to protect the vulnerable has to reflect a commitment to change and improve as more is known and expected.

### **3. Promptly respond to all complaints.**

A nonprofit's youth protection policy should outline how the organization intends to deal with complaints. For example, will any member of the staff respond to a complaint or will a complainant always be directed to a particular trained individual? Will oral or anonymous reports be accepted? What will happen within the organization with respect to reporting issues to executives or the board? Will reports to law enforcement be made as a matter of course because the staff are mandatory reporters or as a matter of practice? Will the organization accept reports from persons who return and cite abuse from decades earlier by someone in the institution? What will the organization's leaders say to stakeholders and participants about the complaint? One problem, in practice, is that policies can sometimes be too general or too strict. If they are too general, too much is left to the discretion of individual administrators and problems routinely arise in that similar situations are often given disparate treatment. If policies are too strict, they make compliance difficult and cumbersome. In practice, you should strive for balanced policies administered by trained staff. A well-trained, sensitive and dedicated staff is really the best device to prevent and respond to abuse.

In the abstract, the process is remarkably simple. The difficulty is in the details. Follow these good practices when responding to an allegation of abuse:

- Direct the person to a designated staff contact. Not every staff member has the background and training to handle a complaint from a victim.
- Presume the person is a victim of abuse. Listen respectfully, take good notes and get contact information. Explain what will happen next—there is a policy and it will be followed.
- Report! Certainly there will need to be communication with the organization's executives, board, legal counsel, and insurer. A report to law enforcement (or child protective services)—even if not mandated by law—is always a good practice regardless of whether the presumed victim is a legal minor. Additionally, all referrals for investigation—whether to law enforcement or child protective services—should be documented by your organization. Please note—one must also report whether the complaint meets the legal standard (usually reasonable suspicion—or more plainly “could this really have happened?”)
- Investigate. Typically, an investigation of abuse should be handled by the proper authorities, and in some circumstances (e.g., after a required report) law enforcement may forbid an agency to take any further steps. However, there will be instances when the organization must do some rudimentary investigating to verify facts and circumstances, especially if the claim is more than a few years old and public authorities are not actively pursuing it. To prepare for scenarios like this, be aware of the statute of limitations for abuse claims. In

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## Five Principles: Reacting to Claims of Abuse

A statement issued by the president of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in June 1992, (endorsed by the membership in November 1992), provided five guidelines on how Catholic Church staff should respond to claims of abuse suffered by service recipients. Although there are many variations and even more details, the principles still form a useful basis upon which to make policy and apply to institutions that are secular and religious. They are set forth here:

- 1. Respond promptly to all allegations of abuse where there is reasonable belief that abuse has occurred.**
- 2. If such an allegation is supported by sufficient evidence, relieve the alleged offender promptly of their ministerial duties and refer them for appropriate medical evaluation and intervention.**
- 3. Comply with the obligations of the civil law as regards to the reporting of the incident and cooperating with the investigation.**
- 4. Reach out to the victims and their families and communicate sincere commitment to their spiritual and emotional well-being.**
- 5. Within the confines of respect for privacy of the individuals involved, deal as openly as possible with members of the community.**

some jurisdictions this may be quite long. Often when an allegation is made of long since passed abuse, the allegation may arise in conjunction with legal proceedings, in which case the organization should be guided by its attorney. Even if charges are never filed or the actual report does not lead to conclusive results, the organization must assure itself that the accused has the required fitness for continued service. Additionally, if the alleged abuse would have resulted in any violations of the organization's policies, then these policy violations should be investigated and addressed—even if authorities cannot substantiate the abuse.

- Remove the accused, at least temporarily while a credible accusation is investigated by the proper authorities. The most controversial and sensitive issues that the organization must deal with are questions such as when the accused should be removed, on what basis, and for how long. The person should be advised to seek counsel and receive notification if the matter was reported, that an investigation is underway, and that further action is expected. If a person is not removed, this might signal that the organization considers the complaint insubstantial. On the other hand, there may be extenuating circumstances.
- Act with confidentiality. The privacy of the person making the complaint as well as the privacy of the accused and the reputation of the organization are all on the line. Acting with confidentiality does not mean allowing secrecy or a "cover up." The organization should act prudently with due regard for

the privacies and reputations of all involved.

- Prepare to deal with the public. Not every complaint will result in a media inquiry or every action in an institution in a press release. But some consideration must be given as to the need for a public response, and some preparation must be made in the event that news has already begun to leak.
  - Follow-up with the presumed victim, the accused and other stakeholders to communicate next steps.
  - When the matter is concluded, de-brief with key staff and counsel for lessons learned. Be prepared to evolve and revise, and re-screen and re-train.
- 4. Communicate compassionately with victims and the wider community.** There is much sensitivity among nonprofits about how best to deal with those who have been abused. Many nonprofit organizations encourage victims to come forward and offer communication channels including hotlines, the Internet, brochures, and other devices, all of which signal that the institution is open to receiving a report of abuse. This kind of education may not only eliminate suspicion but helps raise confidence that the institution cares and understands the need for effective action.

There is also some sensitivity around terminology. In this article we have mainly referred to persons making reports as either "victims" or "complainants." Neither should be taken in this context to be a pejorative term. Rather, they accurately describe a person who is in fact a victim of abuse, because

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that person is not responsible for their own exploitation, and because the complainant is voicing a concern and expecting action. In the case of alleged child abuse, victims who are now adults sometimes prefer to be called “survivors” or “victim-survivors.” Another term often used by organizations is “alleged” as a descriptive term for a victim to signal that a claim has been made, but it has not yet been adjudicated according to legal standards.

Perhaps a softer term is to refer to such persons as “presumed victims” which signals that the institution is operating on the presumption that the facts as stated did indeed occur and that the organization is acting accordingly. Presumptions can be rebutted and in a small number of cases the claims are proven to be without substance. But experience shows that a large majority of those bringing forward complaints about abuse are acting with some basis in fact. Policies should therefore be written and implemented with the expectation that the person is telling the truth, not circulating a lie.

**5. Focus on Prevention and Education.**

While no system is entirely foolproof, there are things an organization can do to enhance its ability to prevent abuse, starting with screening prospective employees and volunteers. Prevention raises barriers to abuse by focusing on staff and volunteers who serve the vulnerable in a nonprofit’s programs, by creating awareness in those who are served of situations that could end in abuse or exploitation, by encouraging reports to agency officials and to public authorities, and by holding everyone accountable for creating and maintaining a safe environment.

Another preventative policy is education. If an after school recreation program, school, day care center, or church teaches those it serves about the signs of abuse or how to maintain appropriate personal boundaries, that education process raises awareness. There are some instances when the resulting awareness has led to reports of “grooming” and other boundary violations that may be a precursor to abuse. From the perspective of organizational information, much can be learned from these complaints of precursor events or recent abuse. Who is the accused and how did they come to be associated with the organization? How did the complainant know what to report and to whom? What kind of media or other follow-up occurred? In other words, an organization can learn what worked and what did not, so as to do better in the next incident and adjust policies as needed.

Though the leaders of every nonprofit hope, and perhaps believe, that the organization will never have to face an incident of staff or volunteer abuse of a client or service recipient, prudent risk management requires that much more affirmative steps be taken to prevent, plan for, and respond to such allegations. Every client-serving nonprofit should identify policies, screen, train and supervise staff and volunteers according to the risks associated with these positions, and be prepared to implement a response plan if there is an allegation of abuse. Only in this manner can the nonprofit attain the two separate objectives: minimizing the risks to vulnerable clients and minimizing the adverse consequences if a risk should materialize. ■

“While no system is entirely foolproof, there are things an organization can do to enhance its ability to prevent abuse, starting with screening and checking the background of employees and volunteers.”



## Vital Partners in Youth Protection: Engaging Parents and Caregivers

*By Emily Stumhofer*

You've seen it in the news or heard about it through the neighborhood gossip chain, but you hope you'll never hear the same news again: an appalling allegation of child abuse is uncovered at a trusted nonprofit. Almost anyone would feel repulsed, devastated, or enraged at such news, but perhaps the news hits home the worst for parents—especially those who entrust their child's care to a nonprofit or other agency. What can parents and other caregivers do to ensure that their beloved children are safe, or at least to reduce the risk of harm to their children while they are in the care of a nonprofit?

Child protection and the safety of youth are essential considerations for all organizations that serve youth on a regular basis. Youth serving organizations aren't the only agencies that need to have a plan for protecting youth. Even nonprofits that primarily

serve adults may also serve youth, if only on an infrequent basis. For example, an association of kayaking enthusiasts may find a young fan of the sport in their midst, or a social services agency that delivers meals to the homes of elderly community members may find that a household includes a child living with his grandmother.

In many instances, when a nonprofit commits to implementing a policy or program to protect youth in its care, there is uncertainty about the appropriate scope of the policy/program, and about the best place to start. Nonprofit leaders often rightly feel that youth protection practices must be tailored or created from scratch to suit their organizations' missions, programs, and unique participants. Chances are, your board, staff and volunteers will quickly buy into a customized youth protection program, especially once

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they recognize that safeguarding your vulnerable clients is not just necessary, honorable and ethical, but it also inherently supports the fulfillment of your mission. However, what many nonprofit leaders overlook is the possibility of engaging another group of key stakeholders in the youth protection process: parents and caregivers.

Parents and caregivers are often the most enthusiastic partners in child protection programs. Parents and caregivers are usually delighted to hear that an organization strives to ensure the safety of their children. Leverage this free, ever-lasting spring of parental fervor and commitment to support your nonprofit as you develop or implement child safety programs.

### *Goals of a Child Safety Program*

Child safety or *youth protection* programs may involve many different things. For some organizations, the primary concern is protecting children from abuse that may occur within the organization. For others, child safety may be much broader and also seek to protect children from other possible forms of harm, including:

- Bullying during organizational programs or activities, at home, or at school
- Cyberbullying and online predators
- Exposure to hazards such as chemicals, paint, cleaning supplies, sharp objects, and equipment like ladders and tools
- Injury that occurs during activities such as using the nonprofit's play area, riding a bicycle, or running on a slippery surface
- Sexual or physical abuse
- Neglect

- Dangerous decision-making involving drugs, alcohol and other risky activities

- Suicide or other self-harm resulting from depression, stress or other mental health challenges

The extent of an organization's child safety program will depend entirely on the specific programmatic offerings of the nonprofit, as well as the ages and developmental stages of the children it serves. In any case, reaching out to parents to assist with building a strong program can lead to positive results.

### *Understanding the Role of Parents and Caregivers in Child Safety*

For many children, parents or caregivers are the most influential role models in their lives. Although children spend time in school, sporting activities or other community activities, most children spend the majority of their free time with their parents or caregivers. With the right information and support from nonprofits that serve their children, parents and caregivers can help prevent or identify potentially harmful or dangerous behaviors, or identify signs of abuse in their children. Children may also be more likely to report experiencing abuse or harm to their parents or caregivers than to other adults.

In addition to enhancing your organization's child safety program, by engaging parents and caregivers in youth protection, you can offer support to children outside of your programs. With parents who are fully empowered and educated in the realm of youth protection, a child may have a reduced risk of suffering harm related to bullying, emotional distress, eating disorders, safety incidents, and so on.

### *Ways to Involve Parents and Caregivers*

- Ask parents and caregivers for input on how they would like to be involved in your organization's programs and activities
- Encourage parents and caregivers to connect with staff and volunteers at your organization; provide instructions for parents to easily access nonprofit staff and volunteers
- Provide volunteer or partnership opportunities for parents and caregivers who demonstrate an interest in supporting your child safety program
- Offer training and educational materials to parents and caregivers to boost awareness of youth protection issues, and to promote understanding of your child safety goals and objectives

### *Helping Parents and Caregivers Be Effective Child Safety Partners*

Engaging parents in nonprofit programs and child safety initiatives can seem like a daunting task. However, with the right planning and the right support, parents can become successful partners, and help your organization develop a robust child safety program.

- **Communicate**—The most impactful parent engagement in child safety programs requires clear and consistent communication. Organizations trying to build a partnership with parents or caregivers should commit to providing parents with several channels of communication, through which parents can: learn more about the programs and activities offered by the nonprofit; find opportunities to volunteer

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and assist with programs; check in with staff and other youth-serving personnel who interact with their children; and, provide feedback and recommendations about current and future program offerings. Consider offering multiple communication channels or poll parents on the channels that best suit their lifestyles:

- ❑ Memos or letters sent home with children, or sent through the mail
- ❑ Email or text message blasts providing updates on programs and activities
- ❑ Flyers posted throughout the organization's facilities and on the website
- ❑ Online blogs or chat boards where parents can hold conversations with the organization's staff, volunteers and other parents
- ❑ Newsletters sent to parents on a regular basis (e.g., once per month)
- ❑ Postcard updates mailed or sent home, specific to the individual child
- ❑ Report cards or progress reports, sent via mail or email, or available online
- ❑ An online site where parents can login and see updates about their child's participation in an organization's programs or activities, review report cards and recent mailings, and reach out to the organization's staff members
- ❑ Phone calls
- ❑ Automated phone messages
- ❑ Face-to-face meetings or conferences between the organization's staff and each child's parents or caregivers
- ❑ Group meetings for parents or caregivers of all children participating in a particular program or activity
- ❑ Announcements or advertisements on local radio or television

■ **Provide educational materials and online or in-person training—**  
For most organizations new to child safety programs, the first goal is ensuring that measures are taken to protect children involved in the organization's programs and activities. The second most common goal is getting employees and volunteers involved in the effort by providing support, education and training on why child safety programs are important, and how they can help all parties. Although many organizations may be overwhelmed with trying to fulfill these two goals, providing support and training to parents can often be done in concert with providing support and training to staff and volunteers.

- ❑ For **small organizations** with fewer resources, the primary way to engage parents and provide education on child protection efforts may be to hold a group meeting or session where a brief introduction to child safety is provided. In these meetings, a short training can be incorporated where parents are introduced to the specific initiatives the organization is undertaking to reduce safety risks for children involved in programs and activities. Offer parents supporting information and educational materials about your child safety protocols, such as information from reputable sources like the CDC ([www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/index.html)) or Childhelp ([childhelp.org](http://childhelp.org)).

- ❑ For **mid-sized organizations**, or those with the primary purpose of serving youth, training may involve a series of trainings or brief meetings introducing best practices in child safety, the steps the organization is taking to protect children, and what the parent should do if he or she has a concern. Additionally, mid-sized organizations may have a point person who leads child safety initiatives. This person, in addition to being a resource for staff and volunteers, should also be available to communicate with parents who reach out with concerns or recommendations for strengthening the youth protection practices in place.
- ❑ **Large organizations** with less restricted resources may consider creating an online parent portal that hosts information including the organization's specific youth protection policies, online training available to parents (e.g., webinars, courses and podcasts), articles and resources with additional information, and instructions for reporting suspected abuse or child safety concerns. Additionally, the online portal may provide the contact information for staff leading your youth protection efforts.

Regardless of the size of the organization, or the availability of resources, all nonprofits that serve youth should consider providing information and training specifically for parents and caregivers, to promote child safety awareness, and to empower parents to act as vital partners in child safety.

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- **Provide volunteer opportunities for parents and caregivers**—For many parents and caregivers, finding time to volunteer may be very difficult on top of an already busy schedule. However, many parents would love to be a part of an activity in which their child is participating, to get an idea of what the child is learning and to support the organization in its mission. To maximize parental involvement in the programs and activities of your nonprofit, consider offering a variety of engagement opportunities:

- *Encourage parents and caregivers to serve as mentors, chaperones, or coaches for your organization*—depending upon the programs and activities you offer, you may have a variety of needs for parental involvement and volunteer support. Parents are a pool of potential volunteers that should not be overlooked! Invite parents and caregivers to play a rewarding role in your organization.
- *Ask for help from parents and caregivers in writing grants or looking for new sources of fundraising*—some individuals may be more comfortable playing a behind-the-scenes role in your organization, rather than directly interacting with children. In these situations, there are still important roles to be played, and your nonprofit could benefit from taking advantage of a parent's existing expertise.
- *Invite parents to help out with meal-time activities, weekend programs, or special events*—find out what the parents and caregivers of your youth

participants do for work, or what expertise they have. For example, if one parent is a landscaper, she may be willing to lead a youth activity where children grow their own plants.

- *Invite parents to help coordinate activities and make calls to remind parents and youth of upcoming appointments and events*—even involving parents and caregivers in making routine calls and putting out reminders about activities and events can be extremely beneficial. Your nonprofit can get help, and parents and caregivers will become true stakeholders in the work and mission of your organization!

### ***Common Barriers to Parental Engagement***

#### **1. Parents and caregivers are unable to attend training sessions or volunteer due to schedule conflicts.**

- Make it a priority to offer a variety of activities and workshops, and base them on the schedules of the parents and caregivers. Doing this will send the message that you care about the families of your youth participants, and you are willing to make the effort to ensure that parents and caregivers can be involved with their children's activities.
- Provide alternative ways for parents to gain information or volunteer without being present for your organization's meetings and activities. Consider providing online training and educational materials. Create a parent listserv so parents can be in touch with other parents and caregivers, and have the information they need to make sure their child is taking full advantage of your nonprofit's offerings.

- Make it easy for parents to attend the meetings or workshops you hold. Consider offering free childcare or refreshments to parents and caregivers who attend your meetings or training sessions. Make the meetings fun by having giveaways or raffles for nominal prizes.

#### **2. Parents aren't comfortable at meetings or activities due to language or cultural barriers, or unfamiliarity with the culture of your organization.**

- Host programs and meetings that are culturally sensitive to parents who may not be comfortable. Acknowledge that interacting with others isn't the only way that parents can help out with your organization and support their children. Bring multicultural and multilingual staff to your events where parents will be present, and make sure that parents and caregivers know that these staff members will be available to them and their children.
  - Incorporate diversity and inclusion education into your staff and volunteer training, especially if you serve a very diverse group of children or those who come from different backgrounds.
  - Translate your educational materials and postings for parents into as many languages as you can. The goal is providing education and information to as many community members as possible.
- #### **3. Staff members have difficulties working with parents and maintaining relationships.**
- Provide support to your staff and volunteers to enhance their relationships with the parents and caregivers of the children you serve. Encourage staff and volunteers

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## Vital Partners in Youth Protection: Engaging Parents and Caregivers continued from page 15

to share with you any concerns or discomfort they experience while interacting with parents. Provide training and coaching on how to interact in a positive way with parents, how to respond appropriately to questions, and how to handle an unhappy or concerned parent or caregiver.

- Provide workshops and development opportunities where your staff and volunteers will have the opportunity to learn how to better engage parents and strengthen relationships with the community. Offer trainings on varying topics (e.g., customer service, top concerns of parents and caregivers, etc.), since all staff members will not have the same relationship-building strengths and weaknesses.

At the end of the day, your nonprofit's goal is to continue providing mission-driven services to children and other clients. Child protection programs and policies are one factor that will play a role in the success of your programs, activities, and ultimately, your mission. Ensuring that clients of all ages are able to engage in your activities safely and confidently is a very noble and worthwhile goal for any nonprofit. Engage parents and develop dedicated support for your nonprofit; this will boost the caliber and sheer number of stakeholders who are empowered to help advance your mission. ■

Emily Stumhofer is a Staff Attorney and Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about the topics covered in this article at [Emily@nonprofitrisk.org](mailto:Emily@nonprofitrisk.org) or 703.777.3504.

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