

# Risk

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## Vigilance, effective policies needed to protect kids from sexual abuse

Too often we read headlines that scream allegations of sexual abuse. We're disheartened. We fret. We wonder why the abuse has become so prevalent in today's society.

But the fact is, for every case of abuse that is reported, there are more than twice as many cases that are unreported.

Experts believe just 30 percent of sex abuse cases are reported to authorities<sup>1</sup>.

Unfortunately, just following state laws on background checks, codes of conduct and training are not enough to prevent sexual abuse, according to a 2014 study<sup>2</sup> by the Government Accountability Office. Further, school policies can sometimes seem to contradict laws and make terrible situations even worse.

Schools are extremely attractive to predators. No school should feel secure. It is essential to continually update policies designed to stop predators from entering your school in the first place and detect them quickly if you don't.

### Improve screening processes

"Screen anyone who's working directly with kids, even volunteers," said Kimberlee Norris, an attorney who specializes in sexual abuse litigation and is a cofounder and director of MinistrySafe and Abuse Prevention Systems (<https://www.ministrysafe.com>).

Create opt-out opportunities for those with the wrong motives. "Make it clear in the job description, the application and the interview that you train staff, volunteers, parents and students to recognize inappropriate behavior and report offenders," Norris said.

Training is absolutely essential. "Intake personnel must know how to use questions to elicit a high-risk response and recognize high-risk answers," Norris said. "Preferential sexual offenders tend to prefer an age and gender. A history of working with the same age and sex of children and frequent relocations can be warnings."

"Sometimes, you get a gut feeling the person is hiding something," said Sam Spitali, a former administrator, principal and assistant principal. "Look at big gaps in employment and ask why they occurred."

Work with legal counsel and human resource experts to develop your interview questions.

(See Sexual abuse, Page 2)

## Inside

### Staff Lounge

*Stay on top of wet floor risks*

### Managing Your Risks

*Don't let hazardous materials go down the drain*

### Higher Education

*Students' safety doesn't happen by chance*

### Pre-K Through 12

*It takes a team to keep bus rides safe*

### Q I A

*Risk Reporter talks with Tom Heneghan, senior product manager of business continuity programs for the American Red Cross*

<sup>1</sup>[tinyurl.com/nnwej5z](http://tinyurl.com/nnwej5z)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/660375.pdf>



## ( Sexual abuse )

### Check references

"It's time-consuming, but it's critical," Spitali said. "You must vet responsibly."

State that you will contact references on the application — creating another opportunity for a predator to opt out. Ask references questions designed to elicit high-risk responses. "Be leery if references don't know the applicant in the context of working with children," Norris warned, "especially if the applicant's resume includes many dealings with children. Ask references if they'd leave their own child in this person's care."

### Run better background checks

Conducting a national criminal background check is a good place to start. Norris also recommends conducting a background check at the county level.

"Most child sexual abuse crimes are prosecuted at the county level, so focus there," Norris said.

Who warrants a criminal background check and at what level? "There's no one-size-fits-all," Norris said. "If a volunteer serves in a supervised classroom reading to kids, you can afford a less in-depth check given the structure of the interaction. For employees and volunteers, you absolutely can't afford to be wrong about — like a coach or a principal — pay for a more intensive search."

A "clean" criminal background check doesn't necessarily mean much. "Less than 10 percent of sexual predators ever encounter the criminal justice system," Norris said. "The criminal background check is a standard of care in schools — and you must do it — but it's no silver bullet. It can't stand alone."

### Create policies designed to protect

Clearly state policies about what constitutes harassment and abuse, reporting procedures and consequences in your handbook. "If legally allowed, make it your policy that inappropriate activity isn't limited to school grounds," Spitali said.

Limit one-on-one situations between an adult and a student. This means no physical interaction between an adult and a student (wrestling is common with male predators) and no electronic communication at an individual level. No adult should give a student a ride alone. There should be strict policies about overnight situations (e.g., for sports), and meetings in a travel situation should be in a public area, not a hotel room.

Be careful about verbal interaction too. "Forbid conversations that involve sexual content between adults and students, unless it's part of school curriculum," Norris said.

### Monitor your school

Assign staff members to walk the halls and check out bathrooms, closets, out-of-the-way corners, hallways and stairs. "Create the sense there are people on the lookout at all times and all places," Spitali said. "If there's a room with the lights off, check it out. If the band room is empty, walk through it."

"Play structures are a notorious location for peer-to-peer sexual abuse," Norris said. "Newer structures have holes to allow greater visibility."

### Educate teachers, staff members, parents and students

In many cases, the predator is popular and well-liked. "Go with your instinct," Norris said. "If something seems off, don't dismiss it because you like the person. Molesters are good at being likeable."

"Our advice to students: If an interaction makes you feel uncomfortable, tell someone," Spitali said.

Common grooming behaviors include gaining access to the child — academic help and working on athletic skills are common — and gift-giving.

"The single most critical thing you can do to protect your child is to go very slowly in allowing an adult to be alone with your child," Norris warned.

### Protect students from each other

The age of the first act of molestation is distressingly low. "The vast majority of convicted male offenders — 85 percent — committed their first offense before the age of 18," Norris said.

Peer-to-peer sexual abuse often starts with bullying. "This isn't to say all bullying results in sexual abuse, but it is typically the starting point," Norris said. "Look for brewing imbalances of power between students."

"Clearly spell out what constitutes abuse or harassment," Spitali said. "Don't assume students know. Teach a unit on sexual harassment and the consequences for this behavior."

### Know the signs of abuse

These include a drop in grades, eating disorders, having a hard time sleeping or concentrating in class, truancy, sexualized behavior, layering clothes to hide gender features and wearing clothes too warm for conditions (to hide injuries).

### Recognize you are mandatory reporters

Teachers and staff members are mandatory reporters in nearly every state. Some states allow reports to administration. In other states, the report is made directly to authorities.

"I strongly believe in reporting directly to the authorities," Spitali said. "You short circuit the good ol' boy aspect."

"If your state allows reporting to administration, designate at least three different people to whom to report abuse or neglect and require these three to share reports with the other two within 24 hours," Norris said. "This avoids a bottleneck if the alleged molester is a friend or relation."

Staff members often are reluctant to be seen as 'telling' on a coworker. "They don't want to accuse someone of dreadful things and be wrong," Spitali said. "It isn't your job to prove the abuse. It's simply your job to report in good faith. What if this child were yours?"

cont.





## Don't let hazardous materials go down the drain

Safe disposal of hazardous materials is essential when it comes to personal injury, property damage or harm to the environment. In most areas around the country, it is illegal to dispose of hazardous materials in the trash, down storm drains or onto the ground.

Some jobs at educational facilities might require employees to use products containing hazardous components, and there could be long forgotten, leftover hazardous materials sitting in storage closets.

Several types of hazardous materials need to be analyzed to determine how to properly dispose of them. Typical examples include paints, cleaners, stains and varnishes, batteries, motor oils, fuels, fluorescent tubes, needles/syringes and pesticides.

Chemicals flushed down drains, poured onto the ground or washed down storm drains can poison lakes, rivers and streams, and contaminate soil. Hazardous materials thrown into trash cans and then placed in landfills can seep into the ground and contaminate soil and sources of drinking water. Damaging effects caused by improperly disposed of hazardous materials have the potential to significantly impact the health of people, plants and animals.

Consult with your local government to determine how to properly dispose of hazardous materials generated by your school. Most local governments provide hazardous material collection sites that accept specific materials, and they have the expertise to safely process and dispose of those items.

Make sure your school has procedures in place for safely disposing of used hazardous materials. Also, double-check to verify that disposal procedures are followed. By doing so, you will help reduce potential health and safety issues involving employees, students, guests, animals and the environment.

Edward A. Steele  
Risk Control Manager

# Staff Lounge

## Stay on top of wet floor risks

Wet floors can be a challenge any time of year and pose a special risk during the winter months. Schools are especially vulnerable.

Janitors and cleaners, elementary school teachers and assistants and secondary teachers have the highest incidents of reported slips, trips and falls, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and that doesn't include incidents involving students or visitors. Floor contaminants, including water, are the leading cause of slips and falls for public employees<sup>1</sup>.

Common slip-hazard areas include those related to food service (serving lines, for example), bathrooms and building entrances.

The following actions, suggested by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, can help your school avoid slips, trips and falls.

**Train all staff members to recognize spill hazards.** School safety is everyone's responsibility, and all staff members should know conditions that could create a slip hazard.

**Make it a policy to address wet floors immediately.** All employees should know to cover, clean or report spills promptly.

**Create a written housekeeping policy.** Include how to contact the maintenance staff, where and how cleaning materials and products are stored, when to use wet floor signs and barriers, what cleaning materials are appropriate for each area and floor surface, and when specific floors should be cleaned — before and after school is best.

**Place wall-mounted spill pads and wet floor signs throughout your school.**

This makes it easy for staff members to address problems immediately. Be sure to remove signs after floors are dry, or the signs will soon be ignored.

**Use barrier devices to control large spills.** Barrier devices will contain the liquid — water, cleaning materials, etc. — and prevent additional problems.

**Install high-absorbency floor mats near entryways.** These should be large enough so anyone entering the building will take several steps on the mat. If you constantly find water around or past the mat, it means it is not large enough or is saturated. On especially wet or snowy days, make it a policy for someone in maintenance to regularly inspect and replace all entryway mats. Make sure all mats are securely anchored so they do not become a tripping hazard.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2011-123/pdfs/2011-123.pdf>

# Students' safety doesn't happen by chance

As students come to view your campus as their "home away from home," they might feel safer than they should.

The Clery report, which captures crime statistics on and around college campuses, shows crime typically is lower on a campus than the surrounding area. That said, safety shouldn't be taken for granted, said Scott Law, director for campus public safety at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa.

"You must be proactive and aware," he said.

There are many things that can be done to help keep students safe on campus.

**Limit building access.** Require keys or access cards for campus buildings. "Our system records swipes so we know who's entering the building," Law said.

**Maintain a security presence.** "In the residence halls, residence life staff has people at the front desk 24 hours a day," Law said. "Public safety officers regularly walk the floors."

**Educate students.** Urge students to be aware of their surroundings and recognize their role. "If you're coming into your hall and don't recognize the person behind you, don't let them piggyback off your access card," Law said. "If you see someone wandering on your floor, don't assume all is well. Ask if they belong there or call the RA (resident advisor) or the front desk."

Students also should travel in a group — at least three is ideal, Law said. Students should not talk on the phone or listen to music when walking alone, and they should avoid deserted walkways and rooms.

"Tell people where you're going to be and when you plan to be home," Law said. "If you're not back, your roommate will know to check into it."

**Consider adding a mobile app.** All Drake students can sign up for Drake Guardian — an app Law describes as "a blue light (alarm system) in your pocket." Students can use the app as a panic button — one push and they're connected to security — or as a way to send out a message that all is not well.

A student enters information into the app that indicates the student is walking home and sets a timer for the expected travel time, Law said. If the student doesn't log in and report his or her arrival in the specified time, an alert goes out. Smartphones are GPS-enabled, and a



Drake team can track a student if his or her alarm goes off.

**Provide safety resources.** Drake still maintains its network of blue-light phones on campus. "We haven't gotten everyone on the app, and visitors don't have access to it," Law said. "Plus, the blue-light boxes are a visible deterrent against crime."

Safe walk programs — where students, staff or visitors can ask for an escort within a certain distance of campus — and taxi programs also are helpful.

"We offer self-defense classes, but I'd caution that these only have value if you practice what you've learned," Law said.

**Urge staff and visitors to be safety-conscious too.** Students aren't the only ones who need to be familiar with safety resources and aware of their surroundings.

**Let men know they're not immune.** "Guys assume they're safe, but anyone can be a victim, especially if they're alone," Law said.

**Use every resource to get the word out.** Law works with Drake's marketing team to get safety messages out using both traditional and electronic media. "Student government is critical," Law said. "Students respond much better to messages from their peers."

**Recognize the impact of alcohol and drugs.** "Drugs and alcohol affect people's judgment, period," Law said. "Stress the importance of going out in a group, never leaving someone behind in a bar or at a party with someone they just met. Get their phone number. They can text (one another) tomorrow."

**Never blame the victim.** "The victim's behavior is not the reason a crime happened," Law said. "It is always the perpetrator's fault. Everything your school does in the wake of a crime must reflect that."

# It takes a team to keep bus rides safe

School buses are the safest way for children to get to school, so says reports by the American School Bus Council, the National Academy of Sciences and the U.S. Department of Transportation. That's only true, however, if your school, staff members, parents and children work together on bus safety.

Here's what schools can do to help get their students to school and back home again without incident:

**Keep parents in the loop.** Share bus safety information with parents and ask them to review it with their children. Parents will want to know who's driving their child to school. The American School Bus Council recommends sharing a short bio of each bus driver that includes their qualifications, skills training and safety record. Each bus driver should wear a name tag or display his or her name.

**Follow best practices for hiring and training drivers.** All bus drivers should receive a thorough background check that includes a careful review of their driving record. Your drivers must obtain a commercial driver's license and a school bus endorsement. "Our drivers go through a rigorous training process and have to pass a number of tests designed to ensure they're capable of safely driving the bus," said Randall Schulz, transportation director at the Mount Horeb Area School District in Wisconsin.

The American School Bus Council recommends that drivers be subject to pre-employment, random and post-accident drug and alcohol testing, and pass periodic medical exams. They also should receive training on student loading and unloading, evacuation, how to manage student behavior and basic emergency medical procedures.

Drivers should never text or use their cellphones while driving. "Drivers can pull over and use their phones in an emergency, but if they're used while driving, it's a federal offense," Schulz said.

**Be conscientious about maintenance.** Schulz's drivers go through a checklist each day that includes mirrors, lights, tires, fuel and leaks. Have drivers fill out an end-of-the-day report that notes the condition of the bus upon return — including any problems — and is signed by the driver. The transportation director must verify that serious issues are addressed before the bus goes back on the road. In Mount Horeb, each bus also has a thorough quarterly inspection and comprehensive annual inspection.



**Consider adding cameras.** Cameras on the outside of the bus might help deter drivers from going around a stopped bus and identify drivers who do pass a stopped bus. Cameras on the inside can be a good way to monitor student behavior and driver conduct.

**Add a second adult.** Many districts can't afford to have a second adult on the bus, but it's a good idea if you can.

**Get kids on board with safety.** Review bus safety at the beginning of each semester. Teach students how to board and exit the bus safely — the times when injury is most likely to occur — never to walk behind a bus nor crawl under a bus to retrieve something and to wait for the bus in a safe place away from the street.

Stress how critical it is for students to stay seated and keep their heads and limbs inside the bus.

Good behavior on the bus also is important. Enforce consistent consequences for bad behavior. "We have a stepped system that depends on the offense but suspend bus-riding privileges immediately in the event of a physical attack," Schulz said.

Practice bus evacuation each semester too. In the event of an accident, students should be instructed to follow the driver's instructions. He or she will need to determine if conditions warrant leaving the bus and if it's safe to do so. Each bus should carry a fire extinguisher, road warning devices and basic first-aid supplies.

**Walk the bus.** Upon arrival at the school and at the end of the route, the driver should walk the entire length of the bus interior to ensure that nothing — and nobody — is still on the bus.

# Q | A

## A Perspective

Every school wants to do all it can to protect students and staff in the event of a disaster. Recognizing that many organizations struggle with disaster preparation, the St. Louis Area Chapter of the American Red Cross created Ready Rating™. The program includes an assessment tool backed by a variety of disaster planning resources. Risk Reporter recently discussed the program with Tom Heneghan, senior product manager of business continuity programs for the American Red Cross. To learn more about Ready Rating go to [readyrating.org](http://readyrating.org).



### **Risk Reporter: Tell us about the program and how it works.**

**Tom Heneghan:** Disaster preparedness is like healthy eating. You know you should do it, but you don't always know where to start, and it's hard to follow through. Ready Rating™ delivers the tools you need to do both. The program's focus is assessment. It provides a snapshot of your present state and includes tools to evaluate and address problem areas. And it's not a one-time thing. To continue being a Ready Rating member, you have to improve your score by at least one point (out of a total of 123) each year.

### **Risk Reporter: Walk us through the steps.**

**Heneghan:** First, create a team and conduct an assessment. Include people from core areas, such as facilities, teachers, parents and administration — even older students. Empower these people to get insights from key stakeholders, so you have an accurate understanding of where you are in the preparedness process.

The assessment goes pretty quickly. There are 79 questions, but many of them have a simple "yes" or "no" answer and the process usually takes an hour or two. Next, assess your vulnerability. What weak points did you discover? What are you most worried about?

Follow with plan development. Focus on the areas either most likely to be a problem or, even if rare, that pose the highest risk. There are often simple things that take little time or money that really make a difference. Then train your staff. Everyone — from your teachers and administrators to your kitchen and maintenance people — needs to understand their role in the event of an emergency. The final step: Ask how you can help your larger community. Hold a presentation on family fire safety or a CPR class, for example.

### **Risk Reporter: Is Ready Rating personalized to an industry or location?**

**Heneghan:** It's more general, but the assessment process lets you weigh hazards based on your geographic location and elements specific to your organization. For instance, your plan has to consider the age of your students, building layout and whether you have medical staff on site. The resource tools on our site help tailor your plan. One particularly good one is the Emergency Response Planning Tool.

### **Risk Reporter: Your program has had impressive results. Would you talk about that?**

**Heneghan:** The average improvement is 14 percent in the first year and 50 percent in the second. The most common actions include educating staff and updating existing plans. Don't worry if you start with a low score — now you know how to improve.

- Church Mutual supports the Ready Rating program. Visit [www.churchmutual.com/readyrating](http://www.churchmutual.com/readyrating) for more information.