

# *Preventing and Reporting Child Abuse*

BY **TRACY ARNETT**

**J**onny\* is withdrawn, eats very little, stares at the floor when you speak to him, and struggles socially. You've observed these behaviors for some time, and have attempted to analyze whether anything in the classroom might be contributing to his depression or anxiety. You have even mentioned your observations to the parents so that they are aware and watchful at home as well.

Then the day comes: every teacher's fear and this child's nightmare. Jonny bursts into tears because you tell him you are planning to speak with his parents about a poor choice he has made. Adrenaline surges through you as you hear the reason for Jonny's tears: He is afraid of what his parent might do. He doesn't want to be locked in a closet or basement. He is afraid to go home because dad goes crazy and hits, screams, or burns him. He sounds terrified. As you speak with him, you have reason to suspect that he has been traumatized by physical or psychological abuse at home. You are scared, angry, and confused.

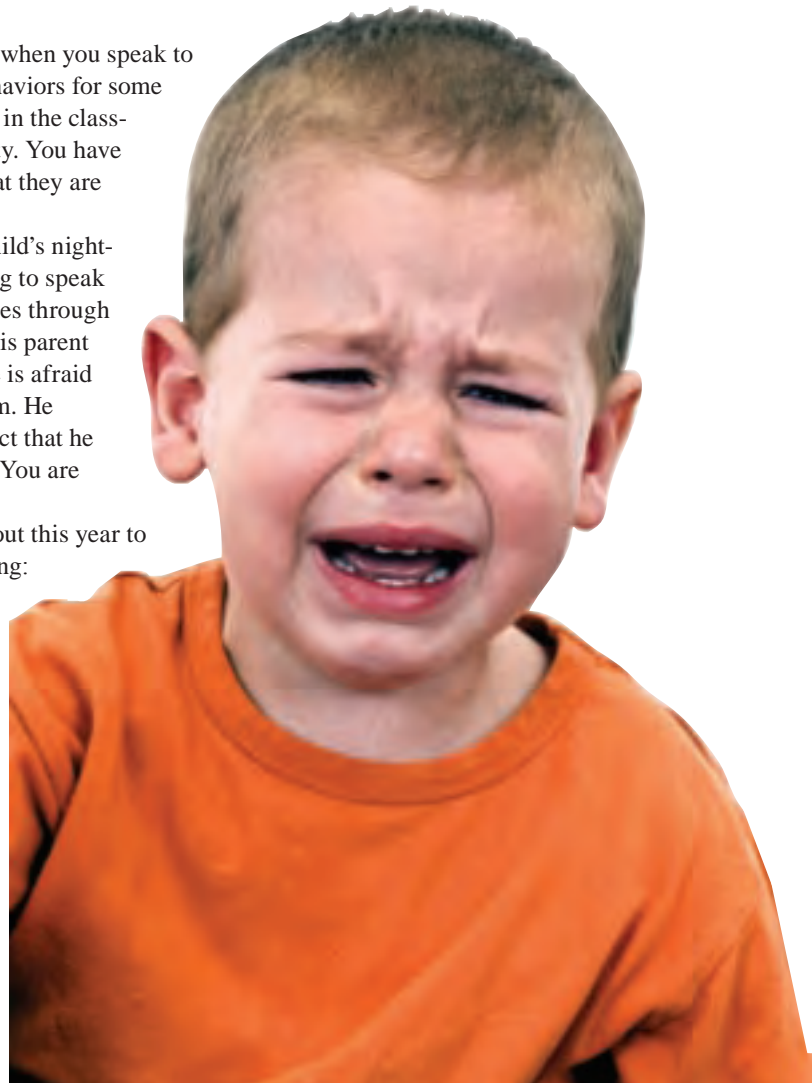
**STOP!** Pull out the notebook that you have been using throughout this year to document sensitive situations, and begin writing. Record everything: your observations, suspicions, and words. Whether Jonny came to you, or you observed something that caused concern, it is your duty to write down every detail. Be certain to include information that Jonny gives you and things that you say.

In other situations, you would call the parents and let them know that their son or daughter needs to see a counselor, physician, or pastor. In this case, however, you can't investigate, and you can't ask the parents to investigate. As dictated by law, you must call Child Protective Services to investigate. It is extremely important, as well, to inform the school principal and your education superintendent. It will be wise to keep them updated every step of the way; you will need the extra support.

After every phone call, record the name of the person you spoke with, the date when you talked, as well as what everyone

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\* Not a real person.



said. If you asked questions, record them with the responses.

If you were given directives, make sure to indicate that as well.

This is an incredibly uncomfortable situation for every teacher, student, and parent. Jesus asks us to care for His children, to provide for their needs. It is not your job to determine whether the child is being abused. It is only your job to report things that you see and/or hear. It is not an option; it's the law. You are now, officially, stuck between a rock and a hard place! Take a deep breath. Send up a prayer. The only way out...is through.

### What Constitutes Abuse?

Child abuse is defined by each state or country but involves psychological, physical, and sexual abuse as well as psychological or physical neglect. Many governments designate various community workers as mandatory reporters. Each U.S. state regards teachers as mandatory reporters of suspected abuse and neglect, and knowingly failing to report possible

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abuse can be a felony. (Please note that appropriate parental discipline is not considered abuse; laws relating to this vary from place to place.)

Since the definition of abuse can be somewhat subjective, you need to err on the side of protection for the child and allow Child Protective Services or government-appointed officials to do their job. They will investigate the child's living conditions, interview everyone involved, and take whatever steps are necessary to provide for the child's needs. It is your job, as teacher, to be observant and to gather information. Locate, read, download, and print your area's regulations defining child abuse and how to report it. (The North American Division Office of Education Website contains this information for locations within its territory.)

### Child Abuse Can Happen Anywhere!

There are many different places and times when a child can be abused or violated; the home is certainly not the only place where this occurs. As teachers, we must be alert to all potential dangers when children are under our care.

Adventist schools are intended to be places where young people can learn about Christ in a safe, academi-



cally stimulating place. However, one of your students could be physically or sexually abused at school during a field trip or extra-curricular activity.

Regrettably, young people are afraid to talk about abuse, especially sexual abuse. It's embarrassing and scary. You may suspect something, or a student may report something to you. Volunteers, substitute teachers, fellow students, staff members, or sadly, even fellow teachers can be sources of abuse. Any adult who spends time with young people should undergo a background check.

Physical and/or sexual abuse can happen anywhere and at any time, and the accusation of abuse can be nearly as damaging for students, teachers, and schools as actual abuse. Teachers must use every reasonable precaution to protect themselves and their students from the opportunities for both accusation and abuse. Should the teacher observe or suspect abuse, it is his or her responsibility to report the information

### Sample Description of Harm (Child):

**ABUSE:** Any willful or threatened act or omission that results in any physical, mental, or sexual injury or harm that causes or is likely to cause the child's physical, mental, or emotional health to be significantly impaired.

**NEGLECT:** Any act or omission where a child is deprived of, or allowed to be deprived of, necessary supervision, food, clothing, shelter, or medical treatment, or a child is permitted to live in an environment when such deprivation or environment causes the child's physical, mental, or emotional health to be significantly impaired or to be in danger of being significantly impaired. The foregoing circumstances shall not be considered neglect if caused primarily by financial inability unless actual services for relief have been offered to and rejected by the caretaker responsible.

**THREATENED HARM:** A situation, circumstances, or behavior which leads a prudent person to have reasonable cause to suspect abuse or neglect has occurred or may occur in the immediate future if no intervention is provided.

**SPECIAL CONDITIONS:** A situation that does not rise to the reasonable cause to suspect harm level, but requires intervention.

(State of Florida: <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/definitions.shtml>)

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to the local superintendent and secular authorities.

The culture, routines, procedures, and habits of the school must be such that everyone is protected. The basic rule is: Reduce the times that an adult is alone with a child or a student is alone with another student as much as possible. This might sound extreme, but it's better to prevent abuse than have to repair the damage after it occurs. Each school must determine what protection is appropriate and necessary for its own situation.

**Consider these guidelines to protect your school staff from dangerous accusations.**

- Adults should avoid spending time alone in their classroom or office with a child. Install large windows in classroom and office doors. When you can't avoid being in your office or classroom to speak privately with a student, try propping the door open. It's best to sit in chairs separated from each other to avoid any appearance of impropriety.
- Do not transport a child alone in your car. Maybe a parent calls to ask you to drive her child home. Of course, you want to be helpful; but remember that this can potentially be a dangerous situation. Take another child with you, or request that another parent, transporting his or her own child, drop the child at home instead.
- Be constantly alert to ways to minimize the risk to yourself. Do you occasionally, or regularly, find yourself alone at the end of the day waiting for one child's parents? Depending on weather, try to wait outside where you and the child are visible to others. When this isn't feasible, plan ahead by asking another parent who has the time to wait with you. When you request this favor, describe the rationale for your request. Most adults will understand and be willing to help.



- Reduce opportunities for students to spend time in the classroom, library, office, or other areas without adult supervision. It takes only a second for something to go wrong. Older students, especially, will resist "lining up" and traveling together from the playground, gym, or cafeteria to the classroom. However, it is better protection for everyone to stay together as a group. The teacher must observe the behavior of every child.

"Mrs. Jones, he touched my breasts!" "They blocked me into the corner and wouldn't let me out." "She kicked me





‘where it hurts.’” “He dropped a wad of paper down the front of my shirt.” These allegations could cause a parent to sue the school, teacher, and fellow students for assault or negligence. What will be your defense? “The kids are allowed to leave the classroom in small groups”; or “My students are mature enough to work in the classroom without an adult”? It will make a huge difference if you can assure the judge and parent that the child broke a school rule that put him or her in danger: “She was out of the room without permission”; or “He went back to the classroom when he only had permission to go to the bathroom.” Note where the blame falls.

Examine your procedures and policies. Is there more that you can do to protect your students? Each school situation warrants scrutiny so that you can improve the routines; what can you do better?

Two of the most inaccurate assumptions you can make: “My students would never do something like that!” and “The parents at our school wouldn’t sue!” Don’t deceive yourself. When Sally comes home and tells Mom that Rick touched her inappropriately, the parents are likely to be angry when they find out that your policy allows Rick and Sally to be alone somewhere in the school.

Give Rick and Sally and your other students the protection that they need! Establish and enforce rules that protect both students and teachers. A good rule to enforce: “No students in rooms without adult supervision, and only one student may leave the room at a time.”

### Establish Guidelines for Field Trips

Field trips are another source of concern. Preparation is vital. Screen your chaperones carefully. Non-parental chaperones should undergo background checks. To ensure safety, establish and review field trip routines; some suggestions are listed below. Remember that all field trips should be approved by the local school board or administrative committee, and overnight trips must be approved by the school board and/or local conference office.

### Sexual Abuse by a Teacher, Staff Member, or Other Adult on School Premises

If, after taking all appropriate precautions, the unthinkable happens, and



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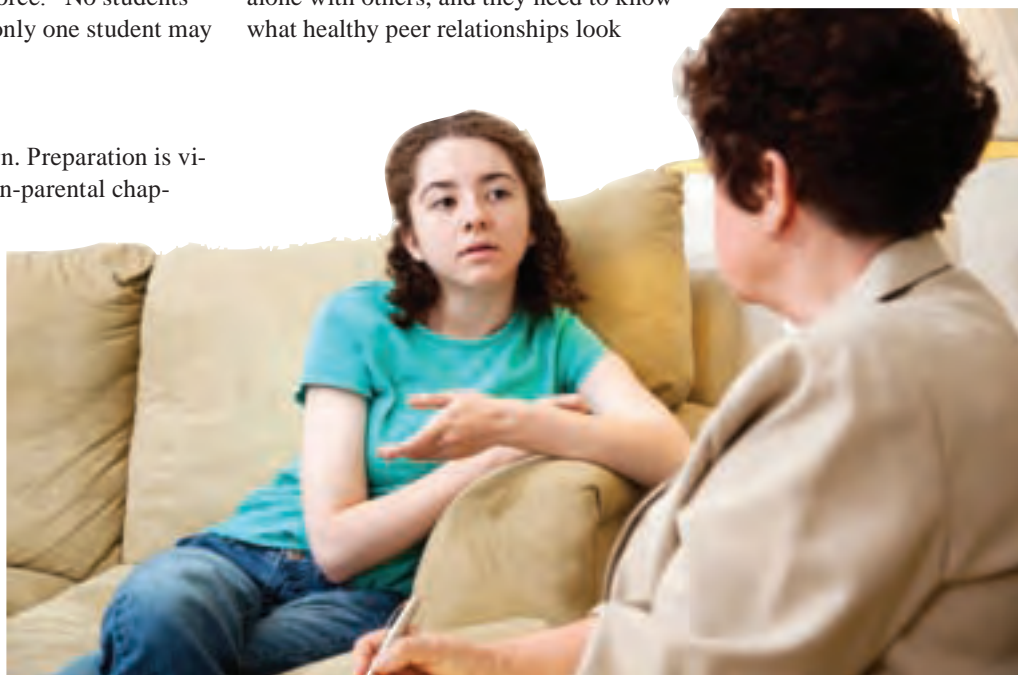
a child is abused while under your school’s supervision, what should you do? Although everyone hopes and prays that his or her school will never have to deal with a situation such as this, you will be far ahead if you reviewed your responsibilities in handling the event. As soon as it is discovered, the incident must be reported to the school principal, the conference superintendent of education, the child’s parent, and local law enforcement. Depending on the age of the victim, he or she

may need your assistance to document the incident and make the report. You can aid the investigation by writing down as many facts as possible. Be sure to record all details surrounding the event: time, location, clothing, possible witnesses, and statements or threats. It is also important that the child not be allowed to clean up, change clothes, or use the restroom, unless absolutely necessary, while waiting for the authorities to arrive.

By reporting abuse, you are doing your part to ensure the safety and well-being of the young people under your care. They rely on you. Victims of abuse are scared, confused, and lonely. As the adult, you must perform the daunting task of contacting the authorities.

### Educate Your Youth

Take the time to educate your students about respect and self-protection. Older students will spend more and more time alone with others, and they need to know what healthy peer relationships look



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## Sample Field Trip Policies

Have same genders sit together in vehicles.  
Ensure that drivers and riders are the same gender whenever possible.  
Vehicles are to stay together and be within sight of one another.  
Assign students to small groups for the entire trip.  
Have an adult chaperone each small group.  
With advice from the conference, design a permission slip for parents to sign.  
Collect permission slips and make arrangements for transportation well ahead of time.

and sound like. Provide examples for them of ways to protect themselves from abusive situations. Young people of all ages should receive age-appropriate information on what constitutes abuse and where to go for help. Pray with them, help them feel comfortable, and discuss self-defense measures. Victims of abuse will need counseling and emotional support.

### There's no better time than today to begin protecting your students and staff from a harmful situation. Here's how to get started....

1. Conduct a detailed evaluation of the procedures at your school; identify those that could be improved.
2. Identify additional guidelines that may need to be included.
3. Print your state's/country's definition of abuse and reporting guidelines.
4. Inform yourself about abuse prevention and recovery.
5. Perform appropriate background checks on staff and volunteers who have regular contact with your students.
6. Contact your education superintendent for instructions on handling various forms of child abuse.
7. Create an information packet including prevention and recovery guidelines to present to your local school board, church board, and school families.

### The Teacher's Legal Responsibility

It is every teacher's legal responsibility to be prepared to prevent—and to deal with—difficult situations. Acquaint yourself with the local laws, church policies, and legal procedures. Substitute teachers and staff should submit to a full background check based on your school's and conference requirements. In the U.S., there are companies that will come to your school and collect information about everyone on the same day. It's better to screen all personnel at the beginning of the school year than to make people feel “singled out” by individual investigations during the school year. Teachers, volunteers, substitutes, and other personnel should all be screened. Familiarize yourself with local government or state regulations regarding background screening. The North American Division Office of Education Website contains a great deal of helpful information relating to this: [http://www.nadeducation.org/educator\\_toolbox/78](http://www.nadeducation.org/educator_toolbox/78).

If you are a principal, talk with your teachers, staff members, board members, and education superintendent so that all are “on the same page.” Their collaboration can be invaluable when there is an incident. Consider inviting a representative from Adventist Risk Management or law enforcement to assist with your training as

part of a teacher/staff in-service workshop.

Make sure that your school board, parents, and constituents are informed about what constitutes abuse and what steps must be taken if abuse is reported or suspected. Sharing this type of information prior to any incident will give you valuable support if the need arises.

Physical and sexual abuse are crimes. They are out of our control and out of our line of authority.

These situations must be investigated by the authorities and handled in a sensitive manner. Preparation and prevention are key components. You are not alone! Many teachers have had to go through the experience of contacting Child Protective Services. You may have to call on behalf of a fellow teacher's child, an elder's child, or your pastor's child. You may suffer condemnation, criticism, and alienation from your church family. Hold your head high. In the end, the only thing that matters is whether you have done what God wants you to do: Take care of His children because they can't protect themselves. ✍

This article has been reviewed by Adventist Risk Management.

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*Education and Religion, and a minor in Secondary Education. She has taught in Adventist schools for nine years, six of which were as a junior academy principal. She is currently independently employed as a tutor for Adventist homeschooled youth. It continues to be her primary goal to provide an Adventist education option for every family that desires it. Mrs. Arnett writes from Zephyrhills, Florida.*



## Resources

### Identify, Prevent, and Report Child Abuse and Neglect

<http://www.nadeducation.org>

Information about your state's guidelines under resources.

<http://www.ncvc.org>

National Center for Victims of Crime. Valuable information in the sexual abuse and child sexual abuse sections of the resource library.

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/identifying>

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing>

Resources and information from the Child Welfare Information Gateway Website.

<http://www.childsafe-international.org/index.asp>

Contains U.S. and international information on the protection of children.

<http://www.adventistrisk.org>

Information on child abuse prevention and field trip planning guides.

<http://www.cdc.gov/injury>

Print informational packet: “Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures” by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007.