"Awareness" Makes a Difference

By Arthur F. Bledsoe, VP Chief Risk Management Officer at Adventist Risk Management, Inc.
Youth-serving and faith-based organizations continue to find themselves in the headlines concerning child abuse. Allegations of organizational cover-ups, trusted employees accused of inappropriate acts and unfathomable acts of children engaged in sexual activities make us wonder can anything be done to stem the tidal wave of child abuse? Tragically, in today’s society, children being trapped in abusive situations is all too often shrugged off as the norm.

**April is Child Abuse Prevention Month.** As Christians in the Adventist community it is an excellent time to ask, What can I do to help prevent child abuse? How can we make a difference in the life of a child who may be caught in the horror of abuse? How can we as a church make our congregation and its ministries a safe place for our children in the community?

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During the past year child abuse prevention has become a major focus within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Both church administrators and lay leaders are taking the issue of child abuse seriously, because “awareness” is the first major step in prevention! Awareness that child abuse can happen at your church is a key factor in breaking the silence that surrounds the cycle of abuse. “The most powerful tool to reduce and prevent child abuse from occurring is to raise awareness, says Dr. William Murdoch, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Loma Linda University. “It’s the secrecy and shame that keeps the abuse problem continuing.”
Recent medical studies have shown that high risk children who have been trapped in abusive situations are seriously impacted emotionally, spiritually, and physically. It also can affect the child’s life expectancy and cause early death. To learn more on how child abuse can impact the victim, family and church, Loma Linda University Health has produced – “End It Now: Understanding Child Abuse in the Adventist Church” a powerful 32 minute video. Adventist Risk Management would encourage all church leaders to watch this video at http://vimeo.com/53897191.

There are several major initiatives currently underway to create a greater awareness on the impact of child abuse within our church and families. In October 2011, the North American Division approved two actions that help to provide tools to implement child protection at our local churches and schools. First, a new working policy FB 20 requires all conferences to conduct background screening and provide training for all volunteers who work with children. Second, the NAD entered into a five year service agreement with Shield the Vulnerable to provide economical online training and background screening for adult volunteers and employees. Twenty-seven conferences have gone live during the past twelve months with the Shield the Vulnerable program. More than 12,500 adults have already completed the program.

Adventist Risk Management has continued to expand its child protection resources at our website: www.adventistrisk.org.

In 2012, new resources were added that allow the local church or youth group to develop its own child abuse awareness campaign. The Seven Campaign outlines pro-active steps that your church can take to help eliminate child abuse. This movement is starting to take root in Adventist congregations in over 75 countries around the world. You can learn more by visiting the website: www.TheSevenCampaign.org.

On average, ARM annually receives 15 new child abuse claims from conferences in the United States. During the past twenty years, there have been over 400 claims involving more than 525 children. Each of these situations is tragic and presents an opportunity for the church to do more in the area of child abuse prevention. In the past three years, twenty cases of child-on-child abuse have been reported from churches, schools, and youth camps. As we review the incidents received during 2012, we had a 180% increase in the number of child-on-child abuse cases. This type of incident may point to a lack of appropriate adult supervision during church-sponsored activities. Some of the victims involved are kindergarten-aged children. We must raise the standard of supervision to prevent these types of incidents from occurring during youth and children’s ministries.

A difference can be made as we raise our voices and create a greater awareness within our congregations. Children who have a connection with adults they can trust is the best way to safeguard youth from abuse. This takes time, training, and effort on the part ministry leaders and adults who volunteer to work with kids.

To learn more on how you can make a difference, take time to check out the resources listed in this article or visit:
As we all work together, the safety of our children will be enhanced. Thank you for all you do in ministering to our children.

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