150 Days to a Solid Child Protection Policy

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"I'm overwhelmed," the school principal complained. "I have to deal with curriculum, student discipline, HR problems, disgruntled parents, and my Board. Now I have to create new child protection policies, and I have to do it yesterday. I simply can't find the time to get it all done."

Most administrators have this reaction to yet more advice about child protection policies. It seems that you must do it all and do it right now. We propose a system of workable action steps within a manageable time frame. Taking one step at a time, organizations can develop a solid and workable child protection policy.

I. First 30 Days: Teams, Philosophy, and Audits (see handouts)

The first 30 days sets the foundation for an organization's child protection policy. Spend this time investigating standards and evaluating current policies. With the two exceptions explained below, don't worry yet about writing new policies or changing existing ones.

A. Coordinator and Teams

We recommend teams for several reasons. First, having group working together helps spread the load around. Second, getting other people involved allows you to get multiple perspectives and areas of expertise. Finally, these team members will help your organization make child protection an ongoing part of the mission rather than a one-time project.

The jobs of these teams are not finished after they write the policies. They won't just write a policy; the team members also help enforce your policies and help continually evaluate them, to help make child protection a living part of the organization's culture.

1. Child Safety Coordinator

The point person for both teams will the Child Safety Coordinator (CSC). We recommend one person to lead both teams so that your organization has someone with a high-level view of all the work that's happening. This person needs to be not only a leader, but someone with the authority to implement and enforce policies.

2. Child Safety Team

The first team we recommend is the Child Safety Team (CST). This group will be responsible for evaluating, writing, and following up on the bulk of your improved child protection policy. Most of this team's work will be in the first 30–120 days of evaluating and creating or tweaking policies. This group also needs to continually evaluate how the organization is carrying out its responsibility of protecting children. So choose members who are willing to make an ongoing commitment to the

project.

3. Incident Response Teams

The Incident Response Team (IRT) deals with injuries and significant violations of policy. Most people assume that the IRT only needs to be involved after a serious incident. We recommend that this team start its work much earlier, from the beginning of the process, both to help avoid policy violations and to be better prepared if and when incidents happen.

B. Philosophy and Definition

This is the only actual writing that you need to do during the first 30 days. First, your CSC and CST need to work with your governing Board or owners to embed the importance of child protection in your organization's foundation documents. Second, both teams and the CSC need to develop a workable definition of child maltreatment that will inform all your policies and practices.

1. Philosophy

A solid child protection policy shows up in every part of an organization's work, starting with both governing and aspirational documents. Evaluate your organization's mission statement, by-laws, founding documents, and website statements. Do they reflect the importance of protecting the children in your care? If not, work with your Board or C-Suite to write that philosophy. Then use those statements as your goalposts as you evaluate and strengthen your policies.

There is no particular language that's best for these documents. We recommend, though, that your child protection philosophy include language reflecting most of the following points:

a. Describe child safety as a key goal. Your organization needs to keep child safety as a central tenet, not simply one of several good outcomes.

b. Ground child safety in what the Bible says about the responsibility to protect children.

c. Have a longer explanation somewhere of what child safety means to your organization. You don't have to include all the details every time the topic comes up; summaries are fine in shorter documents such as mission statements. Be sure that there is a comprehensive explanation somewhere in your governing documents.

2. Definitions of Maltreatment

At the same time, your CSC and both the CST and IRT need to develop definitions of child maltreatment. This is not the place for an aspirational statement of child dignity or flourishing. Those are good goals, but they belong elsewhere. What you need for these definitions is concrete, workable language that will enable everyone in your program to recognize maltreatment when they see it.

For example, a common definition of physical abuse is "non-accidental injury." It's clear, short, and easily recognizable. People can remember it without having to look back into a handbook. If it's in line with your state's laws and regulations, that phrase could be part of your organization's

definition of physical abuse.

That phrase illustrates another fact about your definition, which is that you don't need a single phrase or sentence to cover all the different kinds of abuse. You will need a definition of physical abuse, for example, and a definition of bullying. The teams should draft definitions to cover all the different types of maltreatment that your organization needs to avoid internally and recognize externally.

The relevant types of maltreatment will vary according to your jurisdiction and your client base. Summer camps, for example, rarely need to worry about school truancy laws. Nevertheless, your teams need to review all the categories of maltreatment to decide what is relevant to your organization.

Be particularly careful when defining amorphous concepts such as bullying or emotional abuse. It's very easy for definitions to confuse bullying and ordinary conflict, for example, and it's important to know the difference. Learning how to deal with conflict and hurt feelings are important life skills for children, and we do not serve them well by buffering them from those important lessons. Not everything that makes a child sad is bullying or emotional abuse. Avoid open-ended aspirational definitions that lend themselves to arbitrary enforcement. Look for clear definitions with objective measures.

Finally, your definitions do not have to include every detail. Whether your state's child pornography laws cover teen sexting, for example, probably is a better topic for training events. What you should be striving for is a definition that causes people to recognize the possibility and start asking more questions. Saying that physical abuse is "non-accidental injury," for example, does not answer the question of what's an accident or whether a non-permanent red mark on a child's skin is an injury. The definition is a good one not because it covers every detail, but because it's short enough to be memorable and provide a concrete framework for more questions.

C. Initial Audit (see handouts)

Spend the rest of your first 30 days auditing your policies. You can't figure out what you need to write until you know what you have. This is the beginning of a collaborative process with your teams to develop policies that your organization can implement consistently.

We recommend that the IRT evaluate your (1) whistleblower policies; (2) mandated reporter policies; (3) mandated reporter training; (4) insurance coverage and historic policies; (5) document retention policies; and (6) communications policies. Solid policies in each of those areas are essential to a professional and proactive response for your organization.

The CPT should evaluate all the remaining policies: (1) employee and volunteer screening; (2) access control; (3) behavior and boundary guidelines; (4) creating a safety culture; and (5) planning how your organization will implement its policies.

D. Staff Surveys (see handouts)

Both teams should evaluate how your organization implements its child protection policies. We've included two recommended surveys in the handouts that you should consider circulating among stakeholders *before* creating and implementing your policies. Building an organization that protects children and youth requires both good policies and good implementation. Good implementation requires having a staff that understands your policies, believes they are important, and feels empowered to speak up when policies are not being followed. The surveys on positive accountability and psychological safety can give you an idea of the current state of your organizational culture and help you understand how to better empower your workers.

II. First 60-90 Days: Audits and Drafting Policies (see handouts)

In the next thirty to sixty days, you start building on the foundation you set in the previous exercise. This is the phase when you start writing or editing your policies to bring them up to the standards you identified in the first 30 days. We also recommend that you use this time to start an in-depth audit of your employee and volunteer files to ensure that they meet your new standards.

A. Audit of Employee and Volunteer Files

At some point in building a strong safety policy, you will need to be sure that your current staff and volunteers meet all your screening standards and that you have the documentation in each file. It's a time-consuming task, and you need to decide on your screening standards first. For that reason, we recommend that you do the bulk of that individual file review in the final phase of this child protection project. However, criminal record checks are a non-negotiable standard, and your safety team can review files for that requirement relatively quickly.

For that reason, we recommend that within the first 60–90 days you (1) decide what criminal records checks (CRCs) to require for which positions, and (2) review the files of your current employees and volunteers to ensure you have documentation of clear records.

If you are missing clear CRCs for anyone who has regular access to children, then get those checks done immediately. To the extent possible, restrict those employees or volunteers from unsupervised access to children while you are awaiting the results of the criminal records checks. In this context, remember that if you cannot find the documentation, then it doesn't exist. Don't rely on your memory; be sure that the file has written documents.

Also be sure that, if the existing or new CRCs show a criminal conviction, child maltreatment registry determination, or bad reference check, you have a written explanation in the file of why you decided that record doesn't show that the worker poses a danger to children. Not all convictions or arrests or placement on child maltreatment registries should disqualify people from working in your organization. But if you decide to allow the person to work with children, or to do so with limitations, be sure that the file documents that reasoning.

B. Write Your Policies

By the time you finish the research and evaluation that we recommend for the first 30 days, you should have a good idea of what you need in your child protection policies. We recommend that the IRT work on the policies that it evaluated. Similarly, the CST should be working on the remaining policies.

As you write the policies, you need to keep some important principles in mind:

1. Feasibility. Your policies must be feasible for your organization. This principle is one reason that it is good to have a variety of perspectives on your two teams. Get everyone's input on whether the policies that you are considering actually will work in your organization.

2. Building a safety culture. You are not creating just another policy for your organization; you are building a child safety culture. As you develop your policies, analyze and learn from the stakeholder surveys that you conducted in the first 30 days.

Developing a strong safety culture requires developing clear and just consequences for policy violations. You must avoid both permissive attitudes that allow incompetent or malevolent people to remain in your program and draconian consequences that expel good people and hurt morale.

III. First 120 Days: More Policies and Communication (see handouts)

After you've written your core policies, it's time to draft less urgent policies and finish time-consuming audits. It's also the time to start implementing your new safety culture by communicating your policies to your employees and stakeholders.

A. Board or Ownership

Now is a good time to encourage your Board to audit itself for good governance standards. Governing boards are subject to inertia like any other group and are just as prone to overlook maintenance in the urgency of day-to-day matters. Now that your organization, including the Board, is looking at the policies involved in child protection, it's a good time to evaluate other governance issues that may affect your safety culture.

B. Incident Response Team

The IRT should continue to concentrate on the areas related to responding to violations of policy.

1. Develop document retention policies
2. Develop and schedule mandated reporter training for workers, parents, and other stakeholders
3. Start communicating mandated reporter policies to staff, volunteers, and stakeholders

C. Child Safety Team

Likewise, the CST should continue the work that it has already started in the evaluation and drafting phases.

1. Now that you have defined your screening policies, audit the records for all your current employees and volunteers. Conduct whatever rescreening is necessary to meet your new standards.
2. Develop policies and standards for the following areas:
    a. Use of pictures and videos of children
    b. Offsite activities, if needed
    c. Parent orientation on child safety policies
    d. Training for children and youth, if you decide to have such training
3. Develop and schedule training for employees and volunteers in new child safety policies
4. Begin communicating child safety policies to stakeholders
5. Develop or find specialized training for people screening employees and volunteers.
6. Consider needed upgrades in physical plant, develop a budget and realistic timeline for potential changes.

IV. Yearly Audits and Training (see handouts)

After you have your plan in place, you have to do the part that is the hardest for most organizations to do consistently. Making the child protection policy a part of your culture requires you to audit the policy frequently to be sure that it's still working for your organization. If it's not working, then you will need to either change your policy or increase your training and enforcement. But first you must identify the weaknesses in your child protection culture.

Once you know what changes you need to make, you can plan your training for your staff. We recommend at least yearly training on child protection policies and mandated reporter responsibilities. People with specific responsibilities, such as those who are screening workers or part of the IRT, may need periodic training in those responsibilities as well.

A. Frequent Audits:

We recommend at least yearly audits (more frequently if feasible) in the following areas:

1. Worker Documentation. At least once a year, have CST members go through the files of every adult who works with your program, including volunteers. Be certain that each file has the criminal records checks and reference checks that you have decided to require. If you are missing any criminal records checks, either remove the worker from contact with children or start supervising them, whichever route your jurisdiction requires or recommends, while you complete the missing checks.

If you are missing a large number of background checks, then you need to figure out why.

Perhaps you are trying to do too many reference checks, or you need to assign more people to the task. Criminal records checks are not optional, so figure out what you need to do to have a CRC for every adult in your program who comes into contact with minors.

2. Employee Assessments. A yearly audit is a good time to survey your staff, volunteers, and interns in several areas. First, have the CST give workers the Psychological Safety and Positive Accountability assessments again and compare the results from year to year. If you see the scores go down or stay at a low level, then you have some culture areas that you need to address.

Along with the assessments, consider quizzing your staff and volunteers about your child protection policies. The CST can either distribute written questions along with the employee assessments or have informal lunch-and-learn discussions. In either instance, don't just ask workers to recite the rules. Use hypotheticals to learn if they know how to apply the rules to particular situations. Pull stories from the news or the industry grapevine to create the hypotheticals and ask your staff in as low-pressure a manner as possible to tell you how they would handle each scenario. What you learn from these exercises will tell you what training you need to do each year.

3. Incident Reports. Have both of your teams review all your discipline and incident reports from the prior year. Ask the CST to look for patterns or common weaknesses. For example, are your bullying incidents happening in a particular area in the school? Perhaps you need to assign more adult supervision to those areas. Even accidents can signal a looming safety problem that you need to address. Review as many records as possible to ensure that you have a comprehensive view of what's going on with child safety in your program.

Ask the IRT to view all the reports to assess the organization's response and perhaps conduct some tabletop exercises. Evaluate whether the organization had clear lines of responsibility and whether it has the right people performing those tasks. The IRT should focus on weaknesses in the response and the best ways to address those vulnerabilities.

B. Training

As we explain in later chapters, we recommend refresher training on your child protection and incident response policies at least yearly. It's a good idea to do this training after the yearly audits so that you know how to target the training. Yearly training is a good opportunity to do the tabletop exercises that we recommend later in this book. Those exercises build your organization's "muscle memory" without having to go through an actual incident.

We recommend, if possible, more frequent training in smaller chunks. Many of our clients include a safety reminder in routine weekly emails. Others have a particular day for an email, such as "Safety Monday." Lunch-and-learn sessions are a good way to focus on a particular topic or do some short tabletop exercises. In addition to attendance records, keep notes about feedback from these sessions so that you can use them in your yearly evaluation.

V. Conclusion

Many organizations make three basic errors: (1) considering child protection as the task of one person, department, or section of the organization; (2) viewing incidents of child maltreatment as rare and stemming from the malicious intent of one person rather than as a common danger that all youth-serving organizations must plan for; and (3) reacting to human errors rather than figuring out ways to help prevent those errors.

Using this timeline, we hope your organization can make child protection an integral, ongoing process, and create a culture that protects children, values transparency, and rewards feedback.