

Safe and Sound

Have you given much thought to the safety of the programs and facilities for the children of your congregation? We'd like to think that our churches and church school classrooms are safe places, but we know that this isn't always the case. Rather than say "Not in our church," be proactive to ensure that your buildings and programs keep children's safety in mind at all times. Designate time to identify and address all safety-related issues, from emergency procedures in case of a power outage to available medical supplies for treating injuries. Keep in mind that for some children, the Sunday school classroom may be the only safe place they experience all week.

Just as we strive to be a positive presence in the lives of the children we teach, Sunday school classrooms should be positive places for children to spend their time. Consider these basics as you begin to evaluate the facilities and programs of your church. You might also research safety-related policies and procedures in your local schools and identify state and local agencies' guidelines regarding child-related safety concerns.

Sunday School Registration

Examine the thoroughness of your Sunday school registration procedures. Do you have an emergency phone, cell phone, or pager number on file for each learner? Does the registration form list any special medical concerns, such as allergies? Is the child on any medication? Most parents and caregivers do not view these important questions about their children as prying, but as acceptable information for maintaining safety and security. Now may be the time to revise your registration form, no matter how many learners attend your program. Develop a storage method to keep these files secure so that personal information remains confidential.

Check-in Procedures

Think about how secure your Sunday school program is by considering how safe children are on their way to and from class. How do children check in to Sunday school or other events? If they are usually dropped off in the church parking lot, consider the risks involved in this practice. Think about changing this drop-off policy so adults are expected to walk their children to their class and check them in on a sign-in sheet. If your enrollment is fairly high, create information cards to help busy volunteers ensure that the correct person

picks up children from church events. Ask local child-care centers, preschools, and public schools about their check-in and checkout procedures that might be adapted for use in your setting.

Emergency Plans

Develop a plan so teachers can reach parents and caregivers immediately in case of an emergency. If worship and the education hour occur at the same time, you should know how to locate parents and caregivers in the sanctuary. If your church uses an electronic reader board or computer screen during the service, develop procedures for posting a message in case of an emergency. If adult education classes are offered at the same time, develop a method for quickly locating parents and caregivers. Designate an adult in each class who could find a parent or caregiver in the church building. If they are not in the church building, plan a way they can be reached. Although you may never need to use such a plan, be prepared!

Physical Space and Materials

How safe are the physical spaces and materials in your church building? There are many things to consider, from the kinds of scissors used in the three-year-olds' class to the route learners travel as they move from an opening song and worship time to their classes. Look around your class. If you live in an area where tornadoes, earthquakes, or other violent weather can occur, where will you go? What about a fire? Post a chart to outline the procedures and evacuation routes to use in the most likely scenarios for your area. Also check for emergency supplies of food, water, flashlights, blankets, and first-aid supplies.

If there are phones in classrooms or the gathering area, make sure that 911, other emergency numbers, the church address, and the church phone number are clearly posted. Check whether there is a cell phone if no land phone is available. Designate and post who should be contacted first in case of a medical emergency: parents and caregivers, Sunday school superintendent, parish nurse, or other members.

Examine the visibility of the learning areas in your church building. Is a window in or next to each door so the Sunday school superintendent or church staff person can check in on teachers and children? If you have partitions in a more open, flexible-space area, can others look over the walls to view teachers and learners?

Teacher/Student Ratios

Children and teachers alike benefit from the different personality traits and teaching styles that are such a big part of team teaching. Team teachers work as partners, teaching together through the Sunday school year. If questions emerge about inappropriate behaviors with learners, the presence of two adults in the classroom at all times helps address such problems.

Mentoring is a good way to ensure a safe and constructive Sunday school program. Team a teacher who is experienced and trusted with one with less experience so the veteran teacher can mentor the novice. Another benefit of mentoring is the addition of future well-trained teachers to your volunteer staff!

Teacher Training

Good teacher training is essential, but it must address much more than details about the particulars of curriculum. Teacher training sessions are a perfect time to address safety issues. Make sure that everyone working in a Sunday school class attends some sort of teacher training before the school year begins. Videotape the training session for those who missed the scheduled time. Be sure the training describes appropriate behavior between teachers and learners; reviews policies and procedures for registration, check-in, and classroom emergencies; and identifies important locations of the posted emergency instructions, phone, and first-aid kit.

Other Responsibilities

If you have an education board or committee, consider how those people might help during the education hour. They could walk through the halls and monitor classes, help teachers if a child requires special attention, direct children looking for a room location, or help parents and caregivers find a teacher or learner. Such a system can be a safety net in your program—and today's world.

We hope our Sunday schools are the safe places we want them to be. Many of the things we can do to ensure safety for children are common sense and require little time or effort to implement. Other safety practices may require more intentional efforts to evaluate and put into place. We must take time to evaluate our facilities and programs to make sure they are secure in every way for the children we teach. Then each Sunday school classroom will truly be a place for children to feel safe and sound.

Follow these tips to make sure your education setting encourages safety, security, and good health!

- Develop a comprehensive health and safety plan for your congregation, put it in writing, and make sure key individuals are familiar with it.
- Include a health and safety tip in each church newsletter.
- During at least one teacher training session each year, include a section on fire safety, telephone use, first-aid kit location, and emergency procedures.
- Display the emergency evacuation route in every class and gathering area. Make sure to address procedures for extreme weather conditions that may affect your community.
- Post the church's phone number and street address at every phone along with any special instructions for using the phone (for example, if a number is needed to dial out of the system).
- Hang signs in bathrooms reminding everyone to wash hands. Include pictures and words.
- Include a section on class registration forms about food allergies, medications, custody arrangements, medical insurance coverage, and other health and security issues.
- Learn which congregation members are medical professionals, and whether you have a parish nurse on staff.
- Encourage volunteer leaders and staff to obtain first aid and CPR certification, including infant certification. Keep a list of certified individuals in the office.
- Teach learners to walk safely during transition times, and always plan appropriate adult-child ratios for learners on the move.

Adapted from "Child Safety: How Can the Church Help" by Debbie Trafton O'Neal, © 1996 Debbie Trafton O'Neal, and from "First Aid for Sunday School" by Irene Lee, © 1996 Irene Lee, both from the December 1996 issue of *Parish Teacher*. Used by permission.