

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention vs. Active Shooter Protocols: Useful Information for Any Ministry

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Editor's note: We have received increasing feedback and questions asking about how to balance the necessity of transparency in safe environments involving children vs. the valid fear of active shooters in ministerial environments—both of which could potentially affect us all. This article hopes to provide context and clarity on how to consider them both.



In today's environment, people in ministerial environments, educators and parents are facing a unique challenge that can produce a real dilemma. What are we to do when the practices and policies for creating safe environments that protect our children from sexual abuse conflict with the practices promoted by law enforcement for dealing with active shooters in the school or parish? When we consider all the factors

along with the real risk of harm, we can find actions that promote safety in both situations.

It is important to put the situation in context based on facts rather than media reports. Research tells us that an estimated 9.7 percent of all children will be molested by a school employee before they graduate from high school.¹ These figures only reflect the research conducted in public schools. Many, many states' private schools are not even required to offer abuse reporting training or prevention programs. Estimates are that the risk is higher in private schools because predators can "hide out" there.² In fact, according to the Department of Education, only 13 states require reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect by employees and administrators of private schools.³

Although active shooter incidents have increased in the past 20 years, while devastating, the number of victims of school shootings is still substantially smaller than the number of children being molested by school teachers and employees.

So the question for many is, "How do we keep our environments safe from sexual predators and protect our children from the growing risk from active shooters at the same time?"

Active Shooter Protocols:

There are two common acronyms that point to the recommended ways to respond to active shooters: LEAST (Lockdown, Evacuation and Survival Tactics) and ALICE

(Alert/Call 911, Lockdown/Shelter in Place, Inform/Constant Real-time updates, Counter the Attack/A Last Resort, Evacuate/Get Out). Both of those plans include some of the same elements.⁴

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Protocols:

All interactions between children and adults should be visible and in an open environment that allows for monitoring by others. Empty, hidden, or unused areas should be locked and secure so that no children or adults can access those areas without permission and oversight.

The problem/dilemma:

Both plans for active shooter prevention include fewer windows, covers on existing windows, and areas where children and adults can be secluded. However, child sexual abuse prevention policies require openness and recommends windows everywhere. Taken alone, some of the policy recommendations of protections from active shooters could actually play into the hands of someone who does not have good intentions with children—potentially even a sexual predator. Nobody wants that!

Children need to be protected in both scenarios. If we look at a few of the priorities, we can find ways to have them work together for the best possible outcome.

- Two protocols that have demonstrated the best results in an active shooter situation are lockdown and evacuation.
- In both shooter protocols, panic buttons and lockable doors are recognized as the first line of defense in an active shooter scenario.
- Shades that can be closed in an emergency are a useful tool in an active shooter incident.
- Environments need to promote openness, monitoring, and observation in order to protect children from the risk posed by boundary violators or potential sexual predators.

If we consider all the facts and the nature of the risks involved, there are things we can do to protect our children in both situations. Designing a safe environment policy requires looking at all the possible scenarios that could arise and then looking at options to address those issues. We can find solutions that protect children from both risks.

Possible Solutions:

- Panic buttons and lockable doors on classroom and areas where children regularly gather can be a valuable part of the safety program. Even if a predator intended to seclude a child in a locked area, the existence of a panic button might deter the predator from acting.
- Moveable shades are one answer to the issue of closing off rooms where children and adults are gathered when an active shooter is on the premises. Having movable boards or covers or pull-down shades—or even cardboard

pieces that can be moved to cover windows can accomplish the goal of eliminating the shooter's ability to see if there is anyone in a room. Using these shades only in active shooter emergencies promotes both objectives.

Finding ways to protect children from sexual predators and active shooters requires thinking through both situations and the recommended solutions in a way that considers all the risks and arrives at compromises that promote the best possible solution. No one should disregard the recommendations that promote physical safety in high risk situations and none of us can ignore the environmental issues that favor the desires and actions of sexual predators. Think this through with everyone in the room, so that all the risks are considered when setting policies and everyone looks broadly at the situation to find comprehensive solutions.