



CRIMINAL HISTORY CHECK & SCREENING PROCESS

Overview: Screening Process

The Screening Process is an extremely important part of your role as a director. While it is designed to help you identify potential threats to your program, it is also the best way for you to provide quality mentors for your partner school. While each of the components helps screen for potential predators, it also helps attract and retain individuals who have the sensitivity, commitment, and sense of responsibility to be great mentors. Take the time to be curious, ask follow-up questions, and record your responses. Following best practices now will help you build a safe and thriving program.

As outlined in training, the Kids Hope USA Screening Process must be followed for everyone in your program who will have access to children, including your pastor, spouse, and best friend. In other words, there are no exceptions. The Screening Process has FIVE components:

- 1. The Application**
- 2. The Interview**
- 3. Reference Checks**
- 4. Criminal History Check**
- 5. Pastoral Review**

Screening to Prevent Sexual Child Abuse

The Application, Interview, and Reference Checks are critical components of the Screening Process, especially as they relate to identifying and discouraging sexual predators. Because sexual predators cannot be identified visually, and only 10% may show up through a background check, we must review the application carefully and listen attentively during the interview and reference checks for high-risk or evasive responses. It is important to note that many abusers gain access to children by appearing trustworthy, helpful and outgoing to those who are 'in charge' (the gatekeeper). As the director, a potential abuser may have already identified you as the gatekeeper and may already be working to gain your trust. By being prepared for deception, you are in a better position to keep an abuser out of your program. Paying attention on the front end, and having the mindset, 'not my kids, not on my watch,' will go a long way to protecting your students.



Characteristics and High-Risk Indicators of Predators

Use the information below to help you identify any red flags on the application or while conducting the interview and reference checks. Male offenders, who are 90% of all abusers, may have the following characteristics or risk indicators:

- Unstable work history
- Frequent or abrupt relocations
- Gaps in employment or residence history
- Job requiring frequent travel out of country
- Poor or remote relationships with references
- References that are much older or younger
- Past employers/supervisors are not identified
- No references in "kid context" for those with experience working with youth
- Lives far out of service area
- Applied/was not accepted by another program
- Expresses concern/discomfort regarding information sought
- Evasive or non-answers to direct questions regarding abuse
- Frequent activities with children, usually of a specific age and gender
- Skilled at meeting a child's needs
- Provides special privileges or gives gifts
- Has 'kid-magnet' hobbies, toys, activities; knows what's popular with preferred age and gender
- Photographs or videotapes children
- Unwilling to accept role as adult, instead identifies and prefers interaction with children
- Describes child as 'close' or 'best' friend
- Describe children as possessions - 'that one is mine,' 'she belongs to me,' etc.
- Unrealistic beliefs concerning children (commonly uses words like 'pure,' 'innocent')
- History of extreme abuse/neglect as child, alcohol or drug abuse, depression
- Narcissistic, 'me-oriented' perspective, rarely a team player
- Asks questions about overnight trips
- Interested in establishing 'trusted time alone'
- Extreme behaviors
- Very secretive, unable to answer questions
- Impatient with the process
- Unusual anxiety to get started
- Inappropriate questions/comments/jokes
- Skillful at gaining trust of adults
- Exhibits exceptionally helpful and willing behavior
- Pattern of dating single moms
- Limited or shallow social interaction with peers
- Wants immediate access to organization gear/'swag' such as t-shirts
- Fails to honor appropriate program boundaries, often testing program guidelines and rules
- Playful but inappropriately 'touching' with children, pushes back on physical boundaries guidelines by engaging in tickling, wrestling, or rough housing



Criminal Background Checks

Criminal History Checks are only one part of the Kids Hope USA Screening Process. Because only 10% of sexual predators are ever convicted of a crime, it is important to know that background checks are a risk management tool and part of due diligence, but they are far from being a guarantee of safety.

Unfortunately, criminal records are spread across many databases and locations, and searches are complex and confusing, and differ from state to state. Also, there are some inherent weaknesses and challenges for discovery of peer-to-peer and young adult abuse, as younger offenders have sealed records and college students have multiple addresses. This can make it difficult to get a complete criminal history, especially if an applicant has lived in more than one state. That said, a reasonable criminal background check is still a necessary standard.

Currently, in addition to checking the National Sex Offender Registry, Kids Hope USA requires a name-based criminal history check at the state level for every mentor and substitute mentor. However, since cases are prosecuted at the county level, it is recommended that a screening be done through the county courts as well. It is possible that the national standard may move to include fingerprinting. Please stay in touch with Kids Hope USA national office through the director website so that we can keep you apprised of changing standards.

Requirement: Every mentor and substitute mentor must agree to and pass a criminal history record check. It is recommended that prayer partners be screened in the event they wish to interact with the children at Kids Hope USA events.

Special note: Your church may already have the following process in place for anyone who works with children while representing the church. If this is the case, find out your church's procedure for confirming that your applicants have gone through the entire process below and have been approved to proceed with training to be a mentor.

Process:

1. The first step is to consult with your school principal on the school district's policy for volunteer background checks; some school districts have their own background check process that will need to be followed. Then, discuss with your supervising pastor the level of background check the church desires for the mentors; the church may wish to check at the same level as volunteers in your children's ministry, and this may be higher or lower than the school's requirements. Make sure to meet or exceed whatever policy is in place for the school, and please recognize that the associated costs may need to be covered by the church.
2. Make sure all your volunteers have signed their applications, giving you permission to conduct the screening and to share results with both the pastor and the principal.
3. Determine your state's procedure for conducting criminal history checks. Contact your State Police Department directly (this may also be done via the web or by telephone) and conduct the criminal history check according to your state's procedures.



4. Conduct a sex offender registry check by using the FBI National/State Sex Offender Registry. <https://www.nsopw.gov/>
5. If there is a criminal record for one of your volunteers, review this with your pastor as a follow up in the Pastoral Review process.
6. Be aware of common "plea-down offenses." Because children are involved, it is not uncommon that the accused was offered a plea deal rather than the case going to trial. Note that the following convictions should serve as a serious red flag: providing alcohol/tobacco/porn to a minor; contributing to the delinquency of a minor; indecency or exhibitionism (flashing), and voyeurism (peeping Tom). Do not accept a self-reported explanation for one of these offenses. Instead, require that the applicant procure and report back information that shares what happened from an authenticated law enforcement source. Validate any information.
7. If the record contains any history of:
 - sexual abuse of children
 - conviction for any crime in which children were involved
 - history of any violence
 - history of any sexually exploitative behavior
 - dismissal from a job or volunteer position caused by misconduct with a child

Close the application and working with your supervising pastor, inform the volunteer that they are not eligible to participate.

If the record contains other convictions, consult with both the pastor and principal to make a final decision on participation. The nature of the offense, the length of time since the conviction, and the extent of the individual's rehabilitation are all factors to be weighed.

8. Make sure all your screening records are in order for each volunteer. They should be kept in their individual files and secured in a locking file cabinet or password-protected digital file.
9. It is recommended that background checks are periodically refreshed every two to three years, and at a minimum every five years.

Helpful websites:

Federal Sex Offender Registry: [nsopr.gov](https://www.nsopr.gov)

Ministry Safe: ministrysafe.com

MENTOR: mentoring.org/screening

Pastoral Review

Part of the screening process includes the pastoral review. Using the Pastoral Review form, submit all applicant names to the pastor or pastoral staff, sharing with the pastor that she/he is providing a character reference for these church members or attendees. If the applicant is so new to the church that they are not yet known to the pastoral staff, you may wish to request a reference from a previous pastor. (You may desire to do this step first in order to avoid having an interview with a potential volunteer that your pastor may reject.)