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Teacher aims to prevent child abuse in churches, other communities

By [John Longhurst](#)

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COLUMBUS, Ohio — Jeanette Harder's goal is to help churches and communities become safe places for children.

"I strongly feel the need to prevent child abuse in church, but also in neighborhoods, schools and soccer teams," she said at Preparing Our Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect, a seminar at the Mennonite Church USA convention.

Nearly 800,000 children were abused or neglected in the United States in 2007, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The most common type of abuse was neglect, which she defined as lack of care, food, education, medical care or supervision.

Sixteen percent of cases involved physical abuse, she added, with nine percent suffering sexual abuse and seven percent being emotionally abused. Eighty percent of offenders were parents.

"Nobody intends to abuse children," said [Harder](#), who teaches social work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and attends First Mennonite Church in Lincoln. "There are risk factors that lead to abuse."

Risk factors include domestic violence, substance abuse, parental stress, poverty and a child's disability, she noted, adding that many states require adults to report abuse or neglect.

But, she warned, someone who suspects abuse shouldn't "interrogate the child," she said. "We're not skilled, and the child is often not able to say what happened."

Churches can play a role in helping to prevent abuse by supporting families at risk through things like providing food, clothing, counseling, childcare or programs that let parents get a break from looking after children, she noted.

It's also a good idea to establish relationships with agencies that work with abused children, she went on to say.

"You are more likely to call on them for help if you have a relationship with them," she said, adding that agencies working with abused children are also more likely to call on churches they know and trust for help in responding to families in crisis.

Congregations should also have procedures and policies to guide their efforts to help families, and to keep children safe from abuse — including sexual abuse.

For Harder, this would mean educating everyone who works with children about abuse and neglect; always requiring that two adults be present whenever children are involved in a program or a class; putting windows into every door; and screening everyone who wants to work with children.

It's the last point that raises the most controversy, she noted.

"Nobody wants to believe it could happen in our churches," she said. "We resist enacting policies because we're in denial that our members could ever do that."

But it can, and does, happen in churches, she added. "You've got to get a plan in place before something bad happens, not wait until it happens," she said.

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