

# Is Your Church At Risk?

by Rebekah Gibbs

Security plans can avert disaster and ensure the safety of children

According to the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMART), more than 350,000 family abductions occur in the United States each year. “Family abduction” refers to an incident where a child is taken in violation of a custody agreement. This amounts to more than 1,000 family abductions per day.

Although the statistics are not broken out by abduction locations, many churches set themselves up as prime targets for family abductions by not taking a close look at their childcare security strategy.

An estranged parent who has been kept from his or her children, grandparents who feel they have more rights than they’ve been given, or mothers who return months after abandoning her kids, are all examples of potential family abductors.

Add to that the right combination of unlocked doors, distracted kids, “trusting” volunteers and lax security measures, and it’s easy to see why today’s children—and children’s ministries—are at risk.

In addition, many children are allergic to different foods such as peanuts, wheat or dairy products or fabrics like wool or polyester. It is the responsibility of the church to handle these children and their special needs with care. To disregard these special needs is to accept the liability resulting from such neglect.

## Take Precautions

To help ensure the safety of children—at least in these areas of abduction and allergic reactions—many churches still depend on older, disjointed, manually driven security systems, such as numbered stickers and attendance sheets. Unknowingly, these churches are putting themselves at risk, leading to costly lawsuits (in excess of \$1 million) and a damaged reputation in the local community.

To maximize your ministry’s chances of avoiding this liability, implement an intentional, coordinated, cohesive security process, addressing several aspects of your children’s ministry: registration and check-in, volunteer screening, emergency preparedness and perimeter surveillance. Inexpensive tools using the latest technology are worth the investment.

As families enter your ministry, they expect to find not only a spiritual sanctuary, but also a haven of protection from the rest of the world. All week they hear about terrorism and natural disasters – even virtual thieves who would steal their very identity. The more you can assure these parents that their children will be safe, the better off your children’s ministry will be.

Consider the normal way children’s ministries currently conduct their security. Parents enter the church and go directly

to their children’s classrooms. In the case of a first-time visitor, a host or greeter will escort the family to the classroom. If the volunteer teacher is present when the family arrives, the teacher will offer a sign-in sheet on which the parents fill in their names, the child’s name, their location in each of the services, and a method for contacting them during the services.

For additional security, some churches will distribute two-part stickers with matching numbers for child and parent. The intention is that the worker will ensure the child’s and parent’s sticker number matches before they release the child to the parent after the service.

Although this method is well intentioned and cost-effective, it leaves the burden of judgment at pick-up time up to the volunteer—and this may prove detrimental.

For example, imagine 10 sets of parents picking up children at one time, with one volunteer working in the classroom. It would be easy for the volunteer to become frazzled and hand the children over to “parents” as fast as possible. The last thing a volunteer wants to do is get in the way of a happy reunion between parent and child. In this scenario, checking matching sticker numbers could easily become secondary.

The potential problems with this system are many. The first is that, depending on the volunteer training, each volunteer may have a different idea about acceptable security practices. One may place a checkmark next to the child’s name on the check-in sheet.

Another may be more diligent about checking sticker numbers. This disjointed approach could lead to confusion, ending up with a child in the wrong hands. Conversely, if a volunteer does intervene to ensure a proper child-to-parent exchange, the delay creates tension between parent and volunteer and is seen as an inconvenience.

Another disadvantage of a paper and sticker-based system is that it makes it unwieldy to track attendance. Churches depend on teachers or other volunteers to manually mark attendance sheets and write down information about visiting children. Then information from all classes is brought to a central location and tallied. Not only is this an inefficient method for pulling together attendance numbers, but as we will see later, it is also a security risk.

Imagine a world—or at least a children’s ministry—without checklists, clipboards or stickers. As families enter the children’s ministry area, they would stop at a computer kiosk that easily handles the responsibility of check-in and registration.

Returning families would carry a security card, swiping it through a card reader located next to the kiosk. The kiosk would confirm the child’s information, and then print out two

security badges—one for parent and one for child—with random-number barcodes. The badge would also feature the child's photo and any important information, such as food allergies or special diets.

New families could visit a second, hosted kiosk, where a trained greeter could guide parents to enter the child's information

using a keyboard. Once completed, the printer would generate security badges like the case above, as well as directions to the appropriate classroom.

Using a kiosk system like the one above allows for faster processing of new and returning children into classes. Depending on how many kiosks you use, this system could

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## Checkpoint Success Story

**P**rotecting the well being of our children is not just a concern of daycares and schools; it is a concern that has transcended class and culture to every aspect of our society. Unfortunately as it may be, churches are increasingly feeling the need to seek out ways to ensure the safety of the children that pass through their doors on any given day of the week. Quail Lakes Baptist Church in Stockton, California recognized the severe impact that a missing child or a child released to an unauthorized person could create for their congregation and knew that they needed to implement a system to ensure the safety of all children within the church walls. The previous process the church utilized involved manual roll sheets. This process would have to change in order to ensure safety to the fullest degree.

### Checkpoint

With approximately 1,800 members and 150-200 preschoolers in attendance on a typical Sunday, the church needed a solution fast. According to Director of Christian Education, Caryn Shapiro, "We had been looking for a solution but had only seen software that was specifically designed to accommodate the intricate needs of a particular church. In other words, the software had been written for that church and their programs only. Then we learned that ACS Technologies had Checkpoint and it was designed to address the necessary security and documentation processes when it comes to dropping off and picking up children at any church event." She continued, "What impressed us the most was that it was so easy to use and the program is able to interact with the main data base of families and their children and create updates of families as necessary. It gave us the perfect blend."

When churchgoers are preparing to drop off their preschoolers, parents are greeted by church staff members who are near the two kiosks dedicated to the Checkpoint process. Parents simply enter the last four digits of their last name and the system prints two labels including one for the parent and one for the child. The children are escorted to their classrooms and the child cannot be picked up without the matching label. In addition, Shapiro commented, "We also use a customized banner during the check-in process that might include any special information that parents might need to know such as an upcoming special event or different service times. This information can appear on the screen and that way we can give parents up to date information about our programs."

Quail Lakes unveiled its Checkpoint program in September of 2005 and within one month of its operation, the program had basically paid for itself. Shapiro explained, "During our first month of operation, we had two incidents which were custody issues. In both instances our teaching staff was able to respond to unauthorized individuals who attempted to pick up a child by telling them that they were unable to release the child without the correct label. Both of these cases later revealed that the people who were attempting to pick up the children did not have custody of them and were not authorized to do so. Having Checkpoint helped us to identify exactly who should be picking the

### They are Precious in His Sight: Quail Lakes Baptist Church - Stockton, Calif.

children up and made it easier for us to deal with these difficult situations in a tactful manner."

Shapiro explained, "Having Checkpoint has improved our security immensely and has improved our ability to address issues of that nature. I'm sorry to say that we are living in a time like this where a child's safety is of great concern but we are and we must address it. We have benefited in that it has taken my paid staff in our preschool program and has freed them up to have time to make sure that teachers and volunteers have what they need to do their jobs efficiently instead of having to be concerned about who is in what class. Now they can focus on the ministry itself."

With Checkpoint in place, other processes are simplified. Shapiro noted, "Having Checkpoint makes updating class rosters very easy especially since the younger children tend to move around so much from crawlers to walkers to Pre-K. With the click of a button their information is updated to reflect their new status." This also helps to alleviate confusion because preschool children are moved up to their new status position according to their birthdates while other children move up to a new class the first Sunday in July.

Reporting features within Checkpoint have also been useful to Quail Lakes. Because Checkpoint works with other ACS software, it has allowed the children's ministry department to evaluate classroom size and plan accordingly. As a result of the information that the data base gives them, they are able to split grade levels if necessary. Shapiro said, "For some reason certain ages of kids produce what we call 'Bumper Crops' or large numbers of children in specific age groups. This year we have a lot of two year olds in the classrooms so now we know that next fall we will need to create another class of three year olds. This is easier to identify because of the reports that we get from ACS."

This summer, Quail Lakes is planning to use Checkpoint to assist them with their Summer Day Camp. The camp expects to bring in at least 150 children in the first through the eighth grades. Checkpoint will play a vital role when it comes to managing registration, rosters and checking in and out each day during this nine week program.

Putting the safety of children first has helped the church in numerous ways. From simplifying administrative processes to providing well rounded programs, safety is precedence. Shapiro added, "I think that our overall perception from parents is that we value safety. Having Checkpoint visibly demonstrates that we care about children and their safety. It has also helped us to communicate with people. For example, when someone is new to our church and they see this system in place, it sends a clear message about the values of our church when it comes to the way we perceive children." ❖

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### About Quail Lakes Baptist Church

*Started in 1959 by a group of committed Christians their mission is to win and build passionate, life-long followers of Jesus Christ. Toward this end, they offer a great diversity of ministries to all spectrums of the community. All are driven and led by talented, Godly staff and committed lay people who give leadership and momentum.*

save considerable time, allowing for classes to begin (and end) on time. The security badges, complete with barcode and additional information about the child, offer parents peace of mind along with an immediate familiarity with a new facility, much like a directory in a shopping center.

At pick-up time, volunteers will no longer depend on registration lists and numbered stickers, eliminating the risk of making a judgment call as to the person picking up the child. They can use the technology and barcode security badge as the “bad cop,” ensuring a match between the two before allowing the children to leave the class.

One church-wide advantage of the kiosk system is immediate access to attendance counts. With reports generated after the classroom time begins, ministry personnel can immediately know how many children are being cared for, as well as the location of each child who has checked in—during the entire time he or she is on the property.

The kiosk system can also be used for activities at times other than Sunday morning, and at locations not at the church. Kids can be checked in for field trips, retreats, offsite youth events and other special functions. In these cases, databases are used to compare the list of those checked in against a pre-registered list, ensuring that no child is left behind.

Using relatively inexpensive technology, churches have the opportunity to provide an added degree of security to its children’s ministry. Ministries can benefit from replacing old, paper-based processes vulnerable to human error with electronic solutions that can drastically minimize judgment calls.

These tools can also help you manage volunteers in order to encourage the best possible spiritual education for your kids. Having the ability to conduct background checks can reveal any problems before they have a chance to materialize, and assigning volunteers based on their gifts and previous training is a win-win for all parties.

You can’t afford to leave any doubt in parents’ minds as to the safety of their children during an emergency. Make sure all workers are aware of their responsibilities so they can spring into action if the need arises. Remember, information is power. Know how you can get your hands on that vital information and distribute it to the right people in a timely manner.

Standardized training should be a requirement for all volunteers. Only with this information will your workers be empowered to introduce families into your ministry in a way that builds confidence. Your procedures will rise only to the level of the weakest link. Investing in the lives of kids requires commitments to their safety and security. ❖

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*Rebekah Gibbs is a senior development coordinator for ACS Technologies and oversees product development for the entire ACS People Suite, including ACS Checkpoint. She has worked for ACS Technologies for more than 15 years. ACS Checkpoint provides necessary security and documentation to the process of dropping off and picking up family members from events like youth group, children’s church, and the nursery. For more about ACS Checkpoint and other ACS Technologies products and services, visit [www.acstechnologies.com](http://www.acstechnologies.com) or call 800.736.7425.*

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