

# **TEACH ONE REACH ONE**

## **Ministering to Marginalized Children**

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## Foreword

After decades in ministry, I have come to realize there are children who are invisible to most adults. These children live on the margins. They live all over the world, but they are rarely noticed by the average person. The harsh reality is the vast majority of marginalized children live their daily lives facing almost insurmountable challenges, some even struggling to survive.

These children understand it is unlikely anyone will intervene to improve their lives. Christians do help some of these children. There are millions more, however, that need not only assistance with their physical needs, but also a chance to learn about God. If we do not seek out these children, they will live lives of desperation and may never even hear the name of Jesus. This book is designed to encourage a passion for seeking and saving these precious souls - the marginalized children of the world.

*Note: While the primary source for your ministry should be the Bible, the guidance in this book will lead to more impactful ministry when combined with the counsel given in the books "Effective Ministry to Children"<sup>1</sup> and "Effective Ministry to Teens."<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://teachonereachone.org/effective-childrens-ministry/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://teachonereachone.org/effective-teen-ministry/>

## Chapter 1 - Who Is the Marginalized Child?

*"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these."* Mark 10:14b (NIV)

Every child is marginalized in some way. Children's voices are not given the same weight as those of adults. In many countries, children, for example, are not allowed to sign binding, legal contracts. Their lack of knowledge, maturity and life experience would leave them vulnerable to predators if they were given the same rights as adults in the signing of legal documents. They need the protection of the adults who are authorized to sign contracts on their behalf. This denying of rights given to adults is often viewed as a way to protect children or to protect others from the mistakes children may make from their lack of knowledge, maturity and life experience.

In our world, there are children whose marginalization goes far beyond the norm. Their voices are not just marginalized to protect them from predators. In fact, their marginalization may be caused in part by predators or others who wish to do them harm. These children are often virtually invisible to those around them. Many adults seem not to care about the special circumstances that are causing these children emotional brokenness or putting them in physical danger.

Often these children do not receive the same quality of education as other children in their societies. Though some have loving, supportive families, many do not. Marginalized children may struggle to meet their basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and medical care. They often have no one to advocate for their best interests. Because of their struggles and lack of support, marginalized children may die before adulthood or live a life where a lack of education and personal or surrounding poverty, addiction, disease or crime can lead to them growing up to then become entrapped in the world of marginalized adults. Sadly, most of these children will also never be given an opportunity to learn about God and what He wants for them and from them.

These children need to be loved unconditionally. They need help meeting their basic needs. They need to learn about God and His plan for their lives. They need to learn about Jesus, who was willing to die on the Cross for their sins. Your ministry can help change the lives and the eternities of the marginalized children around you. However, it will require skill sets and strategies in addition to the ones you may already use when ministering to children.

This book will examine several groups of children who are marginalized by society. Sadly, many churches have also ignored them over the years. Yet, James and other writers in the Bible make it clear that those who are marginalized by the world, should be of special concern to Christians. Your ministry may not be able to give them everything they need, but you can have an enormous positive impact on them physically, emotionally, mentally



and spiritually by using the skills and strategies in this book. (Note: While this book uses the words “child” or “children,” the information can also prove helpful when ministering to teens or adults who have been marginalized for similar reasons.)

### **Finding Marginalized Children**

Whether you realize it or not, there are probably several groups of marginalized children in your area to whom you could minister. A few of these children may already attend your Bible classes and ministry events. You may or may not be aware that they have special circumstances in their lives that require some additional ministry from you.

Other marginalized children are in the world around you. Because they are marginalized, though, they are often hidden in the shadows of our daily world. Unless you are already aware of the needs in your area, you will have to do some research. You need to understand the types of children who are marginalized in your area and approximately how many children are in each group.

Government statistics are often of little help in identifying and locating children who are marginalized by your society. Often the fear or stigma attached to their issues makes them reluctant to respond to government requests for information. Some governments choose to report minimized numbers of marginalized children in their area for political and financial reasons. You may be able to find some general statistics of children who are impacted by a particular issue, but in my experience, the actual numbers are probably much higher than those provided.

Some social services officials are willing to speak with anyone who is interested in serving the marginalized children they may monitor. Many of these officials have a heart for marginalized children and are overwhelmed with the enormity of the task of helping them with inadequate government resources. They may be happy to share with you which groups of children they are unable to help sufficiently. In other locations, social services officials may refuse to meet with you or give you helpful information.

To find marginalized children without the assistance of statistics or social services, you will need to go into your community and find these children yourself. This work can be slow and tedious. However, the Bible makes it clear that those who are marginalized by the world are important to God. God expects these people to be important to Christians. Often these children and whatever family they have are struggling alone with problems that may seem insurmountable. When Christians offer to serve them, the families who are assisted are often very interested in learning more about God. They want to understand the God who loves them and encourages His people to serve those others often ignore.

Often the best way to start locating marginalized children is to have conversations with people in your community. Your next door neighbor may have as much useful information as a teacher at the local school or someone you meet at a cafe. When talking with people

you do not know, use respectful language. Explain the reason you are seeking information from them. Thank them for any information or suggestions of better contacts they may provide.

For the same reason it is difficult to find government statistics on marginalized children, you may find others are reluctant to share what information they know with you. They may fear your motives or what you may do with the information. Some ministries have found advertising an initial event attracts the children they are trying to locate better than any other method. If you can find just one child who needs the extra resources your ministry can provide, that child or his or her family will often spread the word to other children and families with similar needs. Your ministry may grow slowly, but if you provide quality ministry resources, it will grow.

### **Targeting Your Ministry**

It can be impractical initially to try to find and minister to multiple types of marginalized children at the same time. Some groups have needs that obviously overlap. Others have needs that are so tremendous and unique that trying to minister to several different groups with overwhelming needs could be counterproductive. At times, God will send your ministry a child from a specific group of marginalized children. Often, this child can be the beginning of your ministry to other children with similar needs.

This book will attempt to explain the most common ministry needs of the various types of children who are generally marginalized. A knowledge of their needs and the strategies and resources you may need to minister to them can help you make the best decisions. A thorough knowledge of the gifts of your potential ministry volunteers can also prove helpful in determining the initial focus of your ministry. As with anything, covering the decision making process with prayer will make it easier for you to see God working as you attempt to make critical ministry decisions.

### **Special Safety Concerns When Ministering to Marginalized Children**

While any ministry to children should have multiple safety precautions in place, this is especially true when ministering to marginalized children. These children have often already experienced loss and trauma in their lives. The church should be seen by them as a safe, loving environment. Failing to provide adequate safeguards can mean your ministry only adds to any pain the children have already experienced.

Human predators prey on the weak, just like animal predators. Children who are marginalized by society are often the targets of human predators. Organizations that serve these children are seen by predators as too kind and naive to adequately protect the children to whom they minister from volunteers who may want to harm them. Predators often attempt to volunteer for ministries serving marginalized children in order to have easy access to multiple victims.

In addition to checking the backgrounds of potential volunteers, setting up the safety precautions described in detail in the book *Effective Ministry to Children* can add another layer of protection between predators and their potential victims. (We have provided an overview of these precautions in Appendix 1.) This is particularly important when working with children who are very young or non-verbal.

If you are serving children with certain special needs involving mobility issues, your facility may also need changes to be safe for those children. Items like ramps, handrails and other accessibility features can make your facility easier to navigate and safer for the children you serve.

### **Common Groups of Marginalized Children**

While every location is different, there are specific issues that seem to marginalize children around the world. The degree to which they are marginalized may vary from place to place, but they are often the same people who were marginalized in the time of Jesus. Let us briefly examine several of the issues that cause children to be marginalized.

- **Special Needs.** These children have physical, mental or academic needs that place them outside of the norm for children their age. These needs may be as a result of genetic abnormalities, fetal conditions while in utero, disease, accidents, abuse or neglect. Special needs can range from barely noticeable to profound. The more severe the disability, the more likely the child is to be marginalized. In this book, we will examine children with special needs in general, as well as children who are blind and children who are deaf.
- **Disrupted Family Model.** The typical family model of a mother, father and children is often disrupted for various reasons. This disruption can cause children to be orphaned, abandoned, abused, neglected or suffer other consequences that may arise from a broken family model. Even in circumstances when a child still has a loving home provided by one or more parents, the disrupted family model still creates a need for special ministry.
- **Orphaned and abandoned.** These children have parents who may or may not be alive. For a variety of reasons, these children have no parents to raise them. They may be in orphanages, group homes or living on the streets. Children who have been adopted may still benefit from some of the special strategies used to minister to and teach orphaned and abandoned children.
- **Abused and neglected.** These children are often still living with one or more parents or parent figures. They may also be living in group homes or some type of foster care. Some have been adopted by loving parents after the rights of their abusive or neglectful birth parents have been severed. Regardless of their current situation, these children have experienced physical, emotional, verbal or sexual abuse or have been neglected by the unwillingness or inability of care takers to meet their basic needs. This trauma can also cause issues for them physically,

mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Even those who have been adopted into loving homes may still need special strategies to help them recover from past trauma.

- **Generational poverty.** These are children who are often living in extreme poverty. Those caring for them may struggle to provide for their basic needs. Generational poverty differs from situational poverty in that the family has been unable to rise above the poverty level for multiple generations. This often is a result of other underlying issues that can range from lack of sufficient education and training to addiction and more.
- **Refugees.** These children, with or without their families, have been forced to flee from another country or another area of the same country. This is often because of war and violence, but can also result from famine, natural disasters, disease or other extreme conditions making every day life dangerous. Often these families have left most, if not all, of their material possessions behind as they fled.
- **Cultural minorities.** These children were born into a group that is a minority in their society. The smaller the size of the minority, the more likely the children are to be marginalized. This is often particularly true if the minority has customs, language or other cultural differences from those around them. Each of the groups discussed in this book is also a culture and most are a minority culture in their society. A child can actually be a member of multiple minority cultures in addition to one or more dominant cultures.
- **Critically or chronically ill.** These children often spend most of their time in hospitals or at home, too ill to attend the regular activities a healthy child might. Some may be able to attend school or church, but their health may prevent them from fully participating. These dynamics can cause social isolation in addition to the problems their illness causes.

Entire books could be written on how to more effectively minister to each of these groups. This book will attempt to give you an overview of what may be involved in ministering to the various types of marginalized children. The resources provided should allow you to begin serving these children and teaching them about God in ways that will help them begin building firm spiritual foundations and develop to their godly potential. You will learn ways to give them the extra emotional, physical and spiritual support their special circumstances require for them to grow, flourish, and reach their full godly potential.

### Discussion Questions

1. Who is a marginalized child?
2. What are some groups of children that tend to be marginalized in most societies?
3. How can you find children who are marginalized in your area?
4. What information can you find about children who are marginalized in your area?

## Chapter 2 - Ministering to Children in a Multicultural World

*"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands," Revelation 7:9 (ESV)*

All children are members of various cultural groups. Their age, gender and a variety of other factors determine the number and types of cultural groups of which they are a part. Children who are marginalized beyond the norm are often members of additional cultural groups that are further diminished in almost every corner of the world. While the remainder of the book will help you minister to the difficulties children in these cultural groups experience, this chapter is designed to give you a general understanding of culture and the ways it can impact your ministry.

## **Defining Culture**

Before we examine in detail how culture impacts ministry to marginalized children, it is important to define what is meant by culture. Culture is defined as the customs, arts, social institutions and achievements of a particular nation, people or other social group. While we tend to think of culture as being more associated with nationality or ethnicity, members of the same family can be members of different cultural groups for various reasons.

Children can be in different cultural groups because of their language they speak, religious preferences or beliefs, family customs, gender, age, interests, schools, dietary practices, artistic interests and pursuits, and many other aspects of behavior. These may be influenced by nationality or ethnicity, but they can also be influenced by things like geography, family finances and the world around them.

You may be ministering to a culturally diverse group of children who would all be considered cultural minorities in the area where you minister. Or you may be ministering to a culturally diverse group of children where some belong to a marginalized culture and others belong to the dominant culture. You may be ministering to a group of culturally homogeneous children who live only minutes away from children of a different culture whom they may rarely, if ever, see in their daily life. In some cases, you may personally belong to several cultures different from those of the children to whom you minister.

In Revelation 7:9-10, God paints a picture of how various cultures will interact in Heaven. *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" (ESV)* Unfortunately, in our fallen world, the attempt to create a culturally inclusive environment is often more likely to cause misunderstandings, hurt feelings and negative attitudes and behaviors than it is to result in the picture painted in Revelation. Doing the work necessary to have your ministry closely reflect the scene pictured in this passage, however, can draw others to your ministry and church.

In order to truly minister to marginalized children, we must also address how culture impacts your ministry and any Bible classes or activities it provides. Culture impacts your ministry in two areas, both of which need to be examined carefully. The first is addressing the historical cultures contained in the Bible. Often children (from any background) place Bible stories into the familiar framework of their own culture. This can leave them with misunderstandings and cause them to miss the depth that understanding the cultures surrounding the stories in the Bible provides. Understanding these historical cultures does not change the meaning of scripture, rather it restores the full intricacy of it.

Second, culture impacts your ministry when you attempt to make your ministry comfortable for children of all backgrounds. It is important that every child feels welcomed, loved and included when they encounter anyone connected with your ministry or church. Your ministry needs to actively seek to include children from all cultural backgrounds in the classes, activities and services you provide. No child should ever be ignored or excluded because of his or her cultural background.

### **Presenting Cultural Differences**

Before we address culture in more detail, it is important to understand how to present culture in ways that create unity and not further divisiveness. One of the goals of any Christian ministry should be to encourage those involved to spread the Gospel message. This includes the children to whom you minister. In order to be truly effective in teaching others, it is crucial to love them. Often people struggle to love unconditionally those they see as being very different from them.

Brain science has found that when our minds view someone as being too different from us, our brains mentally remove the humanity of the other person. It is as if our mind suddenly thinks of them as an inanimate object. This dynamic in brain function has allowed various people groups to do terrible things to the people of groups they believe are too different from them, without also causing them to fully realize how horrifically they are treating those people. This does not absolve them of their horrific choices, but merely highlights the danger of neglecting to notice the similarities between two cultures.<sup>3</sup>

For children to become truly passionate about helping others get to Heaven, we have to encourage them to look for similarities in the people they meet - instead of focusing primarily on the differences. Those teaching children, however, often believe noting the differences makes learning about other cultures more interesting. Unfortunately, this focus on the unique aspects of a culture only emphasizes differences and can make it more difficult for children to develop empathy for the people of that culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Epley, *Mindwise*, (New York: Random House LLC, 2014), 40

This dynamic can be adjusted in part by pointing out the similarities within the differences. For example, children in another area of the world may prefer a different type of bread, but they are still eating bread. Students can then taste the bread that may be new to them, finding they may like it as well and better understanding that below any differences on the surface, they have many things in common.

It can also be helpful to teach children how to ask people questions that will help them find similarities and therefore points of emotional connection. While they should not interrogate people when they first meet them, they can ask casual questions designed to find things they may have in common. Giving children opportunities to practice these exchanges will make them more natural when opportunities for meeting new people occur in real life.

Teaching volunteers and children to avoid making assumptions about people from various cultures is perhaps more difficult, but ultimately essential. Studies have found that two people from apparently very different cultures may actually have more in common than two people within the same culture.<sup>4</sup> A child who enjoys stamp collecting and watching old movies, for example, may have more interests in common with an older adult than with another child. Taking the time to learn about an individual's preferences, rather than assuming a particular culture dictates those choices, will lead to a better understanding of others, regardless of the various cultures to which they may belong. Regardless of the similarities and differences between cultures, children need to be actively taught the equal worth God has given every person and the commands requiring Christians to love others as they love themselves.

There are several activities you can do with children to help them begin to see the problems in making assumptions about others based on their culture. One is called *Shoebox Empathy*. (Note: This activity can also be used in empathy training for adult ministry volunteers.) Find several shoebox sized containers. Ask various people to place five items or five pictures of items in the box that best represent them. The more diverse the people participating are, the more successful the activity will be.

Give a different box to every group of two or three students. Instruct them to open the box and use the items in the box to develop a detailed description of the person who created the box. After students have had time to develop a detailed description of the person, give each group a chance to share the items in the box and their description. Press them to give extremely detailed descriptions - including the various cultures to which they believe the person may belong.

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<sup>4</sup> Hanel et.al., "Cross-Cultural Differences and Similarities in Human Value Instantiation"

As each group completes their turn, reveal the true description of the creator of the box. After every group has shared their conclusions, discuss their perceptions versus the realities. Why were they often wrong? To make the point even more impactful, choose random objects from the boxes and ask which students also enjoy those things. Finish by asking the children to explain why it is wrong to make assumptions about people. (For more activity ideas, see Appendix 2.)

### **Cultural Background of Volunteers**

Regardless of the cultural backgrounds of the children to whom you minister, the adults in your ministry are members of at least one different culture from the children you serve. In fact, if you have a diverse group of adult volunteers, you may have several different cultures represented. Culture is dynamic and changes over time. The adults in your ministry were raised in a slightly or perhaps vastly different culture than that in your world today. This is true even if your volunteers minister close to their childhood home. These generational differences mean there is an automatic cultural divide between adults and young people.

Volunteers should be trained to recognize these cultural differences and make necessary adaptations to present examples and scenarios that better resonate with their students. If you are teaching a lesson on perseverance for example, using the example of making corrections on a typewriter using correction tape will be meaningless to the young people in your Bible class. If, however, you used the example of autocorrect on a device, they will be more likely to understand whatever point you are attempting to make.

Some adult volunteers may actually try to join the culture of their Bible students. They may mimic the fashion choices, slang and other aspects of the current youth culture. Often this makes students lose respect for the adult in question. Young people create their own culture in part to differentiate themselves from the adults in their world. While they do not mind adults showing an interest in learning about the youth culture or occasionally using their slang or listening to their music, they become frustrated with adults attempting to fully join their culture. Some young people will distance themselves more from adults trying to fully join their culture than from adults who are totally ignorant of their culture.

Volunteers should also recognize that even within Christianity, various congregations will have cultural differences that often have nothing to do with biblical or church doctrine. These differences are often most obvious during the worship service in the songs that are sung or the various ways other acts of worship are conducted. There can also be cultural differences in how members of the congregation interact with the various acts of worship and each other and the types of classes and activities provided. Children from other congregations may expect to find similar cultural aspects in your congregation or ministry and need help bridging the two cultures when there are differences.



When children express confusion or disappointment at any cultural differences in your congregation or ministry, it can be helpful to allow them to describe what they have previously experienced. The differences and their reaction to them can dictate how you respond. At times, merely showing an interest in learning about the children's previous church culture is sufficient. Some children may want an explanation for why you do things differently. Patiently listening and explaining differences can ease the transition for most children. They may even share some great ideas you want to incorporate in your ministry in the future!

## **Biblical Culture**

Written over several thousand years and mentioning over thirty nations or empires, the Bible contains information that is impacted by multiple cultures. During the course of the Bible, the area represented by modern Israel alone was controlled by the Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans at various times and influenced additionally by the Egyptians, Philistines and other surrounding cultural groups.<sup>5</sup>

When attempting to represent people in the Bible to young Bible students, try to find illustrations that are as realistic as possible. While there are actual drawings for a few people in the Bible from their lifetime, those are rare. The Jewish religion during the time of the Bible was extremely strict about making images of people and therefore made none - not even of kings like David and Solomon. Any images still available today are those created by the Romans and other cultures who did not have those same restrictions.

Although we don't have photos or even images of the majority of the people in the Bible, we do know what the majority of people from those cultures and time periods wore as clothing and often features about their general appearance like average height and hair color. While we do not know what Jesus looked like, for example, it is almost impossible to accurately imagine him as an extremely tall man with blond hair and blue eyes. While it may seem unimportant to find the most accurate illustrations, to some children obviously inaccurate depictions can later become a stumbling block for their faith. It can make it appear as if those using obviously inaccurate illustrations may have ulterior motives or are biased in some way.

It is understandable that Bible stories reflect the culture of the time in which they occurred. Ignoring the impact culture has on the lessons we are to learn from those stories can diminish - although not change - their true meaning. For example, Abraham's servant traveled to find a wife for Isaac.<sup>6</sup> Rebekah approached him and offered to bring water for him and his camels. A modern child listening to the story may imagine Rebekah turning on a hose and filling a trough with water. The reality of Rebekah having to lower a heavy jar into a deep well and pulling up an even heavier jar seven or eight times to provide water

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<sup>5</sup> Boston University, "Israelite History in the Context of the Ancient Near East"

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 24

for one camel (the servant probably had four or more camels with him)<sup>7</sup> tells an entirely different story. Set in modern times, Rebekah had only to turn on a faucet. In reality, Rebekah had an incredibly servant heart to do the tremendous amount of work required to help a stranger, Abraham's servant.

The different cultures of the Bible can also make some Bible stories almost unintelligible to children from a radically different culture. In the story of the bridesmaids<sup>8</sup> is a description of waiting for a groom and not having enough oil for some of their lamps. The story continues with some of the bridesmaids having to go find more oil and missing the wedding. To a child only familiar with electricity and unaware of any significance lamps - especially requiring oil - had in a wedding, these cultural details can cause them to be distracted from the purpose of the story or even to dismiss the story entirely as unrelatable.

The cultural gap between the experiences of your Bible students and the cultures in the Bible can be bridged in several ways. Taking the time to show children photos or replicas of items unfamiliar to them can improve understanding. Providing experiences where students step into the cultures of the Bible temporarily by tasting the foods or having some of the experiences common to those cultures can give children empathy for living life in those cultures. At a minimum, volunteers should pause and attempt to explain unfamiliar objects, occupations and customs to help children better understand what they are being taught.

### **Creating a Multicultural Environment**

Regardless of the cultures represented by the children served by your ministry, the environment you create should reflect our multicultural world and the vision of Heaven described in our opening scripture. Children from any culture entering an environment created by your ministry should feel as if they are as represented as children from any other culture. This is particularly important for children who may be part of a cultural minority amongst the children served by your ministry.

There are multiple ways you can make your environment and your ministry classes and activities more culturally inclusive. The most obvious adjustment that can be made is to carefully choose illustrations and artwork to reflect a wide variety of appearances. People depicted in your environment should have a variety of different skin tones, builds and features. Children with obvious differences like wheelchairs, canes and hearing aids should also be apparent.

An effort should be made to avoid caricatures of people that reflect stereotypes. Common examples found in many classrooms are the illustrations and photos of children dressed in

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<sup>7</sup> Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, "Genesis 24"

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 25:1-13

historic costumes of other cultures that are rarely, if ever, worn today. Those photos give children an inaccurate image of children from other cultures. For example, if you are attempting to depict children from various countries, it is important to avoid picturing the child from the Netherlands wearing wooden clogs and historical Dutch clothing. A Dutch child today would be wearing clothes similar to the children served by your ministry and should be depicted accordingly.

If your ministry uses toys like dolls or children's books and games, they too should reflect people with a variety of skin tones, builds, features, ages and disabilities. Although these can be difficult to find, there are dolls, books and games that include images of people from a variety of cultures. If you are representing occupations, try to include a wide variety along the entire spectrum of possible jobs and careers. There should be photos of farmers, retail workers, trade workers and jobs requiring a higher education to pursue, regardless of the occupations of the parents of the children in your ministry.

It is also helpful to remember that not every child lives in a "typical" family culture. Some families have only one child, while others may have many children. Some of the children to whom you minister will live with both of their parents, while others may have only one parent in the home or have additional extended family living with them. Making assumptions that all children have siblings or live with both parents can leave some children feeling excluded and even ostracized. Changing the wording in examples and activities slightly can usually eradicate this issue almost entirely.

Art supplies can help students create works of art that are more accurate or more multicultural. There are multicultural crayons and markers available that allow children to depict people with a wide variety of skin tones. Multicultural or even "nostalgia" construction and art papers can accomplish the same goal. Ideally, children should be able to depict themselves as accurately as possible with the art supplies you provide. (Unfortunately, multicultural art supplies can be difficult to find in stores. You are most likely to be able to find them for purchase online.)

### **Classroom Management and Culture**

When one thinks of cultures, things like language, food, music and other similar aspects come to mind. There are other elements of culture that can impact behavior, attitudes and language. These in turn can impact the classroom environment. The impact should be positive or neutral, but if ministry volunteers are ignorant of these cultural differences, there can be misunderstandings, hurt feelings and even anger between the various cultural groups represented in your ministry.

Cultures exist on a spectrum with collectivist cultures on one end and individualistic cultures at the other. Collectivist cultures value the community over the rights of any individual within that community. Individualistic cultures, on the other hand, place the rights and needs of the individual over those of the community as a whole. While few

cultures are entirely one or the other, most will have a preferred place on the spectrum. Forces outside and inside of a particular culture can also move it along the spectrum in either direction over time. As a result, older generations in a particular culture may appear to be operating from a different place on the spectrum than younger generations in the same culture.

Children from collectivist cultures will generally behave differently in the classroom than children from more individualistic cultures. There are other aspects of various cultures that will also define acceptable classroom behavior in different ways. It is important to understand that if an adult teaches or ministers to children who are from a different culture than the volunteer, what is perceived by the volunteer as misbehavior may actually be viewed as appropriate classroom behavior in the child's culture.

It is important for volunteers to understand that students from some cultures will be louder, talk over each other, call out reactions during a lesson, use gestures when talking and generally appear more emotional when communicating. Students from other cultures may speak almost in a whisper, look down when speaking, only speak when pressed and give few emotional cues when speaking.

Communication in the classroom can also be impacted by cultural ideas of honesty and directness. Some cultures favor telling the entire truth - often in a very direct or even blunt fashion, while others may be more circumspect in their communication. How children communicate to adults also varies from culture to culture. Some children are taught to show respect to all adults and may even have specific ways they are allowed to address adults and communicate with them. Other cultures stress children showing respect only to adults in certain positions of authority within the community. Still other cultures allow children to treat adults as peers, believing respect must be earned.

Students from different cultures may also have widely different ideas of personal space. Some children may feel comfortable being only a few inches apart from the person to whom they are talking, while others will only feel comfortable when there is substantial distance between them and others. Children from some cultures will hug and kiss everyone, while children from other cultures may be reluctant to even touch others or be touched by them.

Classroom behaviors can also be impacted by cultural norms of questioning and disagreeing. Children from more collectivist cultures will pressure anyone who disagrees with the group to change to match the group - even in matters of opinion. Children from more individualistic cultures may balk at the idea of rules or anything that appears to emphasize conformity. Some cultures encourage students to ask questions and express their opinions forcefully in a classroom environment. Other cultures encourage questioning and debating only when done respectfully, while still others discourage any perceived open challenges to teachers.

One cannot assume or assign classroom behaviors as being cultural, however, without a thorough knowledge of the child and what he or she has been taught is acceptable classroom behavior. One child may belong to multiple cultures with varying ideas and possess some combination of those norms as his or her idea of acceptable classroom behavior.

Since it can be confusing to both volunteers and children to determine all of the possible cultural influences on classroom behavior which could impact any particular group of children, it is perhaps best to work on creating a unique ministry culture. This ministry culture can be refined even more if particular classes add personal touches to their classroom culture.

Creating a unique ministry or classroom culture begins with a discussion of what volunteers and children have been taught is acceptable classroom behavior. Decisions can be made as a group as to which elements will be included in class or ministry rules and practices. Do not forget to add elements of fun to your class culture. You may want to develop a special way of greeting each other, have special scripture or faith songs that are favorites or even choose a verse as a theme for the group.

Creating a unique ministry or classroom culture will level expectations for acceptable behaviors and attitudes within the group. It may take some time for everyone to remember and adjust their attitudes and behaviors to match the agreed upon group standards. Once children have mastered any expectations that are new to them culturally, it will be easier to determine when a classroom behavior does not meet the standards the group has agreed upon. When these standards are violated, it will be easier to determine whether a behavior is a cultural misunderstanding or an act of defiance.

It is important to remember that if your ministry volunteers have come from another culture to minister in an area that is culturally different from their own, it is not appropriate to attempt to change the local culture. Cultural assimilation has long been a controversial topic in ministry. Cultural norms regarding preferences in areas like music, language, clothing and more should be respected. Culture should only be encouraged to change when it goes against God's commands. Creating a unique, temporary classroom culture is not attempting to force children to assimilate their culture to another, but rather create a cultural norm in that setting that everyone understands and has agreed upon for any time spent together in that environment.

### **Multicultural Community Outreach**

Community outreach by your ministry should be inclusive. Any child within your geographic area should be invited to participate in your ministry classes and activities. Unfortunately, some groups of children are at times virtually unseen by ministries and churches because of their cultural background. Judgments may be made that because of the prevalent

religious beliefs of a child's culture, language differences or other aspects of a child's life, he or she is somehow not a "good prospect" for a ministry.

Some Christians believe Matthew 7:1-2, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (NIV) refers, at least in part, to the tendency of some Christians to decide with whom they will share the Gospel message, based on personal judgments of how they think the message might be received. These judgments can unfairly exclude some children from learning about God and what He wants for them and from them. Every child in your area should be given that opportunity, regardless of his or her cultural background.

In order to build a bridge to varying cultures to be allowed to minister to the children in those cultures, it is important to understand the felt needs of that community. What would create an interest in your classes and activities that would overcome any possible hesitancy created by perceived cultural differences? Obtaining this information may take time as you build relationships that increase trust and understanding. While your group may not be able to meet every felt need of every child in your community, showing the care and concern to build relationships and have meaningful conversations may prove a sufficient cultural bridge for many children and their families.

It is also important to understand those things a culture finds offensive. While people in other cultures understand someone from a different culture may be ignorant of all of their customs, it makes a more positive impression if your actions are viewed as respectful of their customs. Often cultural groups find certain terms describing them as offensive. These terms change over time, so you may find books or song lyrics that use terms which may (or may not) have been acceptable when written, but that are hurtful to children who hear those terms today. Removing those terms from the materials you use and the vocabulary of ministry volunteers is crucial to reflect God's love accurately and make your community outreach efforts more successful.

Some volunteers ministering to children from a culture different from their own may unintentionally signal disrespect for various aspects of that culture. Teasing children about their accent or becoming frustrated at a child who is unable to speak the language of the volunteer fluently is never acceptable. While it may be natural to prefer familiar foods, music and other cultural aspects, showing disdain or disgust at the different preferences of your students should be strongly discouraged. Volunteers should be encouraged to become students of unfamiliar cultures and seek to understand and even appreciate various aspects of them.

In cases of religious differences, this does not mean you have to disobey God in your attempts to be respectful. Nor does it mean you need to pretend that beliefs which are disobedient to God are acceptable to Him. Rather, you can acknowledge a difference in beliefs that most likely stems from their cultural background and perhaps an ignorance of

God and His commands. Your relationship can give you opportunities to respectfully teach them what God wants, much as Aquila and Priscilla taught Apollos. (Acts 18:18-28)

### **Avoiding Cultural Appropriation**

Cultural appropriation is the adoption of one or more elements of a particular culture by one or more members of a different culture. The nuances of this topic are beyond the scope of this book. It is important to understand the dynamic, though, as it can negatively impact your ministry.

Cultural appropriation is considered to be different from cultural assimilation and cultural exchange, although there is often confusion about those differences. In general, the person who wants to adopt something from another culture for personal use, should carefully examine his or her motives. This is particularly important if someone from a culture considered a dominant culture appears to be adopting something from a minority culture - particularly if it appears the person is doing so for financial gain or to mock the other culture.

If at all possible, when you wish to use something from another culture, ask several people within the culture if the way you wish to use the cultural element might be viewed as offensive. Or you might prefer to ask them the best way to incorporate an element of their culture in the ways you had hoped to use it. If people find your desire is to understand and educate about their culture and you are using elements in respectful ways, most will appreciate that you are attempting to respectfully educate others about various aspects of their culture. In fact, they may volunteer to help your ministry incorporate a particular cultural element to ensure it is used correctly and respectfully.

### **Teaching Children in a Homogenous Culture**

Although areas of homogenous culture are becoming rarer in our world today, they do still exist. There are a variety of reasons why these areas may exist, which are too complex for us to examine in this chapter. It is important, however, that children living in an area of homogenous culture are taught about the multicultural world around them and the one that will exist in Heaven.

Many of the ideas given for creating a multicultural environment within your ministry will help. Your ministry may also wish to be more intentional in introducing the children to whom you minister to a wide variety of cultures. This can be done through children's books, activities, field trips and interactions with people from other areas, including missionaries and the people to whom they minister. Care should be taken to reflect the world accurately, which includes the children's own culture. It, too, should be included in the cultures reflected in your ministry environment. When teaching children about other cultures, the emphasis should be on finding points of connection, reflecting God's love accurately, serving others and sharing the Gospel message.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What is culture?
2. What are some aspects of culture that can impact a ministry?
3. How do the various cultures in the Bible need to be addressed to increase children's comprehension of the Bible?
4. What are the various cultures represented by the children to whom you minister?  
What are the various cultures represented by you and your ministry volunteers?  
How might any differences in those cultures impact your ministry?
5. How does a ministry create a welcoming, multicultural environment?
6. How might culture impact classroom management?
7. What is the strategy for creating a unique classroom culture?
8. What is cultural appropriation?
9. What are ways to introduce children to cultures different from their own?
10. What are some ways to build bridges between different cultures?



## Chapter 3 - Ministering to Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

*"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

Matthew 11:28-29 (ESV)

Children are vulnerable. Children who have been marginalized beyond the norm are even more vulnerable than the average child. The vast majority of the marginalized children discussed in the remainder of this book will experience one or more traumatic events during their childhood. Children who have experienced trauma need to be ministered to in ways that help them acknowledge, process and heal from any trauma they have experienced, in addition to any other needs their marginalization may create.

Children who have experienced trauma will often need the help of a professional to process and heal from any traumatic experiences effectively. Professionals who are truly qualified to assist children with traumatic backgrounds are more difficult to find in some areas than others. While you may not have the credentials to provide professional counseling to children who have had traumatic experiences, there are things you and your ministry can do to love and serve these children that will also help foster their healing.

### Definition of Trauma

Childhood trauma is defined as frightening, dangerous or violent events experienced or witnessed by a child. These events can be as a result of neglect, abandonment, abuse (physical, psychological and/or sexual), bullying, acts of violence, natural and man made disasters, war, community crime and/or violence, critical or chronic illness, traumatic loss and any other event that children may find psychologically disturbing. These events may have happened to them personally or they may have witnessed them happening to someone else.<sup>9</sup> Often the types of trauma a child may experience are complex and intertwined. What can at first appear to be one traumatic event, may actually involve multiple types of trauma.

Studies have found that even trauma experienced in the womb (usually as a result of the mother using drugs or drinking alcohol during pregnancy) can impact a child negatively.<sup>10</sup> While children experiencing any type of trauma need some of the same basics to begin healing, various types of trauma require additional specific interventions. In cases of severe trauma, children will need professional help in addition to the strategies detailed in this chapter.

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<sup>9</sup> De Bellis, "The Biological Effects of Childhood Trauma"

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## **How Trauma Impacts Children Physically**

Trauma can impact children in a variety of ways. Two children experiencing the exact same trauma may have different ways of responding to that trauma. Even though children may not always evidence obvious signs of negative consequences after experiencing a traumatic event, the event has still impacted them. Any children who have experienced a traumatic event should be supported emotionally and spiritually, regardless of how well they appear to be handling it.

The most common negative impact on children who have experienced trauma is on their physical health and the growth and development of their brains and nervous systems. In childhood, the body is rapidly growing and changing. Some of these changes are genetically determined, but many are impacted by the environments in which the child is living. If children experience trauma in their environment, they will experience possible disruptions in their health, growth and development.

How badly trauma disrupts the normal growth and development of a child depends upon the age of the child when the trauma occurs, the type and severity of the trauma, as well as its duration. Trauma occurring at certain critical junctures in development can have a more serious impact than if the trauma occurred at a different point in the child's life. While children are generally resilient, trauma pushes resiliency beyond what it is meant to help the child process. The idea that children can entirely avoid being negatively impacted by trauma is not supported by research.<sup>11</sup>

Even more disturbing is that childhood trauma can continue to negatively impact the health of the children who experienced it well into adulthood and long after the traumatic events have ceased. Research has found that physical complaints from the stress of trauma on the body can range from frequent headaches, body aches and stomach aches to the development of various chronic health conditions. These often begin during the trauma and can last for the rest of the child's life.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, some types of trauma, like physical abuse, also cause physical damage to the child's body. Children may experience bruising, burns, wounds from weapons, broken bones, brain damage and even death. Trauma can also encourage those traumatized to engage in at-risk behaviors like smoking, drinking alcohol and using drugs. These behaviors only add to the physical problems they may already be experiencing.

The brain development and nervous systems of children who have experienced trauma are often disrupted and/or damaged. The brain may be physically injured or certain aspects of brain development do not occur because of the trauma. Some areas of the brain and the nervous system will be underdeveloped while others may become hypersensitive. Children

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Complex Trauma Effects"

may over or under respond to stimuli and appear to respond inappropriately to sensory input like noises, touch and light. They may injure themselves without feeling pain or appear to have constant non-specific pain throughout their bodies. We will examine this in more depth later in the chapter.

### **How Children Respond to Trauma Emotionally**

Traumatic events are viewed as danger by the child's brain. The brain has two major levels of operations. The "higher" brain is the part of the brain that uses decision making and analytical skills to make choices regarding what the child should do in any given situation. The "lower" brain is designed to react quickly to immediate danger. It does not take the time to analyze, but rather reacts quickly to help the child avoid being hurt by the perceived immediate danger. (Both levels contain several parts of the brain which can also be negatively impacted in specific ways by trauma.)

The lower brain has three options for helping the child avoid danger. The first is "flight". If a child goes into flight mode, he or she will often literally run from the perceived danger. Or the child may hide or take other evasive actions. Children in "flight" mode will do whatever their brains view as necessary to avoid the danger.

The other option the brain gives the child is a "freeze" mode. The child may become very still and/or very quiet. He or she may appear detached from what is happening. The child may actually appear frozen as he or she seems to be unable to make decisions or perhaps even move. Children in "freeze" mode have decided that becoming as invisible as possible may help them avoid the danger. It is important to understand this choice is not a conscious one, but rather the option the "lower" brain has chosen to use.

Finally, a child's brain that perceives danger may choose to use the "fight" mode to protect the child from danger. The child may appear combative and lash out physically or verbally. Children in "fight" mode may continue these behaviors until they feel safe, regardless of whether or not there is any real and immediate danger present.

If you are ministering to children from traumatic backgrounds - especially where the trauma has been long term - these children may find it difficult, if not impossible, to switch from operating in the lower brain to the higher brain. Their brains perceive danger everywhere, because the children have so often been in danger previously. Even when a place, like your ministry environment, is safe, the brain will not immediately accept it as safe.

Some children will have triggers that bring back the memories and intense emotions of the trauma they have experienced. These triggers will vary and may not be obvious to anyone ministering to them. Unless the child is mature enough to realize the existence of triggers and share those with you, observation is your best tool. What are the common factors that send a particular child spiraling emotionally? It could be sights, sounds, smells or certain

words. Sometimes authority figures - often called upon in emergencies - will trigger a child who has experienced trauma.

**Triggers** are smells, sights or sounds that consciously or unconsciously remind one of a traumatic event in the past.

If a trigger is present, the child who is triggered will usually move into the lower brain and make use of flight, freeze or fight behaviors in an attempt to avoid further trauma. Volunteers should be trained in the best ways to help soothe the child and encourage him or her to feel secure again. Since successful strategies may vary from child to child, caregivers or the child may be able to provide suggestions of helpful strategies.

When children who have experienced trauma go into flight, freeze or fight mode, those ministering to them may struggle. The behaviors used by the lower brain to protect the child are often seen as unacceptable classroom behaviors. Perhaps the child runs away when there is a sudden loud noise. Or the child refuses to participate in activities or answer questions. Or the child appears constantly rebellious or angry. While these children may appear to be rebellious, they are actually frightened. Volunteers will need to help them develop more acceptable coping strategies, but will only be able to do so once they can make these children feel safe with them.

Little vital learning appears to happen when traumatized children are in a classroom environment, because until the children feel safe enough to move into their higher brain functions, little learning will be occurring. A brain does not simultaneously operate in the higher and lower levels of brain function. The brains of children from traumatic backgrounds will be focused on reacting to perceived dangers by using their lower brain functions, rather than allowing the higher brain to do its job in the learning process. Until your ministry can find ways to convince these children they are safe, it will be difficult for them to learn everything God wants them to know.

Children who have experienced trauma may also have difficulty identifying and expressing their emotions. There are a number of reasons for this. Your ministry can help by having times during regular Bible lessons when emotions are explained and discussed in ways that do not expose any child's particular trauma. Helping children sort and label the various emotions involved in their processing of what happens in life can make it easier for them to have meaningful conversations about events, process and even begin healing from trauma.

Strong emotions can make children feel out of control and the strength of some of those negative emotions can cause additional anxiety in children who have experienced trauma. Teaching children how to use scripture, prayer, exercise, artistic pursuits and other godly

strategies for relaxing and calming emotions and anxiety can prove very helpful both when they are in a classroom setting and in their everyday lives.

### **How Trauma Impacts Children Relationally**

It is not surprising that children who have experienced trauma often have difficulty trusting others and attaching securely in their relationships. This may be particularly pronounced in children who have experienced trauma at the hands of a parent or someone else whom they should have been able to trust. This may make it more difficult for you to find ways to connect emotionally with children who have experienced trauma. It is not impossible for these children to form secure emotional attachments to those ministering to them, but it may take more intentionality and time than it would to have those same relationships with the average child.

If the trauma children have experienced was at the hands of a parent or guardian, it is unlikely they will have securely attached to them. This causes additional problems for these children. A lack of secure attachment to a parent figure early in life can mean the impacted child will be more vulnerable to stress and less likely to be able to regulate their emotions - or even express them. This can in turn cause issues with self control, and cause the child to have reactions that are inappropriate for a given situation.

Children with attachment issues will need special strategies to help them form healthy relationships with others including friends, authority figures, caretakers and eventually romantic relationships. They will also need help learning how to identify and replace any inappropriate parenting strategies they experienced that may have caused their initial trauma. These new strategies can help them prevent repeating unhealthy family cycles with any children they may eventually have.

### **How Trauma Impacts Learning**

Children who have experienced trauma often experience difficulties in an academic environment. These difficulties will also impact how well they are able to learn in any Bible classes or other learning experiences you provide. Some of these difficulties are a direct result of damage caused by physical abuse. Other learning difficulties are from the underdevelopment of certain areas of the brain that are common to children who have experienced trauma. Or they may have difficulty learning because of some of the psychological issues trauma can cause.

Physical abuse can cause actual damage to the brain. Shaken Baby Syndrome can lead to seizures, visual problems, cerebral palsy and cognitive impairment, all of which can negatively impact a child's ability to learn, understand, remember and use new information. Physical abuse to the head in an older child can also result in brain damage depending upon the severity of the blow to the head. Being shoved down stairs or into heavy objects can also cause brain damage in a child. If the mother took unapproved drugs

or drank alcohol during pregnancy, her child may also have damage to the brain and nervous system.

Trauma can also cause the brain to develop improperly. Studies have found that children from traumatic backgrounds often have lower IQs and delays in language and other areas impacting academic achievement.<sup>13</sup> Three areas of the brain are particularly impacted in children from traumatic backgrounds. Both the cerebrum and cerebellum are underdeveloped in the brains of children who have experienced trauma - especially in children who were abused and/or neglected. The health of the cerebrum and cerebellum impacts learning in numerous ways. When these areas are underdeveloped, the child's potential to learn is lessened. In addition, the area of the brain that connects the right and left hemispheres (corpus callosum) is often severely underdeveloped. When healthy, this connection allows the two hemispheres to share information and is crucial for learning.

Fortunately, underdevelopment of the brain can be corrected in many cases. Often good nutrition, adequate sleep and exercise can help the brain begin to grow again - particularly the cerebellum. Learning new things and providing common childhood experiences that may have been missed can also help. Encouraging the child to participate in activities that are rhythmic and alternate sides of the body, like crawling, marching or drumming, will help the corpus callosum begin to develop normally.

Finally, learning can be hampered by the psychological consequences of trauma. Children who have experienced traumatic events may be too distracted to pay attention in class. Sadness, depression and anxiety can also hamper a child's ability to learn. In severe cases, children may have PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome) creating problems with attention and memory by exacerbating issues with depression, anxiety and sleep disruption. Some children find these issues will lessen after a time, if they are not exposed to new or continuing traumas, while other children will need help healing from the psychological impact of their trauma.

### **How Trauma Impacts Children Spiritually**

Trauma communicates to a child that the things they believed were trustworthy are not. When the child does not have enough understanding of God and the world to process what happened, it is understandable that this distrust can easily be transferred to God as well. Despite that, some children find trauma weakens or destroys their faith, while others find it strengthens theirs. The difference is often tied to whether or not those around the child know how to help the child use his or her faith in God to not only process what happened, but begin the healing process.

The prisoners in the concentration camp with Elie Wiesel during WWII demonstrated a common reaction to trauma and God. Although the prisoners decided God was to blame

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<sup>13</sup> De Bellis, "The Biological Effects of Childhood Trauma"

for their suffering, they continued to pray to Him anyway.<sup>14</sup> While studies on the impact of traumatic events on spirituality often include multiple religious beliefs, the overall conclusion is that spirituality can help in the coping and healing processes.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, young children may have been taught nothing of God and have no spiritual framework to use to process and heal from their trauma.

Your ministry can provide that framework for children who have experienced trauma. You can teach them about God and His love for them. You can help them begin to understand the impact of living in a fallen world, where sin causes pain and destruction. You can help them learn and understand the things God wants them to know to move past their trauma and live the lives He wants for them.

Studies have found that trauma often causes the victims to begin thinking of themselves in extremely negative terms.<sup>16</sup> This may stem in part from things the person causing the trauma said to the child or an immature understanding on the child's part of any role they believe they may have played in the traumatic event. This is not the godly self esteem the child is meant to have. Teaching children how God views them by using applicable scriptures can help them restructure their view of self and modify their self talk.

Your ministry can teach children who have experienced trauma how to use prayer to express their emotions to God. By using people in scripture like Job and David, as well as many Psalms, you can help them learn to tell God everything that is on their hearts and minds in prayer. Your ministry may also have the resources to create small support groups for children who have undergone similar traumas. With the proper materials, these groups can often be led by people without degrees or certification in counseling.

Your ministry can also teach children a healthy biblical theology about sin, trauma, forgiveness and God. Even many adult Christians have created an internal theology about traumatic events that is not reflected in scripture. It is essential to avoid misusing scripture or offering trite religious platitudes in an effort to help children. The theology in scripture, when taught accurately, will help the child process and heal from trauma. False theology can at times delay healing or even add to the trauma.

Finally, a healthy Christian community gives children who have experienced trauma a group of people who will love them unconditionally. Christians who will help them learn about sin, grace and forgiveness. Loving people who will listen to them when they need to talk about what happened. People in your ministry who are trained to help them move past what happened and become the people God created them to be. Secular studies have

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<sup>14</sup> Meichenbaum, "Trauma, Spirituality, and Recovery: Toward A Spiritually-Integrated Psychotherapy", pg. 6

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pg. 9

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pg. 7

found that social connectedness is critical to the healing process.<sup>17</sup> Social connectedness in a healthy Christian community has the potential to help even more.

### **Creating a Trauma Sensitive Environment**

If your ministry is serving children who have experienced trauma, creating a soothing, trauma sensitive environment can help them feel safer. This in turn will allow them to be able to begin processing and healing from the trauma they have experienced. Your ministry may not have the ability to make all of these changes to your environment, but making any adjustments can help children soothe the nerves and senses made hypersensitive by trauma.

When creating a calming classroom environment, it is important to have a classroom that is soothing without putting students to sleep. While one would think warm, cheerful colors would help children who have experienced trauma, for some children they can add yet another stimulus to a brain that is already overwhelmed. If you can choose paint colors, opt for blues, purples and greens as they tend to have a calming effect. Touches of brown in the room can reduce fatigue, while relaxing students and making them feel safer.

If you cannot paint your room, consider bringing in decorative items like pillows, art and other items in those colors. Just do not cover the walls with too many items, as this can also prove too stimulating. Keep the lights low and use natural lighting whenever possible. Soothing music can help calm children as they enter the room, but remember to keep the volume low.

Some children who have experienced trauma will manifest their anxiety in what appears to be fidgetiness. Providing bean bag chairs, fidget items, weighted lap pads and similar items can allow them to self soothe while in class. Make sure to provide these items for others in the class who want them in order to avoid potentially embarrassing a child by pointing out any differences. Chosen carefully, soothing items should not disrupt others when used while you are teaching.

**Fidget items** help reduce stress in children who are anxious. They are often items that can be manipulated repeatedly and quietly during times when the child is to sit quietly (as in a classroom setting).

In cases where children struggle with extreme anxiety, tantrums, sensory overload or other issues that often lead to behaviors that can disrupt the classroom, it can help to have an area where the student can calm down away from the classroom activity. These areas can be separated by a room divider or a separate sensory room can be created. Children needing to use these areas should be accompanied by an adult to ensure their safety.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pg. 9



## **Ministering to Children Who Have Experienced Trauma**

As mentioned earlier, when children experience trauma, it makes them feel as if many of the things they believed were dependable are no longer reliable. They may express feeling off balance, insecure and/or unsafe. Routines and boundaries can help restore this balance and give children the safety and security they need to begin processing and healing from the other consequences they may be experiencing.

If you are ministering to a child who has experienced trauma or their parents, guardians or caretakers, strongly encourage having a schedule that is extremely routine and predictable. The children should know when there will be healthy meals and snacks, as well as things like what time they will rise and go to sleep. There should be as few surprises as possible in their lives while they attempt to regain their emotional balance.

Sleep is also extremely important for children attempting to heal from trauma. Attempts should be made to provide them with more than enough adequate hours for sleep. Trauma can cause sleep disturbances. Since children already need between nine and twelve hours of sleep each night to be healthy, children who have experienced trauma may need even more hours in bed to be able to actually get the sleep they need for their bodies and minds to be refreshed and to facilitate healing.<sup>18</sup>

Children who have experienced trauma also need a very clear understanding of the rules in any environment and what will happen if rules are disobeyed. Care needs to be taken when giving corrections to be firm while avoiding sounding harsh. When consequences are necessary, it is important to use the minimal consequence necessary to achieve the desired results.

Trauma can also disrupt even the most stable home environment. Schedules and rules are often discarded as the adults in the family try to cope with the traumatic events. A return to schedules, rules and boundaries - even if it is only in your ministry environment at first - can help these children begin to feel secure again.

Children from abusive backgrounds may have been living in an environment with inconsistent expectations and extreme reactions to real or perceived infractions for their entire lives. If they upset or angered an adult in their home of origin (for any reason), consequences may have been severe and abusive. At other times, they may have been allowed to do anything they wished with no restrictions, rules, correction or consequences.

As much as children may want and need structure and fair, firm boundaries with consequences when they are violated, those from traumatic backgrounds may react violently against them. This is often from fear, anxiety or residual anger at the events

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<sup>18</sup> Cohen, "How to Keep Your Brain Fit", pg. 3

and/or people that traumatized them. Consistency, as well as love and kindness in their daily care and when they disobey, will usually cause these extreme negative reactions to lessen over time.

To deal with the trauma they were experiencing, children often develop coping strategies. While some of these strategies, like hoarding and hiding food, may have helped them meet basic needs or kept them safer in the traumatic environment, they can be counterproductive in a healthy one. Adults interacting with the child need not only to explain why the coping strategy is no longer needed, but also to help the children develop a bridge strategy they can use until they feel confident the old strategy is no longer necessary.

Some children have developed other coping strategies that provide comfort, like thumb sucking. These may be continued long after most children have stopped using these comforting habits. Some of these comforting coping mechanisms can expose them to ridicule from peers, which can add to problems with anxiety and self esteem. To help children who have experienced trauma replace these coping mechanisms with behaviors more common to their age group, it will first be necessary to give them the time and assistance they need to feel safe and secure in their new environments.

### **Helping Children Process Trauma**

Children who have experienced trauma need help in processing what has happened to them. If the trauma happened before they were verbal, it may be stored as images with no words attached, adding to their confusion. How much help they will need with processing their trauma depends upon their personality, the type and duration of the trauma, as well as a number of other factors.

It is beyond the scope of this book to provide detailed information on how to help children fully process trauma so they can heal and move past it. It is important, however, for anyone involved with these children to understand that allowing them to develop a permanent victim mindset in lieu of processing the trauma is not in their best interest. Defining themselves as permanent victims based on the trauma they have experienced often leaves them stuck in the past, feeling helpless and voiceless. Encouraging them to view traumatic incidents as incidents that were neither deserved nor define their identities is a crucial part of helping them heal and move past their trauma. (Additional information on the victim mindset can be found in Chapter 10, Generational Poverty.)

Processing trauma may take the help of a professional. Even children who seem to be experiencing relatively minor consequences from trauma they have experienced will need help from an adult in processing what happened. The work involved in processing, healing and moving forward can seem overwhelming at times to the children and their caregivers. They must, however, be encouraged to continue the process to give the child hope for a better future.

In addition to any professional help a child receives, there are activities that can help a child process minor traumas or aspects of more involved trauma independently or with the help of a caregiver. While professionals use these same activities at times in therapy, use by non-professionals merely gives children additional opportunities to express the emotions connected to the trauma and gives their caregivers an opportunity to better understand what happened to the children and how they are processing the experience. (These activities should not be used by people who are not licensed in therapy as a way to diagnose or treat a child.)

Art, music and play therapies are perhaps easiest for a lay person to provide for children who have undergone trauma. They can use art supplies, musical instruments or toys to express and work through some of the emotions the trauma has caused. People who do not have degrees in art, music or play therapies should be careful to avoid attempting to interpret the products children produce. Rather they should ask the child non-threatening questions like, “Can you tell me about your picture?”, giving children opportunities to talk about their feelings or the traumatic events that caused them, should they choose to do so. It is important to note that if children produce the same traumatic scenario in their art or their play over and over, they may have become stuck on some aspect of the trauma they are depicting. When that happens, it is important to have a professional work with the child to become “unstuck”.

Storytelling is another way to help children process what happened to them. They may not understand in particular the “why” or the underlying cause of the trauma. Creating stories involving animals to explain the trauma in ways the child can better understand can prove extremely beneficial. A child abuse situation, can be explained for example, as a mother animal who does not know how to take care of herself or her child. She needs someone to care for her (animal) baby, until she learns what she needs to know to take good care of her (animal) baby herself. (Note the importance of using animals in these stories. This allows the child to relate to the story while maintaining a safer emotional distance.)

When creating and telling these stories, it is important to refrain from judging the abuser too harshly. The child needs only to understand the abuse was not deserved nor did they cause the person to become abusive. Abused children still love their parents and hope to be reunited with them, as hard as that may be for others to understand. Assigning horrible motives to someone who may one day change and become a better parent is not in the child’s best interest.

In situations where the caregiver is not sure of the details of the trauma, it is perfectly acceptable to create animal stories with various scenarios. Those that do not apply to the child’s actual circumstances will merely be viewed as a story. Those stories that closely mirror the child’s experience will resonate. There may be many tears and requests to retell the story multiple times if it reflects the child’s actual experience. This allows children to

complete the needed processing and mourn what happened to them. While one may assume storytelling is only for small children, experts have found even some teens will respond to it favorably.<sup>19</sup>

As part of the healing process, children who have experienced trauma may benefit from having the experiences they missed in their earlier childhood years. They may not have been given the healthy opportunities to explore their world that other children usually had at those ages during which the trauma occurred. As a result, children who have undergone long term trauma may be interested in activities that normally are appropriate for children who are much younger. Allowing them to have those experiences can also help them heal and move forward from their trauma. It is important to note that while providing these experiences, caregivers must be careful to provide them in ways that protect the children from unnecessary criticism or teasing from their peer group.

### **Providing Closure for Trauma**

When children are exposed to a one time traumatic event or a long term trauma has ended, it can be beneficial to the child to provide some degree of closure. This can help the child place a figurative end to the trauma, even though the impact of what happened may linger for some time. Children may want to choose something to denote closure or they may want you to suggest an activity that can mark the end of the trauma. Often activities used in bereavement can also be used for this purpose.

Once the child has found a way to symbolically mark the end of the trauma, they will need help finding activities to allow them to move past what happened. While some of these may be distractions, activities can also include those mentioned earlier to help children process and heal from trauma.

Finally, it is important to find ways to give children who have experienced trauma hope for a better future. They will continue to live in a fallen, imperfect world, where bad things happen. Understanding that God will be with them and the hope they can find in not only that, but spending eternity with Him in Heaven will give them the hope they need to move into the future.

### **Trauma and Marginalization**

Regardless of the trauma experienced, children who are loved and supported by your ministry will be better able to process and heal from what they experienced. As they heal, they will be more capable of developing strong spiritual foundations and growing to their godly potential. As you read the remainder of this book, you may want to refer back to this chapter to consider how the various causes of children being marginalized may have also caused them trauma. Adding the strategies from this chapter to other ministry efforts can give many children the extra help they need.

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<sup>19</sup> Gaye Guyton, Personal Interview

**Discussion Questions**

1. What is childhood trauma?
2. What are some of the causes of childhood trauma?
3. How does trauma impact children physically?
4. How does trauma impact children emotionally?
5. How does trauma impact children relationally?
6. What are the three areas of the brain damaged by trauma?
7. How does trauma impact a child's ability to learn?
8. How does trauma impact children spiritually?
9. What are some elements of a trauma sensitive environment?
10. What are some ways to minister to children who have experienced trauma?

## Chapter 4 - Ministering to Children With Special Needs

*"And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table; he was lame in both feet." 2 Samuel 9:13 (NIV)*

One of the most commonly marginalized groups of children in the world is children who are born with special needs. It is also one of the largest groups of marginalized children with a population of over 93 million children worldwide.<sup>20</sup> Any child who functions outside of the norm in a variety of areas including physically, cognitively and emotionally can be considered to have special needs in order to be able to navigate the world with the same ease as a person functioning within the norm.

Special needs may result from genetic abnormalities, fetal conditions while in utero, disease, accidents, abuse or neglect. Children with special needs may have abilities that fall below that of the average child in moving, hearing, speaking, seeing, cognitive skills and behavioral or social skills. These differences may impact one or more areas of development. Areas of development not impacted by the special needs may be average or above average in ability. In fact, the term "twice-exceptional" refers to children who are both intellectually gifted and have one or more areas of disability. It is estimated that 6% of children with special needs are actually twice exceptional.<sup>21</sup>

How badly children with special needs are marginalized can vary greatly from culture to culture. Even within a particular culture, certain geographic areas may marginalize these children more than others, often due to the cultural norms, educational level and financial resources of the local citizens. Religious beliefs, or the lack thereof, may also impact how children with special needs are treated in a particular area.

In many low and middle income countries, children with special needs have no access to a free, public education or the special devices they may need to navigate the world more comfortably. UNESCO estimates that as many as 90% of children with disabilities in these countries do not attend school.<sup>22</sup> They are more likely in every country to be victims of abuse from relatives, assault, rape and other violent crimes. Most will never be employed full time and will live below the poverty line, both as children and adults.

Low Income Countries had a GNI (Gross National Income) per capita of \$1035 USD or less in 2019. Middle Income Countries had a GNI per capita of \$1036 - \$4045 USD in 2019.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> UNICEF, "Disabilities"

<sup>21</sup> Bluestain, "Twice exceptional, doubly disadvantaged? How schools struggle to serve gifted students with disabilities"

<sup>22</sup> UNESCO, "Disabilities"

<sup>23</sup> The World Bank, "World Bank Country and Lending Groups"

In some areas, children with special needs may have numerous resources available. Often their marginalization comes not from lack of needed services, but from peers and adults who do not interact with them as they would other children of the same age. They may also suffer from teasing, bullying or isolation by peers.

In other localities, children with special needs may not be able to receive basic services, including special medical care. They may struggle to navigate their world because of a lack of assisted devices or public aides like ramps and special transportation. In extreme cases, they may be considered to be cursed by God and face the possibility of being abandoned or even killed because of their differences.

### **Identifying Special Needs**

In a ministry setting, it is not always possible or even necessary to know the exact diagnoses for the special needs a child may have. Children with special needs can be misdiagnosed, especially if they are very young or in areas with substandard medical care. Certain special needs may not be identified and diagnosed until the child experiences difficulties in school. Some parents may be unwilling to share information about their child's diagnosis, either because they are in denial or because they are afraid their child may be hurt in some way if that information is shared with others.

What may be more helpful to your ministry is to understand the general ways special needs can impact a child's ability to learn, participate in class and have social interactions with others. Each child will have differences in how their special needs are manifested. Children with the same diagnosis may have different issues. The severity of any issues can vary greatly from child to child. Some children may also have one or more underlying health issues that are associated with their condition. These health concerns may necessitate additional accommodations.

**Accommodations** are changes needed to make it easier for children with special needs to participate fully in lessons or activities.

Whether or not the parents of a child with special needs choose to share their child's diagnosis, you will need to use your observation and assessment skills to determine the appropriate accommodations the child needs. Your goal should be to help the child participate in Bible classes and ministry activities as fully as possible. A child with special needs should never be denied access to activities for children of a similar age or be seated in a corner and ignored while others are participating in classes or activities.

### **Primary Areas Impacted by Special Needs**

There are several general ways in which special needs can impact a child's ability to participate fully in your ministry's Bible classes and activities. Observing children with special needs can help you identify which of these primary areas have been impacted.

Some will be obvious, while you may learn about other areas impacted as the child begins participating in your Bible classes and activities.

- **Cognitive skills.** Cognitive skills are used when the brain receives information and processes it. Children with special needs may have damage or differences in their brains that impact how they receive information, how they process it, how they retain it or some combination thereof. Children with special needs can struggle with the ability of their brain to receive and/or process information accurately, the speed at which their brain processes information, memory, and more. It is critical to note that the inability to communicate does not necessarily have a correlation to cognitive skills. Many children who cannot communicate are unable to do so because of physical issues, not because of a lack of cognitive ability. In fact, they may have average or above average cognitive skills. The cognitive abilities of nonverbal children are often assessed inaccurately by professionals, because it is almost impossible to assess the cognitive abilities of someone who is unable to communicate. It is often best to assume a child has greater cognitive skills than he or she may actually have, at least in the beginning. If the child appears to struggle with cognitive tasks, adjustments can be made. If you underestimate a child's cognitive abilities, however, he or she can become hurt, frustrated and angry-possibly causing relational issues in addition to denying the young person access to the information about God that he or she is actually able to process.
- **Motor skills.** Motor skills involve how the body uses muscles to perform various tasks. Motor skills are usually discussed in terms of gross motor and fine motor skills. Gross motor skills issues would impact a child's ability to walk, run, sit, stand, lift objects and other movements involving the large muscles in the body. Fine motor skills are those using the smaller muscles in the body. A child struggling with fine motor skills may have difficulty writing, drawing, coloring, cutting, manipulating objects, dressing and eating.
- **Communication skills.** Children with special needs may struggle to communicate in the same ways as other children of the same age. They may be nonverbal or difficult to understand. Children with special needs may also be deaf or hard of hearing and have issues with receptive communication skills. The communication difficulties may also involve vocabulary, intonation, verbal tics and other issues that can hamper communication.

**Receptive communication** is the process of receiving and understanding messages.

- **Social skills.** Special needs may also impact the social skills of some children. Some children with special needs may be more outgoing and empathetic than the average child their age. Other children with special needs may have difficulties reading facial, verbal and nonverbal cues from others, resulting in awkward or inappropriate social interactions. Social skills can also be impacted if a child has become internally



focused and is uncomfortable or frightened about interacting with others. Echolalia, repetitive behaviors, restricted interests, lack of eye contact and intense reactions to certain stimuli can also impact the social skills of children with special needs. The social isolation children with special needs experience in some areas can also hamper any social interactions the child does have by causing the child to be inexperienced or unaware of the conversational norms of his or her peer group, including topics of conversation, slang and other aspects of peer communication.

**Echolalia** is the persistent repetition of words or phrases.

- **Health issues.** Certain special needs can also create other health issues for the child or teen. It is crucial to receive accurate information from family members regarding any allergies or health issues that might arise when the young person is in your care. The family should also provide your ministry with a list of warning signs of distress and the ways various health issues should be handled. If the child will be in your care in situations where the young person may need to use the toilet, eat or drink, ask for detailed information on any assistance that may be needed. Health information should be given in writing and signed to minimize misunderstandings. This document should be reviewed and updated as necessary several times a year or whenever new issues arise. Don't forget to obtain emergency contact information, a list of allergies and medications, special assistive needs and any other information that may be helpful during a health crisis.

### **Training Volunteers**

Volunteers ministering to children with special needs will need additional training, unless they have previous experience working with young people who have special needs. Even experienced volunteers, however, will need to know the expectations your ministry has for how these children are to be served.

It is critical to establish a mindset within your ministry that every child has the potential to learn about God on some level. Every child should be taught as if he or she will one day have the ability to make an informed decision about dedicating his or her life to God by becoming a Christian. The vast majority of children with special needs will eventually reach that spiritual milestone, if given the opportunity to learn what they need to know to make an informed decision. When cognitive delays are present, the age at which the young person is able to make an informed choice may be much older than the average child, but is often still possible.

It is also important for everyone involved in your ministry to accept the concept that every young person with special needs has been given at least one gift from God to use in service to Him - regardless of how severe his or her special needs might be. Training can be given

to volunteers to better equip them to assist young people with special needs in gift discovery, development and use.

Ministry volunteers should also understand the need for young people to do as much as possible for themselves. Many well-meaning volunteers will be tempted to complete activities for children with special needs. Completing tasks independently is critical for all children, but especially for those who find it more difficult. When assistance is needed, care should be taken to provide the minimum amount of help necessary for the child to participate in the activity.

In the most extreme cases, hand over hand assistance is preferable to completing the activity for the child. It is better for the child to do as much of an activity as possible independently, albeit partially, than to sit idly by while an adult completes the activity for him or her. When volunteers are trained to work with specific children, they should be given individual guidance as to how much assistance the young person should be given in various scenarios.

**Hand Over Hand** is when a volunteer places their hand over the hand of a child with special needs and guides that hand to perform an activity the child can not yet perform independently.

Volunteer teachers may need training on how to adapt the various aspects of their Bible lessons or activities to allow children with special needs to participate. Since the adaptation needed will vary from child to child, this type of training may need to be personalized for a specific young person. In addition to this initial training, it is important to communicate regularly with volunteers ministering to young people with special needs. This communication can help identify any problems or difficulties quickly and enable the creation of a plan to address them. Because these children and their families may have had negative experiences in a previous church environment, it is crucial to make their experience with your ministry and church as positive as possible.

Because many young people with special needs also have health concerns, your ministry may want to provide training in handling common issues that could occur. This should include training on what to do if a child has a seizure, has difficulty breathing or has any other health crisis with which your volunteers may need to provide assistance. They also need to learn the signs of distress each child may display when having a health episode or crisis. This is especially crucial for children who have communication issues.

Volunteers should be informed of your ministry's guidelines for when to send for a young person's parents to help intervene in a health situation and when to handle it without involving the family. These guidelines will vary from child to child and should be created by the child's parents. Parents should always be informed when any health issues have

happened while a child with special needs is in the care of your ministry. These communications can be written or verbal and should include even seemingly minor health information, like toileting and sleeping.

Finally, volunteers should receive training on how to minister to the unique emotional and spiritual needs of young people with special needs and their families. While these children and their families have many of the same needs as everyone else, their unique difficulties and struggles can create needs for additional physical, emotional and spiritual support.

### **Peer Training**

When children have more obvious or serious special needs, it can be helpful to have a discussion and training session with their peer group. Often, the parents of children with special needs prefer to participate in these exchanges. In some cases, it may be appropriate for the young person with special needs to participate in these sessions as well.

Peer discussions and training sessions should be carefully planned with the help of the young person's family. Peers should be given information that is accurate, age appropriate and respectful. The specific information shared will vary with the age and maturity level of the peer group and the wishes of the parents of the child with special needs.

There are materials you can use to make peer training sessions more effective. Look for age appropriate books written about children with special needs in general, as well as books about children with a similar special need to the young person entering your ministry. Advocates for certain special needs have developed empathy activities to help young people better understand what daily life is like for the child with that particular special need. Providing opportunities for those in peer training sessions to participate in these activities can encourage empathy. These activities should be conducted with great respect and include guided participation and reflection activities.

The primary goals of peer training sessions should be to help young people develop a better understanding of why the person with special needs appears or acts differently from the norm and the ways in which they can be loving and welcoming to him or her. Young children are often concerned about whether or not they can catch the issues they have observed in the young person with special needs, much as they would catch a cold or other illness. They want to understand what specific differences there may be and what caused them to occur. While these questions don't always have answers, giving them age appropriate information can also help in developing understanding and empathy.

Peers of any age group should be taught how they can help the person with various activities and how to avoid hurting them either physically or emotionally. They may also need to understand the best ways to be inclusive in their conversations, social exchanges and activities. In certain situations, it may be beneficial to provide young people with

guided practice in helping their peers with special needs. This is particularly important for younger children attempting to assist in activities where someone could be injured if the assistance is not given correctly.

### **Creating a Welcoming Environment**

Many families of children with special needs have been made to feel unwelcome in various environments, including unfortunately, some churches. They may appear hyper-sensitive at times, when they are actually merely fearful of yet another negative experience hurting their child in some way. It is critical that your ministry is incredibly intentional in creating an environment where children with special needs feel welcomed and loved.

If your ministry operates within the context of a church, the entire congregation needs to be educated and have their expectations set, even if many of the members will not be directly involved in your ministry. Members should be encouraged to be friendly and welcoming, and make a special effort to have intentional positive interactions with the child and his or her family. Avoidance is read by many families of children with special needs as another form of rejection of their child, so the more positive interactions these families have, the more they will feel loved and accepted.

Some adults will feel very uncomfortable around children with special needs. It can help to give them training similar to that provided for the peers of these children. Better understanding what they should and should not do in any interactions with the child can give them more self confidence in interacting with the child and his or her family. Some adults may also benefit from having guided practice (using scenarios) to feel fully equipped to treat a child with special needs in the same loving ways they interact with children who do not have them.

At times, uninformed members of a congregation may express concerns about the behaviors some children with special needs exhibit, viewing them as disruptive in a worship environment. Church leaders should encourage members to view any possible disruptions as an opportunity to actively show God's love to others rather than as an annoyance. In some cases, it may be necessary to have private conversations with concerned members to avoid unpleasant interactions between recalcitrant members and children with special needs or their families.

Each environment in which children or teens with special needs may find themselves should be evaluated to discover any changes that need to be made to make the environment safer and easier to navigate. What might make movement or participation in regular activities too difficult? Widths of doorways, lack of ramps, narrow bathroom stalls, fluorescent lighting and other similar facility issues can impact a young person's ability to participate and therefore feel welcomed. You may or may not be able to make physical changes to your facility. If changes are needed, but not allowed or possible, think of

creative ways to solve potential issues. If you are unsure how to assess or correct possible issues with your facility, ask someone with experience to assist you.

### **Choosing the Appropriate Class Environment**

Perhaps one of the most debated areas of secular special education over the years has been determining what is the most appropriate educational environment for children with special needs. This debate is still common in most ministry settings, especially those involving Bible classes. The decision is not difficult if a child has mild or even moderate special needs. In ministry environments, children with these issues can easily participate in classes for their age group with a few accommodations.

Where to place children who have special needs that are severe or profound is more complex. While a dedicated environment can be helpful in some cases detailed later, in general, it is best for a child with even profound special needs to be placed in your regular Bible class environment. The question then becomes with which age group the child should be placed.

There are two schools of thought in this debate and both have advantages and disadvantages. The first is that children with severe or profound special needs should be placed with children who are younger than they are. The reasoning is that they are cognitively on the same level with younger children. Unfortunately, estimates of the cognitive abilities of children with severe and profound physical disabilities are highly debatable. It is difficult to accurately assess the I.Q. of a child who is non-verbal or barely verbal, which is often the case.

A child with profound physical special needs, may actually have average cognitive abilities, but have no way to communicate those abilities. Placing these children in a younger environment will leave them bored, frustrated and even angry. On the other hand, if children are cognitively several years behind their peers, they may also have interests and experiences more in common with younger children. If the decision is made to place a child with special needs in a class with younger children, the age difference should still be only a year or two. Large age differences between the child with special needs and the rest of the class is not in the best interest of any of the children.

The second school of thought is that children with special needs should always be placed with children of the same chronological age. Children - especially older ones - are very aware of differences. Placing children who already have differences in a Bible class with younger children adds yet another difference. This is especially true at ages where physical growth spurts can mean a huge difference in size between children who are only a few years apart in age. This additional difference can harm the child's self esteem and self worth. Once again, the cognitive abilities of children with special needs may or may not make peer placement the best choice for them academically.

So where should you place a child with special needs? There is no perfect answer. The needs of each child must be considered. The child's parents will most likely want to participate in the decision of where to place their child. You may need to try more than one class environment to find the one that is the best fit. The ultimate goal is to find a class environment where the child is learning at his or her cognitive level and feels loved and safe. As with any child, you want to find a learning environment that will help the child with special needs build strong spiritual foundations and grow to his or her godly potential.

### **Dedicated Environment For Special Circumstances**

If your facility has an extra space you can dedicate to ministering to children with special needs, it can prove extremely helpful. While children with special needs should be mainstreamed with their peers as much as possible, it can be advantageous to have a dedicated space to use when the regular classroom environment becomes too overwhelming or there is a health or other issue which makes it in the child's best interest to be in a separate environment for a short time. This environment can be equipped with special tools that can help meet the immediate needs for calming, health concerns or other issues that might arise.

**Mainstreamed:** When a child with special needs is placed in a class environment with children who do not have special needs.

If your ministry has a dedicated environment to use for your special needs ministry, some parents may request their child be taught and even worship in this sheltered environment. This request often results from parental fears or previous negative experiences. These parents may believe their child is better protected from possible negative experiences in a secluded and protected environment.

While sequestering a child with special needs in a dedicated classroom is not always in the best interest of the child long term, it can provide a safe bridge environment until the family is more comfortable with your ministry and church. Your ministry will need to work closely with the family to make any transition to the regular classroom environment as safe and stress free for everyone as possible.

When equipping a space dedicated for use by children or teens with special needs, it can be helpful to have items available that at times may also be used in a regular classroom environment to assist children with special needs. Some of the items listed below, however, may prove disruptive in a regular classroom environment and are best used in a dedicated space. These special tools often help with calming and provide important sensory stimulation. While none of these items is required to have a dedicated space, it can prove helpful to purchase or create as many of these items as possible.

- Pillows for positioning young people comfortably.

- Water beads
- Play doh, therapy clay
- Plastic tubs filled with beans, rice or sand and several plastic objects
- Soft scarves
- Interactive Bible story books
- Soothing worship music
- Calming clouds painted on ceiling or on fabric ceiling light covers
- Lamps to replace overhead lighting
- Body socks
- Weighted vests, lap pads or blankets
- Bean bag chairs
- Fidget items
- Lava lamp, aquarium or other soothing visuals - actual or virtual
- Exercise or therapy bands
- Timers
- Movable room screens or dividers
- Noise cancelling headphones
- Large red and green switches for assisted communication
- Readers' theater/social stories/role play scripts

### **Classroom Accommodations**

Children with special needs may need special accommodations to be able to fully participate in Bible classes and activities. As mentioned earlier, the goal should be to make it possible for children with special needs to participate in your Bible classes and activities as fully as any other child might. While this is not always totally possible, accommodations will maximize the ability of any child to participate to the best of his or her ability.

Accommodations can range from providing special classroom tools to having an adult helper dedicated to each child. The list below contains accommodations that are within the ability of most ministries to provide.

- **Extra assistance.** In some cases, a child will need an adult who is responsible for providing any additional assistance a young person might need. This can include helping move or position the child, monitoring health conditions, facilitating activities and more. While they may be able to provide valuable information or help train volunteers in how to best assist their child, parents should not be expected to fill this role in their child's class.
- **Special tools.** Some children with special needs can participate more fully if they are provided with tools designed for younger children or children who have problems with motor skills. An individual white board and marker, for example, can work better for those with fine motor issues than paper and pencil. Often helpful items are specially shaped or larger than the items normally used by children of the same age. Triangular crayons or pencils, primary pencils, pencil grips, loop scissors

and more can make it possible for some children with special needs to participate in activities without adult assistance. A simple item like a reader highlighter strip can make it easier for children with certain learning disabilities to read text. These items often can only be found for purchase in stores that sell classroom supplies or online.

- **Fidget items.** Children with special needs that make it difficult for them to sit quietly in a classroom setting can benefit from having an item to fidget with during class. These items can be purchased or made. Look for items that are quiet and won't distract other students. Play doh or therapy clay, kneadable erasers, small stress relief balls, worry stones, Wikki Stix, Silly Putty and other items that can be quietly and repeatedly manipulated are great fidget items.
- **Noise, light and other sensory elements.** Young people with certain special needs can become over stimulated by certain sensory elements. For example, fluorescent lighting can cause issues for some children, while those with seizure disorders can have seizures triggered by strobe lights. Whenever possible, use natural lighting in classrooms. When that is unavailable, lamps work better than overhead lighting. Loud noises, strong smells and other sensory elements can also be problematic for some young people with special needs. When you are introducing a new noise or other sensory element, it is best to introduce it gradually and increase the intensity slowly if needed.
- **Physical movement.** All children benefit from moving around periodically. For some young people with special needs, this movement is critical. If they are allowed to stand while working on an activity, for example, they may be less likely to get the movement they need by an activity that disrupts the entire class.
- **Multiple methods for giving instructions.** Because young people with special needs often have issues processing auditory or visual information, it can be helpful to give instructions in multiple ways. Instructions for an activity, for example, are often given verbally. It can be helpful to also write the instructions where students can see them. Some children may need to be given only one step of the instructions at a time. Others may need to repeat the instructions back to an adult to make sure they processed them correctly or have the instructions explained more slowly and thoroughly.
- **Visual schedules and classroom rules.** All children, but especially children with certain special needs, can benefit from having a visible schedule and posted classroom rules. A schedule helps them know what will happen next and can make transitions easier. Some children with special needs appreciate having a personal schedule that has two sides. One side is for things yet to occur, the other for those that have been completed. Small laminated squares for each of the events can then be velcroed to the schedule and the child can move items as they are completed to the other side of the schedule. This helps minimize confusion and gives them a sense of accomplishment in addition to the other benefits of a visible schedule. Knowing the rules can improve compliance, especially in children with memory or processing issues. A posted list of classroom rules helps all of the young people in a



class understand the expectations for their behavior. For pre-readers, it can be helpful to post illustrations beside each written rule.

- **Transition Aids.** All children can struggle with transitions from time to time, especially when they require stopping an activity they are enjoying. Children with some special needs can have intense negative behavioral reactions if transitions are not handled carefully. Schedules help, but must be altered occasionally for various reasons. Many have found that a timer of some sort is useful. Being able to see how many minutes are left for a particular activity can help a child who struggles with transitions begin mentally preparing for change. The timing of activities, however, can sometimes be fluid within the course of a Bible class. In those instances, having a routine when transitioning between activities can be helpful. Perhaps it is a song you always sing as you transition or a special routine. Knowing what to expect next is one of the primary keys to successfully transitioning children who struggle and transition aids can provide that comfort and security.
- **Quiet zone.** Children with certain special needs can become overwhelmed by too much stimuli. This can lead to meltdowns, tantrums and other behaviors that can disrupt a classroom learning environment for a significant period of time. If your ministry does not have a dedicated space to allow overstimulated children an opportunity to gather themselves, it can be extremely helpful to create a quiet zone in your classroom. Use a room or other divider to shield the overwhelmed child from visual stimuli. Provide earplugs or noise cancelling headphones to reduce or eliminate noises. It can also be helpful to have a weighted vest or lap pad and/or body sock to help calm the child. Fidget items can also help students who are calmer, but not quite ready to rejoin their peers. A child should never be left alone in a quiet zone. If the child cannot be seen by adult volunteers working with other students, a dedicated adult should stay in the quiet zone with the child and help calm him or her.

### **Strategies for Adapting Bible Lessons and Activities**

In addition to the accommodations your ministry is providing, volunteer teachers may need to employ some specific strategies in order to effectively reach both average students and students with various special needs. While the specifics may vary with various groups of students, these general concepts can help you develop strategies for successfully teaching groups of young people with divergent abilities.

The easiest way to determine what changes a teacher may need to make in lessons or activities is to review the plans carefully. What challenges would each young person have with the lesson as written? Is the material too difficult or too easy? Do more explanations need to be added to the lesson? Does it need more visual, tactile or other sensory information to be better understood? Are special tools needed for some students to fully participate in the activities?

These same questions should be asked in preparation for teaching any group of students. Depending upon the special needs of your students, however, you may need to find or add resources not normally needed. Students with assistive communication needs, for example, may need additional word cards for words they may not normally use outside of Bible class. Students who are deaf may need the lesson signed to them or written instead of verbal instructions. Students who struggle with fine motor skills may need loop scissors or triangular crayons.

**Assistive Communication:** Devices that may be assistive, adaptive, or rehabilitative and facilitate communication.

Here are some of the more common adjustments to a lesson plan that may help some children with special needs.

- **Using sensory items normally associated with teaching younger children.** There is a tendency to eliminate sensory items like photos, objects and things that can be tasted, heard or smelled from Bible lessons as children grow older. Older children, especially those with special needs, would often benefit from having these sensory items in their Bible lessons as much as younger children. The more senses involved in a lesson, the more likely it is that senses not impacted by the special needs of the child can aid him or her in better comprehending what is being taught.
- **Providing interactive lesson books.** These are particularly helpful for children with special needs who have difficulties communicating. The Bible story or lesson is broken down into several main points, each of which has an accompanying visual. The visual is a laminated square that can be velcroed to the page with the matching point of the lesson. Students can remove all of the velcroed visual pieces and place them on the correct page as that point in the lesson is made by the teacher. These lesson books can also be used to help young people review recent lessons.
- **Asking questions of varying difficulties.** Having questions on a variety of levels (See Appendix 3.) is helpful in any classroom setting. Consider asking questions specifically designed for the abilities of any children with special needs and call on them first. When creating these questions, think carefully not only about the cognitive skills of the child, but his or her processing speed and communication skills. It is important to avoid embarrassing the child, while at the same time preventing other students from answering questions designed to include the child with special needs in the discussion. Often subjective questions that do not have a specific correct answer work best.
- **Using visual cues in the lesson or activities.** Since children with special needs may have hearing issues or problems processing what is heard accurately, having things that are said accompanied by visual cues, like printed words or graphics can help. Signing can also help students who have been taught various signs, even if they are not fluent in sign language.

- **Adjusting the teacher's speaking voice.** It is sometimes possible to slow the pace of speaking enough to aid children who process language more slowly while avoiding a pace that is so slow it bores the other students. It is also important to work on clear articulation of words, especially if they are not used in the daily vocabulary or if one or more students struggle with hearing. Making sure children who have hearing difficulties have a clear view of your face while you are speaking, can help them in their efforts to read your lips.
- **Adjusting seating in the classroom.** Children who have difficulties seeing or hearing well may benefit from sitting more closely to the teacher or items important to the lesson. Children with movement disorders, or who have trouble sitting calmly, often benefit from having peers seated slightly out of reach. Other children may need important items to be placed easily within reach. A circular arrangement of seats encourages better social interactions than rows, where children can be more easily missed or isolated.
- **Providing a routine, especially for transitions.** Children with special needs may have difficulty transitioning from one activity to another. Having a classroom routine or schedule, giving a warning before beginning to transition to something new (For example, "You have five minutes to finish and then it will be time for your parents to pick you up from class."), timers and transition songs can help make transitions less stressful and easier for everyone.
- **Breaking down and/or demonstrating instructions.** Instead of giving multi-step instructions, break them down to several one step instructions. Or have a visual cue card ready to help students who forget the steps in a vague instruction like, "Clean up your area." Place visual reminders of the instructions for an activity where they can be seen. Or give students a check list so they can keep track of each step of the instructions as they complete it. Demonstrate steps of instructions that may be confusing or require new skills.

## Behavior Management

Some students with special needs may have behaviors that can prove disruptive in a classroom setting. These must be managed carefully in order to do what is best for all of your students. Special strategies are needed depending upon the type and duration of any disruption. This rarely involves removing the young person with special needs from the mainstreamed classroom environment permanently.

One of the benefits of ministering to young people with special needs is the way in which they impact their peers. They are a gift to your overall ministry. Young people with special needs can provide spiritual growth opportunities for other young people that may otherwise be missed.<sup>24</sup> Behavioral differences, tics, unique vocalizations and other behaviors that could be disruptive in a classroom setting, should instead be seen as opportunities to encourage empathy, love, service, patience and perseverance.

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<sup>24</sup> Becker, "The Ministry of the Disabled", pg. 39

This does not mean that behavior issues caused by disobeying rules or lack of self control should go unaddressed. The expectations for certain behaviors and how disruptions are handled may differ slightly from the norm for children with certain special needs. When a young person with special needs enrolls in your ministry, it can be helpful to understand what realistic expectations for classroom behavior are. This can be difficult information to obtain for a variety of reasons.

Many parents who have children with special needs do not expect their child to obey the same rules they may have for their other children or that your ministry may have for all of the children who participate in your classes and activities. Or they may spoil their child. These parental tendencies often come from a sense of guilt or pity. (Occasionally, parents may be too harsh on their child with special needs, because they confuse the inability to follow a parental command with disobedience or rebellion.)

In situations where you believe a child is capable of following rules and directions, but is not doing so, it can be helpful to ask an expert. You may be able to better understand a specific child's ability to conform to classroom expectations with the help of special education teachers, doctors, social workers and other professionals who have experience in working with young people who have a variety of special needs.

If realistic expectations for the child's behavior differ from what is currently expected at home, you can still work with the child to improve his or her compliance in your ministry environments. Because of the short term nature of most Bible classes, it can be helpful to have cues to remind the young person of the specific behavior he or she should be exhibiting at any moment. This cue can be a printed visual one or a secret signal between you and the young person.

In situations where the young person is in ministry settings multiple hours at a time for several days a week, it can be helpful to create a more formal behavior contract. The teacher and the young person should work together to create a document that explains expectations, consequences and rewards for certain listed behaviors.

Any conversations about behavior with a student should be very specific and as concrete as possible. Focus on only one behavior at a time. Demonstrate the appropriate behavior to make sure expectations are understood. If memory issues are present, find ways to cue or remind the young person of the agreed upon behavior.

Children with certain special needs may benefit from practicing appropriate behaviors and social interactions using Reader's Theater or Social Stories scripts. Many of these can be found for free online, or you can write your own. Each script should cover a specific situation that might occur in your ministry environment and which requires the child to

react in some way. The lines in the script allow the child to practice specific things they could say or do in that situation that would be considered appropriate.

**Reader's theater and social stories** are written to help children with certain special needs better understand and practice the nuances of interpersonal communication so they can interact more effectively with others.

In a Bible class setting, consequences for misbehavior should be minimal. Correction or redirection should be sufficient. In extreme cases, it may be necessary to have an adult escort the young person to another area, where he or she can have the privacy and soothing items needed to regain self control.

Incentives for appropriate behavior are not generally helpful long term, especially for older children. If a child with special needs is really struggling with specific behaviors, however, a short term incentive program can prove helpful in some cases. Individual successful attempts should be verbally praised. In many cases, any sign of improvement should be recognized, even if the final result did not meet the full behavioral goal. If you choose to give some concrete incentive, give it sporadically and after multiple successful attempts. As many children with special needs have allergies, avoid incentives that involve candy or other foods.

### **Worship Accommodations**

The worship service environment has its own unique experiences. Accommodations may be necessary in order for children with special needs and their families to fully participate in a worship service. These children and their families should feel loved and welcomed when they come to worship. Church and worship leaders should be trained or at least provided with the information they will need to create a worship environment that is inclusive.

The families of children with special needs should be involved in identifying the seating that best meets the needs of their child to both participate and to make a quick exit if an issue arises during the worship service. Once the area has been selected, it can be helpful to reserve specific seats for them. This will ensure the needed seats are available and prevent possible disruptions if the family arrives and someone is in the only seats that may work for their child.

As mentioned before, children with some special needs may have trouble controlling the type and volume of noises they make. Members should be encouraged to see these as opportunities to show love, empathy, patience and perseverance. If the vocalizations cause a severe, prolonged disruption, parents and ministry leaders should have a plan in place for how those incidents will be handled.

Worship leaders should consider having a sign language interpreter. This can prove helpful for children with communication issues as well as children who are deaf or hearing impaired. Often children with communication issues are taught some sign language, even if their hearing is normal. It is not usually necessary to hire a professional sign language interpreter. Often, interested individuals are able to learn enough signs to be useful in interpreting songs, prayers, and even sermons.

It can also be helpful to have a few song books and Bibles available in large print. Words that are projected, should be in simple, large, easy to read fonts. If children are called to the front for any reason, plans should be made to enable children with special needs to participate as well. Often, having non-family members act as worship assistants to the family can prove helpful when the family needs extra help or is unsure how to navigate something that happens in the worship environment.

Your ministry may want to provide worship bags for children with special needs. These bags should contain fidget items and other quiet activities that can help keep the child engaged during the sermon. Make sure to include any special tools like triangular crayons or pencil grips the child uses in ministry classes and activities.

### **Additional Felt Needs**

Young people with special needs and their families have many of the same needs as anyone served by your ministry. Their unique circumstances, however, create some additional felt needs that may be outside of the ministry you normally provide. Or you may provide this support to all of your families, but be unaware that families who have children with special needs may need some additional ministry in these areas.

These felt needs will vary depending upon your location and the individual family. While it is unrealistic to believe your ministry can meet every felt need of every family, this section will help you understand the various additional ways your ministry may be able to serve families who have children with special needs.

Families who have children with special needs can find themselves feeling hopeless and helpless for a variety of reasons. These feelings are often more acute if the family does not know God. Ministries can give families the hope they so desperately need. This must be done carefully, however. Scriptures should not be taken out of context or used as mere platitudes. Nor should a family's concerns be dismissed as unnecessary or as an over reaction to their circumstances.

When scripture is quoted to someone with little Bible knowledge, there is often no context given with the scripture. Without the context the rest of the Bible provides, a random verse can seem at times cold or unfeeling, especially if not accompanied by loving attitudes and actions. When families better understand who God is and how much He loves them, those same verses can provide comfort and hope. Care should be taken to help families fully

understand that while their situation may at times seem hopeless, there is a hope to be found in Jesus that transcends the situations they may encounter.

You may find some families question God's love for them or are angry at God because their child has special needs. In some locations, they may have been told their child is actually cursed by God because of their child's special needs. While we know this is not true, it is still believed in some areas. These issues must also be addressed with love and patience. Great empathy should be used when having any conversations in which someone is attempting to help families understand God's love for them and all of their children.

Children with special needs can also experience depression, issues with self esteem and anger at God.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, some young people may actually find their faith and spiritual maturity is advanced for their age, because of the trials they have endured. Care should be taken not to assume children with special needs automatically have certain emotions or concerns. Taking the time to examine with them how their experiences may be impacting their faith journeys is more effective than addressing issues and concerns they may not actually have.

While gift discovery and development is important for all young people, it is essential for children with special needs. Much of their lives may be spent hearing what they cannot do because of their special needs. They need to understand that God gave them a special gift - something they can do well - to serve God in His Kingdom. Identifying, developing and using that gift to serve God can help provide meaning and purpose to their life in God's Kingdom. It can also help them develop a perhaps more realistic, godly self esteem.

Each child will be different, because God often gives very different gifts to people who may appear very similar. You may need to help a child experiment to find the gift he or she was given. Creativity is helpful when attempting to guide children with special needs in discovering, developing and using their gifts to serve God. Do not forget the powerful gift a smile or a hug can be to those who need it. A listening ear can be a special gift that can be used to serve God. Pay careful attention to how others describe children or the things about them that seem to draw people to them. These can be important clues to the gift or gifts God has given various children. To help you find ways to identify the gifts of children with special needs and find ways to teach them to use their gifts to serve God, we have included more detailed information on the topic in Appendix 4.

Children with special needs and their families often experience social isolation which can lead to loneliness and feelings of being unwanted or unloved. This isolation can be because of the fragile health of the child, the difficulties of transporting the child or because others may forget to include or purposefully exclude them from social activities and functions.

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<sup>25</sup> Juli Kessler, Personal Interview

To mitigate this isolation, you will need to work with the family to determine its causes. If the health of the child is a concern, are there ways people can visit without endangering the child? If transportation is an issue, can someone provide the transportation or support they need to more easily move the child from place to place? If the parents are socially isolated because they cannot find childcare, is there someone who is willing to be trained to provide volunteer, appropriate childcare?

If the isolation is the result of exclusion by those involved in your ministry or congregation, it may be necessary to host educational sessions or have individual conversations with those who are excluding the family. You can also create opportunities for social interactions and work with various individuals to guarantee the child feels welcomed and included. Your ministry may need to help others learn how to be comfortable around the child and how to meet his or her needs in homes and other social environments. Encouraging intentionality in including every child when planning events is a good habit for everyone involved in your ministry or congregation to establish.

Having a child with special needs often has a negative impact on family finances. In some situations, this burden can be extreme. Needs for medicine, therapies, and assistive devices like wheelchairs and lifts may go unmet due to a lack of funds. In many cases, having a child with special needs can prove too stressful for a marital relationship. This may result in the parent providing the majority of the income for a family actually abandoning the family physically and financially. Often this means the remaining parent is struggling to meet basic needs for clothing, food, shelter, diapers and more. They may also find themselves the only or primary caregiver for their children.

Your ministry may become aware of these economic burdens and needs as you serve the family. If your ministry has limited financial resources to share, it is important to carefully evaluate how the monies can be spent so they will most benefit the child and his or her family. It is highly unlikely your ministry will be able to meet every financial need of every family to whom you minister. It is important to establish some sort of policy (See Appendix 5.) for determining the types of requests for which you are best equipped to supply the needed funds or items.

Every attempt should be made to be fair and transparent in how you provide financial assistance either directly or indirectly. Problems can occur when families compare the assistance your ministry provides to them with that given to other families. While it may not be appropriate for families to compare how your ministry serves them, it is unfortunately part of human nature. In some cases, these comparisons can create a dynamic that may undermine your other ministry efforts. Finding a way to provide any assistance fairly - even if not always equally - should minimize any problems.

Even when families have adequate financial resources, they may struggle to find the special assistive items, medical personal or therapies that will most help their child. Parents rarely



have extra time and parents of children with special needs are often sacrificing basic self care needs to provide the additional care their child needs. They do not have the time to research to find the resources that could provide some additional much needed assistance. Your ministry can serve these families by doing the research and making phone calls to assist them in finding needed resources.

In some areas of the world, a free public education is not available to children with special needs. It is beyond the scope of this book to fully explain the various ways a ministry to children with special needs can provide educational assistance. Without substantial funding, it would be difficult for a ministry to fully meet all of the educational needs of children with special needs in a particular area. Ministries can, however, provide limited educational opportunities and the resources and training to assist families in providing some basic education and life skills training to their children with special needs.

It can be overwhelming to attempt to find and minister to the needs of children with special needs and their families. Without your efforts, however, many of these children will be left in the margins with few opportunities to learn about God. As with any ministry to marginalized children, starting small and allowing God to lead the ministry will allow you to minister to these families in ways that may seem impossible to you now.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the primary areas impacted by special needs that might make it challenging for a child to participate in Bible classes or activities?
2. What is the mindset volunteers, staff and congregants should have about children with special needs?
3. What is hand over hand assistance and when should it be used?
4. What are some ways to create a welcoming environment for children with special needs and their families?
5. Why is it important to train the peers of children with special needs? What should be included in that training?
6. What is a dedicated environment and what special resources would be helpful to have in one?
7. What classroom accommodations might a child with special needs find helpful?
8. What are some ways to adapt Bible lessons and activities so children with special needs can participate more fully?
9. What are some special considerations about behavior management that should be used with children who have certain special needs?
10. What are some worship accommodations that can be helpful for families with children who have special needs?
11. What are some additional felt needs that families with children who have special needs might have?

## Chapter 5 - Ministering to Children Who are Blind or Legally Blind

*"Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately, they received their sight and followed him."* Matthew 29:34 (NIV)

Blindness and severe visual impairment (sometimes referred to as legally blind with correction) impact an estimated 1.4 million children under the age of sixteen worldwide.<sup>26</sup> Even in high income countries where blind people have access to education and special resources, blind children are often institutionalized or attend separate schools for the blind and are more likely to end up undereducated, unemployed and living below the poverty line. In low and middle income countries, the outcomes are even more dire and can include early death.

A ministry to the blind will often include only a handful of children, unless you are located near an institution or school dedicated to serving blind children. Although you may not develop a specialized ministry serving the blind, it is important to understand the special ministry needs a child who is blind may have. Every city has multiple blind children who live there. Blind children are often invisible in society and they and their families may welcome the opportunity to worship where their special needs are met with enthusiasm and love.

If you are ministering in an area with food insecurity, poor medical care, unclean drinking water and high poverty levels, the incidence of blindness in children will be higher than in areas with better conditions. You may wish to focus on ministering to children living in an institution for the blind, who attend a special school for the blind or who are kept at home because of a lack of educational options. Your ministry may choose to help prevent future blindness in local children, as well as ministering to children who are already blind.

For our purposes, there are three types of blindness: blindness, severe visual impairment (vision that is 6/60 or worse with correction), and vision that is correctable, but has not been corrected. The first two types of blindness can be found anywhere, while the third is generally only seen briefly in young children who haven't been screened for vision problems recently and in children of all ages in areas of extreme poverty with little access to medical care.

**6/60 Vision:** A person with 6/60 vision can see at 6 meters what someone with standard vision can see at 60 meters away.

There are several possible causes of blindness in children. The prevalence of the different causes varies by area. Financially comfortable areas will have a higher percentage of children born blind who have hereditary blindness. Areas with food insecurity, poverty,

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<sup>26</sup> Gilbert and Foster, "Childhood blindness in the context of VISION 2020 - The Right to Sight"

poor medical care, unclean drinking water and other struggles will have a higher rate of blindness caused by preventable issues like poor nutrition, disease, dangerous medical care and accidents. In fact, three-fourths of the world's children who are blind live in the poorest areas of Asia and Africa.<sup>27</sup>

### **Volunteer Training**

Volunteers who will be working with children who are blind, legally blind or visually impaired will need some additional training. They will need help in understanding how each child needs assistance in navigating the world around him or her. Volunteers will also need to know how to train other children in age appropriate ways to help their classmates who are blind.

Volunteers who are teaching children who are blind or visually impaired will need to learn how to adapt their visual aids and other classroom items to create the best possible learning environment. Many of those needed changes are discussed at length later in this chapter.

### **Classroom Accommodations**

Children who are blind may or may not have other special needs. In this chapter, we will only address the accommodations needed because of their visual impairment. Blindness and visual impairment can make it difficult to navigate an environment, particularly one that is unfamiliar. Some blind children have a cane and can navigate areas quite well. Others will need to be led from place to place. Blind children will also find it helpful to have much of the visual world around them described in detail.

It is important to never assume you know what type of assistance children who are blind might need. It is never appropriate to grab their hands and start pulling them around the room or shoving items at them. Ask if they need assistance and what type of assistance they would like. Speak and introduce yourself before touching a child who is blind. Explain what you are going to do before you do it.

Children who have canes may need very little assistance in navigating their environment. Someone attempting to grab a blind child and lead him or her around without first getting permission, can actually put the child in danger or cause unnecessary anxiety. Some children with canes may still appreciate a description of nearby obstacles or the room itself. This extra information can make it easier for them to navigate with their canes.

Children without canes have often been taught to hold the elbow of the person guiding them and walk about a step behind and to the side. The person guiding should be as specific as possible in describing upcoming obstacles. For example, "In two paces, we will

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

reach three shallow steps going down. Okay, here are the steps, one, two, three...now we will walk straight for about a hundred meters. There is nothing in your way.”

Children in your ministry who are not blind will often be eager to guide the child who is blind. It is important that they be trained before being allowed to guide another child. Without training, they may cause injury to the visually impaired child by failing to properly alert the child to upcoming obstacles.

In addition to guides, children who are blind need verbal descriptions of what their eyes would see. Blindness merely limits access to visual information, so they need help in obtaining this sensory input in other ways. When describing surroundings to someone, it is important to be as descriptive as possible. Many children who are blind appreciate the use of color words, even if they have never actually seen colors. They have created an image in their minds for various colors and can use color words to understand and differentiate between items. (Although color blindness is not often mentioned in a discussion of blindness, it is a common condition that makes it difficult for some children to differentiate between colors. It is important when ministering to a child who is color blind to be aware of this difficulty and provide additional assistance when differentiating between colors is essential to participating in a lesson or activity.)

It is important to remember that most children who are blind have hearing within the normal range. They do not need someone to shout at them in order to be heard. Their hearing may at times seem to be a bit impaired only because we (often unknowingly) use lip reading and other visual cues to help us “hear” when someone does not speak clearly. While children who are blind do not have access to this extra information, they usually do not need people to speak more loudly, merely more clearly.

It is extremely important when planning a Bible lesson to consider what information you are expecting students to learn using their sight. For each of these areas, you will need to find other ways of giving children who are blind that same information. If you are showing children a photo, a map or an object, describe in detail what the other children are seeing. If the object is something they can touch or handle, allowing them to do so will give them additional information.

If you use picture books or other visual aides, both blind and visually impaired children will benefit from having items that have textures or are three dimensional. This allows them the opportunity to explore the item with their hands and benefit from that extra sensory information. If older children are visually impaired, printing anything they need to read in the largest font possible can give them the same independence as your sighted students who can more easily see printed materials.

If children who are blind need to access items to do an activity, describe the placement of the objects using the hands of the clock. For example, “The glue is at two o’clock.” Don’t

forget, if something visual is happening in the room, someone needs to describe what is happening so the child who is blind does not feel excluded.

It can be helpful to have a few children who are interested take responsibility for providing some of the descriptions needed during a Bible class or activity. They can whisper any needed commentary, lessening the need for the teacher or leader to stop and describe everything visual that is happening. Choose children who are loving and kind and enjoy ministering in this way. Once they understand what they are to do, all but the very youngest of children can provide helpful, constant descriptions with ease. In toddler or preschool classes, a dedicated adult can provide this assistance.

Children who are legally blind still have some sight. They may sense light or be able to make out very large objects held very close to them. These children will benefit from allowing them to hold and closely examine visual aids you may share with the class. If you are using photos or maps, try to make the detail you want them to notice as large as possible, to make it easier for them to see and process. Children with extremely low vision can also benefit when items they are expected to see, read or interact with are in high contrast. Outlining letters in yellow or red, using light letters on a dark background or placing needed objects on a white surface can give them the extra help they need.

Consider adding sounds, smells and tastes to your lessons and activities. Often these senses are an important substitute for gathering helpful information when sight is unavailable. If the Bible story has a donkey in it, for example, allow students to feel a donkey (real or stuffed) and hear donkey noises. These experiences can help them understand a donkey, even if they have never seen one before.

## **Braille**

Some children who are blind or have severe vision problems have been taught to read Braille. Braille uses raised dots to represent letters or sounds (depending upon the language). It is read with the hands moving across the raised dots on a page, much like one would read print with one's eyes. Many books, including the Bible, are available in Braille. These books can usually be obtained through organizations who will provide them for free or at low cost to people who are blind.

If you have Bible students who can read Braille, it is unfortunately difficult to transcribe items you may want the students to use. The only options at the moment are to hire a Braille transcription service or to produce the items yourself. Braille transcription services are difficult to find in many areas and charge by the word or page. The cost is often prohibitive. To transcribe documents yourself, you would need either special software and a Braille printer or a Braille typewriter, all of which are very expensive. If you are ministering to a large number of children who are blind, however, it may prove a cost effective way to create original documents.

A less helpful, but more affordable option is to purchase a Braille label maker. This can allow you to label things in Braille that the child may find confusing. It is also helpful if your ministry is trying to help children learn how to read Braille. Common objects can be labeled, giving the child practice in reading Braille.

If you are using computers or have access to one for students to use during class, it is possible to buy Braille keyboards for a reasonable cost in many areas. This would allow the student who is blind to type documents unassisted. They can also use dictation software, although that may prove disruptive for other students who are attempting to work in the same area.

While it may not directly impact your ministry to children who are blind or visually impaired, it is worth noting that children who are legally blind can benefit from being taught to read Braille. If they have already been taught to read print, the switch to Braille is relatively simple. The ability to read Braille can make it faster and easier for them to read than attempting to read printed documents with extremely large font sizes.

### **Worship Accommodations**

If the child who is blind attends worship with his or her family, they may appreciate their preferred seating being reserved for them. Often, it is easier for someone who is blind to navigate into seating that is in the front of a section and on an aisle. Others may prefer to have a pew or row of seats in front of them so they can use their hand on it to guide them. It is important to speak privately with families to find their seating preferences.

If children have some vision, they may appreciate having large print hymnals and Bibles available to them for the worship service. Children who are blind may want to use a Braille Bible. Braille hymnals are available in some languages. (Note: If the Braille hymnal is different from the one used by sighted individuals, you will need to provide the correct hymn numbers to those using Braille hymnals.)

### **Additional Felt Needs**

Children who are blind or visually impaired have some of the same issues as other children with special needs. They may believe they are defective or less valuable in some way. In some areas, they too are thought to be cursed by God. While we know this is not true, it is important to teach children who are blind that the Bible teaches they are indeed valued and loved by God. Children who are blind are often of average intelligence. They find, however, that many individuals treat them as if they have cognitive issues and are not intelligent. These and other erroneous beliefs about blindness can damage the self esteem of children who are visually impaired.

Helping children who are blind develop a more positive, godly self esteem is important. Encouraging them to see their value to God, to the Church and to the world is crucial. This can often be done by helping them discover the gifts God has given them to serve Him, as

well as helping them develop and use those gifts. Finding ways they can serve will help them understand how God sees them in spite of their blindness. This is especially important in a world where in the best of circumstances only a small percentage will find full time employment and live independently. (See Appendix 4 for more information on gift identification and use.)

Depending upon the resources available in your area and the child's family, young people who are blind can develop a sense of learned helplessness. Others in the child's life may be allowed to do things for the child that he or she is capable of doing independently. Learned helplessness is not beneficial for the healthy growth and development of any child, but for the child who is blind it can be catastrophic. Volunteers should be informed as to what the child can and cannot do safely. They should encourage the child to do everything that is safe for him or her to do - even if it is difficult.

Often families have encouraged learned helplessness because they are afraid for the child's safety.<sup>28</sup> As a result, they have not encouraged their child to explore their environment in the same ways as children who are sighted. This can cause developmental delays in other areas. These delays can usually be overcome when the child is given the opportunities to explore and experiment that were missed. Your ministry may be able to provide some of these experiences during your Bible classes and activities.

In areas where there is poverty or resources are scarce, merely providing a cane to a child can make the world safer for the child to explore. They are relatively inexpensive to obtain and there are resources available online to help your ministry teach children how to use a cane properly. Canes give children who are blind and severely visually impaired freedom, independence and the ability to explore and learn about their environment safely.

### **Schools for the Blind**

While this book cannot provide all of the guidance your ministry would need to open or run a school for the blind, it may be helpful for those considering such a ministry to understand the types of special education your ministry would need to provide. These skill sets would be in addition to any religious or secular education you are giving to the children enrolled.

Schools for the blind spend a lot of time and effort helping children who are blind become independent. Whether or not independence for individuals who are blind is currently possible in your area is irrelevant. Skills that provide independence can prove extremely helpful both to the child and to whomever is living with or caring for the child.

One of the keys to independent living for those who are blind is the ability to easily obtain information others may get from sight. They need to learn how to read and write Braille.

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<sup>28</sup> Greg Aikens, Personal Interview

They need to learn how to use computers and recorded materials. They may also need help in sharpening their listening skills to obtain extra needed or helpful information.

Children who are blind also need help in navigating their world safely. Learning to use a cane and explain to others how to guide them is critical for staying safe. In addition, children who are blind need to be able to find the items they need through Braille labels, descriptions others provide, special organizational skills or by learning how to effectively feel for needed items.

Independent living skills are important, even if it seems a very remote possibility at the moment. Societies can change and grow. Opportunities that are not available now, may be common in a few years or decades. Preparing children to navigate the world independently in activities like shopping, cooking, personal hygiene, cleaning, clothing and even handling money can prepare the child for the best possible future.

To be fully independent, children who are blind will need the equivalent to a secular education and skills that make them employable. This may also mean additional training in assistive technology and job skills. Children who are blind can also benefit from learning leisure pursuits like playing an instrument (Braille sheet music is available), pottery or other similar hobbies.

### **Blindness Prevention and Correction**

If there is a high incidence of blindness in the children in the area where you minister, you may be able to help prevent future cases of blindness in children or provide what is needed to allow children who are blind or visually impaired to see again. Your ministry may decide to provide this area of ministry in addition to how you already serve children who are visually impaired. To do this well, it is important to understand what is causing the blindness in the children in your area. Hereditary blindness is unavoidable, but many other causes of blindness can be eradicated or corrected.

Worldwide, there are several common causes of childhood blindness. These can often be prevented with medical intervention, education or supplements. Vitamin A deficiency causes blindness that can be prevented by supplying supplements and education about good nutrition. Some areas have found teaching families how to grow, prepare and eat foods rich in vitamin A have more long term benefits than merely providing supplements.<sup>29</sup>

In other areas, measles and rubella are the major causes of blindness. Vaccination programs and testing pregnant mothers for rubella immunity can halt these easily prevented cases.<sup>30</sup> Screening, medicine and education can also prevent ophthalmia

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<sup>29</sup> Gilbert and Foster, "Childhood blindness in the context of VISION 2020 - The Right to Sight"

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



neonatorum, or blindness caused by a treatable infection caught in the birth canal of women who have a sexually transmitted disease.<sup>31</sup>

Parasites can cause blindness in areas with unclean water, poor hygiene practices and poor medical care. Education and medications can help prevent or cure the majority of blindness cases caused by the various parasites. (Note: Some cases may also require the care of a physician skilled in the removal of eye worms.)<sup>32</sup>

Some children lose vision because of cataracts and retinal scarring. Retinal scarring is often caused by childhood accidents or home eye remedies. Although accidents cannot always be prevented, educating parents about eye safety and care can lessen incidents. When cataracts and retinal scarring are present, they can often be cured with the proper surgical interventions.

In areas of extreme poverty, children may be legally blind because they cannot afford the medical care to obtain a prescription for eyeglasses or to purchase them. Merely providing eye exams and access to eyeglasses can restore vision. It is important to note that sight is a developmental process involving the brain. Children with sight problems need to receive glasses as young as possible for their sight to develop properly.<sup>33</sup>

If you are ministering in an area with children who are primarily blind because of non-genetic factors, a robust prevention and correction ministry can slowly reduce the number of children who are blind or severely visually impaired. While this may eventually shift your ministry to another group of marginalized children, the long term benefits of your prevention and correction programs can last for generations.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are some issues blind children may face?
2. What are some additional training needs volunteers ministering to children who are blind may have?
3. What are some classroom accommodations that can make it easier for children who are blind to learn?
4. What are some important things to understand about Braille? How might you be able to use it in your ministry?
5. What are some worship accommodations children who are blind or visually impaired may find helpful?
6. What are some additional felt needs children who are blind may have?
7. What types of special education might your ministry need to provide if you open a school for the blind?

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Healthline, "Everything You Need to Know About Eye Parasites"

<sup>33</sup> Gilbert and Foster, "Childhood blindness in the context of VISION 2020 - The Right to Sight"

8. What are some of the causes of childhood blindness and how might your ministry be able to eradicate or lessen the impact of some of them in your area?

## Chapter 6 - Ministering to Children Who Are Deaf or Hearing Impaired

*"At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly."*  
Mark 7:35 (NIV)

Approximately 34 million children in the world have disabling hearing loss.<sup>34</sup> Ninety percent of those children live in homes with hearing parents, who often do not know how to communicate with them.<sup>35</sup> Only two percent of these children will ever know who Jesus is or what God wants for them and from them.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the deaf community is considered one of the largest groups of people in the world that has not been reached by the Gospel message.

Children who are deaf are also denied a secular education in many countries around the globe. Eighty percent of people who are deaf receive little, if any, education worldwide.<sup>37</sup> Although their cognitive abilities may be average, the lack of communication skills and education makes them appear to be cognitively impaired, not merely delayed. The lack of education means that as adults, the deaf are largely unemployable and living in poverty.

Deaf children are three to five times more likely to be abused than hearing children. This may be in part, because parents become frustrated with communication issues. In fact, only two percent of fathers (most typically the abusers in homes where deaf children are abused) have learned to sign and communicate with their deaf children. Some researchers believe as many as 50% of deaf children are sexually abused and over 40% are physically abused.<sup>38</sup>

Since about twelve in every one thousand children under eighteen are deaf,<sup>39</sup> you may find there are actually quite a few deaf children in your area. As is the case with children who have other special needs, they may be difficult to find. Often families who have children who are deaf have found each other, however, and have created their own community in the margins of society. Identifying and ministering to one child who is deaf and his or her family can quickly introduce your ministry to others with similar needs.

### Sign Language

Since the ability to communicate with children who are deaf is essential for meaningful ministry, it is crucial to have an understanding of sign language. Signs are not based on oral language, although they are sometimes taught to hearing people that way. Unlike Braille, signs are hand signals that primarily represent ideas rather than letters or characters. Signs

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<sup>34</sup> World Health Organization, "Deafness and Hearing Loss"

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, "By The Numbers: Statistics and Facts on the Deaf"

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

may represent words or phrases that have no equivalent in the local spoken language. While hand spelling is possible in many sign languages, the amount of time hand spelling takes makes it cumbersome for regular conversation.

Each country or culture has developed its own sign language. It is estimated there are roughly three hundred sign languages around the world.<sup>40</sup> Some may be similar to others, but there is a difference in sign languages even amongst countries that speak the same oral language. In a handful of countries, each school for the deaf has its own unique sign language. In locations with a high incidence of hereditary deafness, each village may have developed a unique sign language.<sup>41</sup> To make it even more complicated, some countries are still in the process of developing a unique sign language, which means many ideas may not yet have a sign designated for them.

While there is an International Sign Language, it is considered a pidgin language and is primarily used at international conferences for the deaf. Unless the International Sign Language becomes the prevalent form of communication in the deaf community, it is crucial your ministry learn, teach and use the local sign language. Otherwise, the children will still be isolated from the larger deaf community in their region or country.

It is important to understand that without signing, deaf children may only have resources like pointing or perhaps grunting to express their ideas. Reading and writing are based on representations of objects and ideas using words learned in speech. Without knowing sign language, it is nearly impossible for a deaf child to learn to read or write. A child who cannot hear, speak, sign, read or write lives in an extremely isolated world, unable to express thoughts, feelings or ideas with ease.

The resources available for volunteers, parents and children to learn your local sign language will vary from language to language. For more fully developed sign languages, it may be possible to find teachers who will come and train volunteers, parents or children. In other areas, it may be necessary to learn the language using books or online videos. It is not necessary to hire professionals to teach sign language or to interpret for your ministry. Many volunteers and even children and teens find they are able to learn enough sign language to be able to interpret in increasingly complex situations.

## **Deaf Blind**

It is estimated that 0.2% of children worldwide are both blind and deaf and another 2% of children worldwide live with milder forms of both deafness and blindness.<sup>42</sup> This subset of children is even more likely to suffer negative consequences because of their disabilities. They are often truly distanced from the rest of the world, because they do not have the two

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<sup>40</sup> Sans, "Sign Languages Around the World"

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Sense International, "First Global Report on Deafblindness"

senses most needed for human interaction and learning. However, this does not mean they cannot be taught, rather that it will take special strategies.

Children who are both deaf and blind are also more likely to be born into poverty and less likely than other children to live with both parents. Between 20-75% of children with deaf blindness also have additional special needs.<sup>43</sup> Because of their unique educational needs, they are seventeen times less likely to be in school than other children.<sup>44</sup> They have a high rate of depression because of the isolation they feel, but are less likely to have access to mental health professionals.

Should you minister to children who are both deaf and blind, you will use a mixture of the strategies employed for children who are blind and children who are deaf. Because touch is their primary method of understanding and interacting with the world around them, teachers should plan lessons and activities that provide multiple opportunities to learn through the sense of touch.

Children who are both deaf and blind will need someone to sign in the palm of their hands to be able to “listen” to what is being said. Many have also been taught to read Braille. If they have not been taught sign language or Braille, their families may have developed their own ways of communication. These methods can be used until the child can be taught sign language and Braille.

### **Volunteer Training**

It will be essential for any volunteer interacting with children who are deaf to learn as much sign language as possible. When children who are deaf are placed in Bible classes with hearing children, another option would be to have an interpreter accompany the child and sign everything that is said during class.

Teachers who are using an interpreter need to be aware of the speed capabilities of the person interpreting. If the interpreter signs more slowly than the speaker's speed of speaking, the teacher should consider slowing down the pace of speaking a bit. It may also be possible to assist the interpreter by repeating important information or giving brief summaries of key concepts that would be easier to interpret. Some interpreters prefer having a written copy of what will be said in advance so they can learn any signs for words they have not interpreted before.

Volunteers also need to remember that children who are deaf may not be allowed to attend local schools. There may also be no special schools who are prepared to teach children who are deaf. Even children who attend school often struggle with reading and writing. Sign language has a different structure and grammar than spoken language.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Children who hear can make a smooth transition from spoken to written language that is not possible when moving from sign to written language. This can cause problems if your ministry expects students to read and write during your Bible classes and activities.

Volunteers also need to be prepared to handle classroom management issues that may arise with some children who are deaf. If children have not learned sign language or are just beginning to learn it, they may use strong emotional responses to communicate. It is a similar dynamic in many ways to that often seen in toddlers. With their limited vocabularies, toddlers may throw a tantrum because they do not believe the words they know are adequate enough to fully express their emotion or when they believe they are not being heard or understood. Deaf children who cannot sign may have a similar reaction for the same reasons. Volunteers should look for signs of frustration in students who are deaf and give them ways to communicate before their frustration becomes an intense emotional response.

### **Classroom Accommodations**

As mentioned earlier, children who are deaf will need someone to interpret everything that is said during class. Some teachers may feel comfortable doing that, while others will need an interpreter. Even if the teacher is not signing the lesson, he or she should learn enough signs to greet any children who are deaf by name and have some basic social interactions with them.

It is important to remember that any auditory information in the lesson will not be heard. There are other ways to communicate the sounds the child is missing. Often children who are deaf “listen” to music by feeling the vibrations it is making. Other noises may need to be described using adjectives and adverbs. Do not forget that in order to be socially engaged with peers, the other children in the class should learn enough sign language to have simple conversations. Many children find signing fun and will gladly practice and use any signs they are taught.

It is also important to remember that extra strategies may be needed to keep students who are deaf safe. They cannot hear alarms, verbal warnings of danger and other noises that can keep them from harm. Volunteers and teachers should be aware of this dynamic and be extra careful to protect children who are deaf from dangerous situations they may encounter since they can not hear the warning signs.

### **Worship Accommodations**

Children who are deaf will need someone to interpret what is happening during the worship service. Many churches opt to have a sign language interpreter stand in front of the congregation so adult visitors who are deaf can also benefit from the interpretation. Having a translator in view can also encourage hearing members to begin learning sign language. Some congregations have even taught the entire congregation how to sign various hymns and the entire group signs when singing those songs.

### **Additional Felt Needs**

Children who are deaf and their families have many of the same felt needs as children and their families with other special needs. A felt need that is often unique to families with children who are deaf is the need for family members to learn sign language.

Parents of children who are deaf are most often people who can hear well. As a result they often know little, if any, sign language when their child who is deaf is born. The demands of work and caring for their families leaves them little time to learn how to sign. Many of these families also do not have the financial resources to take classes in signing. The inability to be able to communicate with their children easily can cause additional stress and conflict in the home. As mentioned earlier, this can often lead to unnecessary frustration, anger and even abuse.

Ministries often find that offering basic sign language classes to the family and friends of children who are deaf is one of the best ways to minister to these children and their families. Some ministries will open these classes to the community as well. Within the context of these classes, it can be easy to use Bible stories and concepts to teach signs, thereby sharing the Gospel message while teaching others sign language.

### **Schools for the Deaf**

Ministries in areas where deaf children have no access to education have opened schools for the deaf. Often these schools seek to educate deaf adults as well as children in basic reading, writing and math skills. Having these skills gives them increased independence and, in some cases, can give them opportunities for employment otherwise unavailable to them.

In addition to basic academic skills, many of these ministry schools also teach critical thinking and independent living skills. Because of their social isolation and lack of education, many children who are deaf act younger than their chronological age. They may have also missed critical work and independent living skills training because no one believed they would be capable of either.

Schools for children who are deaf often employ speech therapists. Children who are born deaf rarely speak without speech therapy. This is one area where it is important to use people in ministry who have been trained as professional speech therapists. The methods used are complex and varied, making it difficult for someone without training to be effective.

In either a ministry based in a church or a school ministry, it is important to remember there are only about three hundred people in full-time ministry to the deaf worldwide.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> By The Numbers

The time the children who are deaf have with you may be the only time they have easy access to religious instruction during their entire lives. Teaching them as much as possible about God and the Bible is crucial. Teaching them to read well enough to understand the Bible is also important for them to continue growing spiritually should they move to another location.

Those who are teaching children sign language for the first time need to understand that as children learn to communicate, they will often have much to say that they have not been able to communicate before. Often these thoughts are of sadness, frustration or anger about the things that have happened in their lives. Those ministering to them should be prepared to provide emotional support and lay counseling if they are trained in it. Helping children who are deaf process their emotions in appropriate, godly ways can also help them be more emotionally and mentally ready to grow spiritually.

### **Deafness Prevention and Correction**

Only five percent of deafness is considered hereditary.<sup>46</sup> The remainder of children become deaf because of poor medical care or abuse. The best way to prevent children from becoming deaf is to provide vaccines and affordable, quality medical care for children. Parenting and anger management classes can help decrease the amount of deafness caused by abuse.

Financial considerations can prevent children who are deaf from obtaining medical devices that can improve or restore their hearing. Cochlear implants are expensive and almost impossible to obtain in areas with substandard medical care. Implants are also most effective when children receive them at very young ages. Even when children can be sent by charities to areas where they can receive the implants and the costs are covered, the sustainability of the implants should be considered. They require special care and regular maintenance. If this is unlikely to happen, implants may not be the best option.

Hearing aids can help some children who have impaired hearing. They are less expensive, but still require maintenance. If this can be provided, it can make a huge difference for some children. Once again, the earlier these devices are used, the more likely they will prove helpful for both hearing and speech.

Hearing loss caused by build up of earwax, punctured eardrums, infections and abnormal growths can sometimes be restored with medical intervention. It is best to find doctors who specialize in hearing restoration to analyze and treat deafness or hearing loss that may be caused by one of these potentially treatable issues. Helping families find appropriate medical providers can prove extremely beneficial.

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<sup>46</sup> Abbie Wilson, Personal Interview



## **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some issues children who are deaf face?
2. Why are people who are deaf considered one of the largest people groups least taught the Gospel message?
3. Explain sign language and name the sign language(s) used in your area.
4. What are resources available to you for learning the local sign language?
5. Who are people in your ministry who would be willing to learn the local sign language?
6. What are strategies for teaching and using sign language to help children who are deaf feel welcome and fully participate in your ministry and church?
7. What special accommodations are needed in classrooms and worship services for children who are deaf?
8. What felt needs do children who are deaf and their families often have?
9. What secular educational needs do children who are deaf in your area have?
10. What are some ways a ministry might help in the prevention or treatment of deafness and hearing impairment?

## Chapter 7 - Ministering to Children From Disrupted Family Models

*"Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended.'" Matthew 19:8 (NLT)*

As with many things in our world, God had a perfect plan for families. Adam and Eve became father and mother to a number of children and raised those children as a couple. This plan is often disrupted in our world today for a variety of reasons. When any part of God's plans are disrupted, there are often negative consequences for the people involved, as well as those around them. This chapter does not attempt to make moral arguments regarding the many possible causes of the disruption of the original family model. Rather it will focus on the special physical, emotional and spiritual needs children raised in disrupted family models may experience.

Ministries often avoid addressing the needs of children from disrupted family models for fear of upsetting the adults in the child's life. This is unfortunate, because secular studies have found any disruption in the two-parent family model can have a negative impact on the children involved. The negative consequences can impact their physical health, academic success, emotional health, behavior, spiritual life and more. Ministries can help children overcome these obstacles and provide loving support for both children and adult family members.<sup>47</sup>

The country in which you minister largely determines how many children are impacted by a disrupted family model. Children in Middle Eastern countries primarily still live in two parent homes. Children in Central and South America and Africa have the highest incidence of a disrupted family model, with as few as 36% of children living in two parent homes. The remaining locations fall somewhere between the two extremes, with most countries having a significant number of children living in a disrupted family model.<sup>48</sup> (It is important to note that these numbers are somewhat optimistic as they do not take into account the marital status of the two parents in the home. As a result, children were considered to be living in a two parent home even if the parents were not married or one was actually a step parent. Parents who cohabitate and step parents appear to have a mixed impact on a child's growth and development.)

### Types of Disruption to the Family Model

Even in the majority of secular studies, the ideal family structure matches that of God's plan - children being raised in a home with both of their parents. There are various ways this model can be disrupted. The type of disruption, as well as the age of the child when it occurs, helps determine the types and severity of the negative impact.

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<sup>47</sup> Brown, "How Divorce Affects Young Adults' Religiosity"

<sup>48</sup> Sutherland, "Children Are Most Likely to Live with Two Parents in These Countries"

A child who has a parent die before the child reaches age sixteen is perhaps the least negatively impacted. While the loss is significant and there are negative consequences from the death of a parent, the long term negative impact is less than for children whose parents divorce or separate. (It is important to note that boys are more negatively impacted by the death of a parent, while girls are more negatively impacted by the divorce of parents.)<sup>49</sup> Rarely, children will lose both parents and become orphans. The topic of ministering to orphans is complex and will be addressed in a separate chapter.

A second type of disruption of the family model occurs when parents separate for a time because of marital problems. These separations can occur once or multiple times and lead to an eventual reconciliation or divorce. The negative impact on the children involved is greater than if one parent had died, but still less than if the parents divorce with or without first separating.<sup>50</sup>

The family model can also be disrupted when children become separated from one or both of their parents because of abuse or neglect by one or both parents. This separation can be initiated by a parent, an extended family member, a government agency or by children who choose to run away from the abusive environment. Often this leads to children being placed in foster care or institutional care and may lead to their adoption by other parents. Because of the complexity of this type of separation, it will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

Another disrupted family model is that of the single parent whether through choice (giving birth to or adopting a child without the involvement of a spouse or partner) or in a divorce where the other parent cuts off all interaction with the children. As some of the causes for being a single parent are addressed in the sections on death and divorce, the additional research examined was primarily for single parents who never had a spouse or partner involved with the child(ren) in question.

The most common and most harmful disruption of the family model is caused by divorce. The younger the children are when the divorce occurs, the more long term negative consequences they may experience. Girls are impacted more than boys by divorce, with both being impacted negatively and significantly so. Whether or not the divorce was considered amicable appears to have little impact on the consequences the child may face.

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### **Negative Consequences of a Disrupted Family Model**

There are countless secular studies that have attempted to identify the impact disrupted family models have on children. A few of these studies have obvious social agendas and

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<sup>49</sup> Prevoo and Bas Ter Weel, "The Effect of Family Disruption on Children's Personality Development: Evidence from British Longitudinal Data", 3

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

were not considered for this book. An attempt has been made to examine several studies and give the reader an overview of the impact disrupted family models can have on the children to whom you minister. This in turn can help you provide the additional support these children and their families may need for the children to build strong faith foundations and develop to their full godly potential.

Consequences experienced by children of a disrupted family model may be physical, emotional, psychological, behavioral and spiritual. A longitudinal study found that children from disrupted family models were more likely to have lower self esteem, a poorer locus of control and more behavioral problems. These issues were more significant in children from divorced households (as opposed to single parents by choice, the death of one parent or parents who were separated). The younger the children were when any disruption occurred, the more pronounced and long lasting these issues were found to be.<sup>52</sup>

**Locus of control** is the degree to which people believe they have control over the outcomes in their lives versus being controlled by outside forces beyond their influence.

Often when the family model is disrupted, the additional financial burden can mean children are forced to live at a lower standard of living than that to which they were accustomed. In pronounced cases, there may be a struggle to provide children with adequate shelter, food, clothing, school uniforms and supplies and other necessities. Children may be forced to move, and possibly change schools as a result. This only adds to the stress the child may already be feeling.

Divorce also impacts the religiosity of the children involved. (Note: Studies looked at a variety of religions together, rather than examining only Christianity.) When young adults were surveyed, a study found that two thirds of young adults from two parent families considered themselves very or fairly religious compared to about half of those raised in homes where their parents were divorced. In addition, more than a third of young adults from two parent homes reported attending worship service weekly compared to only twenty five percent of those raised in homes with divorced parents.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly though, the impact of disrupted family models on a child's personal faith can vary. Some young people who were considered highly religious became less religious after the divorce of their parents, while others who were marginally religious became more religious after their parents' divorce. Researchers believe this dynamic is because some young people become disillusioned, believing God/religion should have prevented the problems, while others seek comfort in their faith.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Prevoo and Bas Ter Weel, "The Effect of Family Disruption on Children's Personality Development: Evidence from British Longitudinal Data", 2

<sup>53</sup> Brown, "How Divorce Affects Young Adults' Religiosity"

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Further faith issues can result if the parents of the children also experience a crisis of faith because of the divorce. Sometimes, one or both parents will stop attending worship after divorce for a variety of reasons. In extreme cases, one or both parents may reject God and/or Christianity entirely. This can be even more complicated if the children are old enough to understand the marriage was broken because one of the parents broke one or more of God's commands, which then ultimately led to the divorce.

One report found that in some churches, young people whose parents divorce feel as if they go through a second sort of divorce in their church family. This dynamic is more pronounced in congregations where the children see adults taking sides in their parents' marriage, making harsh judgments with little real knowledge of the particulars and even ostracizing the children in some way because of their parents' divorce.<sup>55</sup> Sadly, one researcher found that two thirds of young people whose parents had divorced reported having no one from their church reach out to them during the family disruption.<sup>56</sup>

Children who are raised by single parents for any reason are generally raised by the mother. These households often struggle financially more than other disrupted family models, adding to the stress of parenting. This can also mean children in these homes lack essential items like clothing and school supplies. It can also mean they are left alone or with other caretakers while the parent works often multiple low wage jobs. This can cause academic issues, because academic success is tied directly to time spent with parents - especially being read to by parents and other activities single parents may not have the time or energy to do.

### **Grandparents as Parents**

In many cultures, if the family model is badly disrupted, children are given to a grandparent or set of grandparents to raise. Estimates are that about half of children not living with their parents are being raised by one or more grandparents.<sup>57</sup> While this can on the surface provide a stable two parent home, it is still a disrupted family model. The children may have experienced some sort of trauma that necessitated their custody being transferred from their parent(s) to their grandparent(s). Custody is often transferred because of parental drug abuse, incarceration, abuse or neglect of the children by the parent(s) or even abandonment.

Children raised by custodial grandparents have higher levels of emotional and behavioral issues than the average child.<sup>58</sup> This is due in part to the trauma(s) that resulted in the children being placed with their grandparents. In addition, grandparents are often

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Smith and Palmieri, "Risk of Psychological Difficulties Among Children Raised by Custodial Grandparents"

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

unprepared, ambivalent or even unhappy about becoming primary guardians for their grandchildren. They may have age related health issues, reduced stamina and a smaller retirement income. Grandparents may also be distracted dealing with the issues of their grandchildren's parents.

Grandparents are also more likely to show higher levels of anger, frustration, anxiety and guilt than other adults who may take a guardianship role in a child's life when disruption occurs in the family model.<sup>59</sup> It is beyond the scope of a ministry to intervene in custody models when the child's health and safety are not endangered. Ministries need to recognize, however, the particular stressors unique to grandparents raising grandchildren. Often the assumption is made that these arrangements are stress free, when they actually may have stressors particular to their situation. Ministering to children being raised by grandparents and supporting their grandparents can help ease stress and perhaps reduce the resulting negative outcomes.

### **Ministry accommodations for Children from Disrupted Family Models**

Many Bible class lessons, activities and other ministry events are often developed with the traditional family model in mind. References are often made to both parents with the assumption the child resides with both parents. Other family models are rarely addressed. Furthermore, ministries will sometimes host mother/child or father/child events. Children with disrupted family models may feel excluded or embarrassed in situations that highlight their different family model.

Obviously, the Church wants to encourage the establishment of families as reflected in God's original plan. Children, however, have no control over the circumstances or the decisions that might have been made leading to the disrupted family model in which they are being raised. Care should be taken to avoid embarrassing or shaming them for their current family structure. Alternatives can be given for examples or activities, changing phrases like "your parents", "your mom" or "your dad" to "your mom or dad".

It is also important to work with the child's parent(s) or guardian(s) to find suitable substitutions for any missing parent if there are to be mother/child or father/child events or activities. Appropriate mentors can often be found within the congregation to partially fill some of the roles of any missing parents. These mentors should be carefully chosen, vetted for safety and any training provided to ensure these relationships help the child and are not counterproductive.

### **Additional Felt Needs of Children From Disrupted Family Models**

Additional felt needs of children from disrupted family models can vary greatly from child to child, even within the same family unit. Many of these needs often stem from the needs of the remaining parent or guardians. As mentioned earlier, statistically, the remaining

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

parent is usually the mother.<sup>60</sup> Often, the mother struggles financially for a variety of reasons. These struggles can sometimes be better addressed by helping women attain more marketable job skills or assisting them in finding jobs that have more flexible hours or pay better wages. If your ministry decides to provide some sort of financial assistance, care should be taken to create a policy to ensure fairness and protect your ministry from accusations of favoritism. (See Appendix 5.)

Children from disrupted family models often struggle academically. The remaining parent may be too busy or tired to give their children the homework assistance they need. Or children may find it hard to focus and pay attention in class, complete their schoolwork or study for tests. They may have fallen behind in their studies as a result of missed classes because of the events causing the disruption in the family model. Having a regular volunteer tutor can help children who are struggling academically without putting an additional financial burden on the remaining parent or guardian and can provide needed support for both the child and his or her parent or guardian.

Often the most important felt needs of children from disrupted families are the needs to feel safe and secure in a world that has come to feel unstable. Ministries can provide Bible lessons, discussions and mentoring that can help children regain that sense of security by helping them learn to place their trust in God. Some ministries also provide support groups for children experiencing a disruption of their family model. Often this can be led by people without degrees in counseling if they use the appropriate resources.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of the causes of the disruption of the family model?
2. What are some of the ways children can be negatively impacted by a disrupted family model?
3. What are some special considerations to bear in mind when grandparents are parenting their grandchildren?
4. What are some ministry accommodations for children from disrupted family models?
5. What are some felt needs of children from disrupted family models that a ministry could address?

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<sup>60</sup> Wolf, "The Single Parent Statistics Based on Census Data"

## Chapter 8 - Ministering to Orphaned and Abandoned Children

*"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction..." James 1:27a (NIV)*

Over 140 million children worldwide have lost one or both of their parents.<sup>61</sup> Those who have lost both parents comprise over 15 million of that number.<sup>62</sup> The remainder have either lost one parent, been abandoned by their parents or have been removed or removed themselves from their parents' care. The topic of orphaned and abandoned children is complex. Some children are orphaned in the classic sense of the term, having lost both parents, with no extended family willing and/or available to care for them.

Another large group of children are considered social orphans. Social orphans are children who have no adults responsible for their care, even though one or more of their birth parents are still alive. This group is difficult to number. Some orphans end up in an orphanage or foster care. The vast majority live on the streets. One or both of their parents may be dead, or the children may have been abandoned by their parents or run away from home - often because of abuse. Official counts of orphans often only include children in orphanages or foster care facilities and homes. So-called street children, who are estimated to number as high as 100 million worldwide, are rarely included in official counts because of the inherent difficulties in obtaining accurate information on these children.<sup>63</sup>

In addition, there are millions of children whose parents abuse and/or neglect them.<sup>64</sup> These children need to be removed from their parents' home for their safety and well being. Parental rights may be severed making these children also in need of permanent, loving, adoptive homes. Since these children are often initially placed in some sort of foster care, we will address their slightly different needs in a separate chapter.

Your ministry may be located near an orphanage or in an area with a large number of orphans or social orphans living on the streets. Although their numbers may be rather large, they are often unseen by the general public unless they emerge to ask for food, money or other basic needs.

Ministries interested in ministering to orphans can approach meeting the needs of these children in various ways. Some choose to work with pre-existing local orphanages and group homes, providing needed items and spending time ministering to the children. Others begin their own children's homes, taking on full responsibility for the children in

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<sup>61</sup> UNICEF, "Orphans"

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Christian Alliance For Orphans, "On Understanding Orphan Statistics"

<sup>64</sup> Dorsey et. al, "A Qualitative Study of Mental Health Problems among Orphaned Children and Adolescents in Tanzania"



their care. In other locations, Christians encourage individual families within the congregation to adopt children and make them part of their nuclear family.

The ways you choose to minister to orphaned and abandoned children may be determined by the size of your group and the amount of financial and other resources available to you. Often, local government regulations limit what a ministry is allowed to do to serve orphaned and abandoned children in their area. Other local dynamics like available real estate, cultural norms, safety and other similar types of issues can also impact the ways in which you may be able to minister to these children.

Before beginning any ministry to orphaned and abandoned children, it is critical for you to do extensive research. What local laws and regulations could impact your ministry? What resources are currently available? Are they adequately meeting the needs of orphaned and abandoned children in your area? Are there any special restrictions placed on or privileges given to religious groups ministering to these children? What would the costs be to provide various resources to children who have been orphaned and abandoned, whether you are assisting another group or providing all of the care yourself?

Many well meaning Christians have begun attempts to care for orphaned and abandoned children without doing adequate homework. This can result in wasted time, money and other resources as ministry work slows or stops to deal with unexpected hurdles. Or children may experience unintentional additional trauma at the hands of well meaning, but unprepared ministries. While this chapter is not meant to explain everything a ministry needs to know before serving orphans, it will attempt to give you enough information to help you understand the type of service that may be best for your ministry.

### **Models of Care for Orphans**

Children who are orphans, whether having lost both parents or as a partial or social orphan, must meet their basic needs for food, shelter and clothing in order to survive. There are several models used by authorities, caring adults or the children themselves to provide or obtain the care these children need.

The preferred manner to care for orphans in most cultures is for extended family members of the orphaned children to take over the primary responsibility for raising them. In many ways, this provides a modicum of continuity of care as these extended relatives are often already familiar to the children and have some sort of relationship. Care by extended family members can be problematic when extended family members cannot or do not wish to care for the children as their own. Problems can also arise because these relatives may not be examined for their suitability to raise children.

The next preferred model of care is to temporarily place orphaned and abandoned children in the homes of adults who are willing to consider adopting the children permanently. This works well when a match succeeds and the adoption is completed.

When these situations do not work out for some reason, children may be moved again, adding to the trauma they may have already experienced.

Orphaned and abandoned children are generally available for adoption. Some localities place restrictions on the age of adoptive parents, the age of children that can be adopted, international adoptions, and other factors that could impact a possible adoption. If your ministry wants to encourage Christians to adopt orphaned and abandoned children, it is important to be aware of requirements for potential adoptive parents. Some churches have found success encouraging many of the adults in their congregation to adopt children. It is estimated that if more Christians adopted children, they could provide permanent, loving homes for most of the orphans in the world.<sup>65</sup>

The most common model of care worldwide for orphaned and abandoned children who have no extended family to care for them includes orphanages and children's homes. These may be government sponsored or established and run by religious or charitable groups. Within this category, there are several sub models of care.

Some orphanages and children's homes are set up in dormitory type dwellings. The workers are usually considered merely caretakers. Children are separated by gender and sometimes age. Often this means sibling groups, even within the same facility, are separated and rarely interact. This form of care for orphaned and abandoned children is the most controversial of the government approved models of care. While some dormitory style orphanages provide adequate care, others have been found to barely provide basic needs like food, clothing and safe shelter. A few homes have been found to be a cover for child trafficking or to have employees who abuse the children in their care. Since workers are usually considered caretakers rather than substitute parenting figures, this model also makes it difficult to have the full emotional, psychological and spiritual impact on the children that is possible with other models of care.

Some ministries have approached government officials in various countries and pressured them to close all of the orphanages in their area because of some of these problems. Unless extreme care is taken to find acceptable, safe and loving placements for every child currently in care, this pressure can often result in conditions worsening for the children who had resided in orphanages. In some locations, government officials will close orphanages to reduce criticism, while merely moving children to other orphanages and overcrowding those. They then claim to be closing orphanages while merely moving children to fewer, now overcrowded facilities.

Other ministries have encouraged governments and charities to offer financial incentives to parents willing to adopt orphans who are considered hard to place because of their age or special needs. This can at times result in poor or dangerous placements where the adults

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<sup>65</sup> Christian Alliance For Orphans, "On Understanding Orphan Statistics"

take the money, but then do not care for the child appropriately. In general, ministries should be careful to do abundant research and think through multiple possible outcomes before applying pressure on governments to close orphanages.

If children must be placed in orphanages or children's homes, the preferred model is to set up homes on the campus with house parents who care for a handful of children. Often this allows sibling groups to remain in the same home environment within the orphanage or children's home. The house parents are usually encouraged to interact with the children in their care as if they are indeed a family. While this model is preferred, there are still issues with continuity of care. House parents do not commit for the entire childhood of the children in their care. This can mean a group of children may have more than one set of houseparents during their stay at the facility. In spite of these difficulties, this model is the closest institutional method to placing children in a permanent adoptive home.

Group homes are often used to house children who are social orphans. Often these are children the government is hoping will be able to return to their families of origin or be placed with extended family. Because these placements are considered temporary, the facilities are often similar to dormitory style orphanages or children's homes. These homes are susceptible to constant turnover in both the children who live there and their caretakers.

Although group homes are supposedly temporary solutions, some localities use these as additional orphanages. Requirements in some areas force children to leave these facilities periodically before they can return. This can mean children must return to abusive or neglectful parents for several days to be eligible to return to the group home. This only adds to the trauma and instability these children experience.

The most dangerous way orphaned and abandoned children meet their basic needs is to care for themselves. This usually means living on the streets, foraging for food and clothing. Extremely young children have been found on the streets trying to care for themselves and even younger siblings. As one can imagine, these children are in danger from predators and even other street children. They are susceptible to being trafficked and often become addicted to alcohol or glue.<sup>66</sup> It is the rare street child who receives any education or health care. Outcomes and life expectancy for street children are the most dismal for any model of care.

### **Felt Needs of Orphaned and Abandoned Children**

As one can imagine, children who are orphaned, abandoned or removed from the care of their parents have physical, mental, emotional, academic, and spiritual needs that are often going unmet. Those serving these children, whether secular or Christian, may focus

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<sup>66</sup> Sniffing glue to get high is a low cost, easily accessed inhalant drug of choice for many street children. Generally the glue used is model glue or rubber cement.

primarily on the physical needs of the children. Some may also provide a modicum of academic support. Few caring for these children do much to address the emotional, psychological and spiritual needs created by the circumstances surrounding the child which necessitated care by others.

Orphaned and abandoned children often do not have strong advocates in the facilities where they reside, nor in other environments like school or work. After they become too old to stay in the facility, they also do not have access to the advice and help young adults normally receive from their parents. As a result, the outcomes for these children as adults are often poor.

Studies have found that in addition to the trauma they have experienced in becoming separated from their parents, orphaned and abandoned children often have faced other issues as well. Many have found they are separated from siblings, abused at the hands of strangers or caretakers, forced into trafficking of sex or drugs, forced into child labor, have little support in most areas of their health and well being and face continued instability in housing and caretakers.<sup>67</sup> They may literally have no one in their lives who truly loves them. In extreme cases, they may actually be told they are a burden, have no worth or are unloveable.

The emotional and psychological toll this life of instability and insufficient support causes can be huge. These young people often have sustained grief, post traumatic stress, depression, suicidal thoughts or attempts and anxiety. This in turn can add to poor coping behaviors that only increase the stress and trauma the young person experiences.<sup>68</sup> Because mental and psychological health care is rarely provided to orphaned and abandoned children, these problems can become worse over time. The resulting poor emotional and psychological health can then negatively impact all of the other areas of their lives, including their spiritual health.

### **Ministry to Children in Models of Care Managed by Others**

If you have only a few volunteers and limited resources, ministering to orphans is often easier when accomplished by assisting facilities managed by those outside of the ministry. These orphanages, children's homes and group homes may be run by the government, a larger religious group or a charitable organization. Many of these welcome additional physical resources as well as the attention, tutoring and activities ministries can provide for the children.

Before becoming involved with an orphanage, children's home or group home run by other entities, it is important to research the situation thoroughly. Most homes are managed by people who want to help the children in their care. They may not have adequate resources,

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<sup>67</sup> Christian Alliance For Orphans, "On Understanding Orphan Statistics"

<sup>68</sup> Dorsey et. al, "A Qualitative Study of Mental Health Problems among Orphaned Children and Adolescents in Tanzania"

however, to cover all of the needs of the children. Some orphanages and children's homes are in extremely poor condition, with broken or insufficient furniture, leaking roofs, broken windows and more. Others struggle to provide enough food, clothing or other necessities.

In some facilities, employees are corrupt. They may steal any donations of money, clothing or other items your group provides for the care of the children. It is crucial to set up some method of accountability to make sure any resources you donate are indeed being used by the children and not stolen by employees for their own use or profit. Some ministries have found providing essential items like food or warm clothing to underpaid staff members can reduce theft and even improve the quality of care workers provide the children.

If your ministry regularly visits the children in a facility, it is important to be aware of conditions. Pay attention to facility issues and any evidence of insufficient clothing or food. Notice how children and employees interact, watching for any signs of abuse. It is difficult to predict everything you may notice on your visits. It is important to remember many of these children have no one who is truly their advocate. Educating volunteers in your ministry how to effectively advocate for the children can at times be the most important ministry you can provide for them.

In many orphanages, children's homes and group homes, the children who live there struggle academically. They may have missed years of education or be behind because of illness or special needs caused by abuse or neglect. Often ministries are able to provide children with academic tutoring. This can be combined in many cases with religious instruction, allowing ministries to teach the children about God while also helping them with basic academic skills.

Some ministries focus on providing children living in these homes with loving interactions, mentoring and activities to which they may not otherwise be exposed. These activities may be on site or the ministry may take children to a church or ministry facility or on various day trips to museums, parks and other areas. The extent to which you can do these activities will depend on the rules of the facility where the children reside.

It is important to be as consistent as possible when ministering to children in orphanages, children's homes and group homes. Your ministry should also strive to keep any promises you make to the children. They need as much stability in their lives as possible. Knowing your group will be there at regular intervals and that you keep your promises can help them grow emotionally and spiritually almost as much as the teaching and activities you provide.

### **Establishing a Ministry Children's Home**

To care for orphaned and abandoned children adequately requires many resources. Historically, the standard of care has been to provide food, housing, clothing, a minimum education and perhaps some religious instruction. In the best interests of the children,

however, the standard of care should be to help each child reach his or her godly potential. This is a higher standard of care, but it is truly more reflective of God's love for these children.

Government regulations and local perceptions of Christianity and your ministry's church affiliation can help determine how difficult establishing a new children's home may be. Most of these facilities must be licensed by local authorities. Whenever possible, obtain a national rather than a more local or regional license. This will give your ministry more flexibility in finding children for whom to care.

Even once your home is licensed, having children placed there is largely determined by local officials. It is important to establish strong relationships with these officials. Some ministries have spent resources to build and license a children's home, only for it to remain empty because local authorities will not place children there. This reluctance can be personal, governmental or as a result of pressure from other religious or secular groups. It is important to clarify as much as possible whether or not local authorities are truly willing to place children in your home before investing a lot of resources.

Your ministry must also determine the types of children for whom you wish to care. Local authorities will often have more children available for placement than for whom your ministry can adequately care. Decisions must be made as to which children your ministry will prioritize. There is no perfect model and a case can be made for each as the preferred one. These decisions are difficult and can be heartbreaking, but must be made.

Some ministries will accept any child who is available, including temporary placements. While this does provide an important safety net for children, it can be difficult to make a meaningful emotional and spiritual impact on children who are only there for a very short time or who are older teens. Older children are more difficult to place in adoptive homes and therefore are often more available for placement in a children's home. On the other hand, they have often experienced years of additional trauma and can have learned coping skills that can be dangerous to themselves or other children in your care.

Other ministries have focused on caring for large sibling groups with an upper age limit for the oldest child. Sibling groups, especially larger ones, are very difficult to place as a unit in adoptive homes. Government agencies prefer to keep sibling groups together whenever possible. Ministries willing to take entire sibling groups and place them in home type institutional environments are often preferred by agencies. Younger children have generally experienced less trauma and your ministry will have more years to minister to them, usually resulting in better long term outcomes for the children. It is important to remember that if your ministry agrees to care for an entire sibling group, a much older sibling can suddenly be "found" after the placement. Your ministry will often be required to take the additional child or lose custody of the siblings already in your care.

A few ministries focus on providing care for orphaned and abandoned children who have special needs. This is a critical need in many areas as these children are often difficult to place for adoption or even in orphanages and children's homes. If you are considering providing care for these children, it is important to remember, they are often medically fragile. Depending upon the local health care model, the expenses for medical care and ongoing needs for medicines and medical devices can become prohibitive. Children with special needs also require more time and effort in their care. This often means a ministry will need additional staff or they will only be able to care for a few children.

The other important factor to consider before establishing a children's home is sustainability. Does your ministry truly believe God will provide the resources to provide an appropriate standard of care for a decade or more? It may only add to the trauma children have experienced to live in your home for a year or two only to be moved again because you can no longer afford to care for them. It is impossible to fully anticipate the resources you may have available years in advance, but every attempt should be made to find Christians willing to provide for the needs of the home on a long term basis.

In addition to financial resources, does your ministry have access to enough Christians willing to commit to staff the home on a long term basis? Do you have resources for identifying other Christian workers should the initial workers leave for any reason? Some Christian children's homes have become largely secular because there were not enough Christians to cover the staffing needs. That of course may still provide children with a better standard of care than other local options, but greatly lessens the spiritual impact your ministry can have on these children.

### **Helping Orphans Transition to Adulthood Successfully**

One of the challenges of ministering to children who have been orphaned or abandoned is helping them get the instruction and guidance they need to become successful adults and faithful, productive Christians. Children placed in orphanages and children's homes have often experienced trauma and disruption in the normal developmental process. While helping children heal from trauma was addressed in an earlier chapter, it is important to consider what orphaned and abandoned children often miss in preparing to live an adult and particularly, a Christian, adult life.

We are often unaware of how much children learn from observing and helping their parents complete various tasks that are ultimately the responsibility of the parents in a home. Orphanages and children's homes often don't provide these same opportunities, especially if the facility is a dormitory type institution. In addition, parents often provide their children with direct instruction on important life skills which may not be given by workers who consider themselves primarily caretakers.

Since many orphaned and abandoned children do not receive either direct or indirect instruction and practice in many skills needed as adults, they often struggle after leaving

the institution in which they were raised. As a result, they may have difficulty finding employment, managing finances and even handling relatively basic tasks like preparing healthy food or keeping a clean home environment.

Whether your ministry is serving children in an orphanage or a children's home managed by others or you are attempting to run a Christian children's home, an effort should be made to help the children who live there learn and practice important skills that will prove useful to them as adults. It is important to develop a plan for which skills will be taught and how guided practice will be provided.

The skills children will need to learn to successfully navigate adulthood include life skills, Christian life skills, educational skills, job skills, self care skills (including those needed for physical and mental health) and relational skills. For those interested in a complete list of crucial skills, we have provided a more detailed list in Appendix 6. The amount of instruction and guided practice your ministry can give the children to whom you minister will depend upon the amount of time you are able to consistently spend with the children, the resources you have available and any restrictions that may be placed upon you by those who manage secular or government run institutions.

### **Establishing an Adoption Ministry**

Some ministries have found they are successful in encouraging Christians to personally adopt children who are orphaned, abandoned or placed for adoption by their parents. This can be done using local secular or government adoption resources or, in some cases, by establishing a special adoption agency which focuses on placing children in Christian homes.

While establishing a Christian adoption agency may be difficult, if not impossible, in many locations, any congregation can encourage its members to adopt children. Often this encouragement is most successful when church leaders themselves adopt children. Providing classes and training on the special challenges of raising children from traumatic backgrounds and other support ministries can also make prospective parents more willing to consider adoption.

### **Ministering to Adopted Children and Their Families**

It is important to remember that even children adopted in infancy have likely experienced trauma. They may have been exposed to drugs or alcohol when in the womb and undergone withdrawal at birth. The natural bonding process between mother and child at birth was likely disrupted. Even children adopted at birth may have a temporary placement of a few days with a foster parent until birth parents sign the final paperwork. Children adopted at older ages have probably experienced additional trauma. Those adopted at any age may have also inherited the genetic predisposition to various mental health conditions from their birth parents. These may be unknown to the adoptive parents until the child begins having issues.



The scope of the trauma the child experienced before living with adoptive parents, as well as any inherited mental health issues can impact both the child and the adoptive parents. Parents who adopt a child may have assumed parenting adopted children is the same as parenting children to whom they might have given birth. While many things are the same, adopted children will have unique needs parents may want outside support in meeting. Your ministry may be able to support adoptive parents in many of the same ways you support parents who are fostering children who have been abused and neglected.

In addition to the felt needs of children who have been abused, orphaned, abandoned and experienced trauma discussed in other chapters, adopted children often struggle with their identity. They may have questions about their birth family and why they were placed for adoption. Adopted parents may have little, if any, information to share with their adopted children. Ministries can be supportive by helping children find their identity as children of God. Your ministry can also provide assistance in encouraging secure attachments between children and their adoptive parents. You can often find information about helpful resources like story telling for bonding online or in books written for adoptive parents.

If your ministry is successful in ministering to families who adopt children, it may encourage other families in your congregation to consider adopting children. If Christians adopt enough children, it could lessen or possibly eliminate the need for orphanages.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some options for ministering to orphaned and abandoned children?
2. What is a social orphan?
3. What are some of the models of care for orphaned and abandoned children?
4. What are some of the pitfalls in ministering to orphaned and abandoned children that can hurt the children to whom we are ministering?
5. What are some of the things that need to be considered before attempting to open a children's home?
6. What are some of the skills orphaned and abandoned children need to be fully prepared for adulthood? Why are those difficult for them to obtain? How can your ministry address those gaps?

## Chapter 9 - Ministering to Abused and Neglected Children

*"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"*

Matthew 7:9 (NIV)

It is thought that as many as one billion children under the age of eighteen worldwide experience at least one incidence of abuse or neglect each year.<sup>69</sup> The majority of these experiences come at the hands of a parent, relative or caregiver. (A smaller percentage is at the hands of peers, romantic partners or strangers.) Children who have special needs, are living in generational poverty or with parents who have a history of violence are at an even greater risk than the average child.<sup>70</sup>

There are many different factors that contribute to a parent abusing or neglecting his or her children. In addition to the ones already mentioned, parents who are poorly educated, have children at extremely young ages and have poor parenting practices or support mechanisms are more likely to abuse or neglect their children. Drug and alcohol abuse by the parents can also result in children being abused or neglected.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, it is estimated about thirty percent of people abused as children become adults who abuse their own children.<sup>72</sup> This can create a cycle of abuse that impacts multiple generations in the same family. Often outside help is needed to break a familial cycle of abuse.

### **Negative Consequences of Abuse and Neglect**

Of all of the children in the world who are marginalized, those who are abused and neglected are often at most risk. Although this abuse can come at the hands of different people, the most sustained abuse and neglect is often at the hands of a child's parent or guardian. Being abused or neglected by the people entrusted with a child's care, can negatively impact every area of that child's life.

In the most extreme cases of abuse and neglect, the child dies. The exact number of children who die from abuse and neglect is difficult to calculate. Almost half of the children who die from abuse and neglect are under the age of one year and over two thirds are under the age of three years.<sup>73</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to claim to help to prevent these deaths. While this chapter will address ways of ministering to at-risk parents, thereby hopefully reducing abuse and neglect, the primary focus will be on ministering to children who are experiencing current abuse or neglect.

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<sup>69</sup> World Health Organization, "Violence Against Children"

<sup>70</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Risk and Protective Factors for Child Abuse and Neglect"

<sup>71</sup> Children's Bureau, "Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect"

<sup>72</sup> American SPCC, "Child Maltreatment & Neglect Statistics"

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

## **Types of Abuse and Neglect**

Because cultures vary in their definitions of what comprises appropriate care for a child by his or her parents or guardians, it is important to carefully define the accepted worldwide standards for the various types of abuse and neglect. Most experts categorize abuse and neglect into four primary categories: physical abuse, emotional (or verbal) abuse, sexual abuse and neglect.

Physical abuse is primarily defined as intentionally hitting, punching, kicking, beating, burning or otherwise touching a child in a violent way that produces injury to the child. These injuries are often bruises, welts, burns, cuts, broken bones and damage to internal organs. In many places, child trafficking for any purpose is also considered physical abuse.

Sexual abuse is interacting with a child for any sexual purpose. This can include taking sexual photos and allowing a child to be sexually trafficked as well as the parent or guardian interacting with a child in a sexual way.

Emotional or verbal abuse can be the most difficult to prove and the easiest for parents to hide from authorities. The wording of when authorities can remove a child from a home because of verbal abuse does not exist in many areas. When it does, the definition is broad, but usually includes using language that has a severe negative impact on the child's well being.

Neglect is not to be confused with poverty, although extreme poverty can sometimes lead to neglect and the involvement of authorities. In general, most government agencies do not consider poverty, even extreme poverty, as neglect. Rather, authorities tend to look at whether or not parents are attempting to provide their children with basic necessities and put their children's need for those things ahead of their own desires. Neglect is generally defined as intentionally failing to provide the child with shelter, food, clothing, medical care and appropriate supervision for the age of the child. Some governments also include the failure to provide a basic education for the child as neglect, while others are unconcerned with educational access for children.

## **Models of Care for Abused and Neglected Children**

Models of care for abused and neglected children vary greatly from place to place. In most cases, abuse or neglect must be reported to authorities before the children can be helped. This can be problematic because often the abuser attempts to hide the abuse from outsiders. Unless someone suspects a problem and reports it to authorities, the abuse or neglect is likely to continue or even worsen.

Many countries have some sort of mandatory reporting laws for child abuse. It is important to familiarize yourself with the laws in your area. In some locations, ministry volunteers are among the listed mandatory reporters of suspected child abuse. Once a case of suspected abuse or neglect is reported to the government, the government will investigate and

determine whether or not the child should be removed from the home for the child's safety.

While the vast majority of abuse and neglect cases that reach the attention of authorities are at the hands of a parent or guardian, it is important to note children can also experience abuse at the hands of others living in the home including siblings, extended family members and non-family residents. Most authorities who remove children from these environments will do so until it can be proven the offender no longer has any access to the child. The burden of proof is usually on the parent or guardian to substantiate the child's future safety in the home.

Unfortunately, understaffed government child welfare offices, unreported suspicions and other factors result in probably more than half of the children being abused or neglected never having anyone examine their environment or attempt to intervene on the child's behalf.<sup>74</sup> Since the numbers of estimated abused and neglected children are so high, it may be very likely one or more of the children served by your ministry is being abused or neglected and it will never be addressed by anyone.

It is imperative that any volunteers ministering to children or teens be trained to recognize and report any signs of child abuse or neglect. (See Appendix 7.) This may be considered controversial in some areas. It is important to remember, however, that children who are abused and neglected are in real danger. Some may die and all will experience serious physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual damage. The most loving thing your ministry can do is to allow authorities to investigate and make sure the child is safe.

After authorities confirm abuse or neglect is happening in a home, what happens to the child next can vary greatly. Most localities do not have enough temporary or foster homes in which to place children who have been removed from their homes. Some places have group homes for these children, but they can at times be as dangerous for the children as their home of origin where the abuse occurred.

As a result, many authorities will only remove children whom they consider to be in extreme, immediate danger. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons which will be addressed later. In an ideal world, any child who is abused or neglected would be placed in a loving, safe home until their parents are able to care for them properly. Often government agencies who do remove children from their homes will attempt to place the children with other relatives. This reduces the burden on the government and places it back on the family. These homes may not be examined for the potential safety of the children placed there, so if the adults in those homes also abuse or neglect the children, the abuse may continue until someone reports the abuse or neglect by the new familial caregivers.

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<sup>74</sup> BMJ Open, "Mandatory Reporting Internationally"

Even if children are removed from a home that has been determined to be unsafe, most government agencies try to work with the children's parents to restore custody to them as quickly as possible. This process may be rushed, because of a lack of viable options for placing the children elsewhere. When parents are not truly ready to make better parenting choices, this can result in children being removed and returned to their families multiple times, with little real improvement in their environment.

In some areas, children who are removed from homes where they were abused or neglected are placed temporarily or permanently in group homes or children's homes. These placements are often viewed as temporary placements, although they may be more realistically considered permanent. As these environments are discussed in depth in the previous chapter, you may wish to review it for additional information.

The other option for placing children removed from homes where they are abused or neglected is to place them in what is called foster care in most locations. Foster parents are vetted in some manner, although the quality of this vetting varies greatly from place to place. In addition, foster parents are required by some government child welfare agencies to undergo training. Most foster parents will agree that the training provided is rarely adequate to fully prepare a foster parent for caring for children who have been abused or neglected.

Foster care placements vary in length. Most government child welfare agencies will have the goal of eventually reuniting children with their biological parents. The guidelines under which children are reunited with their birth parents vary greatly from place to place. Most place requirements on the biological parents which must be met before being reunited with their children. The government may or may not provide assistance to help parents meet these requirements. Some ministries choose to work with parents who have lost custody of their children to help them meet the requirements placed upon them by the government in order to regain custody. This often requires extensive mentoring that continues after the reunification.

A few government agencies call these mentoring ministries foster care and leave the children in the home of origin while the ministry works with the parents. This is not foster care and can leave children in extreme danger. If your ministry is approached to enter this type of relationship, the government should provide paperwork clearly stating their expectations and absolving your ministry from any repercussions should the children be harmed because the government refused to remove them from the home.

Families who are reunited may be more closely monitored than before. In other places, these families are monitored after reunification only if there are new reports of potential abuse. As mentioned earlier, if underlying problems leading to the abuse are not addressed properly, there can begin a cycle of children being removed from and

subsequently reunited with their biological parent(s). Each time they are removed, they may be placed with a different foster family, leading to additional instability and trauma.

In some cases, either the government child welfare agency or the parents themselves will sever parental rights on a permanent basis. This allows the children to be adopted by other parents. Foster parents are the most logical and frequent adoptive parents of these children. At times, the foster parents may not be in a position to adopt children permanently and another adoptive home will be found.

### **Ministering to At-Risk or Abusive Parents**

Certain parents are considered at risk for child abuse, even though they have not yet abused their children. There are common factors that are present in parents most at risk for abusing their children at some point. It is important to note that not every parent with these risk factors will abuse their children and not every parent who abuses their children has these risk factors. They are, however, statistically significant. Parents who were themselves abused as children, abuse alcohol or drugs, are poorly educated, have a low income, are single parents with large numbers of children, have mental health issues, possess poor parenting skills, or are extremely young parents and parents who attempt to justify maltreatment are most at risk.<sup>75</sup>

In cases of social isolation or extreme stress, parents who might not normally abuse their children, may begin doing so. Communities with a culture of violence tend to have a higher rate of child abuse amongst their families. It is also significant to note that at times child abuse is at the hands of a boyfriend, step parent or other non-biological caregiver in the home.<sup>76</sup>

Ministries can help mitigate these risk factors by helping parents learn better coping strategies and stronger parenting skills. This can be done with training classes and mentoring by more experienced Christian parents. There are resources for providing parenting classes throughout the life of the child and supportive home visits that can be found online or in books on ministering to at-risk parents.

If you do have access to the parents or guardians who have been abusing or neglecting (or allowing those things to occur) the children to whom you minister, your ministry may be able (in some cases) to also provide classes and mentoring to encourage them to change poor coping strategies and parenting skills. Your ministry can use resources found online to teach parents more effective relational and parenting skills. Teaching them healthy coping strategies can also lessen the likelihood of abuse. Simple habits like encouraging them to sit on the floor and play with their children a few minutes each day can also prove

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<sup>75</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Risk and Protective Factors"

<sup>76</sup> Child Family Community Australia, "Who Abuses Children?"

amazingly effective.<sup>77</sup> Ultimately, understanding how God wants them to live their lives and love their children can help change lives and break toxic parenting habits.

It is important to remember that some parents who abuse or neglect their children have serious issues with mental health, anger, addiction or other problems your ministry may not be able to support. Finding helpful community resources and encouraging parents to take advantage of them can assist them in getting the help they need without overwhelming your ministry.

### **Recruiting and Preparing Foster Parents**

Although most ministries cannot formally recruit and train foster parents, a ministry can help identify Christians who would be willing to foster children. These adults could then be served by your ministry as they go through the process of becoming foster parents with the local government.

In addition, your ministry can offer additional training and support for Christians and others who are providing foster homes for children. Foster parenting is difficult. The length of the placements are rarely known in advance. Children who have experienced extreme trauma are placed in an unfamiliar environment with people they do not know. Often they arrive with little more than the clothing they are wearing.

Your ministry can provide foster parents with the support they will not receive from government agencies. Often any financial assistance the government provides foster parents is insufficient to care for a child, particularly one who may need an entire new wardrobe, school supplies and other necessities. Because foster parents are often given children of varying ages at different times, they may not have the appropriate supplies, toys and other items needed to care for a child of a different age than previous placements. Often donating needed items to foster parents can help reduce the number of concerns they may have when given a new child to foster.

Foster parents also express how isolating the experience can be. Often foster parents are faced with unique parenting challenges unfamiliar to even experienced parents. They may have no one in their lives willing to listen to their concerns or help them solve problems. They need extra encouragement and prayers. Ministries can easily provide this essential emotional and spiritual support.

Finally, as mentioned before, foster parents need special skill sets that can be best learned in training sessions. Your ministry may be aware of people who can provide this training for free to foster parents. Offering these free training sessions can also introduce new people to your ministry and church if you invite all of the foster parents in your area to attend

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<sup>77</sup> Hakman, Melissa, et al. "Change trajectories for parent-child interaction sequences during parent-child interaction therapy for child physical abuse."

these sessions, regardless of their current religious beliefs. In Appendix 8, you will find a list of training sessions foster parents may find helpful.

### **Ministry accommodations for Children Who Were Abused or Neglected**

Local privacy laws may prevent foster parents from giving you any information on a foster child's background or even to inform you the child is indeed a foster child. They can, however, tell you they are foster parents and appropriate assumptions can generally be made about any new children living with the family. Volunteers should be cautioned not to invade the privacy of these children or gossip about any information the child may share with them.

In addition, volunteers should be encouraged to adopt the strategies discussed earlier that can be helpful to children who have experienced trauma. Having a class schedule and posted class rules can provide a sense of security. Having kind and loving interactions with them can reinforce the idea that not all adults will hurt them. Sensitivity should be used in any discussion of the families of Bible students. Foster parents should be asked what the children call them, so the volunteer can adjust any family language appropriately without embarrassing the child.

Care also must be taken when teaching foster children Bible lessons. They may have never been exposed to the Bible or a church environment. Adding helpful explanations, summarizing stories or explaining people who would normally just be named, can make them feel more comfortable. It is also important to remember that children often equate God with their earthly parents when it comes to topics like love, correction or punishment. Children who have been abused or neglected by their birth parents may have difficulty believing basic concepts like "God is love" or may have a skewed understanding of what that means. Taking the time to carefully explain the character of God in ways children can understand will usually prove helpful.

Children who have been abused or neglected may be developmentally behind their peers. There are a number of different reasons for these delays. It does not, however, mean they are incapable of catching up with their peers, just that they may need additional help in learning the things they have not been taught. Sometimes, these delays will manifest themselves in physical skills like the ability to cut. They may also not be on the appropriate grade level academically and have difficulty reading and writing as well as their peers. Your ministry may need to have an adult available tasked with subtly helping children bridge any skill gaps until they have had an opportunity to learn them.

As mentioned earlier, children from abusive or neglected backgrounds may have interests that are more like those of children younger than they are. In some cases, they may have been exposed to adult behaviors usually not seen by children and have a worldliness uncommon for someone their age. They may also have health issues caused by the previous neglect or abuse. In severe cases, abuse and neglect can cause permanent



physical and brain damage, giving a child a special needs diagnosis. Volunteers should look for these developmental differences and devise strategies that help the child participate fully in class without embarrassment.

### **Additional Felt Needs of Children Who Were Abused or Neglected**

One of the greatest needs of children placed in loving foster or group homes is understanding their trauma in light of God's plans for and interactions with our world. How abuse, neglect and trauma impact a child's faith walk can vary greatly from child to child - even among children from the same family of origin. The amount of exposure a child has had to God, scripture and Christians is a major factor. Children who know little, if anything, about God and what He wants from them and for them will have difficulty with trying to frame their trauma through the lens of God's original plan for their childhood and how poor choices and sin negatively impacted that plan.

Children who have some knowledge of God and the Bible may question why God did not protect them from the trauma they experienced. They may also struggle to forgive their abusers. Abuse and neglect may have negatively impacted their self esteem to the point where they question how God could love them and struggle to understand what that perfect love looks like in their lives. This struggle can be particularly difficult when attempting to understand God in the role of a heavenly father - especially if their earthly father figure was also their abuser.

Ministries can help children from traumatic backgrounds overcome some of these obstacles to a strong faith foundation by teaching them about God's perfect plan, the role of sin in our world, how Jesus makes reconciliation possible as well as about topics like grace and forgiveness. This, of course, should be done in age appropriate ways and therefore may take several years for them to fully process their trauma in light of their relationship to God. It is critical children from traumatic backgrounds are also taught how God wants us to treat one another - particularly within family roles. Without this knowledge and understanding, it may be difficult for children to understand how to break a negative family cycle of abuse or neglect.

Children who are from traumatic environments have often missed a great deal of school. This may be because parents are keeping the children home while their injuries from abusive incidents heal or because the parents are neglecting to make sure they attend school. Ministries can help children catch up academically by providing intensive, individual tutoring on academic subjects. Depending upon the age of the child and the subjects, these tutoring sessions can often be tied in meaningful ways to Bible stories giving the tutor opportunities to have spiritual conversations while helping the child learn and practice needed academic skills.

Finally, children who have been raised at least partially in an environment of abuse or neglect may lack the life skills necessary to successfully navigate the adult world. Even

children who have been placed for long periods of time in loving, Christian foster homes may have missed life skill training as their foster parents struggled to meet the other more urgent needs of the child. Preparing and providing foster parents with a detailed life skill plan that can then be adapted for individual foster children, may encourage foster parents to be more intentional in providing life skill training for their foster children.

### **Helping Foster Children Build Support Systems**

One of the most pressing long term needs for children who have been abused and neglected is to find a substitute for the lifelong support network normally provided by families. They could also benefit from having mentors and someone who attends court and legal sessions with them to make sure their rights are protected. If people can be found who are willing to invest in the child long term, the child is more likely to be able to heal from traumatic past experiences and move forward towards the life God wants them to live.

Your ministry can have a long term, positive, spiritual impact on children who have been abused and neglected if you can help them build these key support systems. Because of the trauma in their backgrounds, they may have great difficulty in establishing these relationships independently. They are also more likely to mistake predators for people who have their best interests at heart.<sup>78</sup> If your ministry wants to help abused and abandoned children find Christians to fill these roles, you will need to be very intentional in finding and training volunteers as well as matching them with children and fostering the building of a long term relationship.

The feasibility of providing volunteers to emotionally support children placed in various legal situations because of abuse by parents will vary from location to location. These advocates generally do not have legal training, nor do they represent the child in that way. Rather volunteers accompany children to proceedings in family court and make sure their basic needs are met during the process. It is easy for lawyers and judges to forget a child may be hungry because proceedings have lasted too long. Or the child may be afraid to ask to go to the bathroom. The volunteer also may provide a stuffed animal, needed hugs and a listening ear. Your ministry will need to talk with local court officials and child welfare workers to see if this type of ministry is possible in your area. If it is allowed, they may require volunteer screening and special training.

In some countries, judges can appoint special advocates or guardian ad litem volunteers to help the court learn everything necessary to make decisions that best help the child. These volunteers usually receive special training from groups like CASA<sup>79</sup> and spend time thoroughly vetting the child's best interests by working with legal and child welfare workers, educators, medical professionals and the child to provide comprehensive information to

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<sup>78</sup> National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, "Child Molesters: A Behavior Analysis"

<sup>79</sup> Court Appointed Special Advocates <https://nationalcasagal.org>

the courts. Volunteers visit the child regularly and may also be allowed to make recommendations to the court in the case.<sup>80</sup>

A **guardian ad litem** is a guardian appointed by the court to watch over a minor during a court case.

Helping children who are abused or neglected find long term Christian mentors can be the best solution to bridging part of the gaps in emotional, spiritual and at times physical needs they may have as a result of ever changing custody situations. These mentors should be chosen carefully and thoroughly trained to effectively handle any issues a mentee may be facing. Care should be taken to involve the child when possible in making mentoring matches. While trained adults can help any child, the child will be more receptive if there is an emotional connection with a mentor.

Since children from traumatic backgrounds may require special strategies when being mentored, it is important mentors are trained in not only mentoring, but also helping victims of trauma. Groups like the National Mentoring Resource Center<sup>81</sup> have links to free online training resources in English, which can be translated if necessary and used in your training. You may also be able to find free training resources in other languages online.

Once mentoring relationships are established, volunteers should be encouraged to maintain these relationships for several decades. Mentees may have periods of time when they decide to avoid meeting with their mentors. Mentors should continue to make periodic contact, celebrate birthdays and holidays and do what they can to reassure the mentee they will be available to minister to him or her in appropriate ways when the mentee is ready.

### **Breaking Familial Cycles of Abuse and Neglect**

Your ministry may not have access to the parents of origin of the children to whom you minister. Without access, you will be able to do little to help these parents break current cycles of abuse and neglect. You can, however, begin teaching children how to create a godly home when they become old enough to do so. This can be done by exposing children to godly homes through fostering them or inviting them into healthy Christian homes for meals, family game nights and other activities.

Discussions of God's plans for families, the various roles within a family and how we are to interact with others can also prove helpful. Christian life skills training and practice in areas like godly conflict resolution can perhaps be the most helpful in helping children learn how to break negative family cycles when they begin their own families in the future.

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<sup>80</sup> National CASA/GAL, "Advocate for Children"

<sup>81</sup> [www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org](http://www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org)

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Define neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse.
2. Research local child welfare laws and procedures. How is child abuse and neglect handled in your area?
3. What is your ministry's policy for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect?
4. What are the various possible models of care for abused and neglected children?  
What are the preferred models of care by your local child welfare authorities?
5. What are some ways your ministry can serve children who are abused or neglected?
6. What ministry accommodations may be necessary for children who are in foster care?
7. What types of events can cause trauma to a child?
8. What are some ways to minister to children who have undergone any type of trauma?

## Chapter 10 - Ministering to Children Living in Generational Poverty

*“But if anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” 1 John 3:17 (NIV)*

Nearly 385 million children around the world are living in extreme poverty.<sup>82</sup> Extreme poverty is most common in low or middle income countries where almost 20% of children are living in households with extreme poverty.<sup>83</sup> Even in countries that are not considered low or middle income countries, children may be growing up in environments where their parents or guardians cannot afford to meet their basic needs for food, dependable shelter, clothing, etc.

In some cases, extreme poverty can be brought on by a natural disaster, pandemic, death of a parent, loss of a job or other causes. This is sometimes known as situational poverty. These families were not impoverished before the event and can often escape poverty once the conditions causing the situational poverty abate. The children in families in situational poverty face challenges somewhat different from children who are growing up in generational poverty.

Generational poverty is defined as a cycle of poverty or extreme poverty that has impacted a family for multiple generations. This often implies these families are incapable of escaping their poverty without outside intervention to help them overcome the challenges that have kept them in poverty for multiple generations. In wealthier countries, this same dynamic can sometimes be seen in families who may have access to government resources to help them escape poverty, but are still living in poverty in spite of these resources.

### Consequences of Generational Poverty on Children

The consequences of generational poverty on children go beyond having an inadequate or unstable supply of needed items like food, shelter and clothing. Studies have found that children growing up in households that are functioning under the poverty line fare worse than children raised in wealthier families in almost every possible measure. They are less educated, have more health issues - both mentally and physically - and are more likely to engage in risky behaviors.<sup>84</sup>

Males growing up in poverty are twice as likely as other men to be arrested at some point in their lives.<sup>85</sup> Both males and females from impoverished homes are six times as likely to have a child outside of marriage before age twenty one.<sup>86</sup> Children growing up in poverty

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<sup>82</sup> UNICEF, “World Bank Group study”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> National Academies of Science, “Consequences of Child Poverty”

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

are even more likely to have less critical gray matter in their brains.<sup>87</sup> As with other consequences, it is difficult to determine whether poverty itself, or some of the other factors often found in the environment of impoverished households cause this problem in brain development. For our purposes, however, the cause is perhaps not quite as important as finding effective ways to minimize this and other negative outcomes for children being raised in generational poverty.

Research has found that certain risk factors lead to poor outcomes for children and are more frequently found in homes functioning at or below the poverty level. Poverty early in a child's life, extreme poverty and poverty that lasts throughout childhood have a more severe negative impact than short term, situational poverty.<sup>88</sup> Once again, whether poverty or the risk factors leading to poverty actually cause these poor outcomes for children is unclear. The causation or correlation of the negative outcomes for children raised in generational, extreme poverty may be debated for many more years. The aggregate negative impact of poverty and these risk factors on children, however, is all too clear.

The risk factors found more frequently in homes in poverty that can impact children negatively are dysfunctional family models, poor parenting skills, unhealthy coping strategies, unmet health needs including lack of access to adequate food, clean living conditions and affordable healthcare, as well as crime, violence, lack of sufficient education and educational support, high levels of stress and mental health issues, addiction to alcohol, drugs and other substances, insufficient access to transportation, employment and other resources needed to escape poverty - the list is extensive and every study seems to add another risk factor to it.<sup>89</sup>

These issues in the environment can mean children are born at a low birth weight, or may be born addicted to drugs and go through withdrawal in the first hours after birth. They may not receive the nutritious foods or the quantity of food needed for healthy brain development. Children born into these adverse conditions may have brains that are underdeveloped or permanently damaged in some way.

Children raised in poverty often have mental health issues, sometimes as a result of trauma from what they have experienced or witnessed in impoverished communities with their often higher incidences of crime and violence. As mentioned earlier, all of these factors can also contribute to the children themselves participating in high risk behaviors that have their own additional set of negative consequences.

In spite of the grim outlook, there are children raised in generational poverty who not only survive, but thrive. Often, it is the resiliency of their parents or the intervention of others that can make the difference and help children grow up to break the cycle. Ministries are

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<sup>87</sup> National Academies of Science, "Consequences of Child Poverty"

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

often particularly successful, because they tend to focus on the emotional, psychological, academic and spiritual needs of a child rather than merely providing material goods. (Although most ministries serving children in generational poverty also provide extra food, clothing and other crucial material goods to children.)

### **Ministering to Children Being Raised in Generational Poverty**

Perhaps of all of the marginalized children your ministry may choose to serve, determining the most effective and impactful ways to minister can be the most difficult when serving children living in generational poverty. What are the causes of poverty in the child's family? What is causing the consequences the children are experiencing - the poverty itself or some other factor that may also cause the family to be poor? Or is all of this so interwoven that it is almost impossible to determine cause and effect or even the most helpful ways to minister to children living in generational poverty?

Further complicating the issue of ministering to children being raised in generational poverty are the theological and secular debates as to when helping someone is actually hurting them. For example, some will quote 2 Thessalonians 3:10, questioning the wisdom of providing free food to those who refuse to work. Some nonprofits working with those who are addicted to drugs will counsel against providing money to addicts, believing any suffering caused by the natural consequences of their habit will eventually drive them to seek help for their addiction.

Yet, there are plenty of scriptures commanding God's people to care for the poor. Often ministries become so involved in internal debates about what types of help are appropriate, they end up serving no one. It is important to remember your ministry is focused on serving children. They have no control over the choices their parents have made. Your ministry should focus on providing what the children need to grow to become faithful, productive Christians. Your ministry or congregation may also want to minister to their parents by helping them correct any situations that may be keeping their family stuck in a cycle of generational poverty.

Ministering to children growing up in generational poverty is not easy. For every family, there may be different issues keeping them stuck in the cycle of poverty. As you begin ministering to these children and their families, it can begin to feel like you are peeling an onion. As you begin to minister to one need, it peels back and reveals another one. For example, if you are attempting to help someone find employment, you may believe you will be focused on job skills, only to find the person in question is illiterate and must learn to read as well.

Trying to meet multiple and diverse needs can feel as if your ministry is constantly engulfed in someone's crisis. As a result, many start serving the poor only to become overwhelmed and quit. This can cause even more trauma to the children involved. The people who were

helping them suddenly disappear, causing them to have additional issues with trust. If those leaving are Christians, they may even blame God for abandoning them.

### **Ministry Accommodations for Children Living in Generational Poverty**

It is important to remember that children who live in impoverished environments often do not have access to the full amount of food their bodies need during a day. Or they may not have clothing that is appropriate for the weather. Trying to learn in a Bible class when you have not eaten recently or you are very hot or cold from wearing out of season clothing is not easy.

If you know or suspect a child has not eaten one or more meals before class, making arrangements to serve a healthy snack or meal to the child can be life changing. It is important to provide food in such a way that the child is not embarrassed. Your ministry may also want to send home additional healthy food children can eat during the week. Those who do this regularly suggest including a schedule of when certain foods can be eaten so the child will not be tempted to eat everything at once and then go hungry later.

Some ministries have found having a clothes closet with items like sweaters, coats, rain gear and other essentials in various sizes is helpful. Then children can have quick and easy access to needed items. Once again, care should be taken to avoid embarrassing the child. If the proper clothes cannot be donned before class, do what you can to make the child more comfortable.

In some locations, adjusting the time for Bible classes to match public transportation schedules or to allow children living in areas with a lot of late night noise a little extra sleep can make it more likely children will attend and be able to learn the most possible from your Bible classes and activities. Depending upon the location of your facility, providing transportation may be necessary in order for some children to participate in your classes and activities. Some ministries have been known to relocate their facility to make it within easy walking distance for the majority of the children they serve.

If your ministry is serving a number of children living in generational poverty, you may find it helpful to have additional volunteers. Some experienced in urban ministry suggest that having one adult volunteer for each child can be extremely helpful.<sup>90</sup> This allows for more individual attention, as well as giving more opportunities for volunteers to notice additional needs each child may have. When a one to one volunteer to child ratio is not feasible, try to add as many additional volunteers as possible.

For a variety of reasons, children living in generational poverty may find themselves behind their peers academically. Their parents may also struggle as readers or be unable to read at all. Providing Bibles in easy to read versions for class and home can make it easier for both

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<sup>90</sup> Sharalyn Donald, Personal Interview



children and their parents to read and study the Bible. In languages where an easy to read version of the Bible does not exist, giving the family a children's story Bible can provide some of the same benefits.

Many application lessons in Bible classes for children are written with the average middle class child in mind. It is important to read through any lesson carefully before teaching it, removing assumptions that every child owns certain items. Remember even things like shelter, furniture, clothing and food may be scarce or have a different meaning to children living in extreme poverty.

There is much that people raised in more privileged environments learn that they come to believe is "common knowledge." Children raised in homes where parents do not have that knowledge may be totally unfamiliar with it. Never assume any child knows or understands what you believe to be "common knowledge" regardless of his or her background. Taking the time to carefully explain concepts to the entire class can prove helpful to all of your students, without causing undue embarrassment for children who may not know those things.

Additionally, any Bible lessons involving people who are poor should be taught with compassion. Avoid making editorial comments that imply poverty is always a choice or is somehow deserved. It is important to remember these children have no control over any decisions their parents may have made that contributed to their poverty. Shaming children for living in poverty is never acceptable.

It is also important to train volunteers to be aware of unnecessary comments by adults or children that are hurtful. Children should be protected from teasing about their clothes or other visible signs of their poverty. In some cases, children from poverty are neglected, although not to the point of alerting child welfare authorities. They may not have bathed recently or their clothes washed, causing them to have an unpleasant odor. Once again, saying anything to shame or embarrass the child should be avoided. If your ministry can help improve the situation in some way, intervention should be done with great love, respect and kindness.

### **Managing Classroom Behavior**

Depending upon the variables for each child, some children living in poverty occasionally or regularly experience trauma. While parents living below the poverty line are more at risk for serious conflict with each other or for abusing their children, often the trauma is about something that happened in the children's community. They may have witnessed violence, seen someone have a drug overdose or been robbed. Some children are traumatized by the teasing and bullying or isolation that results from not owning the same items as peers. Care should be taken to institute some of the accommodations mentioned under trauma in Chapter 3.

Children living in generational poverty are often surrounded by stressful situations. This stress produces one of three reactions - flight, fight or freeze. Studies have found that children who have experienced trauma or live in chaotic environments are often hyper vigilant.<sup>91</sup> This can make it seem as if a child is overreacting to a sudden loud noise or other perceived stressor during a Bible class or activity. Flight, fright and freeze can often appear to be acting out behaviors in children, like trying to hide under a table, running from the room or refusing to respond.

It is important to remember that when children are in flight, fright or freeze mode, their brain is operating in what is known as the lower brain functions. These are more reactionary and the child must feel safe to move into the higher brain functions that allow for more rational thinking and decision making.<sup>92</sup> Calming the child is essential for helping the child gain control over his or her thoughts and actions.

Having a visible class schedule and routine and clearly explaining rules and consequences can help children feel safer in your environment. It can also be helpful to alert children to loud noises or other things that may startle them before they happen. Music, lighting, paint colors and other factors can be structured to create a calming, welcoming, safe atmosphere in your classroom or facility.

### **Abuse and Generational Poverty**

While generational poverty is a risk factor for child abuse and neglect, poverty itself is not considered to be child abuse or neglect by governments. While parents who are poor may be unable to provide their children with stable housing, clothing comparable to the average child or even adequate food, those factors in and of themselves do not define neglect that would involve child welfare government agencies.

Neglect is determined more by the intent of the parent than the items a parent can afford to provide. If the parent, for example, does not make an effort to provide food for their child, that would be considered neglect. The amount of food provided only becomes an issue if the child becomes ill from the lack of proper nutrition, and then only in some countries. The litmus test is whether the parent is making reasonable attempts in their circumstances to meet their children's basic needs.

The children's safety is another test for neglect. A parent who leaves a two year old at home unattended for hours at a time is considered to be neglectful of the safety of the child. If the efforts of a parent to provide shelter place the children in physical danger, agencies may remove the children from the home until they can help the parent find safe shelter. The point where that line between safe and unsafe is crossed is often unclear. Many agencies allow families to live in cars, tent cities and homeless shelters, which others would

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<sup>91</sup> Blue Knot Foundation, "Impacts of Childhood Trauma and Abuse"

<sup>92</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development"

consider dangerous. If you have concerns about possible neglect, local child welfare agencies can provide you with their standards for reporting.

Physical and sexual abuse is also more common for children living in generational poverty.

<sup>93</sup> This abuse is not always at the hands of a parent. Often, children are abused - especially sexually - by their mother's boyfriend, a step father, friends of a parent staying in the house or other extended relatives staying in the home. Children can also be abused by peers or when visiting or staying at the home of a peer.

Abuse is explored in detail in Chapter 9. In brief, it is important to remember that ministry volunteers should be trained to report any signs of suspected abuse. They need to be aware of repeated injuries abnormal for a child that age in frequency or severity. Any signs of burns, injuries caused by a weapon or strap, severe bruising with weak explanations or frequent, severe injuries blamed on falls should be investigated. If a child self reports abuse, those reports should be taken seriously and child welfare authorities called.

As a ministry serving children, you may discover that a mother is being abused by a spouse, boyfriend or another adult living in the home. At times both the mother and child are abused, while other men abuse only the mother in the home. It is important to be aware of any possible resources in your area available to women who are being abused and their children. Often women stay in dangerous situations because they are more afraid of the unknown than the abuse. The longer some women stay with an abusive man, however, the more likely they are to be eventually murdered by him. The Danger Assessment has proven to be reliable in predicting which women are at most risk of being murdered.<sup>94</sup> Helping them find a safe place for themselves and their children to stay while the situation is explored can literally save lives in some instances.

In many cases, parenting skills are less than optimum for a number of reasons in families living in generational poverty. While these families may not be currently abusing their children, they are still considered at risk for doing so. Providing parenting classes can give parents better coping and parenting skills and make it less likely that abuse will occur. In fact, one study found that merely getting a parent to play with their child for a few minutes each day drastically reduced the likelihood of abuse.<sup>95</sup>

### **Addressing Felt Needs of Children Living in Generational Poverty**

As mentioned earlier, many ministries struggle with how much material assistance to give children living in poverty and their families. In part, your ministry will be limited by your own financial resources and responsibilities. Most ministries, however, have at least a small amount of discretionary funds which can be used to provide direct assistance to children

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<sup>93</sup> National Bureau of Economic Research, "Poverty and Mistreatment of Children go Hand in Hand"

<sup>94</sup> <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/jr000250e.pdf>

<sup>95</sup> Hakman, Melissa, et al, "Change trajectories for parent-child interaction sequences during parent-child interaction therapy for child physical abuse."

and their families. You also may have access to volunteers or others in the community who are willing to donate items like clothing, food, school supplies and more.

There is a certain expectation in our world that parents provide their children with their basic needs. When poverty makes this difficult or impossible, many parents feel shame. Shame can in turn make parents feel inadequate, contribute to low self esteem and encourage them to withdraw from interactions with others. This shame and its consequences can worsen by the manner in which ministries and others attempt to assist parents in obtaining essential items they cannot afford. Care must be taken to provide children with the items you want them to have without increasing the shame of their parents.

Ministries have accomplished this by providing ways parents can earn needed items. Some do this by providing employment. Others offer classes that teach parents job, financial, parenting and other life skills that will help them improve their current situation or that of their children. Parents who attend these classes are then given credits to “purchase” needed items the ministry has collected. Either of these methods allow parents to reduce their shame by working to earn the things their children need.

These methods do not work, however, in situations when parents do not wish to participate in these programs. Their children may be suffering from insufficient food or lack of other essential basic needs and your ministry may wish to provide these crucial items. In those cases, it may be necessary to provide assistance directly to the children.

Children can suffer shame and embarrassment from receiving help, too. They often understand society expects their parents to provide these things for them. They may believe their parents have failed them and are embarrassed others know. Some children even believe it is their fault the family is impoverished. Or they may be embarrassed when someone realizes they are wearing clothes donated by a peer. Care should be taken to minimize any embarrassment for the child that could lead to feeling shame.

The attitudes of volunteers in your ministry towards those receiving any assistance can also play a factor in feelings of shame. Volunteers should be cautioned to not only be loving and kind, but also respectful of those receiving aid. While it may be tempting to take photos of ministry efforts, it is important to remember how those photos are taken and used can add to the shame recipients may feel. Having their photo spread throughout the community as a poor, unfortunate person who needed help only adds to their shame. So does attempting to capture photos of children and others looking more destitute than necessary in order to underscore the effectiveness or needs of your ministry.

### **Helping Children Avoid a Victim Mindset**

Another problem that can occur when ministries provide support to children living in generational poverty is the tendency to encourage them to view themselves as perpetual

victims. While the children often have been victimized in many ways, encouraging them to define themselves as perpetual victims is unhealthy for them both emotionally and spiritually. Victimhood robs children of hope. It takes away their voice and makes them believe that no matter what they may do, their situation will never improve through their own hard work and/or God's blessings.

Considering themselves perpetual victims also makes children vulnerable to predators. Predators of all kinds often focus on people in poverty for a variety of reasons. Their job is made easier when they can convince potential prey they are perpetual victims and the predator is the only hope to improve their current situation. The predator continues to reinforce the victimization of their potential prey, by making them victims yet again. This can create an unhealthy and often dangerous cycle, where the young person becomes stuck in his or her victimhood and no longer tries to find real solutions to his or her problems.

Often the best thing ministries can do to protect children from predators is helping them develop godly self esteem - seeing themselves as God sees them, dearly loved and valued, with flaws that can be redeemed through God's grace. Teaching them the hope they have in Jesus as well as God's expectations for their lives can also protect them from becoming stuck in a victim mentality. Realizing God has good works planned specifically for them and has given them one or more gifts to develop and use for completing some of these good deeds will give children a sense of purpose and value that predators and victimization seek to withhold from them.

Ministries can also help children avoid predators by teaching them how to identify people who do not have their best interests at heart. It can also help if young people are given strategies that will help them avoid encountering or falling prey to possible predators. The possible predators can vary from area to area. Your local social workers can help you understand the most common dangers to young people in your area.

Volunteers should be encouraged to avoid making statements that can worsen a child's sense of victimization. This can often look like sympathy, but implies only others can improve the child's circumstances. Any statements that imply children are incapable of doing better in school or making better choices also imply the child is a victim of his or her circumstances and unable to change them. Yes, the child's environment may make success more difficult to attain, but children should never be led to believe changing their lives is impossible. Encouraging children to memorize important scriptures to replace false narratives can also help them overcome a victim mindset.

Children living in generational poverty are often denied choices that are commonly given to children being raised in wealthier environments. They may also have missed experiences that are considered common in the homes of other children. There are many reasons for this, but the result is that children denied choices and experiences are often younger

developmentally than their chronological age. They may also have difficulty making choices, because of the lack of experience in having options. Ministries can help children grow by providing some of these missing experiences and giving children simple, safe choices to make.

If there are several children served by your ministry dealing with additional specific issues, like parents struggling with addictions, it may prove helpful to form smaller support groups. There are resources available to help children talk through their struggles in healthy ways during group sessions led by people who do not have degrees in counseling. You may also be able to find resources for some issues that incorporate scripture. When those resources are not available, often there are Bible stories or scriptures that can be easily added to secular material, giving it that desired spiritual component.

Children growing up in generational poverty may need extra help learning skills necessary for them to succeed in school, jobs and relationships. These skills may include academic tutoring, Christian life skills or other areas where they are perhaps not receiving sufficient instruction at home or school. Often parents are excited to have the extra help their children need and providing these free lessons can serve as a community outreach effort as well.

Finally, mentoring is usually thought of as a tool to use with teenagers. Children can also benefit from having a Christian adult mentor in their lives. While these mentors cannot parent the children or remove all of the difficulties from the children's lives, they can provide emotional and spiritual support to help them navigate their world. Mentors should receive training in the appropriate ways to mentor children who may be dealing with issues in which the mentors may have little personal experience.

### **Ministering to the Parents of Children Living in Poverty**

Often the best way to improve life for children living in generational poverty is to help their parents or guardians overcome the obstacles keeping them in poverty. This is a complex problem as each adult may have various factors preventing him or her from earning an income that would lift the family out of poverty. Yet studies found that when families were able to earn an equivalent of an additional \$1000 USD a year, there was improvement in multiple outcomes for the children in the home.

Rather than assuming what parents need to improve their financial situation, it is important to have private conversations with each individual. These conversations are most productive when your ministry has gained their trust. It is important to keep the information they share as confidential as possible to ease any possible embarrassment or shame.

Once the various issues the adults are encountering in finding better employment are identified, you may find clusters of needs. For example, a small group of parents may be

struggling with addiction issues, while another group needs help learning to read or finding appropriate clothes for a job interview. Your ministry may have volunteers who are willing to address the needs of these various clusters or other ministries of your congregation may be willing to take full responsibility for assisting parents in multiple areas.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is generational poverty?
2. How do generational and situational poverty differ?
3. What issue keeps many ministries from actually serving children living in generational poverty?
4. What are some of the consequences children living in generational poverty may face?
5. What are some important ministry accommodations for children living in generational poverty?
6. What are some additional felt needs of children living in generational poverty?
7. In what ways can assisting parents lead to better outcomes for the children you serve?

## Chapter 11 - Ministering to Children Who Are Refugees

*"Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."* Hebrews 13:1-2 (ESV)

The term refugee actually includes two different types of circumstances. The first includes the estimated 13 million children in a recent year who were emigrating refugees - forced to flee from their country of origin to another country.<sup>96</sup> An additional 17 million children were forced to flee from one area of their country to another and are more commonly referred to as internally displaced refugees.<sup>97</sup> This means a total of 30 million children were refugees in one recent calendar year.

(Note: Families who choose to move to another country or within their own country in a non-crisis situation are not included in these numbers. Ironically though, these children may also have some issues adjusting to their new location. These issues are usually much less severe because of the circumstances involved in their relocation. Children born to families who consider themselves historically internally displaced people are also not included, as the information provided in this chapter is based on children who have personally fled their homes.)

It is important to note that children are statistically overrepresented in any population of refugees. While children are approximately one third of the general population, they are about half of the refugee population.<sup>98</sup> Often these children have lost one or more parents in the circumstances that led to the flight from their home or have become separated from their parents during the refugee crisis.

In addition, some children are sent away by their parents, who choose to remain in their original home. The parents hope that their children will have a better life even if their circumstances prevent them from ever being reunited. Unfortunately, the outlook for unaccompanied minor refugees and internally displaced children is grim. They often fall victim to various predators and/or find it difficult to find adults who will keep them safe in their new location. Few realize the parents' hope of finding a better life, unscarred by additional trauma. In a recent year, 300,000 unaccompanied minors tried to gain entry to a country outside of their birth home.<sup>99</sup> (It is unknown how many unaccompanied children are internally displaced each year.)

There are many circumstances that can lead to people fleeing from their homes, but the three most common are war/conflict, lack of food due to drought or other circumstances and natural disaster. Whether people choose to flee to a different part of their own country

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<sup>96</sup> UNICEF, "Child Displacement"

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Donato and Kirton, "Global Mapping of Migrant and Displaced Children: Trends and Patterns"



or to a different one is often determined by how widespread the issue is that caused them to leave. Most people prefer to remain in their own country if adequate safety and resources are available there. Those fleeing to other countries usually believe there is not a better option within their own country.

Ministry to children who are refugees differs slightly if they are refugees from another country or are internally displaced. Some of the needs and experiences are similar, but moving to another country can bring additional challenges like learning a new language and culture. Within this chapter, we will attempt to address challenges that face both groups as well as challenges that may be unique to each group. Your ministry may actually minister to children in both groups depending upon your location.

### **Consequences Experienced by Children Who Are Refugees**

While the circumstances that led to them becoming refugees may differ, the consequences to the children are very similar. It is important to remember that generally families only decide to flee under the harshest of conditions. Often when they leave, they must leave their homes and the majority of their belongings behind. Many may never recoup these items, even if they later attempt to return. It is a huge risk to become a refugee and most families make that choice only because they believe the risk of staying where they are is greater.

The circumstances causing their families to flee can mean the children have experienced trauma both before and during the flight from their homes. The amount and type of trauma will be determined in part by the circumstances causing the flight and how much their parents were able to shield them from the hardships and crisis. The age and personality of the child can also impact the amount of trauma the child experiences. Regardless of how much trauma was experienced by a child, each will have experienced some type of trauma.

Children who experience trauma may react to it in very different ways. This can be true even of children in the same family, who have had almost identical experiences. They may experience anxiety or depression, even long after the actual traumatic events. Many children will have behavioral changes. Some may act out more, while others may become more quiet and withdrawn. Children may regress to an earlier stage of their development or experience new academic problems. They may have issues sleeping or eating and experience nightmares, night terrors or begin sleep walking. Some children will have trouble attending to tasks, while others will have more frequent aches and pains - especially stomach aches and headaches.

All of these reactions are normal reactions to stress. For some children, however, these reactions are severe enough to interfere with their normal daily life. One study found that fifty percent of refugee children fleeing Syria were diagnosed as having Post Traumatic

Stress Disorder.<sup>100</sup> Often, milder reactions to trauma will begin to abate over time. Children whose symptoms are more severe or do not improve may need professional help to manage the symptoms they are experiencing. Children who are engaging in high risk behaviors in an effort to handle their traumatic reactions will also need the help of professionals experienced in working with children who have been traumatized.

Children are often unable to attend school during the crisis that caused their family to flee and during the relocation process. Depending in part upon the length of this gap in schooling, many children will have fallen behind in their studies. If their family has relocated to an area where a different language is spoken, this can mean further academic delays while the child becomes fluent in the new language.

The radical change in the family's circumstances can mean children are expected to take on additional responsibilities within the family. They may need to care for younger siblings, act as the family translator if they learn the new language more quickly than their parents and, in some cases, find employment to help cover family expenses. These additional responsibilities can increase the likelihood of further stress and/or academic issues.

As mentioned earlier, the number of children who are refugees unaccompanied by one or more parents is hard to determine accurately. In a recent year, 300,000 unaccompanied child refugees applied for asylum in a total of eighty countries.<sup>101</sup> In certain countries, as many as 75% of the children arriving as refugees were unaccompanied by a parent.<sup>102</sup> These children often live in a state of limbo unsure when or if they will be reunited with their parents. Very few countries are equipped to provide foster homes for every child who is a refugee in their country. As a result, unaccompanied children may be forced into trafficking, child labor, homelessness or child marriages.

In addition to all of the previously mentioned consequences of becoming a refugee as a child, many find they struggle with their sense of identity. Most children's identities are rooted in their family and the world around them. Their identity is intertwined with culture, customs, language and beliefs. When the family is uprooted in traumatic ways and placed in a radically different community, the child may struggle to not only find new friends, but also define who they are as individuals.

A struggle to find belonging and identity in their new environment can cause sadness, depression, loneliness, anxiety and a sense of isolation. Some children will seem to adapt quickly, while others may struggle for years. If their new community has a radically different culture and/or a different language, children may struggle longer than when moving to another area with similar customs and languages.

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<sup>100</sup> Sirin and Rogers-Sirin, "The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children"

<sup>101</sup> UNICEF, "Five-fold Increase in Number of Refugee and Migrant Children Traveling Alone Since 2010"

<sup>102</sup> Donato and Kirton, "Global Mapping of Migrant and Displaced Children: Trends and Patterns"

### **Finding Children Who Are Refugees or Internally Displaced**

Because of the circumstances surrounding the refugee experience, it is usually easy to find children living in refugee camps. Refugee camps are created to provide housing and other basic needs to large groups of refugees. While they are built as a temporary solution until refugees can resettle permanently, some refugee camps remain for years. The Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, for example, has been in operation for almost thirty years.<sup>103</sup> If your ministry wishes to serve children living in a refugee camp, it is important to contact those managing the camp to learn and understand any rules or limitations placed on those wishing to minister to those living there.

It can be more difficult to locate refugees and internally displaced children who are residing in other temporary housing arrangements. Local authorities, however, may be aware of certain areas where many refugees have been housed or they may be aware of secular groups working with refugees who can help you find them. Often refugees and internally displaced people develop their own internal network to help each other find important resources. One ministry interviewed for this book told us they originally found only ten internally displaced families. Those families shared the information with others, however, and within a year they were ministering to one hundred and fifty families!<sup>104</sup>

### **Ministry Adaptations for Children Who Are Refugees**

The number of adaptations your ministry will need to make will depend in part on how many refugee children you are serving and their original homes. For example, if you have one internally displaced child you will probably not need to make major accommodations for language differences. If, on the other hand, you have five children who do not speak your local language, numerous accommodations may have to be made to enable them to function with ease until they become more fluent in it.

If language differences exist, it can be helpful to have maps, facilities like restrooms and classroom materials translated into the primary language of the children who are refugees. It can also be helpful to have Bibles available either in their language or preferably bilingual Bibles as they begin learning the new language. If interpreters are available, children can benefit from having lessons and instructions interpreted. In general, children seem to learn languages very quickly. With help, most children will learn the local language within a short amount of time.

Since many children who are refugees have experienced trauma, making use of strategies for children who have been traumatized mentioned in other chapters can be helpful. Creating a safe and calming environment with few surprises is usually helpful. It is also important to remember that the standards for acceptable classroom behavior can vary by

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<sup>103</sup> The UN Refugee Agency, “Kakuma Refugee Camp and Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement”

<sup>104</sup> Paige Edeburn, Personal Interview

culture. Clearly explaining expectations and providing visible cues to assist children in remembering rules that are new to them will make any necessary transitions easier for everyone.

Researchers have found that children who are refugees can exhibit specific behaviors that may disrupt the classroom environment.<sup>105</sup> It is important to remember that while these behaviors must still be corrected so everyone can learn in your classroom, they are the result of the trauma the child has experienced. Correction and consequences for explosive anger, rebellious behaviors, inability to concentrate, rule testing, withdrawal or regressive behaviors should be handled with love, kindness and grace.

Volunteers working with children who are refugees should be sensitive to the emotional needs of children who may be struggling with their move and the events that precipitated it. Those working with refugees note that children seem to struggle more with depression than anxiety.<sup>106</sup> They are often mourning everything they have lost, from houses to friends, pets and the way their life used to be. Volunteers speak of children who still cry over their losses several years later.<sup>107</sup> If children seem to be stuck in their depression or are mentioning suicide, it is important to help their family find professional help for them.

Volunteers should also carefully monitor interactions between new children and their peers. While it is unfortunate, some children may have heard negative things about refugees and treat their peers who are refugees poorly. Or, they may be reluctant to welcome someone new into their peer group. Having new children share their experiences or their favorite aspects of their home culture can often help bridge these gaps and facilitate new friendships. Creating opportunities to find things they have in common or giving them shared experiences can also help. Older children may benefit from having open conversations about how God wants us to treat everyone - even those who may seem very different from us.

Often the situation creating the need for families to flee a location has political overtones. Your volunteers may have strong opinions about what they believe should or should not be done in the situation. It is critical for volunteers to understand that discussing their political views with the children to whom they are ministering is inappropriate. If the children broach the subject, the volunteer should focus on listening to them vent their feelings. When volunteers state their political opinions, it can distract everyone from the ministry God wants refugee families to experience.

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<sup>105</sup> Strekalova and Hoot, "What is Special about Special Needs of Refugee Children? Guidelines for Teachers"

<sup>106</sup> Paige Edeburn, Personal Interview

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

### **Spiritual Impact of Becoming a Refugee**

Becoming a refugee can impact children spiritually in different ways. Often, how the parents frame what has happened and how God has worked within that situation influences how children interpret the situation spiritually. Children who have been taught God is an impersonal observer of the world, may find their situation impacts their faith very little. Others may become angry at God for what they interpret as abandonment, while still others can see God's protection in helping them safely leave the danger in their previous home.

Ministries can help children process their situation spiritually by reminding them of the consequences of living in a fallen world and the free will God gives everyone. It can also be beneficial to point out specific ways you see God working in their lives during the transition. Most importantly, they need to be taught how to lean on God when they are hurting or concerned about everything that has happened.

### **Felt Needs of Children Who Are Refugees**

Many refugees do not have the ability to bring all of their household goods and clothing with them when they flee. As a result, children may not have enough clothing or clothing adequate for a new climate. They may have no playthings or very little furniture in their homes, or lack necessary household goods. If their parents are struggling to find employment, food may also be scarce.

It is important to remember that many of these families are experiencing situational poverty. They may be college educated and have held well paid positions in their home area. Many of these families will only need assistance until work papers are obtained and jobs are begun. Other refugees were living in generational poverty before they became refugees. They may need additional interventions discussed at length in the previous chapter on generational poverty.

Many children who are refugees have missed weeks or even months of school. This can make them academically behind others their age. If the new school system is more difficult than the previous one, the delays can be exacerbated. If the children's first language is different from the local language, their progress will be slowed until becoming more fluent in the new language. Tutoring and language lessons can help children bridge academic gaps and catch up to their new peers.

Children crave relationships and may be mourning those they left behind. Even if their friends are also refugees, they may have relocated to a different area. Older children often have begun solidifying peer groups and it can be difficult for any new child to be accepted. Acceptance can be even more difficult to find if the child speaks a different language or has customs that are radically different from local ones.

Encouraging children to include the new children in their activities can help them bond and form new friendships. In some cases, it may help to explain to children why these children have had to leave their homes and move to your location. Older children can understand the need to be especially kind and helpful as the children who are refugees adapt to their new environment.

### **Ministering to Parents of Children Who Are Refugees**

When speaking to adult refugees, they usually mention how much more difficult the transition is for them than for their children. Many have left behind everything they have worked a lifetime to amass, with little hope of recovering it. Or they may be continuing to pay expenses on the house they have left behind, while also needing to pay for new housing. Most need to replace furniture, household goods and clothing.

They may struggle with learning the new language and never become completely fluent. This can make finding employment difficult, if not impossible. Some have professional credentials that are not transferable to a new country, which means they may have to repeat training or accept a lower position than that which they held previously. A large influx of refugees in one area may mean there are not enough jobs for everyone who wishes to work. The financial pressures can be overwhelming, leading to depression and anxiety in some cases.

Some ministries have found a family centered approach helps both parents and children. Ministries and nonprofits serving refugees caution against trying to assist in too many areas of felt needs, however. They suggest focusing on one or two areas and doing those things really well. The areas on which your ministry or church chooses to focus may be determined by the talents and training of your volunteers. Those working with adult refugees generally focus on language skills, career assistance, financial literacy, housing assistance and/or replacing basic household goods, food and clothing.<sup>108</sup>

### **Graduated Care Model of Ministering to Refugees and Internally Displaced Families**

The stated goal of those working with refugees is to help these families become adjusted to their new home or help them return to their previous one once circumstances stabilize. It is never the intention to house families in refugee housing permanently. Unfortunately, because of limited resources, some families may live in refugee settlements for months or even years. Others are given a limited amount of money to find their own housing in the new area. Still others may temporarily reside with extended family or friends for a time.

Those working with refugees often express concerns about encouraging families in situational poverty caused by their refugee status to become families of generational poverty. As a result, many have adopted a graduated care model that encourages refugees to find work in their new location and become financially independent. For example, some

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<sup>108</sup> Paige Edeburn, Personal Interview

groups may provide new refugees with free weekly supplies of food. After a time the family is only eligible for free food once every other week, then once a month and finally once a quarter. It is believed that this graduated model encourages independence while also freeing up needed funds to assist more recent refugees.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the difference between a refugee and an internally displaced person?
2. What are some of the consequences children may experience when they become refugees?
3. What are some helpful ministry adaptations for children who are refugees or internally displaced?
4. What are some felt needs of children who are refugees or internally displaced that your ministry may help meet?
5. What are some ways to minister to the parents of these children?
6. What is a graduated care model and why might it prove helpful to your ministry and families who are refugees or internally displaced?

## Chapter 12 - Ministering to Children Who are Critically or Chronically Ill

*"...I was sick and you visited me..."* Matthew 25:36b (ESV)

Children may be born with a health condition or develop one for a variety of reasons. A study of pediatric emergency room visits found that 45% had preexisting special healthcare needs, 3% were already using some sort of technology to manage their health and it was estimated many, if not most, of the remaining children would be characterized as critically or chronically ill after their discharge.<sup>109</sup> When these health conditions are indeed critical or chronic, the child may become marginalized, as his or her days are filled with doctor visits or spent in bed in the hospital or at home.

Medical confinement can leave children isolated from peers, unable to participate in normal childhood activities and in some places severely limit their educational opportunities. Those who were involved with a child before the medical condition arose may forget the child, who is now no longer visible. Children born with a medical condition may have never had an opportunity to become involved with anyone or anything outside of their family and medical circles.

The number of critically and chronically ill children varies by location. Some causes for health conditions that children may acquire are universal, while others are more prevalent in certain areas. Respiratory illnesses are the top reason for pediatric hospitalizations around the world. Mood disorders, appendicitis and epilepsy or convulsions are more common reasons for hospitalizations in high and medium income countries. Low income countries, in addition to respiratory illnesses, most often hospitalize children for diarrhoea, malaria and tuberculosis. These children are also the most likely to die from their ailments.

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Children may also be marginalized for medical conditions caused by genetic conditions, accidents and cancers. These conditions, as well as the ones previously mentioned, can make children less mobile, cause frequent pain and leave them too weak to enjoy interacting with peers or even participating in normal play activities. Some children are also immunocompromised, making it potentially dangerous to interact with peers who could possibly infect them with a common childhood ailment that could prove dangerous to them.

The impact of a medical condition on the child and his or her family will vary depending upon the seriousness of the condition, the length of treatment, the age of the child, the possible outcomes for the condition and the resources available for treating the child.

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<sup>109</sup> Shudy, et. al., "Impact of Pediatric Critical Illness and Injury on Families: A Systematic Literature Review"

<sup>110</sup> UNICEF, "Childhood Diseases"



Larger cities around the world often have hospitals devoted entirely to the treatment of pediatric ailments. Less populated or poorer areas may have a ward of the local hospital dedicated to pediatrics or treat pediatric patients with adult patients. Since children often benefit from instruments sized for them and need other adjustments made to their care because of their age and size, outcomes for children treated outside of pediatric facilities often are not as positive.

### **Consequences for Children Who Are Critically or Chronically Ill**

The most obvious consequences for children with health concerns are those resulting from the condition itself. To be considered chronically ill, the condition must have been ongoing for a year or more. Critical health concerns are often shorter in duration, but have more potentially serious outcomes, including death. The actual symptoms will vary by not only the condition, but also the severity of it. If you know a child's diagnosis, you can research common symptoms and potential outcomes. This information, however, should never be shared with the child. The child's parents may also welcome the chance to have someone who actively listens to them discuss the concerning symptoms their child may be experiencing. (It is important to remember that only the child's actual health care providers should be recommending possible courses of treatments. The focus of your ministry should be listening, not diagnosing or suggesting treatment.) The child may also want to explain how he or she is feeling, while other children may wish to avoid thinking or talking about any symptoms they are experiencing.

Emotionally, children who are ill report having many of the same issues, regardless of their illness. The severity of these emotions, however, depends upon factors such as the severity of the illness and any symptoms experienced, the age of the child, the amount of normal activity that is missed, the amount of social isolation the child experiences and the amount of involvement the family has in the child's care. The most common emotions experienced are anxiety/fear, sadness/mourning/depression, lowered self esteem, loneliness/isolation, anger and guilt.

### **Spiritual Impact on Children With Critical and Chronic Illnesses**

As in many groups of marginalized children, children who are critically or chronically ill can find the experience strengthens or weakens their faith. Often these reactions are a reflection of their previous religious experiences and education, the attitudes of family members and whether or not someone has adequately addressed their questions and doubts about God that may have risen due to their health concerns.

Dr. Sara Pendleton has done extensive research on pediatric patients and their spiritual coping strategies. She found that children employ many of the same spiritual coping habits as we observe in adults. They ranged from the demanding to begging God for healing,

beliefs ranging from God's lack of relevance to God's ability to work miracles and from avoiding to actively participating in spiritual practices like prayer and worship.<sup>111</sup>

### **Ministering to Critically and Chronically Ill Children**

Unlike ministry to other groups of marginalized children, much of the ministry to children with health issues may occur in hospitals or homes. If the child is in a pediatric hospital, he or she may already have access to a hospital chaplain. This chaplain will probably visit the child and his or her family and offer faith-based support for the length of the hospital stay.

Chaplains in many places undergo special training. Depending upon your location, they may be expected to abide by a professional code of ethics dictated by either their profession's governing group or the hospital where they are employed. These professional standards usually require them to take an ecumenical approach to ministering to children. As such, they are expected to show respect for the religious beliefs of the child and his or her family, whether or not they personally agree with those beliefs. Hospitals affiliated with a particular religion are more likely to have chaplains who, while still ostensibly ecumenical, are more likely to convey the religious beliefs of the hospital's affiliated religion.

As a ministry, you may be approached by the family of a specific child to minister to them while the child is in the hospital. Their invitation is generally the primary requirement the hospital will have for allowing you to visit the child. Be careful, however, to ask about visiting hours and whether or not parents must give permission for the visit if they will not be present when you arrive.

Should your ministry be interested in a more widespread ministry to children in a particular hospital, it is best to discuss your options with hospital administrators. They will know what regulations and restrictions you must follow to be allowed to freely approach patients and their families who have not requested your presence. In some locations, hospitals have been known to contact local churches or ministries to provide something for a patient that is beyond the scope of what they are able to do. Those conversations will usually include a discussion about potential patient access when fulfilling the requested need.

### **Ministry Accommodations for Critically and Chronically Ill Children**

Since many critically and chronically ill children are confined to the hospital or their home, it is important to find ways to bring your ministry experience to them. The child's symptoms will often dictate the types of activities in which the child will be able to participate. You may find you will need to be creative in order to adapt your normal ministry activities to allow the child to safely participate as fully as possible.

In cases where the child has access to technology, he or she may be able to attend your Bible classes and events virtually. While it is not the same as actually attending in person,

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<sup>111</sup> Pendleton et al., "Religious/Spiritual Coping in Childhood Cystic Fibrosis"

making an effort to include the virtual attendee as one would any child who is present can make the experience more realistic. Attending virtually also allows children who have health issues to interact with peers. Once again, the adults managing the virtual experience will need to be intentional in encouraging peer interactions during hybrid classes and experiences.

For children without access to technology, having the Bible class teacher visit and bring activities for the child from recent lessons can help bridge the gap. If the child is feeling well enough, the visiting ministry volunteer may even want to conduct an abbreviated Bible class for the child, including telling a Bible story and engaging the child in a related activity. Some chaplains also use godly play in conjunction with Bible stories to encourage children to explore their feelings about their health issues in the context of a Bible story. (Godly play will be explored more thoroughly in a later section of this chapter.)

Some students may at times be healthy enough to attend Bible classes and activities in person. It is crucial to work with parents and medical professionals to put protocols in place that will protect the child from any possible health consequences. This may include asking parents to keep children who are ill at home in order to allow the immunocompromised child to participate. Masks, covering coughs and sneezes and frequent hand washing can also protect the child from additional germ exposure.

Some critically and chronically ill children may have special equipment they need, like wheelchairs or oxygen tanks. It is important that volunteers and even the peers of children with special equipment are taught how to respect the equipment and help the child manage important aspects of it. In order to give parents a break from caring for their child, your ministry may find it helpful to have a medical professional on hand to assist the child. This will give the parents confidence that their child will be cared for properly. Your congregation may have members who are healthcare professionals or someone in the community may be happy to volunteer to assist your ministry and the family in this way.

Volunteers working with critically and chronically ill children in a regular Bible class setting should be prepared to adapt lessons and activities to allow the child with health issues to participate as fully as possible. Volunteers should also be trained in how to handle a sudden onset of fatigue or other possible symptoms that may appear with little notice. Children who are ill may become more sensitive to light, noises and a lot of movement. Closely monitoring the child's reactions to stimuli and providing a quiet area to rest when needed can help.

Some children who are critically or chronically ill will channel their frustration and anger into inappropriate classroom behavior. While these behaviors still need to be corrected, volunteers should be empathetic to the extreme stress under which the child has been placed by his or her condition. Volunteers may find creating opportunities for the child to

talk with them privately about their emotions, questions and concerns can help alleviate some of the stress with a possible corresponding improvement in classroom behaviors.

### **Godly Play**

Godly Play is an approach that attempts to combine aspects of the Montessori method with religious education. Jerome Berryman and Sofia Cavalletti began developing the method in Italy in 1971.<sup>112</sup> Pediatric chaplains have found Godly Play to be particularly useful in ministering to critically and chronically ill children. They believe it allows children to better place their emotions and questions within the context of a spiritual discussion.<sup>113</sup>

While we cannot explore Godly Play in depth within the context of this book, there are a few general principles that can help you incorporate godly play into how you minister to children. Godly play requires the use of objects that represent people, animals, things and ideas in the Bible. You can purchase Godly Play sets or create your own with handmade or purchased figures dressed in biblical and modern clothing, representations of various objects in the Bible - like animals or everyday items - and a play surface that a child could use while playing with the objects. The surface should be large enough to accommodate several objects, but small enough that it can be managed by a bed ridden child.

Once you have gathered the objects the child can use, you must decide the beginning theme or Bible story with which you would like to frame the child's play. For example, you may want the child to explore prayer through his or her play, or the story of Creation. Each play session has a script the adult can use to guide the child's play. You can find many of these scripts online for free or write your own. (Some scripts found online may need to have the theology within them modified.)

The typical Godly Play script consists of the adult asking questions like, "I wonder..." followed by the child using one or more of the supplied items to answer the question in ways that have personal meaning. When using Godly Play to explore a Bible story, the adult must find ways to engage the child without altering the story itself. This can be done by asking the child to guess who certain figures or items might represent in the story or using objects to make applications from the story to his or her own experiences. Bible stories are generally greatly simplified from the normal version that would be told in a Bible class setting.

Children who are critically or chronically ill can be encouraged to reveal their emotions and how they view God working in their medical situation by asking questions like, "I wonder where you see yourself in this story?" or "I wonder what is something we could ask God in our prayer time?" Some children will benefit from slightly deeper questions like, "I wonder

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<sup>112</sup> Spirit Play, "About Godly Play"

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

what emotions the people in the story were feeling? With which person do you have the most emotions in common?” or “I wonder if David felt a bit scared when he stepped out to fight Goliath? What would you tell him about being afraid and being brave?”

At times, the child who is ill may have a sibling close by when you visit. Studies have shown siblings also struggle when another child in the family is critically or chronically ill. Godly Play is formatted in such a way that you can use it with multiple children. This is often accomplished by having the children alternate using figures and objects to answer your questions. Using this method will allow you to perhaps minister to both the child who is ill and his or her siblings, while engaging in godly play with them. (A list of common Godly Play supplies and templates for scripts can be found in Appendix 9.)

### **Addressing Felt Needs of Critically and Chronically Ill Children**

Pediatric chaplains have general goals when ministering to children who are ill. These goals are also good goals for those in your ministry to have when serving these children. You, of course, want to provide spiritual support for the patient. This can include praying with the child and providing opportunities to learn about and worship God. You can also attempt to provide comfort and hope to the patients, who may be dealing with things that are frightening to them and their families.

Children are not too young to have big spiritual questions. These questions and doubts can be exacerbated by a critical or chronic illness. The child may wonder why he or she is so ill, the role God does or does not play in the illness, whether or not God still loves children who are ill and a number of other important questions or doubts. It is important to address their questions and doubts in accurate, but age appropriate ways. Ignoring or minimizing them does not make them disappear, but may leave the children feeling more as if they are struggling alone.

Children with a chronic or critical illness may want to address things that are both spiritual and psychological. They may be reluctant to have these discussions with family members, medical staff and others who appear overwhelmed at caring for the physical aspects of their health issue. It is important to try and create a safe space within which they feel comfortable speaking with you. Your focus should be on allowing them to say whatever is on their minds. Let them talk until they have nothing left to say. Actively listen, but try to talk as little as possible until they have finished.

Once the child has shared his or her thoughts, be prepared to provide appropriate reassurances and information. It is important to balance comforting the child, being honest and yet giving information in age appropriate ways. In some cases, children will need professional help in dealing with their stress, fear, anxiety or depression. Much of the time, however, providing ideas for self care and giving them support strategies will be sufficient.

Some children may struggle to understand and express the complex emotions they are feeling. Providing art materials and journals can give them concrete ways to begin processing their emotions. While some children will immediately begin creating or writing when given the tools, others may need some prompts to engage them. You may want to suggest they use colors in their artwork that express their feelings or give ideas of several different things about which they can journal or types of journals they can create. Some children may need more pointed prompts, like asking them to depict the things they miss because they are ill or the things they want to do when they feel better. These more specific prompts should help them begin processing and expressing their emotions.

Children who are ill may have needs for specific items the hospital or their parents cannot or do not provide. This will vary greatly from patient to patient and be dependent somewhat upon the local medical system and the financial security of the family. Some hospitals do not provide food, or the family must pay before medicine is given or procedures performed. In other situations, the children may appreciate new items to help them pass the time or feel more comfortable.

Some ministries begin by attempting to supply helpful or comforting items. They may use things such as stuffed animals, prayer blankets, games or art supplies to provide a safe, non-threatening way to interact with the patient and his or her family. This is particularly helpful, if you do not know the family well. Other ministries focus on leaving helpful books and items that can be used after the visit.

The lack of connection with peers and missing important events becomes more important for older children who are ill. Having peers prepare cards and notes, or setting up virtual visits can help ease the isolation. Before bringing the child's peers for a physical visit, however, it is important to get clarification from the facility as well as the child's parents about what is allowed and appropriate.

Missed events can be more difficult to navigate. The child may need to mourn missing the event, even if some sort of substitute can be arranged. Substitute events and celebrations are helpful, but not exactly the same as attending the important event in the same fashion as every other child in his or her peer group. While, as an adult, you may not remember the importance of the event, it is important to be supportive as the child mourns what he or she is missing.

### **Ministering to Parents, Siblings and Caregivers**

Pediatric chaplains minister not only to the child, but also to the child's parents and siblings. They also attempt to support the medical and non-medical hospital staff, their families and people in the community connected to the child. They understand all of these groups may need spiritual support as they care for and interact with the child who is ill.

The impact on the parents of children who are chronically and critically ill is often tremendous. Parents feel responsible for the health and well being of their children. Losing control of the care of a child, along with the stress of the possible impact of the health condition itself, can be overwhelming. Studies have found that the early anxiety levels of the parents of a child admitted to a pediatric hospital were near panic level.<sup>114</sup> If the child's appearance has drastically changed because of the issue, the care involves unfamiliar machines (especially with alarms), the care involves procedures that appear to cause the child discomfort or pain or there are communication issues with staff, the anxiety levels can continue at those high levels for some time.<sup>115</sup>

Although stress levels reduce somewhat during long term stays, the parents of a pediatric inpatient remain above the stress levels of an average parent.<sup>116</sup> The stress level for parents of pediatric inpatients has a direct correlation to the age of the child (parental stress levels being higher for younger children), the number of procedures the child has to undergo, the amount of disruption to the parents' jobs and schedules, childcare issues with siblings of the child who is ill and the quality of communication with hospital staff.<sup>117</sup>

Parents have many of the same needs as their children who are ill. Fifty-eight percent of parents reported having psychological needs due to their child's hospitalization.<sup>118</sup> Although parents were not surveyed about spiritual needs, one can imagine the numbers would be similar, if not higher. In addition, a significant number of parents mentioned having physical and social needs.<sup>119</sup> Parents found they often felt guilty, discouraged and exhausted.<sup>120</sup> Some parents began having their own health issues from the stress, exhaustion, poor eating habits and anxiety related to their child's illness.<sup>121</sup>

Researchers found the social needs of parents often related to the financial burden of the illness or condition, the functioning of the family unit and marital conflict and in extreme cases divorce.<sup>122</sup> Families that functioned well, were cohesive, adaptive and resilient functioned better under the stress of a child who was ill than families who did not.<sup>123</sup> It appeared to some researchers that the stress level of the mother, in particular, also had an impact on how well the family unit coped during the hospitalization.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Shudy, et. al., "Impact of Pediatric Critical Illness and Injury on Families: A Systematic Literature Review"

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

Parents with critically ill children felt better supported by hospital staff than parents of chronically ill children. While every case is different, your ministry can serve the child by providing spiritual and psychological support for the parents. Making sure parents eat nutritious, regular meals and take breaks to rest can help patients and their families as well. The spiritual and psychological support methods described above as helpful when caring for children can also work well with their parents.

The siblings of children who are critically and chronically ill reported various levels of stress. Siblings who spent more time visiting the ill child in a hospital setting fared a bit worse than those who visited infrequently and kept their normal routine.<sup>125</sup> Many reported being fearful and attempted to distance themselves emotionally from their ill sibling.<sup>126</sup> In some cases, siblings were given increased responsibilities at home and/or experienced a disruption to their normal routine, adding to possible increases in their level of stress.

Siblings often reported feeling ignored, guilty, isolated and unimportant.<sup>127</sup> While this is to be expected when parents must focus their time and attention on the child who is critically or chronically ill, ministries can support the siblings of children who are ill by giving them focused attention for a time, perhaps by taking the siblings on an outing. Siblings can also benefit from the same spiritual and psychological support outlined as helpful for the ill child and their parents.

Medical and nonmedical hospital staff are often overlooked by ministries. It is important to remember that they are also humans who can become emotionally attached to their patients. Within the course of a day's work, they may experience frustration at being unable to find a suitable treatment for a child, joy at helping heal a child and mourning for a child who is leaving the hospital or has died. Over time, these emotional experiences can take an emotional, spiritual and physical toll on hospital employees.

Ministries who attempt to support the staff of a hospital spiritually and emotionally will have a positive impact, which may also become a community outreach. Asking staff how your ministry can serve them, providing opportunities within the hospital environment for prayer and worship and giving them small tokens of appreciation can make a positive difference in not only their personal outlook, but also in their interactions with patients and their families.

### **Bereavement Support**

Unfortunately, some children do not survive their health crisis. At times, the family and the child know in advance that the child will not survive. In other cases, both the event that precipitated the death and the death itself are unexpected and sudden. Since parents and

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.



other adults expect children to live to adulthood in our modern age, the passing of a child can prove both emotionally and spiritually challenging.

Ministries have found being present for the grieving family emotionally and spiritually can help ease the pain. People grieve in different ways. In order to be supportive, it is important to support each person in his or her preferred method of grieving. Some parents may want to discuss their child before the illness or accident, sharing memories of happier times. Others may need someone to listen as they attempt to sort through complex emotions.

Grief can also impact the spiritual lives of those who have lost a child. Some parents will lean heavily on God as they mourn, while others may become angry with God. Actively listening to the thoughts they want to express is usually more helpful than attempting to criticize their often jumbled thoughts and emotions. If there are theological struggles, they can be addressed when they have stabilized a bit emotionally and spiritually.

Chaplains have found providing some sort of concrete memorial can help. Some ministries may create a photo album about the child. Others create a memorial plaque or plant a tree in memory of the child. Some families find releasing balloons, butterflies or doves as a tangible representation of the child's transition helps families say goodbye to the child. (Certain areas may prohibit the release of objects for a variety of reasons. Check local ordinances before planning a memorial activity.) Parents may know how they wish to celebrate their child's life or they may look to you for ideas and guidance.

Pediatric chaplains emphasize the need to send a note, card or make other forms of contact on holidays and the anniversary of the child's death. Parents never finish grieving the loss of a child, although the grief may change or lessen over time. Many note the importance of sending a remembrance of the child to parents in the second and subsequent years after the death. Parents often feel isolated in their grief as others begin to forget the passing of the child. Being reassured that others loved and remember their child can provide immense comfort.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why are critically and chronically ill children considered marginalized?
2. What are some of the consequences of serious health conditions on children?
3. What is the potential spiritual impact on a child with serious health issues?
4. Who are some of the people connected to the child who may also need ministry?
5. What are some helpful ministry adaptations when serving children who are critically or chronically ill?
6. What are some of the felt needs of critically and chronically ill children?
7. What are some ways to minister to others connected to the child?
8. What are some things to consider when a child has died?



## Chapter 13 - Protecting Your Ministry From Secularization

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."*

Matthew 28:19-20a (ESV)

When ministries to marginalized children begin, those involved speak of meeting some of the unmet felt needs of children with the intention of also teaching them how to become Christians and live the Christian life. Many also hope to reach the parents and other family members of the children they serve. The goal is realistic. Jesus said "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father, who is in Heaven." (Matthew 5:16 ESV) Doing good works and serving those in need can indeed open doors that allow Christians to share their faith.

Unfortunately, many ministries to marginalized children find themselves secularized within just a short amount of time. They may rarely if ever teach the Bible to those whom they minister. Volunteers may neglect to invite people to attend worship and Bible classes. Opportunities to help those served move forward in their faith journey are regularly missed. The focus of what was once a ministry that attempted to meet felt and spiritual needs, soon only focuses on felt needs. Sadly, most are unaware this has taken place and believe they are still involved in active Christian ministry.

Since ministries start out with spiritual goals in mind, how do they get off track? What happens or does not happen that moves them towards secularization and away from the complete mission God has for their ministry? After examining many ministries that have become secularized over the years, a pattern emerges. Being aware of the pattern can help you protect your ministry from secularization.

### Godly Strategic Planning

Ministries to marginalized children often approach strategic planning in one of two ways. Either they have no concrete plans under the assumption God will guide them without any plans, or they create a business strategic plan almost eliminating God entirely from the process. Unfortunately, without a strategic plan as a starting place, it is more difficult to discern where God is adjusting the plan to serve His purposes. Those who create a business strategic plan tend to assume their ideas and plans are immediately approved by God and often fail to notice when He is attempting to adjust that plan.

What is needed is a godly strategic plan. By creating one, your ministry includes God throughout the planning process and is watchful for God's attempts to adapt that plan. A godly strategic plan also helps your ministry organize what needs to be done and set up action plans so tasks are completed in a timely fashion. It can help everyone involved in the ministry understand your goals and how they play a part in achieving them. Most

importantly, a godly strategic plan serves as a constant reminder of both of your major goals - to serve marginalized children and share your faith with them.

Creating a godly strategic plan takes time and effort, which is one of the reasons many ministries try to skip the process. A godly strategic plan, however, can be a vehicle that enhances your ministry while also allowing you to see more clearly God's plans for it. The information you will need to create a godly strategic plan is too detailed for this chapter, but we have created a guide you can follow in Appendix 10.

### **Volunteer Training**

Volunteer training is crucial to prevent your ministry from becoming secular. While volunteers may be gifted at ministering to or teaching children, they may be uncomfortable sharing their faith with them in a meaningful way. Or they may feel uncomfortable asking young people and their parents to attend Bible classes and worship services. Some may even be fearful of mentioning God or offering to study the Bible with the parents, guardians or caretakers of the children to whom you minister. Even volunteers who are comfortable teaching Bible classes to children may panic if a parent asks them to study the Bible with them.

It is important to train volunteers on how to determine where an individual is in his or her faith walk and how to help that person take the next step. Sometimes, it may be as simple as providing a Bible for a child to take home or inviting a family to worship service. If your volunteers are not extremely intentional about sharing their faith, however, soon even these relatively simple actions will no longer occur. Volunteers also need to be trained how to study with someone who is interested in becoming a Christian or learning more about it. The process does not have to be complicated. In fact, everyone should be comfortable sharing the basics, even if they need to find someone else to help them answer any difficult questions someone might ask.

Taking the time to regularly review the core values in the godly strategic plan of your ministry can help encourage volunteers to be intentional in their efforts to share their faith with the children to whom you minister and any family they may have. You may want to host regular sessions where volunteers share ideas and encourage one another. Without regular reminders, it is easy for volunteers to get distracted by the physical needs of your ministry and forget the spiritual needs of those they serve.

### **Ministry Funding**

Ministries can always use more funds. Extra money allows them to reach more young people or to provide more services to the young people already involved in their ministries. Some ministries receive all of their funding from a local congregation, while others rely on individual and other types of donors for money. Unfortunately, some sources of funding come with restrictions that can quickly turn a ministry into a secular NGO or non-profit.

**NGO:** A non-profit organization that operates independently of any government. In some locations, this term is used instead of the terms “non-profit” or “charity.”

Government funding is often one of the most restrictive types of funding. It is tempting to accept government funding because the amounts of money provided are often large and government funding is often more reliable than individual donors. Most government funding comes with strict restrictions on how religion can be used in any organization receiving them. Before agreeing to accept government money, read any restrictions carefully. Be honest about how much those restrictions will hamper your ability to teach others about Jesus. Many times, ministries will be more impactful by refusing government funds and allowing God to help them find unrestricted funding from other sources. You may grow more slowly than you had hoped, but often slower growth also helps your ministry learn how to be more effective before potentially making mistakes that impact large numbers of people.

Grants from foundations are another source of funding for ministries that often come with some restrictions. These restrictions may be buried in the information about the organization and may not be obvious on any application they may require. Because foundations are often controlled by families or a board of directors, funding can sometimes be withdrawn at the whim of someone who becomes unhappy with the choices your ministry makes. Or they may try to micromanage your ministry by tying future funding to your ministry's agreement to comply with their demands. In addition, some foundations put restrictions on their funds and only allow them to be used for a specific purpose. Any unused funds cannot be shifted to another need in your ministry, but must be returned to the foundation. While not all foundation funding is problematic, make sure you thoroughly understand any restrictions and requirements before applying for funding.

### **Partnering With NGOs, Secular Non-Profits and Faith Based Ministries**

If your ministry begins making a positive impact in the community, you may be approached by an NGO, secular non-profit or faith based ministry to partner with them in some way. Surprisingly, often these organizations are larger than the ministry approached, but have not been as effective or want to share a resource you have which they lack. Because these organizations are often secular, they may want your ministry to make changes during the activities you do together.

Partnering is one of the most subtle ways a ministry can become secular over time. Often the request is merely for your ministry to minimize some of the biblical teaching you normally provide. They may tell your ministry that you can still talk about God and the Bible, but cannot proselytize. Over time, the benefits of partnering with a larger organization can seem to outweigh the need to teach people about what God wants them to do. Slowly, more and more spiritual things are eliminated until only the thinnest veneer of ministry remains.

Faith based organizations are often the most difficult to navigate successfully. These organizations are comprised of groups from various denominations or even religions. The more diverse the groups are within the organization, the more likely your ministry will be asked to eliminate some or all of the religious instruction you provide. Before becoming involved with a faith based organization, it is important to understand the identity of the other religious groups in the organization. What benefits will you get by working together? What is the risk of the people to whom you are already ministering being exposed to false doctrine? What restrictions will be placed on what you can teach both the people you are already serving and any new ones you meet through the organization? Contemplate all of the pros and cons carefully, remembering to consider what might happen in the future if your involvement continues.

### **Conclusion**

The reality is that without proper safeguards, your ministry will become secular over time. One day you may realize your ministry no longer attempts to teach anyone the Gospel message nor encourages them to take the next step in their faith journey. Your ministry is now only meeting the felt needs of marginalized children, while largely ignoring their more important spiritual needs. Taking the time to be intentional in carrying out all of God's purposes for your ministry will help it truly be what God meant it to be.

### **Study Questions**

1. What are several ways ministries become secularized over time?
2. What is a godly strategic plan and how is it different from a standard business strategic plan?
3. What are some core values for your ministry?
4. What are some safe guards you can put in place to make it less likely that your ministry will become secularized?

## **Afterword**

Over a billion children around the world are living lives with problems that may seem insurmountable. Lives that are often unseen and unsupported. Lives that are so marginalized, the children living them may never even hear the name of Jesus, much less be given opportunities to learn about him. Your ministry can't serve all of those one billion children. You can, however, serve the marginalized children in your neighborhood.

Ministering to marginalized children is not easy. At times, it will be exhausting and heartbreaking. If your ministry does not serve these children and teach them the things God wants them to know, however, it is highly unlikely anyone else ever will. Your love for these children and any family they may have will introduce them to God, who loves them dearly. Ministering to them will cause many to want to learn more about God, whom you serve.

Using the information in this book will prepare you to serve marginalized children effectively, while also avoiding many of the common pitfalls. The information itself cannot help any child, however. Your ministry must take it and step out on faith to seek, serve and save the children who are marginalized in your world. May God bless you in your efforts!

## Appendix 1 - Safety Precautions When Ministering to Children

When ministering to any group of children, keeping them safe should be one of your top priorities. There are certain safety standards that are generally considered to be best practices when working with children. In the case of children who are marginalized, their additional needs often create a corresponding need for safety measures that go beyond the norm. While the standards listed below are generally agreed upon around the world, your locality may have additional rules, standards and laws your ministry must follow to be in compliance. Always check with local authorities for the standards with which your ministry will be expected to comply. When those standards are below those in this appendix, every effort should be made to meet the higher level of safety standards.

Groups that license and supervise childcare and educational institutions have developed what they consider to be the minimum safe ratios of adults to children<sup>128</sup>. Understandably, older children need fewer adults helping them than infants or younger children. The recommended adult to child ratio for each age group is as follows:

- **Birth to 2 years:** one adult for every three children
- **Ages 2-3 years:** one adult for every four children
- **Ages 4-8 years:** one adult for every six children
- **Ages 9-12 years:** one adult for every eight children

These ratios were created with the average child in mind. You may be ministering to children who need more adult assistance and guidance. In some cases, your ministry may need one adult volunteer for every child. The ratios given above should be considered the very minimum standard. If at all possible, you should plan on having a minimum of two unrelated adults in every grouping of children. Even if the group size only requires one adult, having that extra adult provides another layer of assistance for both emergencies and regular classroom needs.

Unfortunately, there are occasionally people who offer to volunteer for children's ministry because they want to take advantage of children and hurt them in some way. These predators want to use children for their own sinful purposes. They often volunteer to serve in ministries because they believe Christians are less likely to run background checks and will give them easy, unsupervised or unmonitored access to children. When these predators encounter a rigorous screening process, they will often quickly move on to another organization.

It may be tempting to skip the screening process with volunteers you have known for some time. Unfortunately, we do not always know people as well as we think we do. Ministers and long time, trusted volunteers all over the world have been caught preying on children.

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<sup>128</sup> National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. "Recommended Adult to Child Ratios."



Thankfully, the numbers of these predators are relatively small, but for the sake of the children served by your ministry, it is important to screen everyone who will have any contact with them.

Your screening of volunteers should require potential volunteers to complete an application with contact information, education, past church affiliations, and any applicable work or volunteer experiences. They should also be required to sign a statement that they have never been arrested or convicted of a crime against a minor under the age of eighteen.

If your volunteers are visiting or moving from the United States or other countries where it is possible to run a criminal records check, they should have their results sent to you directly by the agency conducting the search. Wealthy predators will often travel to other countries to prey on young people. They may choose to pose as a temporary or permanent volunteer in your ministry. While criminal records checks only show convictions for felonies, they are inexpensive and serve as a deterrent to predators.

Whether or not you can access a criminal records check on your volunteers, you should ask them to provide personal references you can contact. If they have moved from another area as an adult, at least one of those references should be someone in their previous location. Preferably, they should also provide at least one reference who has seen them work with children in the past as either a volunteer or an employee.

When checking references, it is important to specifically ask the reference for one way in which the potential volunteer could improve. Many people are uncomfortable sharing negative information about someone. If you ask a more generic question about problem areas, you will often get an answer that is not helpful and may be hiding information you need to know. Asking for a specific area needing improvement, however, often yields information about potential problems the person may cause as a volunteer.

Any potentially negative information you discover when checking references may not be that the person will harm children. It could also be about their abilities to work well with others, their dependability, their lack of Bible knowledge or other information that could impact your ministry in some way. Often this knowledge will allow you to train or provide tools that can help the potential volunteer compensate for his or her weaknesses. Otherwise, you may not find out about potential issues until they have already negatively impacted your ministry.

## Template for Safety Policies for a Children's Ministry

This is merely one example of possible safety policies for a ministry to children. Please check with your ministry's lawyers, insurance carriers and advisors for specific changes and corrections needed for your particular program.

XYZ Ministry values the safety and well being of our students. The following guidelines are our expectations for classroom management.

- XYZ Ministry has an open door policy. We require classroom doors without windows in them to be open at all times.
- XYZ Ministry staff and/or permanent volunteers may come into your classroom at any time. They may offer assistance or observe your class.
- Parents of your students may observe your class if they have received prior permission from the XYZ Ministry staff. The staff will inform you when they have given permission to a parent to observe your class.
- Physical/corporate correction is not allowed under any circumstance.
- Cursing, demeaning comments, insults and other ugly speech are not allowed under any circumstance.
- We encourage you to require our students to follow XYZ Ministry rules:
  - Do not talk when someone is giving instructions or teaching a lesson.
  - Raise your hand if you have a question or need help.
  - If an activity allows talking, movement and/or noise, you are still expected to be respectful of others.
  - Do not use your words to be disrespectful or hurt others.
  - Do not use physical violence or force against others.
  - Follow instructions given by leaders, teachers and others placed in authority over you, unless they violate our ministry rules or God's laws.
- If a student disobeys rules or does not follow instructions, they are to be given only one reminder.
- If a student is openly disrespectful or disobedient, please let our floater know as quickly as possible. The floater will determine appropriate consequences. If you become a permanent volunteer, you will be given training on giving appropriate consequences to students.
- If you encounter a problem not addressed by these guidelines or have any questions, please contact Joe ABC.

## Appendix 2 - Empathy Activity Ideas

When ministering to marginalized children, it can be helpful to do activities with volunteers, members of the congregation and/or other children involved in your ministry to help them develop greater empathy. The activity ideas below are adaptable for all ages.

**Walking In Their Shoes** - Bring in various types and sizes of footwear. To make the experience more meaningful, have various people outside of the group loan you a pair of shoes to use. Try to get as wide a variety of people as possible. Have participants discuss how they imagine the person wearing those shoes experiences life. What happens during their day? What problems do they experience? What brings them joy? Then reveal the actual owner of the shoes. Do they want to change their answers? What role did making assumptions play in their answers both before and after knowing the owner of the shoes?

**A Day In The Life** - Have participants answer questions about the day in the life of the student or students who will be joining your ministry. Include questions about things like what they hear when they wake up, and what they have for breakfast, what they enjoy doing in their free time, etc. Then have the new students share the actual answers (or their caregiver if they are non-verbal and have no communication device). How much did they assume without getting to know the person first? What surprised them about the person's actual life? What things do they have in common with the new students?

**Anchor Chart** - Take one very large piece of paper or have each individual create their own anchor chart. What words and phrases can they use to describe the lives of the new students, how they plan to minister to them or any other topics you believe should be discussed. As you get to know the new students and minister to them, what words and phrases need to be removed? What should be added?

**Empathy Building Book Club** - Have participants read various books written by or about children with struggles and/or challenges similar to those of the new children to whom you will be ministering. After everyone has read a book, discuss what everyone learned and what additional questions it brought to mind.

**Immersion Experiences** - Have participants spend time with an adult who faced similar challenges to your new students as a child. Have them tell their story. Encourage them to share tips of things to do or not do to be more effective. Encourage the speaker to arrange experiences that can give participants a better understanding of what life may be like for the new students.

**Through My Eyes** - Have participants design a work of art that depicts life as the new students would see it. Once the students are better known, have them and the participants create new works of art. Compare the artwork of participants to that of the children whose worlds they were supposed to be depicting. Were their works of art similar? What do they

need to do to get to know the student whose world they attempted to depict better, so they will understand their world more accurately?

## Appendix 3 - Bloom's Taxonomy

One of the ways to differentiate your Bible curriculum for children in the same class who are on a variety of academic levels is by asking questions of varying difficulties. By making use of Bloom's taxonomy, you can develop questions that will be easy enough for struggling students and challenging enough for students who have a mastery of the topics covered in a particular Bible lesson.

One of the first things an education major learns is Bloom's Taxonomy. Or you may have heard a teacher throw around the term "scaffolding". Both communicate the idea that there are different levels of learning and understanding. Over time you want to plan questions and activities which will move your students' understanding of the Bible and godly principles from the lower levels to the higher ones.

So what are the levels in Bloom's Taxonomy? What does each mean and how can you move your students from one level to the next? Here are the basics of Bloom's Taxonomy:

**Remembering** - The student is encouraged to remember the basic facts of what has been taught. Unfortunately, most Bible classes for children and even teens can get stuck on this level and never move past it. This means students can quote facts from the Bible, but have no idea what they mean or how to apply them in their own lives. Sample questions: Who was on the Ark? How many tribes were there in Israel? In what country were the Israelites slaves? Any basic question, which asks your students to recall details of the story will fit in this category. This category covers some (but not all) of the basic reporter's questions – who? what? when? and where?

**Understanding** - In understanding, the student is encouraged to put the facts learned into their own words. Christianity has some difficult concepts and words. Just because your student can remember someone was called righteous, does not mean he understands what righteousness is. Sample Questions: What does righteousness mean? Can you give me an example of someone in the Bible who was gentle? Can you tell me in your own words what it means to be the light of the world? These questions will help your students communicate to you what they do and do not understand about what you have taught them. It is one thing to recite the facts, but facts are useless if the information has no meaning to your student.

**Applying** - Some Bible classes for children will include a bit of application. This should actually be a major part of every Bible lesson. Can your student tell you how to take the information in the Bible lesson and put it into practice in her daily life? Honestly, if your students can't tell you practical ways to use what you have taught them, the lesson you have taught has been rendered practically useless. Sample Questions: What can you do to serve others like Tabitha? How can you share your faith and the changes it has meant in your life like the Apostle Paul? Your goal is to have your students take the information they

now understand and figure out how to apply it in their everyday life. Bible knowledge not applied is wasted.

**Analyzing** - Can your students compare the actions of the Apostle Paul to the Fruit of the Spirit? How did Peter and the other Apostles use the Armor of God in their ministry in Acts? Can your students look at their own lives and analyze their behaviors and choices in light of God's commands and principles? This is a skill rarely taught to young people, but so vital for living the Christian life. Sample questions: Why do you think the mother of James and John was concerned about their place next to Jesus? How did Simon the Sorcerer and Cornelius handle the idea of gifts from the Holy Spirit differently? Why did Paul and Peter react to the Jewish Christians' demands differently? These types of questions get your students to examine the scriptures more closely. Comparing and analyzing the actions of godly (and ungodly) men and women over time will help your students begin to notice patterns. Finding and mimicking the godly patterns can help your students make better choices in their own lives.

**Evaluating** - Can your students defend why they believe what they believe about God and the Bible? We hear discussions of teens making their parent's faith their own, but we rarely show them how. I love the words generally associated with this level of the taxonomy: appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, evaluate. Teaching your students to evaluate God's teachings, select to support and value them and helping them learn how to defend their faith are all essential tools you can give them. It can also help them avoid false teachings by helping them learn how to take something someone claims is from God and teaching them how to evaluate it in light of the Bible. Sample Questions: How important is showing love to others in Christianity? How important is your faith in your life? How trustworthy is the Bible? How do we know this is what God wants for our lives? This level is scary for many people, but it shouldn't be. To truly make Christianity their identity and their lifestyle, your students will have to evaluate what they have learned from the Bible. They have to embrace God as the foundation of their lives and their choices. Only then will their faith truly become their own and not just a habit or a to-do list.

**Creating** - This is my favorite level and one seldom reached in Bible classes with kids and teens. We aren't talking about coloring pages or foam cutouts. What we are talking about is life changing, world- changing creativity. Can your students take God's Words and create a life, which is a life of ministry – creating ways to serve others and share their faith? If you can get your students to this level of learning, you have given them the tools they will need to be active, productive Christians in God's Kingdom. Sample questions: What are some ways to serve others and share our faith? Can you think of a way to solve xyz problem in the world that also honors God and points others to Him? How can you design your life so you are glorifying God in everything you do? These questions may seem better suited for teens and adults. In some ways, these higher-level questions should be questions Christians continue to ask themselves throughout their lives. With these questions, even young children can be encouraged to start dreaming godly dreams for their lives.

Remember, this is a hierarchy. Every student won't be ready for every level of these questions during each class time. Some of your students may never be able to shape answers for some of the levels while they are in your class. The importance is not always in the answers, although those can give you important insight into their hearts. Rather, your questions will encourage them to start thinking about God in ways requiring more active knowledge and understanding than they currently have. So ask questions on multiple levels and see if you don't begin to notice a difference in their answers over time. Your students may just surprise you!

## Appendix 4 - Gift Identification and Usage for Children With Special Needs

People often assume children with special needs are not given gifts by God that can be used in service to Him. This is far from the truth. The following tools will help you identify the gifts God has given various children with special needs and how those gifts can be developed and used to serve God. Helping children with special needs identify, develop and use their gifts from God can give them a sense of purpose and belonging in God's Kingdom and should be a top priority for those ministering to them.

God can give many talents. Often Christians may believe children with special needs did not receive a gift from God because their gift is one that may be more subtle or unusual than a more obvious gift like art or teaching. The following is a list of some of the gifts a child with special needs may receive from God that can be used in service to Him. Do not assume a child with special needs does not have a gift because it appears he or she is unable to do these things. People with special needs have accomplished amazing things when others have taken the time and energy to help them find alternate ways of doing tasks using the abilities they do have. Even God-given gifts and talents will need development (including training) to be fully realized.

Ability to Focus	Humor
Accounting	Imagination
Adaptability	Intelligence
Athletic Ability	Juggling
Audio Visual	Listening
Automobile Repair	Marketing
Analyzing	Math
Art	Medicine
Asking Questions	Mercy
Building	Music
Computer Coding	Organizing
Cooking	Photography
Counseling	Problem Solving
Crafts, Wood Working	Public Speaking
Decorating	Research
Detail Oriented	Risk Management
Drama	Science
Editing	Self Control
Emotional Intelligence	Service
Encouragement	Social Media
Enthusiasm	Stewardship
Faith Sharing	Teaching
Fashion/Clothing	Time Management
Generosity	Typing
Greeting/Outreach, Networking	Video Production
Human Resources/Talent Identification	Writing



## Ministry Ideas for Children With Special Needs

Many congregations struggle with integrating children into the ministries of the church. This is even more pronounced if the children have special needs. Childhood is the best time to begin mentoring young people on the ways they can serve God, including serving others and sharing their faith. Below are only a few ideas for engaging children with special needs in meaningful ministry.

- **Greeting** - Even children who are non-verbal can often smile and make people feel welcome. Children with certain special needs may be naturally outgoing, friendly and accepting - making them amazing greeters!
- **Service projects** - Depending upon their motor skills, many children with special needs will be able to help gather and package supplies, care packages and goodie bags given in service to others. Some children may need a bit of assistance, while others can do these types of projects independently.
- **Singing** - Children with special needs who are verbal are often as capable of singing in ministry as well as any other young person. Some may have perfect pitch and a great memory for lyrics and tunes - even if they struggle academically.
- **Communion, prayer and other acts of worship** - If young people are allowed to pass communion trays, read scriptures or lead prayers, don't assume a young person with special needs is incapable of participating, too. Consider possible adaptations that may be necessary before rejecting the idea.
- **Sharing their faith** - Young people with special needs have a unique perspective and experiences that are not necessarily common to all young people. Allowing them to share how God has helped them through their challenges or used them to serve Him can be extremely encouraging to others - whether or not they too have special needs.
- **Repetitive tasks** - Children with certain special needs are able to do repetitive tasks without getting distracted or bored. Putting them in charge of tasks around the ministry that require focus and patience may be ideal.
- **Audiovisual** - Some children with special needs rely heavily on technology to navigate their world. They may be interested and savvy enough to learn how to assist with audiovisual needs during worship services or events.
- **Encouragement** - Some children with special needs are natural encouragers. Giving them an opportunity to encourage others as their ministry can help both the child and those he or she encourages.
- **Prayer ministry** - Prayer is something a child can do regardless of many special needs. Encouraging others to give them prayer requests and tasking them with praying for those requests can work well.
- **Discernment/honesty** - Young people with certain special needs may be very observant and honest. While that honesty can come with no filters, their special needs can make people who would normally reject their advice more open to it.

Some young people with special needs will need someone creative to help them find ways to adapt the tasks they need to complete in ministry so they are able to participate as fully as possible. Independent service to God is the ultimate goal. Helping children with special needs find ways to minister independently can help them find their place and purpose in God's Kingdom.

## Appendix 5 - Template Worksheet for Providing Assistance for Felt Needs

Ministries often have limited resources to meet the felt needs of those to whom they minister. It is important to make wise choices that are as equitable as possible. Below you will find a worksheet you can use to help you make decisions about the assistance you are able to provide to the children and families to whom you minister.

1. How much money does your ministry have available to assist children and their families with felt needs?
2. Approximately how many families a year do you believe will request some form of assistance from you?
3. What is the average amount of assistance requested?
4. Given the answers to the questions above, what is the amount your ministry can afford to spend on average for each family who requests assistance in a given year?
5. Will your ministry focus on meeting specific felt needs, like food, clothing or assistive devices? If so, for which items is your ministry willing and able to provide assistance?
6. What boundaries does your ministry have in place to keep anyone from taking advantage of your ministry? (Application request, personal interview, proof of income and expenses, etc.)
7. What are common felt needs your ministry is asked to help meet?
8. What are other possible sources of helping the people to whom you minister meet these needs in your area? (Food banks, community and volunteer donations of goods, services and/or money, government assistance, etc.)
9. What procedures does your ministry have in place for keeping records of assistance requested, given and/or denied, in case they are requested by the government or some other entity?

It is important to note that many ministries providing assistance caution strongly against giving cash and gift cards as these can often be used for purposes other than what they were intended. If your ministry provides assistance only to those participating in your ministry, be careful to avoid giving preferential treatment to relatives of ministry leaders or other decisions that appear to show preferences for some members over others. If your ministry decides to provide assistance to members of the community not affiliated with your ministry or congregation, many governments will not allow you to discriminate against people based on their appearance, beliefs, etc. As long as anyone meets your basic requirements for providing information or meeting financial thresholds, they must be given the same assistance as everyone else.

## **Appendix 6 - Life Skills List**

Children who have been marginalized often have not had anyone teach them critical life skills. These skills can help them navigate the world and the Christian life more successfully. Some children will be able to learn, practice and master these skills before adulthood, while others may never master them. For children who struggle, it can be helpful to search online for a task analysis breakdown for the skill. A task analysis for brushing one's teeth for example, has seventeen smaller steps. For some children, mastering one of these steps can take days, weeks, months or even years. Every child will have his or her own speed of mastery and should be encouraged, not rushed or chastised if that speed is slower than for others served by your ministry.

- Planning and organization
- Transportation
- Health and medical
- Technology
- Emergencies
- Educational skills
- Career skills
- Creating a support network
- Food
- Cleaning and laundry
- Basic household repairs
- Yard work/gardening
- Financial
- Housing
- Holidays and traditions

### **Christian life skills:**

- Spiritual disciplines
- Gift discovery, development and use
- Christian community
- Money
- Christian character
- Christian attitudes
- Christian behaviors
- Serving others
- Faith sharing
- Boundaries
- Friends
- Dating and marriage
- Parenting
- Healing trauma and breaking the cycle

## Appendix 7 - Signs of Child Abuse and Neglect

While different cultures define acceptable methods for correcting children in varying ways, there is a worldwide standard for child abuse and neglect. Children are often reluctant to share what is happening in their home with those who may be able to help them. Often abuse and neglect leaves visible signs which can alert volunteers to the possible abuse or neglect of a child. These signs may be misinterpreted, however, and if child abuse is suspected the local authorities should be alerted so they are able to conduct any investigation deemed necessary.

Children often become injured in play and for other innocent causes. Abuse is usually suspected only when injuries are severe with no feasible explanation, repeated frequently - often with weak explanations, are hidden and the child appears frightened when the injuries are discovered or are accompanied with other behaviors indicating a child may be living in constant fear.

- Bruises
- Welts
- Burns (Especially from cigarettes)
- Cuts
- Multiple or repeated broken bones
- Multiple serious injuries at different states of healing (indicating time between serious injuries)
- Imprints on the child's body indicating being beaten by hand, belt, etc.
- Marks on the body indicating the child has been bound by ropes or other restraints
- Extreme hunger (Note: Poverty is not considered neglect in most places. This is hunger from being denied food when it is or could be available.)
- Very young children left at home with no supervision - especially for long periods of time
- Very young children demonstrating sexual behaviors children their age generally have no knowledge of
- Consistently wears dirty and inappropriate clothing for the weather
- Serious untreated medical and/or dental issues
- Child appears fearful of going home
- Child is fearful of being touched
- Child has bloody underwear (not from menstruation) or is bruised, torn in genital area
- Depression, low self esteem and other psychological issues (Note: These can result from causes other than abuse and neglect.)
- Running away from home

## Appendix 8 - Foster Parent Training Session Ideas

Parenting children from traumatic backgrounds has challenges that are unique. Parents fostering, adopting or parenting children from traumatic backgrounds can benefit from training sessions helping them develop necessary skills. Below is a list of training sessions parents have found helpful. For more information about the details of any particular training, contact Teach One Reach One Ministries ([www.teachonereachone.org](http://www.teachonereachone.org))

- Trauma's Impact on Children
- Parenting Children From Traumatic Backgrounds
- Setting Behavior Expectations and Consequences for Children From Traumatic Backgrounds
- Storytelling That Connects and Heals
- Managing the Educational Needs of Children From Traumatic Backgrounds
- Helping Hurting Children Heal
- Faith Development in Traumatized Children
- Using Games to Connect and Heal
- Raising a Child With (Autism, ADHD, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, etc.)
- Life Skills That Prepare Young People for Adulthood
- Advanced First Aid
- Advocating for Children
- Facilitating Healthy Attachment
- Preventing and De-escalating Crisis
- Self Care for Caretakers
- Healthy Child Development

## **Appendix 9 - Godly Play Supplies and Script Writing**

There are multiple websites dedicated to Godly Play. To make it easier for you to assemble your own Godly Play sets and write scripts that more accurately reflect scripture, the information below should give you a basic framework.

### **Supply List**

- Small, portable, shallow sandbox
- Playmats representing grasslands and ancient cities
- Small dolls or figurines dressed in appropriate clothing to represent people in Bible stories and modern stories
- Small trees, animals, ancient tents and clay houses, clay jars and other items in scale to the dolls or figurines. The actual items needed will depend upon the Bible story you are teaching.
- Small items in the various Parables like pearl, seeds, sheep, shepherd, donkey, people, etc.
- Water and containers to represent seas and rivers, boats, fishing nets, fish
- Bibles
- Art supplies like paper, crayons, markers, journals, paints, scissors, clay, glue sticks, etc.

### **Writing Scripts for Godly Play**

It is possible to find pre-written scripts for Godly Play online for free or to purchase. Some of these scripts may not meet your needs. Below is the basic framework for writing a Bible story script and a Parable script. Scripts are generally memorized and told from memory.

### **Writing a Godly Play Script for a Bible Story**

- Read the story in multiple versions of the Bible - including a children's Bible.
- Determine what play surface and items you will need for the child to act out the story.
- Write the story as simply as possible.
- Ask the following "wondering" questions during the script
  - I wonder what is your favorite part of the story?
  - I wonder what part of this story is most important?
  - I wonder where God is trying to speak to you in the story and what He wants you to know?
  - I wonder if there is something God wants you to do after you hear this story?

## **Writing a Godly Play Script for a Parable**

- Read the story in multiple versions of the Bible - including a children's Bible.
- Determine what play surface and items you will need for the child to act out the story.
- Write the story as simply as possible.
- Ask the following "wondering" questions during the script
  - I wonder what this (pearl, mustard seed, etc.) could represent?
  - I wonder what God wants you to learn from this Parable?
  - I wonder if there is something God wants you to do after hearing the Parable?



## **Appendix 10 - Creating a Godly Strategic Plan**

A God-Driven Strategic Plan can help your ministry reach its godly potential. It acknowledges God's wisdom and timing, allowing it to work through your observations and ideas. The plan can help improve effectiveness, clarify expectations, capture unshared nudgings of the Holy Spirit, and reduce conflicts and misunderstandings. A God-Driven Strategic Plan is NOT writing a standard business strategic plan, praying over it and then ignoring the scriptures, people, and circumstances that indicate God may want you to change your plan in some way. Done carefully, it is truly a God-Driven Strategic Plan.

### **Before You Start**

- Have everyone involved with your ministry pray for the young people you serve, their families, and your ministry. You may choose to have a special period of prayer and fasting before beginning the planning process.
- Decide who will be involved in capturing information provided by various sources and craft the wording for the final document. Ideally, this should be a committee that includes a wide variety of viewpoints.
- Conduct a Ministry Listening Tour that targets staff, volunteers, parents, students, and Church leadership. You may also consider including community members in your listening tour.
- Decide on a time frame for completing the initial God-Driven Strategic Plan and implementing the first action items.
- Determine how often the plan will be reviewed and any needed changes made. This should happen frequently to capture issues and opportunities as they occur.

### **Conducting a Strategic Planning Session**

- The committee should plan to spend at least 2-3 hours in one session to create the beginnings of the plan. Several additional sessions may be needed to complete the plan.
- Prayer and meditating on scripture should be a major part of the process before and during the session.
- To make the process more efficient, create a large piece of paper for each category of the plan. Have sticky notes available so each committee member can capture their thoughts and place them on the current category being discussed.
- For each category, define what you want to know before allowing suggestions to be written and added to the sheet for that category.
- If you can, allow participants to share the thoughts they have written on their sticky notes with the committee. You will also need to add information gathered during the listening tour to the various categories.
- This initial process should not include critiques of responses. Instead it is an information gathering session.

## Creating a God-Driven Strategic Plan

- The Problem
  - List all of the problems the young people served by your ministry face that could keep them from building strong spiritual foundations and reaching their godly potential.
  - Don't assign responsibility for these problems. We all need to take some ownership for the issues facing young people. Attacking others does not help in solving the problems.
  - Have participants commit to praying over these problems for a period of time or indefinitely. (Nehemiah 1 gives a great example of this type of prayer.)
- The Vision
  - The Vision is your dream of the "perfect" world, where all of the problems you listed are solved. What positive things are now happening?
  - The Vision must accurately reflect God's vision for the young people served by your ministry.
  - The final Vision should be 20 – 40 words, clear and inspirational. Don't focus on that in this initial meeting. Have a talented writer in your ministry take your thoughts and craft the final statement.
  - Your Vision is actually more complex than the final statement. Create a space where those ideas are kept in view – a vision board of some sort, reminding everyone of the full Vision.
- The Mission
  - Your ministry cannot solve all of the problems you listed in order to create your vision. The Mission defines which problems your ministry is willing to help solve.
  - Remember, focus is important. If your ministry tries to solve more problems than it can realistically handle, you probably won't be very effective in any area. Dream big godly dreams, but let God guide them.
  - The final Mission should be captured in one or two sentences about the problem(s) your ministry is committing to help solve.
- Core Beliefs
  - These are the non-negotiables of your ministry and should be based on scripture. Everything else in your ministry should be checked to make sure these core values are being met.
  - Include important priorities like building strong spiritual foundations and baptism. If you don't include these, studies have shown your ministry will become secular over time.
  - If you choose to include non-biblical values like educational best practices, be sure to indicate these are not from scripture and can therefore be changed in the future if needed.
  - Watch for hidden agendas and be respectful of the decisions of your Elders. Keep I Corinthians 10:23 in mind as you finalize your core values.

- Core values should be reviewed and discussed constantly with volunteers, parents and students, if you want them to be practiced. Otherwise, they will fade and your ministry is in danger of becoming secular.
- Strengths
  - What is your ministry doing well and what are your assets (including volunteers)?
- Weaknesses
  - What weaknesses does your ministry have currently?
  - Be careful not to make this personal. There may be a lot of reasons WHY you have these weaknesses, but personal attacks are not productive.
  - Examine your ministry carefully for systemic weaknesses in gift identification, training, feedback, support and/or self-discipline.
- Threats
  - Threats are things that could negatively impact your ministry. Some may be remote possibilities, but being prepared can lessen their impact should they occur.
  - Include outside factors like a military base or factory closing that could have a negative impact on population, as well as natural disasters common in your area.
- Opportunities
  - Capture every idea anyone has for your ministry. There should be no filtering at this point. Big godly dreams should be encouraged.
  - The Holy Spirit is often most evident in this part of the process. Encourage everyone to include every idea they have and look for patterns. At times, a new ministry idea will have occurred to several people and your congregation may have the right mix of volunteers and gifts for it to be successful. Often these ministries never happen because no one has had the courage to mention their ideas.
  - Opportunities can include improving or enhancing your ministry to those whom you already serve, or new outreach ministries targeting the community.
- Goals
  - Goals should be as specific and measurable as possible. God can do anything, but if you don't have measurable goals you can have unnecessary disagreements on whether or not you are reaching them. If your goals aren't specific, you may find everyone has a different idea of what the goal actually means, causing problems in a variety of areas. Capture all long-term and short-term goals.
  - Prioritize your goals. This may occur later in the process of creating your plan, but it is crucial that at some point your goals are prioritized. Your ministry should be focused on no more than 3-5 goals at one time. As one goal is completed, you will add the next goal on the priority list.

- Remember, goals are not action plans. Each goal may require numerous actions to complete. This will be addressed in the next category. Goals should be one or two sentences.
- Action Plans
  - This is a crucial area often missed. For each goal, every step needed to complete that goal should be listed.
  - For the first 3-5 goals on your priority list, assign responsibilities for each task and deadlines. Without these, your action items may never be completed.
  - Test new ministry ideas in small ways before investing a lot of resources. After the test, your ministry can make needed adjustments or decide to end the experiment with fewer negative consequences.

### **After a Strategic Planning Session**

- Have someone type all of the information shared in a strategic plan format. Share this document with as many people as possible for their feedback.
- Conduct follow-up planning sessions as needed to incorporate feedback and refine your plan.
- Discuss how to communicate and implement your plan effectively in your environment.

### **After You Have Begun Implementing Your Strategic Plan**

- Regular assessment and feedback on your plan is essential. Don't let your enthusiasm blind you to needed changes.
- Remember spiritual assessment is difficult. Numbers aren't always the best or only ways to measure success.
- Conduct regular listening tours with staff, volunteers, parents, students and Church leaders to determine what feedback there is on your ministry.
- Humbly consider all feedback for accuracy and value.
- Make necessary changes to your plan.
- Remember, God's timing is perfect. Your initial goal may be in God's Plan, but for later. If a goal still has value, try it again at a later date.
- Reframe any perceived failures as directed by God. He is preventing you from wasting more valuable resources on something that was not in His Plan for your ministry.

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