



HEALING FOR EMOTIONALLY WOUNDED CHILDREN

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Children are not short adults and how they express their fear, sadness, anxiety, or anger is different than it is for grown-ups. How do children "tell us" that they are stressed? At times by regressing to a younger developmental age, i.e. 6 year olds acting like 2 year olds; by being more clingy; by tummy aches; by difficulty learning at school; in poor attention spans; by tantrums; by limited ability to tolerate frustration in play with other children, perhaps by withdrawal, or any other change from the child's usual behavior. A part of normal development is the child's belief that she causes the events that happen to her. The child that is sexually abused at a young age may assume that there is something about her that allowed this to happen, and, this belief can result in a sense of persistent shame. If the parent or children's worker experienced a similar trauma as a child it is easy to assume that all children respond as they personally did, but children are unique in how they "take on" hurts. Some children will cry and others will not. Both children may have been deeply hurt. In addition, we need caution to not look at the problem in isolation and attribute all of the child's behavior to the hurtful incident.

Helping children through the bumps of life requires first of all that we "get it". Children are profoundly impacted by stress in the family or specific trauma to themselves. The fact that they cannot adequately put it into words may allow some adults to ignore or minimize the feelings. An adult might say, "He was only 3 years old when the divorce occurred", as if there was some exemption because you were young. In fact, children usually have fewer resources for support, are more dependent on grown-ups, and are more vulnerable to the long-term impact of early trauma than adults. Adults who have in some way caused the stress, for example by parental fighting in the home, may minimize the impact in order to tolerate their own guilt.

Children's ministers have tender hearts toward children and a desire to help. When a child's behavior causes concern, the first response may be to track down a qualified counselor and offer his services to the child's parents. But in doing this, the children's minister may minimize the importance of their own relationship with the child and the power of healing that they can provide. Yes, some children do benefit from meeting with a professional, but most children can be supported best by the people who love them--parents, grandparents, and caring children's ministers.

So, what can the children's minister do:

- Remember that you don't work alone! No one knows better how to comfort than the Great Comforter. His power, wisdom, and love are available to you. Ps 143:10 "Show me what you want me to do and let your gentle Spirit lead me in the right path."
- Teach children that God knows all about the mad, sad, hurt feelings and listens when they pray. Psalm 56:3 says, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you."
- One of the primary measures of love felt by children is the amount of time the adult spends with them. Send a post card to the child during the week, phone and tell a silly joke, or, attend his soccer game.
- Involve men in children's ministry. An excellent women serving in children's ministry cannot fill the void that results when children do not have good men in their lives. 50% of children who attend church will live in a single parent home (usually with mother) at some point in their childhood and may have limited contact with their father.
- Provide opportunities for hard physical play at ministry activities. Tension in children can be reduced by playing basketball, swimming, running, jumping. Indoor stress reducers may include pounding clay or balloon stomps.
- Maintain structure in children's ministry. Structure provides security for stressed children. Get help if children are acting below their age and are disruptive during teaching time. A temporary assistant to sit close to the child can provide the support the child craves. Some children will enjoy "helping" the teacher tell the story and will be distracted from disruptive behavior.
- If the child is stressed it is likely that the parent is exhausted and emotionally drained. Don't judge or criticize or give advice Offer your warmth and kindness and a good hug. Tell the parent you love their child and are glad to have him in class.
- Don't push children to talk about their feelings. Children speak in their behavior, not words. It is our job to "hear" what is not spoken.
- Finally, it is important to NOT generalize future behavior by the current crisis, i.e. "he came from a broken home". The child is not a permanent victim.

Children can and do heal, and in part that healing will come from a loving children's minister who represents God, the ultimate lover of children. Children who learn that, "There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24) will grow in learning to trust Him for the "bumps" in life yet to come.