

Introduction

It's not easy losing a parent. Or dealing with life's many changes. Or going through a tragic loss.

It's difficult for adults.

But it's amplified for children.

"*Let the children come to me*" (Mark 10:14b). This can be hard when tragedy and trials damage children. You want to help them grow closer to Jesus through difficult situations, but you don't know how.

Although it isn't easy going through trials, it's also tough being on the outside and trying to help children in your ministry who are suffering.

You don't know what to do. You're worried about their feelings or stepping on their parents' toes or saying the exact *wrong* thing.

Of course you care—you love them! It isn't that you don't want to help—it's just that you don't know how.

Group's Emergency Response Handbook for Children's Ministry will help you come alongside children and families in your church who are facing tough times. From care and counseling tips, to practical ideas for your children's ministry, to what to say and what not to say, this book offers insight after insight into how to care for the hurting children in your church.

Of course, it'd be great if you never had to pick up this book! But the reality is that everyone faces tough times—including children and families in your children's ministry. And they need your help.

So when someone you love is going through the pain of parents divorcing, dealing with bullies, or walking through major life changes...it's time to pick up this guide. Use the Table of Contents to find the specific hurt you're concerned about, and then flip to that section.

Once there, you'll find a **real-life narrative**—a story from someone who's been there. Sometimes they're inspiring, and you'll read how the support and love of a children's minister sustained a child through a hard time. Other times they're disappointing and tell stories of children left alone during tragedy or rejected during trial. Either way, these stories will

show you the importance of devoted children's ministers.

Each section also includes **care and counseling tips** that will give you practical ideas for reaching out in love. From listening to children and families, to mediating in hurtful situations, to intentional reminiscing, these ideas will help you effectively support the hurting children in your ministry.

Next, you'll find **ministry tips** for your whole children's ministry or class. These practical ideas will help everyone support the hurting child or family during trials.

And finally, you'll find an invaluable section on **what to say and what not to say** to children touched by these situations. Children are very impressionable, and the words we use can help or hurt a child more than we know. This section will help you avoid the hurtful comments and use the helpful ones.

You'll also find useful boxes in each section that offer Scripture help, guidelines for referring your child or family to a professional counselor, and additional resources, such as books and Web sites, that you can use as you support your hurting child.

Our prayer for this book is that it will help you help a child during a difficult time. And in so doing, you'll help that child grow closer to Jesus because of the love you show.

The names and identifying information of the children and families who have shared their stories have been changed.

The information in this book is meant to be a guide for you to handle emergencies that children and families in your ministry face.

This is not professional advice meant to replace that which you would receive from licensed counselors or psychologists.

Abuse

Supporting Children Who Are Suffering

with counseling insights from LISA DOWNS, LPC
+ ministry tips from LARRY SHALLENBERGER

The Smith family, by all outward appearances, was the all-American, “all-church” family. Bob and Andrea were both working, professional parents, longtime church members, and deeply involved in church life. Andrea was an eight-year-member of the children’s ministry team. Bob served as an elder. Their three children, Sally, Justine, and Kyle, attended every program the children’s ministry had to offer. The view from the pew was that the Smiths had it all together.

Yet Bob was living proof that it’s impossible to profile a pedophile. Bob wasn’t the stereotypical seedy-looking guy patrolling his rusty van through school zones. Bob was a handsome realtor, connected on several community boards. And yet Bob’s computer was filled with child pornography.

Andrea discovered the child pornography quite by accident. When she confronted Bob, he responded with sharp denial and excuses.

“A malicious virus must have placed those pictures on my computer.”

Andrea wanted to believe him, and tried for several months. However, she had gnawing suspicions. Their sex life had been dead for, well, years. When Bob did ask for sex, he made requests that repulsed Andrea. Bob frequently slept in each of the children’s bedrooms, saying Andrea was a

loud snorer. Even though Andrea wondered if Bob had abused the children, she didn't have the emotional strength to face that possibility. Andrea struggled with assertiveness—partly because she had survived deep hurts from her own family growing up. Believing that her husband was capable of betraying *his* family was a thought too terrible to think.

That is, until one night when Andrea decided to check Bob's computer. Again, the computer was filled with pornography. Andrea's heart sank. That week, Andrea found a quiet moment to talk to each of her children, and her worse fears were confirmed. Both Sally and Justine told her, in guarded sentences, that their father had touched them sexually. Kyle, the youngest, refused to talk and became angry when Andrea pressed him for information.

Crushed, Andrea confided in the senior pastor for support. The pastor wisely counseled Andrea to separate from Bob and to demand he leave the home. The pastor also insisted that Andrea call the police and report the child pornography on the computer and the abuse. At church, they told only the children's pastor of the situation. It wasn't necessary to share the information with the volunteer team.

The senior pastor helped Andrea refer the three children to professional counseling to help them feel safe and begin to talk about the abuse. As a result of Justine's disclosures during private counseling, criminal charges were filed against Bob.

Bob tried, on a few occasions, to make contact with his children at the church. It's possible that Bob's unauthorized attempts to contact the children were attempts to either bribe or intimidate his children into silence. The church was able to deny Bob access to his children because they already had strict pick-up and dismissal policies in place.

Bob tried to woo Andrea, perhaps in an attempt to get her to drop the charges. When that approach didn't work, Bob angrily blamed his wife for the abuse, claiming that it was her inadequacies in the bedroom that drove him to sexual deviancy. However, through the support of caring pastors and trusted friends at church, Andrea was able to resist Bob's varied approaches to control her.

During the months leading up to the trial, the church provided Andrea with the emotional scaffolding she needed to take care of herself and her

children. Plus, the church became a safe, fun place for the children to temporarily escape the realities of their family and to learn about the love and comfort that Jesus offers.

When the day finally came for Justine to testify against her father, a few of the pastors and family friends came to the courthouse to provide emotional support to both Justine and Andrea. Even with this support, Justine was unable to provide compelling testimony against her father. The pressures were simply too much for a child to handle.

Bob did eventually serve prison time for possessing child pornography. And through the process of protecting her children, Andrea confronted her own childhood issues. She's been faithful in making sure her children get the help they need. Justine and Sally are both teenagers now, and both benefited from years of counseling to deal with their father's betrayal. Kyle is in the middle school ministry. He deals with academic problems and occasionally fights with other children. Kyle hasn't been as open as his sisters in counseling and will someday still need to confront the abuse that his counselors suspect happened.

While this story doesn't end with "and they lived happily ever after," the Smiths are grateful for the support and help they received at church. They learned that the church can be a place of healing and love, and perhaps one day they can use this trial to help another family in trouble.



Care and Counseling Tips

THE BASICS

Child abuse is shocking and all too common. Someone is abusive if he or she fails to nurture a child, physically injures a child, or relates sexually to a child. Physical abuse often garners the most attention in the news, but the more subtle forms of abuse, such as neglect and emotional abuse, can be just as detrimental. The first step in helping abused or neglected children is learning to recognize the signs of child abuse and neglect.

Be aware that these signs may not always point to child abuse.

TYPES OF CHILD ABUSE

+ Emotional

Emotional abuse is any attitude, behavior, or failure to act that interferes with a child's mental health or social development. It can range from a simple verbal insult to an extreme form of punishment. Emotional abuse is almost always present when other forms of abuse are present. Emotional abuse can have the deepest effect on the mental health of a child.

Signs: apathy (not caring), depression, choosing not to play or be involved in activities, hostility, aggression

+ Neglect

Neglect is a common type of child abuse. More children suffer from neglect than from physical and sexual abuse combined. Yet victims of neglect often go unnoticed because neglect is an act of omission. The child may be ignored, not fed, or have medical needs that are left untreated. A single incident of neglect might not be considered child abuse, but repeated neglect is definitely abuse.

Signs: lack of supervision, not being properly dressed for weather, wearing the same clothes repeatedly, hoarding food, complaints of constant hunger, frequent illness due to poor nutrition or lack of proper medical attention.

+ Physical

Physical abuse is defined as any injury to a child that is a result of physical aggression. This aggression may include slapping, beating, or hitting a child, as well as shaking, biting, or kicking. Children who survive physical abuse are left with severe emotional scars. And as we all know from news accounts, not all children survive physical abuse.

Signs: welts, bruises, or burns, often in unusual places on the body such as the child's back, eyes, mouth, or thighs

+ Sexual

Sexual abuse is any form of sexual act between an adult and a child. Adults who sexually abuse children may do so by fondling or touching private body parts. They may force a child to undress or force a child to watch them undress. Adults who sexually abuse may also force a child to watch others engage in sexual intercourse or introduce them to pornography.

Signs: withdrawing, refusing to engage socially, refusing to undress for sports or other activities, exaggerated interest in sex, acting out sexually with other children, becoming seductive toward others, fear of contact such as a pat on the arm or hug, masturbation, acting out sex with dolls or toys

SCRIPTURE HELP

+ **2 Samuel 22:2-4**

+ **Psalms 23**

+ **Psalms 55**

+ **Psalms 61:3**

+ **Psalms 82:3-4**

+ **Proverbs 31:8-9**

+ **Jeremiah 29:11-13**

+ **Romans 8:15-16**

+ **Ephesians 6:1-4**

+ **1 Peter 5:7**

+ **Revelation 21:4**