

## Pastoral Care with Children

### Tips and Tools

Caring for those connected to a congregation is not reserved for those who are adult members or those who are ordained to particular offices of the church. In fact, educators and volunteers play an important role in caring with children. Caring with implies that we are accompanying a child through a difficult life circumstance. Research into Adverse Childhood Experiences has found that even under the difficult circumstances that these experiences represent that the presence of one caring adult can buffer the effects of these events on children and increase their resilience.

#### **Essential ingredients of care with children**

Care with children requires some of the same essential ingredients as good pastoral care with adults. There are six foundational elements to good pastoral care with children: empathy, trust, safety, noticing, respectful relating, and vulnerability. (To learn more about each of these ingredients please reference the [Compass Point](#).)

#### **Tools for caring with children**

Further, tools for caring with children include: accessible language, listening for children's spiritual meaning-making in their play or casual conversations, and practicing reciprocal vulnerability.

#### Accessible language

Care with children requires careful attention to the differing verbal and embodied language used by children. At times, children's language skills are more limited than adults. For example, children may possess a limited range of words to describe emotions or to explore their attempts to make meaning. The effects of limited language can be readily seen when adults use euphemisms to describe death – such as lost or put to sleep – which have different meanings to children. When caring with children, avoid the use of euphemisms. Rather, attune to the child's use of language, include embodied actions to avoid miscommunication and encourage the child's participation in the care relationship.

#### Listening for children's meaning-making

Children are capable of complex moments of meaning-making. These moments are often disguised in times of creative play or casual conversations. This nature of children's meaning-making underscores the need for attentive listening. Children may not be forthcoming with a problem or their attempts to make meaning of their world; it is incumbent upon others (including adults) to notice. Paying attention to a child's behavior is one way that adults and others can tell a child is struggling.

#### Practicing Reciprocal Vulnerability

Children more readily embrace their vulnerability (defined here as the ability to be changed by the environment or people encountered). Meanwhile, adults often rely heavily on our identities and patterns of behavior as adults who must control or teach children. When adults embrace the sense that they, too, can be vulnerable to being changed in their interaction with a child, they are able to engage more playfully with children.

## **How to use these tools?**

When we engage in pastoral care with adults, we often invite them to have coffee, share a meal, or take a walk with us. We do this because it gives a structure and focus besides the conversation. With children, a similar structure and focus can be achieved through playing, drawing, or reading a book.

### Tips:

Have a selection of activities available and let the child choose.

1. Open-ended activities like building with legos or play-doh or drawing on blank paper are better for most kids. Simple card games like Go Fish and Uno can also be effective activities.
2. Have enough supplies that you will also be able to engage with the child. No one wants to draw while another person watches them do it!
3. Sit at the same level as the child to play. If the child is on the floor, get on the floor (if physically possible).

### Three useful techniques:

1. Ask clarifying questions. This is especially important with questions around hard topics. For example, if a child asks "where is grandma?" immediately after grandma has died, the child might be asking for a theological answer about what happens to us after we die or they may simply want to know where their grandmother's body is.
2. Repeat the child's last few words with a raised voice. A child says to you, "The sky is blue." You reply, "The sky is blue?" by raising the pitch of your voice at the end. This allows the child to reply with a number of different directions. Perhaps they will explore all things that are blue. Maybe they will explain that they learned why the sky is blue. Maybe they will wonder why God made the sky.
3. Embrace silence. This allows the child to lead the conversation toward the topics they wish to discuss. Silence also allows time for children to process what they are experiencing and to recognize God's presence.

### Three helpful phrases:

Remember that children have more limited vocabularies than adults and keep your language accessible. These phrases are simple open-ended requests that encourage the child to lead the conversation.

1. Help me to understand (what you mean, what happened, what came next, etc.).
2. Tell me more.
3. What do you think?

## Equipping yourself and others

All members are called to the ministry of pastoral care. Therefore, you are not alone in caring with children. Involving parents and other adults who are close to the child in the caring relationship is important (always being mindful of child protection policy requirements).

1. Stock your library with books for children and adults on common care topics, including grief, worry, sadness, and relationships. [Flyaway Books](#) offers several titles that are useful.
2. Build your referral network and use it. It is important to recognize the limitations you have with your pastoral care and to refer families when they need more support from a licensed counselor or a support group.
3. Find ways to involve children in relationships of care. Children are capable of providing care and nurture to others. Encourage them to care for other children and involve them in intergenerational opportunities in which the children are caring for older people.
4. Model language for children and adults that validates emotions, expresses care, and encourages conversation.

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July 2023

