



part 1 of 2—

Ministering to Troubled Children

by Timothy P. Lyons

The opportunity to minister to children represents the opportunity to reach entire families. The steady moral and social decline in our culture suggests that the children who need our help most will not likely come from successfully functioning homes. The behaviors they bring to the church can offend our standards and occupy our time. Rather than viewing these situations as problems, we can embrace them as God-ordained events. When handled correctly, these challenges present us with powerful opportunities to impact and reach whole families for Christ.

Plan for Problem Behaviors

The starting point for preparing to handle problem behaviors in children lies within our own hearts. We invest our time and energy preparing our programs to reach children and meet their needs. Programs are important in that they are the vehicles by which we attract children and communicate the gospel. We imagine and anticipate and seek certain responses from our young disciples. Our prayerful expectations can

sometimes feel disrupted by the antics and distractions of a less self-controlled child.

The truth is, real life happens. What better place is there for it to happen than within the church? Jesus was repeatedly interrupted in His ministry by those around Him. He consistently demonstrated a willingness to focus on the needs of the single sheep before Him ahead of



the needs of the 99 surrounding Him. Even the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles wrestled with the fact that the Holy Spirit repeatedly directed events beyond their ability to predict. So must we. Program interruptions and prob-

lem behaviors never catch God off guard. We must be prepared in our own minds to embrace them as opportunities to minister.

To accept and anticipate this level of ministry opportunity leads us to prepare for them. Hospitals devise treatment plans for individual patients. Schools prepare individualized education programs for their behaviorally-challenged students. "One size fits all" ministry may work for the majority, but it does not work for some. We can reach even the unruly child when we prepare specific plans to reach them. Children's workers can be trained for this special kind of "altar work," giving loving guidance and individualized attention when it becomes necessary.

Understand Problem Behaviors

All behaviors have meaning. Children act out their communications because they do not have the skills or training to communicate them verbally. They do not understand intellectually the feelings which motivate their actions. To minister to children we must be prepared to meet them on their own level and under-

stand them in the ways that they communicate to us. If we have ears to hear, we will learn to hear what they are trying to say to us.

All behaviors have purpose.

Children attempt to overcome problems or meet needs through what they do. Often their behaviors seem indirect or counterproductive—negative coping skills which at least partially meet a need even while creating additional problems. They act out when they want a hug. They defy when they want to be lovingly put in their place. Children sense their needs though they would never be able to define them. We do know what they need—love, acceptance, security,

hope, and encouragement. If we have ears to hear, we can identify specific unmet needs and minister to them.

As adults we have insight into a child's perspective. Some things are common to all children. But we would be presumptive to assume that we understand individual children without a real knowledge of their lives. Problem behaviors serve as our opportunity to build bridges into the family, to invite ourselves over to meet the parents, and to hang out with kids on their own turf. This can be an eye-opening experience. The world in which some of our children live may shock us—poverty, noise and chaos, filth,

cockroaches, absent or neglectful or demeaning parents, etc. A deeper understanding of our kids can fill our hearts with a renewed compassion and tenderness for them.

The opportunity to enter a home is an opportunity to identify and minister to the family's needs, to demonstrate acceptance and love rather than rejection and judgment, to serve rather than be served. This level of Christianity opens doors and earns the right to preach the gospel. This avenue of ministry reaches families and witnesses their transformation through the gospel.

Questions for Further Study—

1. How have you handled children with problem behaviors in the past?
2. How did Jesus respond to interruptions in His ministry on earth?
3. List three ways you can prepare yourself for possible behavior problems and interruptions that may occur in your services.

part 2 of 2—

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Intervene in Problem Behaviors

It is important to address behaviors as they come up. Children are born with a drive to explore and test their surroundings. This includes social boundaries. This is how they learn. Even though they may not be receiving training in these areas at home, we cannot ignore disruptive behavior or allow it to interfere with the learning of others. Several simple keys can turn a combative or disrespectful child into a willing pupil and ally.

Show respect to every child

We must model behaviors we expect to teach to others. Protect their self-esteem and improve their attention to you by taking them to the side to talk. Address the child person-to-person. Speak to his heart, not his head. Ask questions. Listen. Ask more questions. Be discerning and build a relationship. Children are more inclined to obey those they respect and

feel connected to. Alternately, they challenge rules from those whom they perceive as uncaring or harsh.

Address a problem while it is small

Delay is an invitation for confusion for a child. When we confront a behavior that we had



previously been tolerating, they will struggle to understand when the behavior is acceptable and when it is not. Help them to explore their motives and the needs represented in their ac-

tions, and help them find more appropriate ways to meet them.

Communicate clearly

Say exactly what you mean in clear and kind terms. Do exactly what you say you will do. Show respect, giving the reasons for your rules. Define your expectations and any consequences or future steps you may take. When consequences do occur, express genuine sorrow that the child has brought about those consequences and directly communicate how the consequences relate to the child's behavior.

Be consistent. Be careful not to single out an individual for behavior that others may get away with. Do not ignore behavior when it reoccurs; do not become worn out when children need repetitive instruction. Problem behaviors do not develop overnight and will not be

changed without patience and persistence. Love the children enough to be a stable force in their lives.

Always stay positive. Remember to measure progress rather than failures. Encourage

the children and offer hope. Demonstrate to them the nurture of God's love and grace and you will win them for eternity.

Troubled children and their families desperately need our help. The torch of the gospel can transform individuals,

families, and entire cultures. Children's ministries provide a unique avenue to become involved when we recognize behavior problems as our opportunities to minister. May God equip us for the opportunities that lie ahead.

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Questions for Further Study—

1. In what ways do you communicate your expectations and consequences of behavior to the children in your ministry?
2. What areas in your life do you need to improve upon to be more effective in ministering to the children with problem behaviors?
3. List two ways that you could reach out to families of troubled children in your church.