



Helping At-Risk Kids: A Must-Do Plan, part 1 of 3—

Grab Their Hands! They're Drowning!

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At our 2006 "Building Champions" National Children's Ministries Leadership Conference, I held a workshop on the how-to's of assisting the at-risk children in our communities. The week after, I received this e-mail from one of our children's pastors:

Brother Marshall:

I am Melba Mackey, children's pastor at Collierville First Assembly of God in Collierville, Tennessee. I was in your workshop last week and not by accident. The Lord brought into our KIDS Church six children from a troubled home. It was discovered that abuse had occurred, and the story just kept going. I, along with some others, spent Easter Sunday holding [name omitted] in our arms, just loving on him. Long story short, the kids had been abused, they said by Momma's boyfriend. They went to the rape crisis center and then back home with Momma.

I know God orchestrated the entire day to rearrange some things in my life and ministry, as well as the ministry of our church....

Thank you for an excellent job presenting the need and the fact that we CAN make a difference. Any help you can provide will be most appreciated and well received.

Because Jesus loves KIDS,
Melba Mackey

Children's pastors and leaders, please hear me: Children everywhere are drowning in the dysfunctional family pools of society. Most people have no clue how staggering the numbers of at-risk children are—those who are distraught, downtrodden, abused, and/or neglected. And many churches have little or no rescue plan to go after these drowning victims!

What is "at-risk"? Here are two standards of measurement—the educational and government standards:

According to the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory: "Students are placed 'at risk' when they experience a significant mismatch between their circumstances and needs, and the capacity of willingness of the school to accept, accommodate, and respond to them in a manner that supports and enables their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development. As the degree of mismatch increases, so does the likelihood that they will fail to either complete their elementary and secondary education, or more importantly, to benefit from it in a manner that ensures they have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be successful in the next stage of their lives."

From the perspective of the local, state and federal governments, "at-risk" children and youth are those who have been identified as possibly being or having been abused or neglected within their family environments, the behavior of which jeopardizes their safety and well-being. The at-risk family, then, is one in which abuse (emotional or physical or sexual) and/or neglect exists and in which the fam-

ily nucleus is disintegrating.

During my training for foster care with the Missouri Department of Social Services Children's Division, I was taught that three-fourths of the at-risk children in our county were placed into the foster-care system because of sexual abuse. In addition, reports indicate that Springfield and surrounding counties—keep in mind that this city has been labeled the “buckle of the Bible belt”—have one of the highest number of meth labs in the nation. So with drug abuse and child abuse/neglect at an all-time national high in communities large and small, so are the escalating and alarming number of children throughout the nation who are at-risk—both in the educational and social services sense of abandonment.

According to the Department of Social Services:

- ❖ In 2004, 518,000 children were identified at “at-risk” in the U.S. foster-care system.

Did you know? Most children are placed in foster care due to family-related abuse or neglect!

Take a look at the crisis in just one state: According to the Missouri Department of Social Services Children's Division, a February 2006 report:

- ❖ 10,531 children in Missouri are in foster care
- ❖ 1,910 children in Missouri are awaiting adoption

How Can You Help?

The Church must take a holistic approach by ministering

not only to the spiritual needs of mankind, but also to the emotional and physical needs. The holistic view, then, requires that we provide assistance to the needy and at-risk children of our communities as a God-given mandate!

There are three easily identifiable ways we can get involved in rescuing the at-risk children in our communities:

1 Incorporate ministries within and outside of the church that target at-risk children (the government terms this “faith-based initiatives”);

2 Target and partner with the “Title 1” public schools (Title 1 identifies schools in low-income communities); and

3 Partner with the county and state Department of Social Services Children's Division. As never before, the public schools and the government are open to partnering with the faith-based community.

Unfortunately, few churches are responding to “the call.” If God is burdening your heart to respond, below are a few of the many opportunities awaiting your time, energy, and talents:

The Local Church

Developing specialized ministries that operate inside and outside of the church walls can (1) yield the greatest spiritual results and (2) produce easily measurable results—i.e., how many children you are ministering to and how many have been

spiritually impacted. However, keep in mind that through partnership initiatives with the public schools and community programs, even more children can be ministered to. Why, you may ask, would the Church wish to partner? Because (1) we can demonstrate the love of God to those in authority over our public schools and local government leaders by cooperating with them; (2) we can reach more at-risk children through community faith-based initiatives that may generate additional opportunities for ministry we may not have otherwise.

Targeting At-Risk Children

Numerous outreach ministry approaches will enable you to minister to at-risk children—such as Sidewalk Sunday School, bus ministry, backyard Bible clubs, outreaches that are coupled with food provisions (grocery distribution, serving snacks and food at your events), outreaches that provide sports and fine arts opportunities, etc. But to identify just the children who are at risk in your community may require that you network with your local Title 1 elementary schools and Division of Social Services Children's Division. Nevertheless, through general outreach ministries, you can reach a multitude of children who are at-risk and/or in low-income communities and/or unchurched.

Below are some specific approaches you can take to minister through the church to the at-risk children in your community:

Tutoring and After-School Clubs

At-risk children are in great need of emotional and educational nurturing. Because family trauma may be the norm for most at-risk children, their lives are being torn apart and their mental outlook fragmented. The Church can provide stability in the lives of at-risk children first and foremost by offering them Jesus. He is the true peace. And through His servants, we can help by being the role models. Mentorship can take many forms, such as serving as a Royal Rangers or Missionettes or High Point leader. Mentorship can also be provided by helping kids after school (weekdays and weekends) through structured tutorial and other after-school activities conducted by the church. Visit a Title 1 school and offer a tutorial program, such as helping the children with reading and math, and you may gain permission to promote the program at school. Some churches that provide after-school activities even provide transportation from the school building to the church facilities.

Mentorship

Many at-risk children have one constant in their lives: change. Children living in at-risk families and/or dysfunctional families experience continual disruptions in their lives. The child can be passed from relative to relative or be relocated from neighborhood to neighborhood, city to city, state to state. Even the at-risk child placed in the foster care system can be handed

to two or more foster families.

By providing a mentor in the life of an at-risk child, you can provide one constant person who can nurture and love that child throughout his or her life of adolescence.

As noted above, programs such as Royal Rangers, Missionettes, High Point, and Sunday School can provide mentorship and role models to at-risk children during the normally scheduled program activities and during special outings



and events. For example, boys in need of a male figure in their lives can find compassionate leaders in Royal Rangers who will mentor them and teach them life skills and practical skills they may never receive otherwise.

In addition to these structured church programs, you can implement a mentorship program that targets the at-risk children in your community. Through structured activities, properly screened and trained

leaders can serve as mentors to children while taking them to church and public activities. One such church-related program being operated by the Assemblies of God is the Shapes program, which pairs up mentors with children whose parents are incarcerated. (For more information on Shapes, [click here.](#))

Respite: Parent's Night Out

The parents of low-income and foster families rarely get a night out for respite. Your church could have a major impact on the community by providing a night out for these parents. This opportunity could be promoted through the schools and by the Children's Division of the Department of Social Services. The summer months are an excellent time to set up a video projector and screen outside on the church parking lot to show a good movie, and the snacks are an added plus to attract families. Such an event can build a bridge to the at-risk children in your community and provide an opportunity to invite the families to church and other church-related events.

Adopt-a-Block

Target an area of the community you and your team will commit to weekly ministry for a one-year period. Research the demographics of the community to determine what families are in greater need of assistance. Begin to visit the homes in that one-block area and simply let the families know you are there to serve them. Once you build relationships with these families,

you will find opportunities to provide assistance in many ways and even to invite them and their children to church.

Adopt-a-Family

This project can be done as a church initiative or by interfacing with the Department of Social Services Children's Division. (Note: If the church is partnering with the Department of Social Services Children's Division, the team must go through the necessary screening and training required of your state and work closely with the case worker assigned to your team.)



The church will need to commit to the project and select a name.



The church will need to make a one-year commitment with a five-member team:

- ❖ Group Coordinator
- ❖ Group Contact Person for Family

- ❖ Special Events Coordinator
- ❖ Financial Planner
- ❖ Parenting Educator

The group coordinator of the church will need to ensure the family's needs are being met according to the goals and abilities of the church. The group contact person communicates regularly with the family and, if working with DSS, updates the DSS Children's Division case worker appointed to that family. The special events coordinator helps ensure the children can attend special events and even plans birthday parties for the children that the family cannot afford. The financial planner helps the family better understand how to manage their finances. The parenting educator helps the parents learn parenting skills and the how-to's of dealing with the stressful issues which provoke parents into abusing or neglecting their children.



The church will need to "adopt" a family identified as at-risk or a foster family it will support through:

- ❖ small-group meetings
- ❖ back-to-school assistance to children
- ❖ sponsored events
- ❖ parents' night out

Sponsorship of Church/District Camps and Other Church-Related Activities

Church/district camps and other church-related activities can be cost prohibitive to the family on a limited income. Many at-risk kids in the community could be reached with the gospel message by providing a church sponsorship initiative, which would cover the admission fees for events such as church and district kids' camps, sporting events, fine arts activities, and more.

Questions for Further Study—

1. If you sense God's calling to help the underprivileged, abused, and/or neglected children in your community, are you:
 - Ready to commit to this ministry for no less than 1 year? If not, do not start.
 - Able to gather a support team—a group of other children's leaders who can assist you and who will also make a long-term commitment to the ministry? If so, begin to meet and to pray together, and see where God will direct you in ministering to the at-risk children in your church and community.
 - Compassionate enough that you can convince others in your church to pray for this new ministry to children? Promote your ministry regularly in the church, and provide specific ways in which the members of the church can pray for your ministry and the children to whom you minister.
2. Have you networked with other churches, other faith-based initiatives, other community services, and/or local government services in your community—to learn more about the needs of at-risk children and how to respond to their needs?