COMPASS Points
GUIDING FAITH IN PRACTICE
Office of Christian Formation

Pastoral Care with Children

Six Essential Ingredients

Pastoral care with children may be neglected from discomfort with children or a perceived lack of knowledge of children's needs. Further, when we view children through the lens of developing Christian knowledge or spiritual practices, we focus on who the child might become. We risk losing sight of a child's current life experiences and how we might provide care with that child.

The PCUSA Book of Order reminds us that all members are called to take part in the ministry of pastoral care (W-5.0204). Pastors are not the only ones who are responsible for caring for those who are a part of a church, including children. In fact, because educators and volunteers may have more frequent contact with children and their families, educators and other adults may be the people a child or their family looks to for care during a particular event.

Prepositions make a difference and the use of "with" in this document is intentional. If I told you that I was going to the store for Mary, you would reasonably expect that I was running an errand because Mary was unable. However, if I said I was going to the store with Mary, the event is a very different one in which Mary is capable of going to the store and I am going alongside as a companion. Perhaps I will assist Mary with getting something off the high shelf that she cannot reach. Or perhaps Mary will help me to remember what I had on my shopping list that I left at home. This analogy extends to our caring relationships with children. We are accompanying children. The ministry of pastoral care calls us to guide, nurture, advocate and heal alongside the person who is in the midst of a difficult life circumstance.

Why do children need pastoral care?

In the United States, childhood is often viewed as a time of simplicity and innocence and as Vivian Zelizer coined in her 1985 book *Pricing the Priceless Child*, children are economically worthless and emotionally priceless. This construction of childhood and children blinds us to the realities of many children's lives. Some see children as precious non-contributors who are resilient even under the worst of circumstances, and therefore, not in need of pastoral care. Others simply believe that ministering to the parents and other adults who surround the child will be enough. No doubt providing care with the adults may assist a child, but providing care with the adults is not a substitute for caring directly with their children.

Rather than childhood being a time of simplicity and innocence, many children encounter complex living situations, fearful school settings, and challenging experiences of grief and trauma. For example, according to the Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model, before the child's 18th birthday, 1 in 23 children will experience the death of a parent or sibling. Parental substance abuse, divorce, and bullying are also a reality of many children's life. Other events for which children indicate they need pastoral care include the death of a pet, a friend moving away or the illness or death of a grandparent.

Six essential ingredients of pastoral 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.

Safety

The most important ingredient for any caring relationship is safety. With children, establishing safety means complying with your church's child protection policy. If you have to have a private conversation with a child, do it within sight of another adult. With older children, be mindful of texting and digital communication and including another adult in the conversation.

Child protection policies help us to keep each other safe, but they are not the only ways that we convey a sense of "felt safety" to a child. Each of us needs to feel safe before we can engage fully with another human being. When the relationship involves a child and adults, it is incumbent upon the adults to structure the interactions to nurture this sense of felt safety. A simple way to do this is to be at or as close as you can get to the same physical space the child is occupying. For adults, this may mean kneeling or sitting on the floor so you can move closer to the child's height.

Empathy

Empathy occurs when we identify with the emotions of another person. Empathy is not the same as sympathy. Sympathy for a crying child may sound like an adult saying, "It's ok," when obviously the child is not feeling ok in that moment. Sympathy can sound and feel dismissive of a person's emotional experience. On the other hand, empathy for a crying child may sound like, "it's ok to cry when we are sad/mad/frustrated." Empathy validates the emotional experience of a child and fosters connection between people.

Having empathy for children requires adults to remember their childhood challenges of a friend moving away, a bad grade on a big test, or a pet dying. Despite life experience that may allow them to have a different perspective on these events, adults who recognize that these events are significant stressors for a child are better able to display empathy when a child shares a similar experience.

Trust

Trust flows from establishing a sense of felt safety and displaying empathy. Trust also may require time to develop, especially with a child who has experienced a traumatic event. Provide a consistent and calm presence with a child to establish trust. Allow the child to direct the conversation, especially initially. Sometimes that may look like no talking and just playing!

The Rabbit Listened is a favorite children's book that helps to illustrate the healing power of establishing trust and providing a listening ear. Be like the rabbit. Show up to listen.

Noticing

Children, especially young children, possess more limited language skills than many adults. Additionally, children may use slang or other words to mean something that adults do not understand. Finally, a bulk of communication with children may occur through body language or physical actions of play rather than through verbal interactions. Notice a child's use of particular words, actions or behaviors. Match their tone, cadence and vocabulary. If you see a child doing an action or using a word that you are unsure of what they mean, get curious and ask them to "tell you about it" or "help you to understand" what it means.

Respectful Relating

A friend in ministry tells a story about a five-year-old misunderstanding the phrase "learn the ropes" and interprets as the child is a concrete thinker. But would we apply the same label to a thirty-year-old for whom English was a second language? Likely not. The key here is respectful relating, viewing a child's misunderstanding of an English idiom through the lens of learning the language rather than through developmental theory's lens allows us to realize that we are not using accessible language for a child, and perhaps some adults. Respectful relating does not trivialize a child's genuine response with laughter or treat their problems as less meaningful because adult experience lets us know that this is a passing concern.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is defined in this context as being open to being changed by an encounter with another. Taking this stance requires an adult to decenter their agenda or concerns. This does not mean that the adult does not have boundaries with the child, which promotes our first essential element of safety. Rather, vulnerability requires adults to bring their knowledge and expertise to structure the care environment and to be willing to follow the child's lead with their parameters of safe boundaries. Embracing the answer of "I don't know; what do you think?" is one easy way for adults to exhibit vulnerability.

For more information on engaging in pastoral care with children, including specific tools and tips, please visit this Quicksheet.

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