



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Good Grief!
(*Children*, pp. 65-68)
- 📖 Hanging In Through
It All
(*Children*, pp. 73-78)
- 📖 Children for Sale
(*Children*, pp. 79-83)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Caring for Children in
Crisis
(*Children*, pp. 84-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Caring for Children in Crisis

How should we respond to the pain and grief that children suffer in crises such as sexual abuse, divorce, and death? We can respond in creative ways to God's call to care for children beyond our families and faith communities.

Prayer

God of compassion and understanding, may we work diligently to develop a loving and caring family in which each member is recognized as a special individual.
We pray for boys and girls who are grieving today, who suffer the losses of divorce, who endure sexual abuse, who face death, or who even are caught in the horrors of war.
In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, we pray for and care for these children in crisis. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:33-37

Responsive Reading[†]

Jesus calls the children dear,
"Come to me and never fear,
for I love the little children of the world."

**Jesus loves the little children,
all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
all are precious in His sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.**

He's a Savior great and strong,
and he'll shield them from the wrong,
for he loves the little children of the world.

**Jesus died for all the children,
all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
all are precious in His sight,
Jesus died for all the children of the world.**

And your cross we'll always bear,
and for you we'll do and dare,
for you love the little children of the world.

Reflection

Often we've sung "Jesus Loves the Little Children" without confronting its powerful verses. Jesus didn't express his love through gentle thoughts from a distance, but by active intervention to "shield them from the wrong." He enlists us to join in their defense: "And your cross we'll always bear, and for you we'll do and dare, for you love the little children of the world."

We can use resources, like those Harris reviews in *Caring for Children in Crisis*, to prepare ministries for children who suffer the loss of their family in divorce, endure sexual abuse, or face death. She reminds us to arrange our ministry to include the entire family, and even pastors and professional caregivers. Taking seriously the grief that children experience is an important first step. "Adults may assume that the young person's grief



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experience will be brief and have no long-term consequences," McClintock explains. "A well-meaning grown-up may even attempt to expedite the 'rebound' by engaging the child in cheerful activities. A far more helpful response would be to guide children in developing healthy patterns of grieving." In *Good Grief!* he teaches children about grief through the dark story of Jesus' sorrow at the death of his friend, Lazarus.

"Jesus died for *all* the children of the world," and many Christians are called to care for children beyond their family and congregation. Shannon Sedgwick left a lucrative job to help International Justice Mission employ "individual countries' own legal systems to document and help combat oppression, including forced prostitution, bonded child slavery, illegal detention and torture, sexual abuse, and widow's lands rights cases." For two years she and IJM colleagues worked with Cambodian authorities to rescue young girls kidnapped for the brothels in Svay Pak. Sedgwick describes herself as "an attorney who has been given a most unbelievable opportunity to save human life every day around the world. I am humbled and fascinated that I ... am given a divine opportunity to bring justice to so many suffering and dying around the world."

Gloria Hammond-White, a pediatrician and co-pastor in inner-city Boston, could not assist all the at-risk kids who came through her private practice as she longed to do. "I was feeling confined by the practice, since I only had them for a minute," she says. "While I had them, we could hear each other and we could meet each other in that place, but then they'd go off and there would be all those other people they would hear" as destructive influences in their lives. She and a professional writer in her congregation began meeting with girls on a weekly basis to help them write about their experiences. A vital ministry, *Do the Write Thing*, gradually emerged. "It wasn't necessarily starting out with a plan that says, 'In January of 1994, you'll start a girls' group.' It wasn't like I planned to do it other than seeing a need, and trying to get a sense from God how to respond to the need."

Study Questions

1. According to McClintock, how can stories and imaginary characters like his puppet Sidney be effective counseling tools with children who are grieving?
2. How do we hear God calling us to serve children in crisis? Discuss what we can learn from the examples of Shannon Sedgwick and Gloria Hammond-White.
3. How does your congregation help children in crisis and their families? What other local resources can you recommend when children are grieving a divorce, sexual abuse, or death?
4. Within your community, is there a group of children in crisis to whom your congregation should minister?
5. What are the dangers of child abuse in our churches? How can we make church programs safer for children in our care?

Departing Hymn: "We All Are God's Children" (in *Children*, pp. 40-41)

†Adapted from "Jesus Loves the Little Children," Clare Herbert Woolston.

Caring for Children in Crisis

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how we should respond to children's grieving.
2. To inventory what the congregation is doing to minister to children in crisis.
3. To consider how God provides specific opportunities for us to care for children in crisis who are beyond our families and congregations.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Children (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"In *Children, Divorce and the Church* ... Pastor Douglas Adams recalls the devastation he felt as a child when his father left the family. Adams was further wounded when the pastor came to their home and offered support to his mother, but ignored him and his siblings. He makes a strong case for the role of the church and the pastor in ministering to the children of divorce: 'If my pastor had stopped to talk to me that summer afternoon when my dad left, maybe my life would have been different today' (p. 115)" (*Children*, p. 85).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with prayers by name for children whom members know are grieving.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Mark 9:33-37 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Do we usually visualize Jesus gathering a group of happy, healthy, laughing children when we read Mark 9:33-37? What if, like the hymn-writer C. H. Woolston, we visualized children who require to be shielded from the wrong and who need for us to act on their behalf with cross-laden daring?

Allow the brief glimpses into the ministries of Mark McClintock, Shannon Sedgwick, and Gloria Hammond-White to inspire members to review their own sensitivity to children's grieving and the congregation's support for children in crisis. McClintock's ministry is church-based and includes teaching children and worship; Sedgwick's is through an NPO (non-profit organization) and involves legal work with governments; and Hammond-White's is a creative outreach to the community using church personnel and volunteers.

You might invite members to share other aspects of the assigned articles that they benefited from. Move the discussion toward an inventory of their personal and the congregation's discipleship in relation

to children in crisis. This can be a great opportunity for members to share concerns, discover opportunities, network with one another, and make some initial plans for a new ministry.

Study Questions

1. Imaginary characters “can diminish the communication barrier that naturally exists between an adult and a child,” McClintock writes. “A puppet on the adult’s hand functions as a peer and advocate for the child; a puppet on the child’s hand allows the child to express troubling thoughts and emotions, projecting the responsibility for these ideas onto the puppet.” Members may report their experiences with grieving children. Did writing stories, drawing pictures, discussing characters in stories, or other uses of imaginary characters help the adult and child to communicate their thoughts and emotions?
2. Shannon Sedgwick and Gloria Hammond-White found ways to utilize their career gifts, in law and medicine, to help children. Sedgwick joined a non-profit organization that had an important mission in progress; Hammond-White addressed a problem on a small scale, yet saw her work grow to involve many others contributors. Each woman received support from working with others in their ministry, rather than working alone. They interpret their opportunities as “gifts” from God and sources of joy, rather than as burdens put upon them.

Furthermore, each woman had to be patient in waiting for successful results. “You can’t spot your success stories right away; they’re not intuitively obvious,” Hammond-White comments. “You just sometimes have to wait—which is of course what God does for us. He waits until we get it, and keeps hanging in with us through it all. That’s the definition of grace.”

3. Members may mention the regular actions of individual members as well as church ministries and support groups. These congregational programs may involve preparation, information, clarification, and ongoing discussion with children in families dealing with divorce, abuse, or death. Do children see members express their grief in worship services and prayer sessions, or are they ‘shielded’ from the grieving process? Are children allowed to mention their own losses, no matter how insignificant they appear to adults?

Do other congregations and agencies in your community offer appropriate support groups to children and their families? Which local professionals do members recommend as both knowledgeable and experienced in working with children in crisis?

4. Encourage members to think of children in crisis beyond the church family. Perhaps these will be children who need advocates in the court system, a group with special physical needs, or children of recent immigrants. Consider how your congregation might cooperate with other churches or agencies to care for these children.
5. Church pastors, teachers, and workers are trusted with spiritual authority as well as the leadership of programs. This concentration of power can be a temptation to their physically and sexually abusing children. Compounding the problem is the fact that “discussion of child sexual abuse remains a taboo subject in most congregations,” Harris notes.

Congregations can begin by being more open in discussing the problems. Proper direction, procedures, and encouragement should be provided for church employees and members who work with children. Most congregations discover that background checks for workers and other precautions are increasingly necessary, though these must be handled in ways that preserve trust and mutual respect among members.

Departing Hymn

“We All Are God’s Children” is on pp. 40-41 of *Children*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.