

by Donald Welch

# INTENSIVE

**BE THE ONE** to prescribe God's love

# CARE

to kids in crisis

Imagine your Sunday school class—all the kids are engaged in the lesson, intently focused on what Joseph's father is going to do to him after the way he's behaved. Then suddenly, your reverence-filled room disintegrates into chaos. Elizabeth—who's experiencing some challenges outside of class—slaps Pedro in the back of the head and calls him stupid. Some kids giggle, but others fidget uncomfortably—they wanted to find out what happened to Joseph. A volunteer scrambles toward Elizabeth, hoping to stop yet another out-of-control impulsive outburst. After the dust settles, you see Elizabeth smiling and looking oh-so-proud of what she's created.

I've encountered kids with a lot in common with Elizabeth in my time in children's ministry. In fact, an established "troublemaker" was one of my first assignments when I signed on as a volunteer.

As a marriage and family therapist and professor, I thought I knew the necessary skills for working with troubled children. *Why, I've helped dozens of families work through issues in family therapy, I thought. It'll be a piece of cake.*

But some of these lads frosted my personal experiences and professional expertise. I had to dig deep into my pockets of patience and creativity for skills that would work with troubled children. From temper outbursts to overtly unbecoming behavior—you name it, I experienced it. And I'll tell you what, I now express my respect and appreciation more openly to children's ministry volunteers—the unsung heroes of our churches.

What do you do when you know a child is hurting or doesn't fit in with the other kids? If a child is suffering because of a physical or emo-

tional challenge—or both—where do you turn? And how do you know whether the challenges are beyond your resources?

You can make powerful connections in kids' lives, even when they're burdened with emotional, physical, and social problems. You don't have to be a mental health professional to help troubled children—you only need a deep commitment to Jesus and kids, and a whole lot of empathy.

Here are three profound principles I've learned in my journey as a children's ministry volunteer and professional counselor:

*Love is the language of relationship.*

*Attention given is affection gained.*

*Time spent equals self-worth.*

### **Love is the language of relationship.**

All children need to be loved, and hurting children especially need to experience love. We shower our troubled children with love, and it's been key to their positive responses to us and other children. When a child can't sit still,

I warmly place my arm around him or her. It's not unusual for a child to crawl into my lap and relax.

As a professional, I know enough Attachment Theory to realize that I'll get nowhere with these children without first connecting with them. So my mission is to foster friendships with them, and I do everything in my power to draw these kids into a relationship.

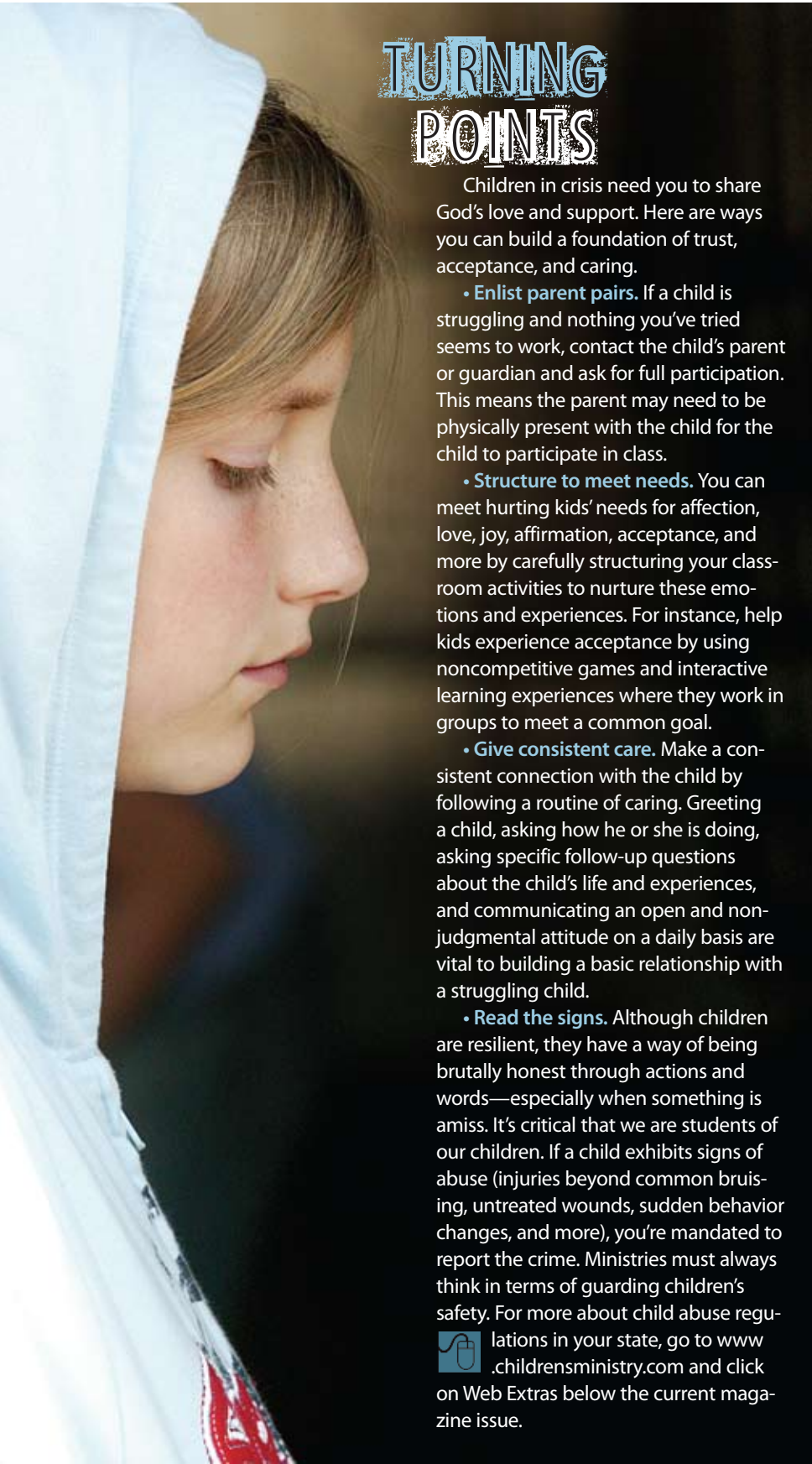
*Love, then discipline.* Children who are suffering through crisis or are otherwise hurting often process their feelings in ways that give them a sense of control, even if the result is negative. So if a troubled child acts out, withdraws, regresses, or displays self-injuring behavior, display consistent, supportive love. For example, I pat kids on the back as their behaviors improve. I hold a hand, smile, sit nearby, encourage participation, and introduce kids to other children. These children excel when they real-

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ize that they're genuinely cared for and valued, and this provides an atmosphere conducive for all children.

It's important to remember that struggling children who act unruly intuitively feel the other children don't approve of them. A misbehaving child tends to reinforce this emotional distance by doing things that increase the negativity. When a child disrupts, our initial response is to get the child to behave because we have other kids to consider.





## TURNING POINTS

Children in crisis need you to share God's love and support. Here are ways you can build a foundation of trust, acceptance, and caring.

- **Enlist parent pairs.** If a child is struggling and nothing you've tried seems to work, contact the child's parent or guardian and ask for full participation. This means the parent may need to be physically present with the child for the child to participate in class.

- **Structure to meet needs.** You can meet hurting kids' needs for affection, love, joy, affirmation, acceptance, and more by carefully structuring your classroom activities to nurture these emotions and experiences. For instance, help kids experience acceptance by using noncompetitive games and interactive learning experiences where they work in groups to meet a common goal.

- **Give consistent care.** Make a consistent connection with the child by following a routine of caring. Greeting a child, asking how he or she is doing, asking specific follow-up questions about the child's life and experiences, and communicating an open and non-judgmental attitude on a daily basis are vital to building a basic relationship with a struggling child.

- **Read the signs.** Although children are resilient, they have a way of being brutally honest through actions and words—especially when something is amiss. It's critical that we are students of our children. If a child exhibits signs of abuse (injuries beyond common bruising, untreated wounds, sudden behavior changes, and more), you're mandated to report the crime. Ministries must always think in terms of guarding children's safety. For more about child abuse regulations in your state, go to [www.childrensministry.com](http://www.childrensministry.com) and click on Web Extras below the current magazine issue.

"Sit in your chair." "Be quiet." "Go to the back of the line."

Although adults are tempted to intervene with discipline when a child disrupts, the quintessential tool is love. Avoid disciplining a child until you've first extended love. Typically a child in this situation needs something other than discipline. Creating ways for the child to receive love and connect with others is a starting point.

*Grow healthy relationships.* Often as a defense mechanism, troubled children will sabotage relationships because they already feel others don't like them. For a child experiencing this intense pain, negative responses from others at least provide some form of emotional connection. The saying goes, "Any emotion is better than no emotion." As broken individuals, we tend to go for the least common denominator by attracting negative attention if we fail to get positive interaction.

We all yearn for healthy connections with others. Relationships, without a doubt, are our greatest need—God identified this while reconciling himself to us on the Cross. This fundamental need may be why some children in crisis continue to elicit negativity from others—negative reactions provide the child with (as strange as it may sound) a sense of normalcy. So if this child gets only negative and inappropriate responses at home, then he or she will work hard to get the same kind of response from others. Even though that's not normal, it feels normal to the child. That makes it vitally important to connect with a troubled child's parents. They're our greatest resource because they guide a child's moral and emotional compass.

Children under age 12 are highly impressionable; what you tell them is what they believe. So choose your words carefully. I've counseled hundreds of adults who, during childhood, were told they were "stupid," "dumb," and would "never amount to

much." Many of these children—now adults—find it extremely difficult to exchange those negative impressions for positive ones.

### Attention given is affection gained.

It's been said, "The best gift I ever received in life was another person who believed in me." How true. A basic human need is to be believed in by another. I experience this often with my kids. They're always bringing their latest art project to show me. Suppose I brushed aside their masterpieces, saying, "Don't bother me with your poorly painted airplane!" or "Quit showing me your awful poems!"

To show my kids that I value them and believe in their abilities, I kneel and give loving attention to their treasures. I look deep into my children's eyes and tell them how proud I am of their creations.

*Build self-esteem.* Troubled children, just like all children, have an innate need to be believed in. They need someone to say, "You matter." Find something children do well and let them know you're proud of them. It may be something as simple as letting a child know you noticed him or her sitting quietly during the prayer. Or it might be an artistic or musical talent. Get on your little friend's eye level. Sit next to the child and look him or her straight in the eye. Never hold back a genuine word of approval. If a child has a hard time with eye contact, be patient. You might first start by gently placing your hand under the child's chin and carefully raising his or her face until level eye contact occurs.

I've conducted child therapy with many kids with low self-esteem. Many of these kids are used to constant scolding void of any compliments, so they don't know what positive approval is. By encouraging

a child, you could be helping that child gain self-esteem. Self-esteem is the foundational building block of a person's self-identity—it's how we view ourselves in relation to the world around us. When kids have negative or no self-esteem, they're at risk for emotional, educational, and social problems that can impact them for life.

Encourage moments of celebration. Talk about kids' positive actions. Listen actively—mirror what the child says to you. Respond to the child's words and actions. It's true for adults and children—to know we've been heard brings value to our soul. Begin today—you'll be amazed how the child responds.

### Time spent equals self-worth.

My son, Daniel, wanted to play Monopoly at age 6. His 8-year-old sister, Savannah, was old enough to understand the game but Daniel wasn't. Yet Daniel insisted that we play—so we did. At times, I'd ask Daniel if he was bored and his immediate response was, "No, I'm having fun." Then he'd frequently add, "Can we play for several more hours?" I pondered his words and thought, *What's Daniel communicating to me? He looks bored and confused, but he wants to torment himself for a couple more hours?*

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I realized that time spent with Daniel, regardless of the activity, meant more to him than understanding the game. He found pleasure and fulfillment spending time with his family. Our presence—not

Monopoly—gave him value as a person. Jesus frequently expressed this sentiment by reassuring his disciples of his constant presence; we can do the same for all children.

How does this work with troubled children? It's simple—spend time together. If a child is on the floor playing, sit beside him or her. Listen to the lesson as if for the first time. Be enthusiastic. Support the child in actions and words. Remember: Kids never get enough love. They're like sponges continually soaking up praise. Never underestimate the value of the

time you give to a struggling child.

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Many lives have been forever changed because someone like you planted seeds of hope with your actions and God's Word. If you happen to meet a girl or boy like Elizabeth this Sunday, give that child a big hug for me. Some of those troubled children will bring you the greatest joy. **cm**

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## WHEN TO REFER

Occasionally a struggling child may need more help than you can offer. Use these indicators to gauge whether it's time to refer a child for professional help.

- Significant negative behavior or personality changes occur over a period of time. These can include anger, aggression, withdrawal, sadness, oversensitivity, clinginess, and more.
- A child no longer enjoys activities that he or she used to.
- A child talks about hurting him- or herself or others.
- You know or strongly suspect that the child has experienced abuse, neglect, trauma, or other significant challenge.

One or more of these indicators may mean your child needs professional assistance. Consult with your pastor or supervisor about how to best connect the child and the child's family with a mental health professional in your area.

