

STUDY GUIDE

Effective Ministry to Kids and Youth in Foster Care



Unit 3: Disciplining Kids In Foster Care

De-escalate conflicts and
discipline with love.



How the Unique Circumstances of Kids in Foster Care Impact Discipline

The Impact of Past Trauma

- **Kids in foster care may be feeling angry and afraid.**
 - They may already be in “fight or flight” mode when they show up to church, meaning that they are ready to protect themselves from an attack.
- **Kids in foster care may feel like they aren’t part of the church community.**
 - They have been separated from their “real” friends and “real” family, and they feel like they don’t belong at your church.
- **These feelings can cause them to:**
 - Argue
 - Lash out
 - Refuse to participate

The Impact of Sibling Dynamics

- **Separation Anxiety**
 - Due to space limitations, 75% of siblings are separated when they enter into foster care, leading to a great deal of anxiety.
 - Kids in foster care may panic when they are asked to do things without their siblings, such as moving to a different classroom.
 - It is typically preferable to keep siblings together, even if their ages would ordinarily place them in different classrooms.

- **Parentified Siblings**
 - “Parentification” occurs when an older sibling takes responsibility for the younger siblings.
 - Parentified siblings may view an unfamiliar adult caregiver as an intrusive figure, and they may resent the adult for usurping their role as primary caregiver.
 - Parentified siblings may also fear that the adult will fail to discipline their siblings properly, leading to negative consequences for all the siblings, such as exclusion from the ministry.

Two Key Principles for Disciplining Kids in Foster Care

Be on the child’s side.

- **Be patient.**
 - Model God’s patience when disciplining children from hard places.
 - Remember that, due to their backgrounds, children may not know what is proper or socially acceptable.
 - Always assume that kids want to behave well. They just might lack the tools or support they need to succeed.

“The Lord is compassion and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. ... He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.” (Psalm 103-8-10)

Kids in foster care may need time to adjust to new environments and routines. Be patient and celebrate their progress and achievements along the way.

- **Listen to them.**

- Avoid drawing conclusions about a child based on their reputation or foster care status.
- Listen and seek to understand the child's point of view before trying to correct the child's behavior.
- Make relationship the foundation of your discipline strategy.

Set High (Reasonable) Expectations

- **Don't expect less of kids in foster care.**

- Give kids a chance to "rise to the occasion" along with the extra support they need to meet our high expectations.
- Seek to uncover the reason behind the problem behavior and focus on meeting that underlying need.
- Protect the right of all children to a safe, orderly ministry environment.

- **Be flexible.**

- When a behavior is dangerous or disruptive, it may be appropriate to temporarily remove the child to a quiet area where they can do calming exercises.
- If the behavior is not actually distracting or harming the other children, it may be best to let it go.

People often make negative assumptions about kids who come from difficult backgrounds. However, we can't discipline them effectively unless we understand where they're coming from.

Due to trauma, kids' developmental age may be much younger than their chronological age. (Even though they are six, they may behave as though they are four-year-old.) Thus, when setting expectations, we need to use clear, concise, developmentally appropriate language.

How to Avoid Retraumatizing Kids in Foster Care Who Struggle with Behavior

Discipline privately.

- **Correcting a child in front of others can cause a child to feel foolish, ashamed, or embarrassed, potentially leading to an escalation of the behavior.**
- **Instead, talk to the child in private and discuss together more appropriate ways to handle a similar situation in the future.**

Don't use the Bible as a weapon.

- **Never use Scripture to attack, criticize, or shame a child, such as saying, "Good Christians don't act like that."**
 - This causes kids to feel shamed, manipulated, or discouraged and turns them away from the Church and even from God.
- **Instead, frame their successes within the context of the faith.**
 - "I noticed the way you shared your snack with Kyle this morning. What a wonderful way to show God's love. I'm so glad you're part of our church."

Avoid labeling a child.

- **Try not to develop negative expectations for children in foster care or single them out for negative attention.**
- **Rather than reinforcing negative labels, show children that you believe in them and trust them to make good choices.**

Treat every child as an individual. Recognize that each child has unique strengths, needs, and experiences and provide individualized support and accommodations to help kids meet expectations.

Children begin to own the shameful identity that has been spoken over them. As one high schooler living in a group home stated, "My teachers think I'm a juvenile delinquent anyway, so why should I even try to do well in school? They all think I'm going to fail."

Discussion Questions

- 1 Read Psalm 103:8–10. Is God’s attitude toward discipline reflected in the way you correct children in church? Are there areas for growth?

- 2 Have you ever learned that a challenging child in your ministry had previously experienced a traumatic event? If so, how did this impact your attitude toward the child? Did this influence your discipline strategy? When disciplining children, do you think that some kids “deserve” more grace than others?

- 3 What does it mean to “be on the child’s side” when disciplining children in foster care? How can leaders demonstrate this approach practically?

- 4 How can leaders effectively use Scripture to encourage and uplift children without causing harm or triggering past trauma?
