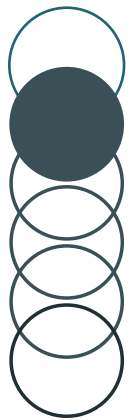


STUDY GUIDE

# Effective Ministry to Kids and Youth in Foster Care



## Unit 1: Understanding Kids In Foster Care

Understand the challenges kids in  
foster care face at church.



## Key Facts About the Foster Care System

Foster care is a system in which children who have been removed from their biological family due to safety concerns are placed in the temporary care of foster parents.

Common reasons for removing children from their families include:

- **Abuse**
- **Neglect**
- **Parental drug or alcohol abuse**
- **Inadequate housing**

The goal of foster care is family reunification.

Children can be in a temporary foster care placement for a few days or several years.

Placement changes are common and can be caused by a variety of reasons:

- **Issues with the foster family**
- **The child's behavior**
- **The need for a different level of care**

Even children who were placed in foster care as babies may still experience feelings of rejection and worthlessness. Additionally, in utero experiences, such as the mother being abused or using drugs, can negatively affect child development. It's also important to note that children experience significant disruptions to their lives even when they are placed with extended family rather than strangers.

## Foster Care Placement and Complex Trauma

Children are removed from their biological families to protect them from traumatic events or situations, such as abuse, neglect, and parental drug abuse.

The act of being removed from their home and placed in foster care is in and of itself a traumatic event.

Every child in the foster care system has experienced multiple traumatic events (i.e., “complex trauma”).

## How Trauma Affects Kids’ Feelings and Behaviors at Church

Trauma makes kids feel **afraid**. Types of fears may include:

- **Separation anxiety**
  - Refusal to leave the caregiver’s side
  - Screaming, crying, yelling, throwing objects, hiding, or physically shaking when separated from a caregiver
  - Struggles when separated from siblings or a trusted adult in the ministry (e.g., children’s pastor, small group leader)

The disciples demonstrated a “fight or flight” **fear** response when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Many disciples ran, but Peter cut off a man’s ear! (Matthew 26:47–56)

Approaching a child from behind may feel threatening due to past hurts. Always approach the child from the front, so they can see you, and ask their consent before touching them. Even a pat on the shoulder could startle them.

- **Fear of going without**
  - Hoarding food or toys
  - Stealing
- **Fear that something they say will be used against them**
  - Refusal to open up during small group
  - Anxiety after sharing personal information
- **Fear that someone will hurt them**
  - Sensitivity to touch
  - Hiding

Trauma makes kids feel **dysregulated** (i.e., feeling out of control of one's mind, body, or emotions). Signs of dysregulation often vary based on the age of the child.

- **Young children may:**
  - Throw things
  - Engage in tantrums
  - Act out aggressively
  - Hide
  - Run away
- **Teenagers may:**
  - Abuse alcohol, tobacco, or drugs
  - Commit acts of aggression
  - Storm off when they get upset

After fleeing from Jezebel, Elijah was emotionally **dysregulated**. He felt hopeless and he prayed for his life to end. Instead of chastising him, God met Elijah's need with a snack and a nap. (1 Kings 19:1-9)

Some children avoid being still and quiet because it creates space for intrusive negative thoughts to creep into their heads.

Trauma makes kids feel **rejected**. Children who struggle with feelings of rejection may be:

- **Highly sensitive to being left out**
  - Crying when they don't get picked for something
  - Angry when someone doesn't share with them
- **Desperate for companionship**
  - Clingy with certain adults or peers
  - Low tolerance for being alone
  - Overly affectionate with adults or peers
- **Prone to social skills deficits**
  - Difficulty forming friendships with peers their own age
  - Unable to navigate conflict
  - Mistaking a neutral comment as hostile or confrontational
  - Difficulty interpreting social cues

Trauma makes kids feel **worthless**. Dimensions of worthlessness may include feeling:

- **Unimportant**
  - Not sticking up for themselves
- **Incompetent**
  - Refusing to participate in activities where there is a risk of failure
  - Becoming enraged or crying after losing a game

Esau felt **rejected** when his father gave his blessing to his younger brother, Jacob. In his distress, the mighty hunter wept aloud and vowed to kill his brother. (Genesis 27:30-41)

David's daughter Tamar felt **worthless** after being horribly assaulted by her brother, and she spent the rest of her life living as a disgraced, desolate woman. (1 Samuel 13:1-22)

- **Powerless**
  - Talking back to adults
  - Refusing to comply with basic requests
- **Ashamed**
  - Lashing out after being criticized or corrected
  - Crying or shutting down when disciplined

When a child responds poorly to direction, calmly explain expectations and attempt to find out the reason why they're not complying.

## Discussion Questions

- ① The primary goal of foster care is family reunification (i.e., returning the child to their original family). How should this understanding influence the way we talk about and interact with the child's biological parents?

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- ② What is your ministry's policy regarding touch? How can you tell when it is appropriate and helpful to offer physical touch? How can you best avoid touching children in a way that frightens them or makes them uncomfortable? Can one rule-of-thumb be applied to all kids, or are there individual considerations?

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3 When a young child or teen becomes emotionally dysregulated (e.g., crying, yelling, throwing things), what strategies does your ministry have to help them calm down? Have you designated safe spaces and safe people to intervene when a particular child is very upset?

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4 What do you do when a child struggles to make friends within the group? If the child connects well with adults, is it important to also connect them with their peers? If so, what opportunities do the kids in your ministry have to build relationships with other children?

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5 Many children in foster care feel unimportant, incompetent, powerless, and ashamed. How can we as the Church both tell and show children who they really are in God's eyes?

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