

A Beginner's Guide to Trauma-Informed Children's Ministry

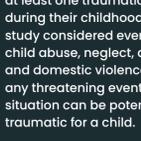
by Dr. Robert G. Crosby and Pastor Kayla Smith

Chances are, you've heard the word "trauma" a lot lately.

At schools, hospitals, community centers, churches—any place that serves children—trauma is now part of the conversation.



There are three big reasons for this:



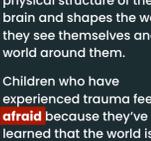
1.

New research shows that childhood trauma is way more common than we realized.

A groundbreaking study by the US Centers for Disease Control revealed that two out of three kids will experience at least one traumatic event during their childhood. This study considered events like child abuse, neglect, divorce, and domestic violence, but any threatening event or situation can be potentially traumatic for a child.

The thing that's particularly scary is that **most childhood trauma stays hidden**. If a child in your ministry was sexually abused, you'll probably never know about it.

2 in 3 kids will experience at least one traumatic event during their childhood.



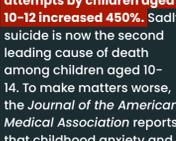
2.

The impact of childhood trauma is a lot worse than we thought.

Trauma affects every part of a child—their heart, soul, mind, body, and relationships. It changes the physical structure of their brain and shapes the way they see themselves and the world around them.

Children who have experienced trauma feel **afraid** because they've learned that the world is a dangerous place. They are **out of control** of their mind, body, and emotions. They behave in ways that get them in trouble and push people away. This leaves them feeling **rejected** and **worthless**. Sadly, without help, these feelings will last for the rest of their lives.

1 in 4 kids aged 4-17 have clinically elevated depression symptoms.

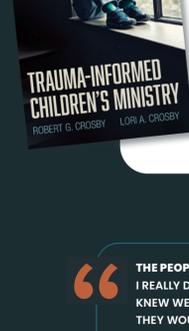


3.

Childhood trauma is escalating at an alarming rate.

Even before COVID-19, childhood mental health problems were on the rise. **From 2000 to 2020, suicide attempts by children aged 10-12 increased 450%**. Sadly, suicide is now the second leading cause of death among children aged 10-14. To make matters worse, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that childhood anxiety and depression doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic. One in four kids now have clinically elevated depression symptoms, and one in five kids have clinical anxiety. There's no way around it. Childhood trauma is a problem every church must address.

1 in 5 kids aged 4-17 have clinically elevated anxiety symptoms.



Trauma-Informed Children's Ministry: A Practical Guide to Reaching Hurting Kids

Learn more about how trauma touches the children you love and what most churches get wrong when it comes to teaching and disciplining hurting kids.

Through inspiring, real-life stories, discover practical, research-based strategies to begin transforming your ministry *this Sunday*.

[Get on Amazon today](#)

AVAILABLE ON PAPERBACK, KINDLE, AND AUDIBLE

“THE PEOPLE AT THE CHURCH HAD NO IDEA ANYTHING WAS WRONG. I REALLY DIDN'T FEEL LIKE OPENING UP, ESPECIALLY TO PEOPLE WHO I KNEW WERE REALLY CONNECTED TO MY FAMILY, BECAUSE I THOUGHT THEY WOULD SEE ME DIFFERENTLY IF THEY FOUND OUT.”

Ryan (Age 11), trauma survivor

How can our ministry help kids who have experienced trauma?

It can be difficult to help kids who have experienced trauma because they don't express their feelings using words.

Instead, they communicate with their behavior.

They might push people away, refuse to participate in activities, get in fights, or have sudden emotional meltdowns. They might fidget or move around the room instead

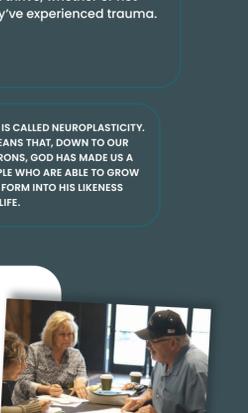
of paying attention to the lesson. Or they might break the rules, lie, talk back to adults, or just withdraw and hide under a table.

Our natural tendency is to react to these behaviors by getting upset, punishing them, or sending the child back to their parents. But this doesn't help at all. **In fact, it makes the situation worse because it reinforces the child's belief that they are worthless and unlovable.** Furthermore, when the Church turns away a hurting child, it teaches them that they have no place in God's family.



“WHEN THEY SAID WE HAD TO GET LEFT OUT, IT WAS LIKE PART OF OUR FAMILY WAS ALWAYS IN THE CORNER, IN THE DARK, WHERE NO ONE COULD SEE US.”

Sara (Age 9), trauma survivor



To reach these hurting kids, your ministry has to be trauma-informed.

But what does it mean to have a trauma-informed children's ministry?



1.

Realize

You realize that many of the kids in your ministry are hurting, even if nobody told you that something was wrong.



2.

Recognize

You recognize challenging behaviors as signs of trauma. They are a child's attempt to communicate their big feelings, not an intentional decision to disobey or exasperate you.



3.

Respond

You respond by creating a safe, loving ministry environment where all kids can thrive, whether or not they've experienced trauma.

Traumatic experiences change the way kids' brains are wired. But positive experiences—like feeling safe and loved at church—also **change the brain**.

THIS IS CALLED NEUROPLASTICITY. IT MEANS THAT, DOWN TO OUR NEURONS, GOD HAS MADE US A PEOPLE WHO ARE ABLE TO GROW AND FORM INTO HIS LIKENESS FOR LIFE.

Train your own children's ministry team with the Reach Hurting Kids Workshop

To be relevant in a broken world, we need to know how to reach hurting kids.

That's why we created the Reach Hurting Kids Workshop, an engaging, evidence-based curriculum that allows you to teach your own team the principles of trauma-informed children's ministry.

Through this workshop, your team will learn how trauma affects the kids they love and what they can do to help hurting kids heal and succeed at church.

[REACHHURTINGKIDS.COM/WORKSHOP](https://reachhurtingkids.com/workshop)



How can I create a safe, loving ministry environment?

Trauma makes kids feel afraid, out-of-control, rejected, and worthless. **Our goal is to do the exact opposite: to make kids feel safe, in-control, loved, and valued.**

As we plan and evaluate every part of our ministries – playtime, worship, teaching, small groups, special events – we should keep these four conditions for healing in mind. Do kids feel safe during playtime? Do they feel loved during worship?

“BE COMPLETELY HUMBLE AND GENTLE; BE PATIENT, BEARING WITH ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE.”

Ephesians 4:2 (NIV)

Furthermore, we strive to create a supportive ministry environment for *all* the kids in the ministry. We don't try to single out the traumatized kids and treat them differently. That way, every child can heal, thrive, and grow into the likeness of Christ within a caring faith community.



Tips for helping kids feel safe

1. Designate a quiet space during playtime

Many kids' ministries create space for games or unstructured play, which can easily become rowdy and noisy. This is a lot of fun for most kids, but **it can be scary for kids who have experienced trauma**.

As Mason, a nine-year-old trauma survivor, expressed, "Church is crazy. There's lots of people running around. Somebody might break in without anybody knowing." You can help by designating a safe, quiet space where kids can go if the noise and chaos gets to be too much.

2. Create confidential prayer journals

Kids who have experienced trauma need a safe way to share their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. They might not be ready to talk about it during small group or even to have someone write themselves in to create confidential prayer journals. Establish a journaling station that kids can visit during worship time. Give them time to reflect and write whatever they want. As you read the journals during the week, write back to them. (Make sure to give them the option of keeping their journal private if they don't want you to read it.) **You will be surprised at how much your kids will share!**



Tips for helping kids feel in-control of their mind, body, and emotions

3. Keep Bible lessons short

Kids who have experienced trauma often have a difficult time sitting still and paying attention. We can prevent a lot of behavior problems by changing activities before they get bored or restless. In most cases, **you don't want to go more than about ten minutes without changing activities**, especially if you are asking them to just sit still and listen. It also helps to give them frequent opportunities to move their bodies. You can say things like, "If you think you're more like Mary, go to this side of the room. If you're more like Martha, go to that side of the room." This really helps kids regulate their minds and bodies during the lesson.

4. Play games that teach self-regulation

Self-control is a skill that is taught, learned, and practiced over time. We can actually teach kids how to control their bodies by playing games that involve these skills. For example, "Freeze Dance" is played by having kids dance to the music and freeze suddenly when the music stops. **When they control their bodies in the game, it teaches them how to control their bodies** when they get angry and feel like hitting someone.



Tips for helping kids feel loved

5. Play with the kids

Whether it's unstructured playtime or an organized game, it's easy for the adults to sit back and watch, use the time to prepare lesson plans, or talk to each other in the back of the room. Don't! Encourage your team to jump in and play along—even if it makes them feel silly. **Play is every child's first language, and it is the absolute best way to break down walls with kids who have experienced trauma.** It also builds rapport that you can draw from later when you have to discipline them.

6. Maintain traditions

Kids need to feel like they're part of a group. And there's no better place for this to happen than at church! One way to create a sense of belonging is to maintain traditions. Think of it like a "secret handshake." **It's something everyone in the group knows about, and it makes them feel like they're "on the inside."** For example, you could have a special prayer you all say together before you start worship. Teach them a Greek or Hebrew word that connects to an important theme or lesson. Kids who have experienced trauma often feel like outsiders wherever they go. But when you teach them your secret handshakes, they will finally feel like part of the group.

7. Give kids a chance to show off

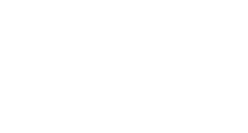
It is extremely important for kids in elementary school to feel like they're good at something. Even more importantly, they need their peers to notice and recognize their abilities. You can create space for this in your ministry. If a child struggles with feelings of worthlessness, **find out what they are good at and give them a chance to shine in front of everyone.** If they like to draw, let them illustrate the Bible story on the white board. If they sing, put them on stage during worship. If they practice Karate, invite them to do a martial arts demonstration. This is a powerful way of building them up, and it teaches them that they have something unique and valuable to contribute to the body of Christ.

8. Give kids meaningful choices during worship

One common frustration children's pastors voice is a lack of participation during worship. The kids refuse to do the motions to songs, and the ones in the back won't even stand! This can be especially true for kids who have experienced trauma. They may resist someone telling them what to do, especially if they fear that someone might mock them if they do the motions. One way to help them engage is by trusting them with meaningful choices. **Worship doesn't need to be one-size-fits-all.** Offer many different methods to worship (like singing, writing in a prayer journal, placing a rock at the altar, or even just resting in God's presence), and trust your kids to make the choice that is right for them.

Conclusion

Jesus said, **"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them..."** (Matthew 19:14). This is the essence of a trauma-informed children's ministry. Instead of driving children away because of their behaviors, we see the pain underneath and speak healing into places of woundedness. We welcome all children – struggles and all – into the community of faith, and into the arms of Christ.



Where can I find more strategies, tips, and resources?

1. The Book

Trauma-Informed Children's Ministry: A Practical Guide to Reaching Hurting Kids by Robert G. Crosby and Lori A. Crosby

[AVAILABLE ON AMAZON](#)

2. The Workshop

The Reach Hurting Kids Workshop

Train your own team with our research-based curriculum!

[REACHHURTINGKIDS.COM/WORKSHOP](https://reachhurtingkids.com/workshop)

3. The Website

reachhurtingkids.com

Who We Are

Reach Hurting Kids Institute is an interdisciplinary team of researchers, mental health professionals, and children's ministry experts. In addition to producing research for scientific journals, Reach Hurting Kids Institute serves the global children's ministry community as a proud partner of the International Network for Children's Ministry, an official resource contributor to the Tim Tebow Foundation, and a regular participant in key

children's ministry conferences, including the KidzMatter Conference and the Children's Pastors Conference (CPC). The Purpose of Reach Hurting Kids Institute is to provide trauma-informed children's ministry resources that empower the Church to reach the hurting kids in our congregations and communities—tearing down the barriers that prevent hurting kids from coming to Jesus and welcoming the most vulnerable among us into the family of God.

