

Disruptive Child ... or Something More?

Ministering to kids with mental, behavioral and developmental disorders

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Little Timmy bolted toward the exit. For his own safety, I stepped in front of the doorway to block him. Without hesitation, he rammed into me like an angry bull. I was shocked. *Why was this child, who was usually sweet and compliant, suddenly acting out?*

Sarah stood in the center of the classroom screaming and yelling words no 4-year-old should even know. As I walked her to the hallway, she hit me, spat in my face, and latched onto my arm like a shark. *What could possibly cause a child to act this way?*

One might simply assume they were being naughty. Just call the parents and make them sit in service with them, right? But this wasn't just misbehavior. I knew something more was going on.

My first step was to sit down with the parents. After having these conversations, my suspicions were confirmed. The issues were stemming from mental, behavioral and developmental disorders (MBDD).

I have encountered many such challenges over the years. In addition to children's ministry, I have worked for more than 20 years in public education, including special education.

MBDDs include issues such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, mental illness, Tourette syndrome, autism, intellectual challenges, and developmental delays. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, more than 15% of children have at least one diagnosed MBDD. These numbers do not include the many children whose families cannot afford to have them properly diagnosed and treated.

Such conditions can make parenting difficult. Sadly, the last place many of these parents want to come is the local church. I've had parents ask, "Why would I bring my kid to church, just to be called out to get them before service even starts?"

As pastors and children's ministry leaders, we need to step-up and walk alongside these families. Doing so will give more children the opportunity to learn about Jesus. It will also give parents the chance to grow in Christ and find the support systems they need so they can better help their kids.

The more you know, the more prepared you will be.

The best place to start is by educating and training volunteers. It is critical in these situations to know the difference between a misbehaving child and one with a disorder. There are organizations across the country that offer training, both online and in person.

Another great resource is the local school district. School officials can recommend agencies and may even offer training for your volunteers. The more you know, the more prepared you will be.

Have a plan in place, even if you don't currently have children with special needs. It's only a matter of time before you will need to draw on that preparation.

As an educator and a children's pastor, the most effective method I have used is an inclusion model. Keeping special needs children in the classroom helps them feel like they are part of the community. It also teaches the other children compassion for their peers.

There are four strategies that any kids' ministry can use when implementing an inclusion model:

1. The buddy system assigns another child, perhaps an older one, to be a friend and helper to the special needs child.
2. Provide specific jobs in the classroom for the child with behavior issues. Many children with an MBDD have low self-worth, which may cause them to act out or withdraw. Let them know they are a valued part of the group.
3. For more extreme cases, assign a volunteer to the child. This one-on-one attention can help head off problems and reduce distractions for the rest of the class.
4. Provide a quiet area where the child can get away from the group. It doesn't have to be a big space. The most important thing is for children who are struggling with their emotions to have a place they can go when needing a few minutes to collect

themselves. A sensory box is a great tool to have in this quiet area. It could include modeling clay, squishy balls, a journal and pen, fabrics of different textures, and even a weighted blanket.

As we acknowledge the challenges and seek proper training and preparation, our ministries can bring these often-alienated families back into the local church where they can feel comfortable and included.

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