

# The God of the Child: Encouraging Children's Spiritual Development During Times of Trauma<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Children are born as spiritual beings, created for relationship with God. However, their spiritual development is shaped by many factors — including their experience of trauma. Sadly, since ancient times, many children have experienced significant trauma and the Bible deals with this topic openly and honestly. This article presents an overview of how trauma may impact children's overall development and especially their spiritual development. While many of these impacts may be negative, the Bible also offers significant hope for children growing up in the midst of trauma. This article will also suggest practical ways that Christian parents and ministry leaders can seek to join children on the spiritual journey during times of trauma.

**Keywords:** children, spirituality, trauma, pastoral care, leadership, ministry leaders.

## Introduction

Children are created with an innate capacity to know their Creator. God also designed a world where everything in a child's environment would point to His nature and character. However, in a world that has been marred, broken, and tarnished by sin, children's ability to see God clearly is compromised. Childhood trauma will influence and shape a child's developing understanding of God and it is vital that parents and ministry leaders seek to intentionally support and encourage children's spiritual development during times of trauma.

## Children's Spirituality

### Children's Spirituality Formed

God wants children to know him, to experience him, and to flourish. However, children's spirituality is constantly being formed — intentionally and unintentionally —

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by factors that will impact their ability to understand and experience God as he is.<sup>2</sup> As Catherine Stonehouse observed, “Children are born with readiness for faith but need an environment of mutual love, care and interaction for the faith potential to become reality”.<sup>3</sup>

God intended a world where children could know and experience him. In the families of Ancient Israel, children learned about the nature, character, and acts of God through their families, their participation in the faith community, their experience of a just civic community, and their encounters with God’s creation. Each of these aspects of a child’s world was intended to display the beauty, goodness, and truth of God. Theologian, Cornelius Plantinga, described the resulting, biblical ideal of shalom in this way,

In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom He delights. *Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be* (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

In a world characterized by shalom, children’s needs would be met, and their spirituality would be nurtured within their families, their faith communities, and an environment that reflected the beauty, goodness, and truth of God.

### Children’s Spirituality Threatened

God’s plan was good, but the spirituality of all children is threatened by a sinful world. For children growing up in a nation at war, the threat is heightened. The world is “not the way it’s supposed to be”<sup>5</sup>.

God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be... In fact, we may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically, morally, spiritually, or otherwise... shalom is God’s design for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder.<sup>6</sup>

Eric Johnson described sin as “the ultimate relational disorder,” and the terrible consequences of sin are felt keenly by every person in a broken world.<sup>7</sup> However, the effects of sin are felt most keenly by children. The circles of family, faith community,

<sup>2</sup> David Csinos and Ivy Beckwith, *Children’s Ministry in the Way* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Plantinga, *Not the Way*.

<sup>6</sup> Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Johnson, *God and Soul Care: The Therapeutic Resources of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 218.

civic community, and creation that were intended to protect, nurture, and teach children are themselves broken by sin and press down on children. As a result, children's ability to see and experience God is threatened.<sup>8</sup>

Four decades ago, Ana-Maria Rizzuto<sup>9</sup> challenged ministry leaders to pay attention to the "God of the child" writing, "No child arrives at the 'house of God' without his pet God under his arm".<sup>10</sup> Many children in our communities come to church with a view of God that has been forged in the context of trauma. What kind of God do these children bring with them and how might we join them more authentically on their journey towards the God of the Bible?

## Childhood Trauma

A growing body of research in the last twenty-five years has examined the pervasive and long-lasting effects of trauma on children's development.<sup>11</sup> Many of these studies have focused on experiences of trauma that are far too common in children: experiences of family violence, mental illness or substance abuse, divorce or incarceration of parents, emotional or physical neglect, and physical, emotional, or sexual abuse as children.

These studies have repeatedly found that:

1. Even during times of peace, childhood trauma is more common than is generally recognized. In one US study with 16,000 participants, half of respondents experienced at least one childhood trauma, a quarter of respondents had experienced multiple traumas.<sup>12</sup> In a time of national trauma like Ukraine is experiencing, childhood trauma is multiplied and intensified.
2. Childhood trauma significantly impacts a child's development with long-term consequences. In short, children who experience significant trauma are more likely to develop life-threatening emotional and physical health conditions. They are also more likely to struggle at school and exhibit self-destructive behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Cupit, *Perspectives on Children and Spirituality* (Bletchley: Scripture Union Australia, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Ana-Maria Rizzuto was a psychoanalyst who focused on religious experience. Her book, *Birth of the Living God* distinguished between a child's cognitive understanding of God, which she called "God-concept," and a child's affective experience of God, which she called "God-image." She suggested that a person may hold a formal belief in God that is at odds with their un verbalized, but deeply held feelings about God.

<sup>10</sup> Ana-Marie Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Hughes et al., "The Effect of Multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences on Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Lancet Public Health* 2 no. 8 (2017): 356-366"; David L. Shern, Andrea K. Blanch, Sarah M. Steverman, "Toxic Stress, Behavioral Health, and the Next Major Era in Public Health," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 86, no. 2, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Kristin Souers and Pete Hall, *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* (Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Shern, Blanch and Steverman, "Toxic Stress."

These research studies highlight that many children – even in times of peace – are wrestling with difficult circumstances and that these difficult experiences are significantly impacting their development.<sup>14</sup>

### Childhood Trauma and Development

Trauma physically impacts a child's developing brain.<sup>15</sup> In healthy childhood, children experience mild to moderate stress in the context of supportive relationships. These normal childhood experiences of stress activate appropriate brain response to environmental threats. However, when children experience intense or prolonged stress, particularly without adequate support, children's response systems are overstimulated resulting in toxic levels of stress.<sup>16</sup>

Early childhood exposure to toxic stress has lifetime consequences. Physically, the effects of toxic stress are seen through higher risks in almost every health category.<sup>17</sup> Neurologically, toxic stress "weakens the architecture" of the developing brain.<sup>18</sup> In practice, toxic stress trains the young child to become a "survivalist".<sup>19</sup> Because the child's early experience of life has demonstrated the need to "fight" or "flee" at a moment's notice, the child's brain learns to respond based on emotion and instinct rather than logic and reasoning.<sup>20</sup> Karyn Purvis and others note that "when the primitive brain is on duty, more advanced areas of the brain...get shut down".<sup>21</sup> Trauma also creates memories which continue to shape a child's view of the world as "the brain continually prepares itself for the future based on what happened before".<sup>22</sup>

### Childhood Trauma and Spiritual Development

Children's experience of trauma also impacts their spiritual development. Writing of children in Liberia who experienced the trauma of civil war, Phyllis Kilbourn observes that "trauma robs children of precious childhood treasures, treasures that were meant to lay the spiritual foundations for their lives".<sup>23</sup> When a child's worldview is developed in

<sup>14</sup> Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, "Childhood Abuse and Neglect Take Their Toll," *National Catholic Reporter* 52, no.15 (2016): 1.

<sup>15</sup> Shern, Blanch and Steverman, "Toxic Stress."

<sup>16</sup> Shern, Blanch and Steverman, "Toxic Stress."

<sup>17</sup> Shern, Blanch and Steverman, "Toxic Stress."

<sup>18</sup> Harvard Center on the Developing Child, Brain Architecture, 2019. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

<sup>19</sup> Karyn Purvis et al., *The Connected Child: Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Purvis et al., *The Connected Child*; Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Purvis et al., *The Connected Child*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Siegel and Bryson, *Whole-Brained Child*.

<sup>23</sup> Phyllis Kilbourne, "Trauma and Loss," in *Healing for Hurting Hearts: A Handbook for Counseling Children and Youth in Crisis* (Ft. Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2013), 34.

the crucible of trauma, the child's view of self, God and relationship with God is affected.<sup>24</sup> However, a review of the literature suggests that not all children respond to trauma in the same way. Childhood trauma may result in spiritual disconnection, spiritual damage, and/or spiritual questioning and spiritual sensitivity in children.

### *Spiritual Disconnection*

Some children who have experienced trauma may experience spiritual disconnection – a sense that God is irrelevant to their world. Young children form their fundamental beliefs about God, themselves and their world as they interact with their world.<sup>25</sup> As a result, children are constantly at work making meaning from their lives and circumstances and weaving a narrative to live by.

Ideally, a child's world reflects the nature and character of the Christian God. As children experience the loving care of a family, they come to understand the loving care of God. As children experience worship in a community of faith, they are pointed to the God who deserves the worship of all people. As children experience the security of a just community, they are pointed to a God who is just and who provides safety. However, when children's worlds reflect little of God's character and human dignity, children's spiritual narrative may be shaped negatively.<sup>26</sup> Children evaluate new information in light of existing information and their own logical processes.<sup>27</sup> This process of evaluation may produce conflicts for a child whose prior experience does not seem to align with Christian teaching. Glenn Cupit cautions that "Whatever children hear about God's 'otherness', his perfection, purity, beauty and worthiness for worship, will be partly gauged against the way such characteristics are expressed in the environments in which children live."<sup>28</sup> Kathryn Copsey, writing in the context of disadvantaged children in London's housing schemes, also reflects on the spiritual disconnection disadvantaged children may feel.

[God's world] has obviously nothing to do with Jamie's world. He knows his world. His world is not beautiful. No one has ever shown him anything in his world that could engender a sense of awe and wonder... He finds it impossible

<sup>24</sup> Lauren E. Maltby and Todd W. Hall, "Trauma, Attachment, and Spirituality: A Case Study," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 40, no. 4 (2012): 302-312.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Vulnerable Children, Divine Passion and Human Obligation," in *The Child in the Bible*, edited by M. Bunge, 399-422 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008); Francis Bridger, *Children Finding Faith: Exploring a Child's Response to God* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2000); Cupit, *Perspectives on Children*; Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009); Martha E. MacCullough, *Undivided: Developing a Worldview Approach to Biblical Integration* (Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design Publications, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Crompton, *Children, Spirituality and Social Work* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998); Cupit, *Perspectives on Children*.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Harris, *Trusting What You're Told: How Children Learn from Others* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Cupit, *Perspectives on Children*, 88.

to take on board the ideas of God as a creator or of a world that is to be valued and treated with respect.<sup>29</sup>

### *Spiritual Damage*

Children's early experiences of neglect and trauma may also cause spiritual damage. Erik Erikson identified the first and primary task of infants and young children as developing healthy trust.<sup>30</sup> This trust comes naturally to an infant who is completely dependent on the care of others but whether that trust can be preserved depends on the response of caregivers to the infant's needs.<sup>31</sup> When caregivers ignore the needs of the child (neglect) or respond to the child with harm (abuse), the child's innate trust is damaged and replaced with mistrust.<sup>32</sup> As a result, a child who experiences early abuse or neglect may struggle to trust anyone – including God.<sup>33</sup> Erikson himself viewed the development of healthy trust as foundational to healthy religious development.

Spiritual damage to children may be exacerbated by religious teaching that does not account for a child's experience of life. Karen-Marie Yust<sup>34</sup> writes,

Keisha's spiritual questions stemmed from her ambivalent view of herself and her previous exposure to conservative religious teachings. She imagined a God of retribution, quick to anger and eager to punish. While she wanted to avoid punishment, she also believed that she deserved to suffer because of what she had done.<sup>35</sup>

Some ministry leaders inadvertently reinforce children's damaged perceptions of God through their own attitudes and behaviors. A counselor recounts the story of a pastor's wife who asserted that "People don't change or heal not because they were injured as children but because their hearts are not open to God".<sup>36</sup> For this ministry leader, mistrust and questions were not a natural result of childhood trauma but of intentional rebellion against God.

<sup>29</sup> Kathryn Copsey, *From the Ground Up: Understanding the Spiritual World of the Child* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2005), 80.

<sup>30</sup> Erik Erikson, "Eight Ages of Man," in *Childhood and Society*, 247-274 (W.W. Norton, New York, NY, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> John Surr, "Links between Early Attachment Experiences and Manifestations of Spirituality." *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 16, no.2 (2011): 129-141.

<sup>32</sup> Erikson, "Eight Stages of Man."

<sup>33</sup> Thema Bryant-Davis et al., "Religiosity, Spirituality, and Trauma Recovery in the Lives of Children and Adolescents," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 43, no.4 (2012); 306-314.

<sup>34</sup> Karen-Marie Yust is a professor of Christian Education and has been studying children's spirituality for over 20 years. For several years, she served as chaplain at a residential treatment center for adolescent teenage girls giving her a unique perspective on trauma and spirituality.

<sup>35</sup> Karen-Marie Yust, "(Non)Cosmetic Ministry: Reclaiming Hope among Abused Adolescents," in *Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008), 129.

<sup>36</sup> Stephanie Van Deusen and Christine A. Courtois, "Spirituality, Religion, and Complex Developmental Trauma," in *Spiritually Oriented Psychotherapy for Trauma* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2015), 30.

### *Spiritual Questioning*

Traumatic experiences may also prompt children to wrestle with spiritual questions. James Garbarino suggested that trauma challenges meaningfulness and that young children feel the conflict most keenly as they are still in the process of forming their worldview.<sup>37</sup> Trauma cannot be easily assimilated into a child's existing views but requires the child to alter the foundational frames of meaning.<sup>38</sup> The effort to produce meaning from difficult circumstances may prompt deep spiritual questions from the child.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the spiritual questions children ask during a time of crisis are very similar to the questions adults ask: Who am I? Where is God? Who can I trust?<sup>40</sup> The primary difference is the language that is used to ask and answer them.<sup>41</sup>

Children do not all respond in the same way to those questions.<sup>42</sup> Crisis is by nature a short-term state, and children will resolve the crisis with or without the help of adults.<sup>43</sup> However, when core issues of meaning are not resolved satisfactorily, children continue to struggle. A qualitative study among at-risk African American adolescent girls found that many struggled with depression and were unable to find coherent meaning in their difficult circumstances. The authors speculated that healthy meaning-making following trauma requires both a coherent worldview and the support of a healthy social group.<sup>44</sup>

When children's difficult spiritual questions are not resolved, some children reject their belief in God completely.<sup>45</sup> However, other children may continue to outwardly profess belief in a powerful and loving God while internalizing a very different lived experience of God. This disconnect between outer religious belief and inner spirituality is devastating to healthy spiritual growth.<sup>46</sup>

### *Spiritual Sensitivity*

Children's spirituality researcher, Rebecca Nye observes that "the more difficult children's life circumstances are, the more spiritual sensitivity and spiritual hunger

<sup>37</sup> James Garbarino and Claire Bedard, "Spiritual Challenges to Children Facing Violent Trauma," *Childhood* 3, no. 4 (1996).

<sup>38</sup> Garbarino and Bedard, "Spiritual Challenges"; Van Deusen and Courtois, "Spirituality, Religion, and Complex."

<sup>39</sup> Yust, "(Non)-Cosmetic Ministry"; Nye, *Children's Spirituality*; L. M. Wagener and H. N. Malony, "Spiritual and Religious Pathology in Childhood and Adolescence," in *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, 137-149 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Nye, *Children's Spirituality*.

<sup>41</sup> George Handzo, "Talking about Faith with Children," in *When Children Suffer: A Sourcebook for Ministry with Children in Crisis*, 173-183 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987).

<sup>42</sup> George Handzo, "Talking about Faith with Children," in *When Children Suffer: A Sourcebook for Ministry with Children in Crisis*, 173-183 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987).

<sup>43</sup> Olle Jane Sahler, "Understanding and Caring for the Child in Crisis," in *When Children Suffer: A Sourcebook for Ministry with Children in Crisis* edited by A. Lester, 56-65 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987).

<sup>44</sup> J. M. Sales, N. A. Merrill and R. Fivush, "Does Making Meaning Make it Better? Narrative Meaning Making and Well-Being in At-Risk African-American Adolescent Females," *Memory*, 21, no.1, (2013): 97-110.

<sup>45</sup> Garbarino and Bedard, "Spiritual Challenges."

<sup>46</sup> Rizzuto, *Birth of the Living God*; Lauren E. Maltby and T. Hall, "Trauma, Attachment, and Spirituality: A Case Study," in *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 40, no. 4 (2012): 302-312.

they may have”.<sup>47</sup> While trauma threatens a child’s spiritual development by raising issues of meaningfulness, coherence and trust, trauma may also prompt some children to seek comfort in a relationship with God. Robert Coles was challenged by the deep spiritual questions and reflections shared by children living in the favelas of Brazil.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, researchers in India found that adolescents who reported higher numbers of Adverse Childhood Experiences also reported an increased desire to connect with God or another higher power.<sup>49</sup> In his longitudinal study of Lutheran children, Kalevi Tamminen found that children who reported spiritual experiences were most likely to have felt God’s presence during times of crises or loneliness.<sup>50</sup> South African researchers interviewed children who were growing up without a family in institutions, foster homes or child-headed households. They found that every child they interviewed spoke about a faith in a higher being who knows, loves, and guides them personally.<sup>51</sup> Working with adolescents in the North American foster system, researchers reported that 95 percent of respondents found meaning through their relationship with God – even while continuing to engage in destructive behaviors.<sup>52</sup> These studies suggest that the impact of childhood trauma on children’s spiritual development is not automatically negative.

### Spiritual Development and Hope for Children

Childhood experiences of trauma influence the spiritual development of children. Research has shown that traumatic experiences are harmful to children’s development – physically, socially and emotionally.<sup>53</sup> However, research has also shown that healthy spirituality in children may help mitigate the negative impact of trauma in other areas of their development.

Studies among adults suggest that belief in a personal God helps individuals cope better with difficult life events.<sup>54</sup> Studies with children in difficult circumstances also

<sup>47</sup> Nye, *Children’s Spirituality*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990).

<sup>49</sup> Anthony Santoro et al., “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Religiosity/Spirituality in Emerging Adolescents in India,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 8, no. 3 (2016): 185-194.

<sup>50</sup> Kalevi Tamminen, “Religious Experiences in Childhood and Adolescence: A Viewpoint of Religious Development Between the Ages of 7 and 20,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 4 no. 2 (1994): 61.

<sup>51</sup> Margie Maistry and Jini L. Roby, “The Spirituality of Vulnerable Children in South Africa: Implications for Social Development and Welfare,” *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 2 (2010): 11.

<sup>52</sup> Lovie J. Jackson et al., “Exploring Spirituality among Youth in Foster Care: Findings from the Casey Field Office Mental Health Study,” *Child and Family Social Work*, 15 (2010): 107–117.

<sup>53</sup> Heather Larkin et al., “Social Work and Adverse Childhood Experiences Research: Implications for Practice and Health Policy,” *Social Work in Public Health*, 29 no. 1 (2014): 1–16.

<sup>54</sup> Parga Kenneth Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997); Terry L. Gall et al., “Spirituality and the Current Adjustment of Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse,” *Journal for The Scientific Study of Religion*, 1 (2007): 101; Donald Walker et al., “Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality during and after Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 1, no.2 (2009): 130-145.

suggest that faith increases children's ability to cope with trauma.<sup>55</sup> Healthy spiritual development may increase children's resilience by providing a coherent narrative and by connecting them with God and others.

### *Healthy Spirituality Offers a Coherent Narrative*

Healthy spirituality offers a coherent narrative that can answer a child's significant questions and offer perspective on their difficult circumstances.<sup>56</sup> Difficult circumstances seem to prompt children to ask spiritual questions and search for meaning. However, faith in the God of the Bible and His story can help a child to discover meaning in their own story.<sup>57</sup> This faith in God may provide a picture of a greater reality that puts individual suffering into perspective.<sup>58</sup>

### *Healthy Spirituality Offers Connections with God and Others*

Children grow in resilience because they experience deeper connectedness with God.<sup>59</sup> However, healthy spirituality also helps children experience deeper connectedness with others.<sup>60</sup> The positive effects of healthy spirituality were investigated by Ghanaian researchers among children living at an orphanage.<sup>61</sup> They found that spirituality contributed to the well-being of orphaned children by helping them develop better coping skills, maintain a hopeful outlook on life, feel better about themselves and connect them to a wider support network.

## Implications for Ministry with Children in Times of Trauma

As we have already seen, God created children for relationship with him, and he desires for children to learn about and experience him through their families, faith communities, just civic communities, and creation itself. However, children's experience of trauma will influence their spiritual development just as trauma influences other areas of their development. Because of this, joining children on the

<sup>55</sup> Coles, *Spiritual Life of Children*; YMCA of the USA, *Hardwired to Connect*; Santoro et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Religiosity."

<sup>56</sup> Coles, *Spiritual Life of Children*; McSherry & Smith, "How Do Children"; Bryant-David et al., "Religiosity, Spirituality, and Trauma."

<sup>57</sup> Gall et al., "Spirituality and the Current Adjustment of Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse."

<sup>58</sup> Edward T. Welch, "How Do We View Suffering?" in *Healing Children of War: A Handbook for Ministry to Children who have Suffered Deep Traumas*, edited by P. Kilbourne, 283-310 (Federal Way, WA: World Vision Resources, 1995); Santoro et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Religiosity."

<sup>59</sup> Coles, *Spiritual Life of Children*; Monique B. Mitchell, Christopher Silver and Christopher Ross, "My Hero, My Friend: Exploring Honduran Youths' Lived Experience of the God-Individual Relationship," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 17, no. 2 (2012): 137-151.

<sup>60</sup> Santoro et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Religiosity"; R. Loveall et al., "Contextualized Social Justice: Entering into Culture to Bring Life to Worthy Children," in *Exploring and Engaging Spirituality for Today's Children: A Holistic Approach* edited by L. Tolbert, 294-306 (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

<sup>61</sup> Joana Salifu Yendork and Nceba Z. Somhlaba, "I Am Happy Because of God': Religion and Spirituality for Well-Being in Ghanaian Orphanage-Placed Children," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 9, no. 1 (2017): S32-S39.

spiritual journey during times of trauma may require a more patient and nuanced approach to ministry.

Specialists working with Tearfund offer a scathing critique of traditional Christian Education for children at risk. They write,

[The traditional model of Christian Education in families] assumes childhood spent in loving, Christian families. The challenge for Christians working with abused, neglected, impoverished, war-affected or orphaned children is to find ways of conveying to them that God loves them despite the apparent evidence to the contrary.<sup>62</sup>

In this time of national trauma for Ukraine, ministry leaders are already keenly aware of trauma's impact on children. However, these leaders will most effectively join traumatized children on their spiritual journey when they become people of safety, share the big story of God and allow children to respond authentically.

### Become People of Safety

Children who have experienced trauma need to experience their parents and ministry leaders as trustworthy people who can be relied on. Since children's perceptions of God are influenced – at least in part – by their perceptions of important adults, it is vital that parents and ministry leaders reflect the consistent, loving, and truthful character of God as they interact with children.<sup>63</sup> However, adults also need to understand that developing trust will take time for children whose life experiences have developed “deeply encoded fear responses.”<sup>64</sup>

### Share the Big Story of God

Children's early experience of trauma may result in distorted views of themselves, others, and God. As a result, spiritual healing must eventually confront these spiritual lies with spiritual truth.<sup>65</sup> Often children's ministry presents children with truth in simplistic and propositional forms. However, this approach to truth is inadequate to address the deep spiritual lies held by children whose life experiences have been hellish.

There is beauty and great power in the fullness of God's story.<sup>66</sup> It is a story of human beings with inherent worth and value as God's children, of how sin has ravaged

<sup>62</sup> Judith Ennew and Paul Stephenson, *Questioning the Basis of Our Work: Christianity, Children's Rights and Development*, (Tearfund, 2006), 69.

<sup>63</sup> Bridger, *Children Finding Faith*; Cupit, *Perspectives on Children*.

<sup>64</sup> Purves et al., *Connected Child*, 52.

<sup>65</sup> Christa Foster Crawford, “From Spiritual Harm to Spiritual Healing,” in *Healing for Hurting Hearts: A Handbook for Counseling Children and Youth in Crisis*, edited by P. Kilbourne, 161-178 (Ft Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2013).

<sup>66</sup> Michael W. Goheen, “The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story,” *Theology Today* 64, no.4, (2008): 469–483.

every part of God's creation and of God, who has entered into the story and is at work to redeem, restore, recreate and reclaim all that was lost and broken. However, children easily miss the power of God's story when it is presented as a collection of unrelated, largely irrelevant, and individual stories.<sup>67</sup>

Sharing the whole story enables children to see themselves and their stories within God's story. The Bible has much to say about injustice, abuse, deprivation and violence. It explores the full range of human emotions: love, joy, peace and kindness as well as anger, depression, bitterness and hurt. Ministry leaders must explore the Bible more widely and deeply with hurting children. Counsellors have suggested that "gaining a spiritual and emotional connection with such stories might help clients of various ages to make meaning out of their own experience of suffering, if processed in an age-appropriate way".<sup>68</sup> Children who understand God's story can recognize God's voice speaking into their own stories. Edward Welch suggested that children who have suffered need to hear God say the following: "Put your suffering into speech. You have been sinned against. I am with you and love you. Know that I am God. There is a purpose in suffering".<sup>69</sup> In the context of the larger story of God, these are not simplistic platitudes but profound truths about the God of the Scriptures in the child's story.

### Allow Children to Respond Authentically

The house of God must be a place where children and young people are invited to come as they are, with their honest questions and struggles, and without fear of condemnation.<sup>70</sup> Allowing children to respond authentically does not mean that Christians abandon objective truth. Freedom to question means that they are willing to engage a child's subjective experience and to help them make meaning as they come to understand and experience the God of the Scriptures.<sup>71</sup>

Parents and ministry leaders may feel threatened by the deep questions and doubts that children may express. However, the way they respond to these questions has profound implications for how children resolve spiritual conflict. If Christians respond to questions dismissively or defensively, the conversation is shut down and children are left to create their own meaning.<sup>72</sup> Recalling his own experience as a child at risk, Dan Lovaglia writes of his mentors, "There was never a question that was off-limits. I could be real and raise messy faith issues with them, knowing they would listen and give me

<sup>67</sup> Scottie May and Catherine M. Stonehouse, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those who Teach and Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010); Wendy Strachan, "Children, Mission and the Bible: A Global Perspective," in *Bible in Mission* (Vol.18), Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, 81-92 (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> Donald Walker et al., "Addressing Religious and Spiritual Issues in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Children and Adolescents," *Professional Psychology, Research and Practice* 2 (2010): 178.

<sup>69</sup> Welch, "How Do We View Suffering?" 295.

<sup>70</sup> Crompton, *Children, Spirituality and Social Work*; Yust, "(Non)-Cosmetic Ministry."

<sup>71</sup> Yust, "(Non)-Cosmetic Ministry"; Newton, *Heart-Deep Teaching: Engaging Students for Transformed Lives* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2012).

<sup>72</sup> Lester, *Pastoral Care with Children in Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1985).

thoughtful responses”.<sup>73</sup> Children who have experienced pain are not necessarily looking for theological answers but for the validation of themselves and their questions.<sup>74</sup> David Csinos and Ivy Beckwith write, “When we treat a child’s questions with respect, we are treating the child with respect”.<sup>75</sup>

For some children, a genuine response to Scripture may look like non-compliance on the surface. Rebecca Nye cautions ministry leaders to consider, “what happens if you are the child who connects intimately to the angry dark reality of the Flood while the rest blithely see Noah’s story as a message about God’s kindness to animals and knack for beautiful rainbows?”.<sup>76</sup> For such a child, pressure to join in a celebratory game will get in the way of a personal and meaningful response to truth. Ministry leaders must be willing to enter into the story with children and to consider how it looks and feels from their perspective.<sup>77</sup> It is only in entering into the story with the child and walking in it together that the child can truly come to see and experience the presence of God in the midst of the story.

### Cultivate Patience on the Journey

Spiritual development in any child is a process rather than an event.<sup>78</sup> This perspective is especially important in ministry with children who have experienced trauma. Children form their worldviews slowly, over time, and through a variety of experiences. Developmental trauma impacts the way that children see themselves, others and God and reforming their worldview will also take time.

At times, spiritual development may appear to be “two steps forward and three steps backward.” Patience is essential as children and young people wrestle with their spiritual identity. Karen-Marie Yust observes that

As in any dynamic process, the conceptual connections with which a traumatized young woman is experimenting are marked in pencil, subject to erasure as their effectiveness is evaluated and alternative approaches are tried. Since faithfulness is a lifelong transformational practice, it is not appropriate to expect adolescents to do their spiritual work in indelible ink.<sup>79</sup>

It is vital that ministry leaders working with children in times of trauma are aware of the spiritual effects of trauma on children and that they are willing to practice patience as they walk with children.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Lovaglia, *Relational Children’s Ministry*, 131.

<sup>74</sup> Lester, *Pastoral Care with Children*; Crompton, *Children, Spirituality and Social Work*.

<sup>75</sup> Csinos and Beckwith, *Children’s Ministry in the Way*, 95.

<sup>76</sup> Nye, *Children’s Spirituality*, 93.

<sup>77</sup> Crompton, *Children, Spirituality and Social Work*; Copsey, *From the Group Up*; Berryman, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children: Montessori, Godly Play, and the Future* (New York, NY: Morehouse, 2013); Strachan, “Children, Mission and the Bible.”

<sup>78</sup> Stonehouse, *Joining Children*; Stonehouse & May, *Listening to Children*.

<sup>79</sup> Yust, “(Non)-Cosmetic Ministry,” 130.

<sup>80</sup> Maltby & Hall, “Trauma, Attachment and Spirituality.”

## Grounds for Hope

These are dark and difficult days for Ukraine, but it is important to remember that there is also great hope. Yes, children are being exposed to much ugliness and evil. Yes, their experience of ugliness and evil will shape them throughout their lives. But the God of the Bible is still present, and He is still at work.

Many of the children whose stories are found in the Bible experienced and were shaped by extreme trauma. However, these stories also demonstrate that God is not defined by the experiences of children but transcends them. Repeatedly, children at risk throughout Scripture personally experience the God of Israel at work on their behalf including Moses and Miriam, Joseph, Samuel, Naaman's servant girl, Josiah, Daniel, and Esther. These children, and many like them, experienced slavery, genocide, war, corruption, family disintegration, kidnapping, violence and more. However, in each of these examples, God not only provided for the child but invited the child to play a significant role in His grand story of redemption.

The most compelling evidence of a God who is reaching out in relationship is the incarnation. God himself steps into human history as a child at risk: The child, Jesus, is born into extreme poverty, into a land occupied by a foreign and brutal army and threatened with murder. In the middle of the night, his family flees to Egypt as political refugees. And yet, Jesus is God incarnate, the Savior of our world, stepping into the pages of human history, inviting all children to know and experience him. The God of the Bible is a God who is *for* children at all times, but especially during times of trauma.

## Conclusion

Children are born as spiritual beings, created for relationship with God. However, their spiritual development is shaped by many factors – including their experience of trauma. These early experiences of trauma are likely to influence children's spiritual development, offering unique opportunities and challenges for parents and ministry leaders. Christian adults who desire to join children on their spiritual journey during times of trauma will do well to be people of safety, share the big story of God, and allow children to respond authentically. However, they must also allow themselves to find hope in the God who transcends all of life's experiences.

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## Бог дитини: сприяння духовному розвитку дітей під час травми

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Анотація: Діти народжуються духовними істотами, створеними для стосунків з Богом. Однак їхній духовний розвиток формується під впливом багатьох чинників, у тому числі й пережитої травми. На жаль, із давніх часів велика кількість дітей переживала значні травми, і в Біблії відкрито й чесно розглянута ця тема. У пропонованій статті представлено огляд того, як травма може вплинути на загальний розвій дитини, а особливо на її духовний розвиток. Хоча чимало таких впливів можуть бути негативними, Біблія також надає чудову надію для дітей, які ростуть в умовах травми. Стаття теж пропонує практичні способи, як батьки-християни та лідери церковного служіння можуть приєднатися до дітей на духовному шляху в період переживання травми.

Ключові слова: діти, духовність, травма, лідерство, лідери церковного служіння.

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