

STUDY GUIDE

Effective Ministry to Kids and Youth in Foster Care



Unit 2: Connecting With Kids In Foster Care

Connect and build trust with kids in foster care.



The Importance of Supportive Relationships

Supportive relationships demonstrate the love of Christ.

- **A child's view and understanding of God develop through their relationships with us—the people of the Church.**
- **Even short-term relationships can have a lifelong impact on the way children develop emotionally, relationally, and spiritually.**

Supportive relationships are therapeutic.

- **Caring relationships help children heal from trauma and navigate traumatic situations with greater resilience.**
- **When children have positive relationships with adults, their defenses are lowered, and they are more inclined to trust and buy into the guidance and boundaries set by those adults.**

Harvard's Center for the Development Child reports that children who do well have at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.

How to Be a Warm, Caring Presence

Greet children by name.

- **Get on their level, look them in the eye, and let them know you enjoyed your time with them.**
- **Pray for them by name throughout the week.**

Ask open-ended questions.

- **Ask questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer.**
 - “What did you enjoy most about your field trip?”
- **When they tell you something, ask them about it later.**
 - “I was praying for you and your science test. How did it go?”

Be consistent.

- **Show up to church predictably.**
 - It is important for leaders in high-contact roles, such as small group leaders, to be there weekly.
- **Let the kids know ahead of time if you aren’t going to be at church.**
- **Work with the same children for more than a year.**
 - To create safety and stability, it is often beneficial for leaders to move up with their kids when they transition into the next grade.

If you have a mailing address, mail a note letting them know you’re glad they attended. If they miss, let them know through a note that you’ve been thinking about them and hope to see them soon.

Be present.

- **Past traumatic events can make it difficult for children to trust unfamiliar adults.**
- **Continue to greet children by name even if they fail to acknowledge you.**
- **Simply sitting next to a non-responsive child communicates that they are seen and that they matter.**

As heartbreaking as it is to consider, kids in foster care may have experienced spiritual abuse, so the church may be scary to them.

How to Connect with Kids in Foster Care on a Personal Level

Making a Personal Connection with an Individual Child

- **Learn about their interests.**
 - Find out what interests them.
 - Learn more about it.
 - Talk to them about it later.
- **Remember what they told you.**
 - Don't ask the same child the same question every week (e.g., "Do you play any sports?").
 - Consider taking written notes and reviewing them the next time you talk to the child.
- **Don't be pushy.**
 - Don't push a child to share something they aren't ready to talk about.
 - We can minister to a child effectively without knowing their story.

Be patient.

- **When a child has been hurt in the past, it can take months or even years to earn that child's trust.**
- **Continue to engage the child even if they are non-responsive.**

Navigating Tough Conversations

- **Avoid giving advice.**
 - Our advice could be misleading or harmful because we know very little about the situation.
 - Be a good listener rather than telling the child what to do.
- **Ask the right kind of questions.**
 - Avoid intrusive or probing questions (e.g., "Why can't you live with your parents?").
 - Ask open-ended questions that allow the child to share at their own pace.
 - *"I know things have been tough for you. Is there anything you'd like me to understand better?"*
 - *"I'm here to listen if you'd like to share anything about what you've been through."*
 - *"What would help you feel safe right now?"*
 - *"If you're ever feeling upset or overwhelmed, what are some things that help you feel better?"*

When asking questions, the aim should be to empower the child, build trust, and help them feel heard and understood, rather than to satisfy one's own curiosity.

- **Reassure the child.**
 - Reassure the child that nothing they say (or choose to withhold) can change how you feel about them.
 - Reassure the child that the situation is not their fault.
- **Follow abuse prevention guidelines.**
 - Learn what you need to report, when, and to whom.

If you have any doubt about your organization's abuse prevention policies, speak with your respective ministry leader immediately to ensure you handle the situation appropriately and provide the necessary support for the child.

How to Connect with Kids in Foster Care on a Personal Level

- **Children may rely on a single trusted adult to serve as their "secure base" at church.**
 - They feel safe participating in ministry activities when they are close to this person.
- **Over time, it is important to expand the child's support network within the church.**
 - The goal is to add to (but not replace) the support they receive from their original safe person.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Reflecting on your own experiences, can you recall a time when a supportive relationship with someone at church had a significant impact on your life? How did that relationship influence your walk with God and sense of belonging at church?

- 2 Can you recall the first time you attended a new church or school? How did the people there treat you when you first arrived, and how did that affect your overall experience? What can you learn from this as you seek to be a warm, caring presence for the kids in your ministry?

- 3 How difficult is it for you to build a relationship with a child you don't know? What strategies have worked best for you in the past? Is there anything you might do differently in the future?

- 4 When a child shares something shocking or disturbing, are you quick to listen or quick to give advice? What can you do to become a more supportive listener?

- 5 Think of a child you have (or seek to have) a close relationship with at church. As you seek to gradually expand their support network, who are three other people or groups you could introduce them to?
