

Detecting Counterfeit Relationships in the Children’s Ministry: Trauma-Informed Strategies vs. Grooming Behaviors

General Behavior	Trauma-Informed Strategies	Grooming Behaviors	Tips for Ministry Leaders
Intentional relationship development	Spending quality time with the child to nurture an authentic, trusting relationship (while maintaining one’s own adult relationships)	Spending time with the child to engender a manipulative relationship (while failing to maintain adult relationships)	Utilize a background check service (e.g., Protect My Ministry) and provide a clear, written code of conduct for adult-child interactions (e.g., ECAP Code of Conduct).
Paying special attention to certain children	Allowing natural connections to form more deeply with some children than others	Being possessive of the child and showing signs of feeling rejected or unhappy if the child pulls away	Honor and preserve positive relationships while helping the child connect with other adults as well.
Maintaining a consistent relationship	Maintaining relational consistency over time while facilitating and supporting the child’s relationships with parents and other adults	Maintaining control over the child over time while emotionally isolating the child from parents and other adults	Remind workers that they are also serving the child’s family, and they should never dishonor the child’s or parents’ wishes.
Sharing personal information	Purposefully sharing age-appropriate information about oneself; inviting the child to share personal information (with clear expectations regarding confidentiality); encouraging parent-child communication	Telling the child personal information that is not age appropriate; asking the child to keep secrets; discouraging or undermining parent-child communication	Provide training to help workers communicate effectively and appropriately with children in the ministry (e.g., Reach Hurting Kids Workshop).
Fostering emotional intimacy	Purposefully sharing own’s own (age-appropriate) feelings with the child; inviting the child to safely share feelings while offering emotional support	Oversharing one’s own feelings with the child; making the child feel responsible for the adult’s emotional needs; developing codependency (i.e., needing to be needed by the child)	Meet with workers regularly to check up on their spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Help workers identify signs of codependency (e.g., excessive worry, control issues, over-involvement, dependency on the child for validation) and offer mental healthcare referrals when needed.
Gift giving	Giving modest gifts on special occasions (e.g., birthdays, graduation)	Giving extravagant gifts for no apparent reason to endear or indebt the child to the adult	Provide guidance on appropriate gift giving (e.g., dollar amounts, types of gifts). Do not allow secret gifts.

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Meeting tangible needs	Recognizing and addressing the tangible needs of the child and family; helping the family when parents and/or other adults are physically present	Providing material resources to create a sense of dependency on the adult; intentionally helping the family when only the adult and child are present	The church should pay for the material needs or reimburse the worker. Large gifts should come from “the church” rather than the individual.
Physical touch	Offering limited touch and affection consistent with the child’s needs and comfort level while making it clear that the child is in charge of his or her own body	Maintaining extended or unwanted touch or affection and/or pushing physical boundaries	Provide guidance on consent (e.g., “Is it okay if I put my hand on your shoulder?”) and appropriate touch in a ministry environment.
Establishing trust with parents and caregivers	Building rapport with the parent or caregiver to partner in promoting the child’s spiritual, social, and emotional development and well-being	Building rapport with the parent or caregiver to gain less restricted access to the child and/or reduce the likelihood that abuse claims will be believed	Provide parents with an overview of your safety policy and encourage them to ask questions or bring concerns about safety in the ministry or specific worker behaviors.
Engaging in one-on-one conversations	Allowing the child to discuss personal topics confidentially (1) within eyeshot of other adults, (2) following clearly established rules and boundaries, and (3) while limiting conversations to age-appropriate, child-directed topics	Physically isolating the child beyond the view of other adults; pressing boundaries and breaking rules; introducing topics that are not age appropriate	Offer clear guidance on acceptable parameters for one-on-one conversations (e.g., specific safe locations, acceptable topics of conversation).
Showing an interest in the child outside of church	Attending a child’s performance, game, or birthday party when invited; texting encouraging messages with the parents’ knowledge (e.g., “I’m praying for your tournament tomorrow.”)	Inserting oneself into the child’s life uninvited; texting or interacting with the child on social media frequently and/or without the parent’s knowledge	Discourage individual (one-on-one) texting in favor of group texts that include the child’s parents and/or other small group members in the communication.
Interacting with the child outside the formal ministry context	Giving the child a ride to church when the caregiver is unable; taking the child out to lunch after church	Consistently seeking to be alone with the child in unsupervised contexts (e.g., in the child’s home when a parent is not present)	Require that the child’s parent provide clear, unequivocal (preferably written) permission for any adult-child interaction outside the formal ministry context.