



REACH HURTING KIDS
INSTITUTE

INCLUSIVE WORSHIP: ENGAGING CHILDREN WITH HIDDEN DISABILITIES

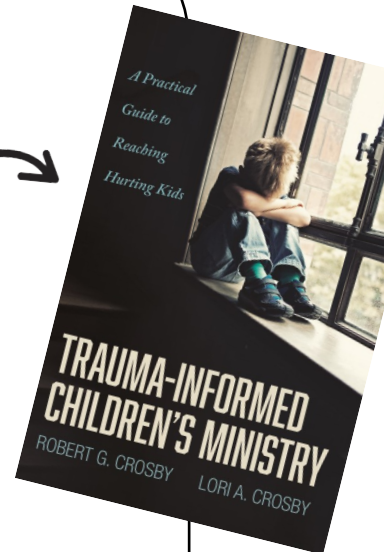
**More resources for building a safe and
supportive ministry for *all* children:**

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 trauma care curriculum.

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

3. The Website

reachhurtingkids.com

Introduction

What are Hidden Disabilities?

Some challenges children face aren't immediately visible but can still make activities like worship harder. These "hidden disabilities" include learning differences, sensory sensitivities, or the effects of childhood trauma. Trauma, in particular, can leave unseen marks on a child's emotions, thoughts, and spiritual life, influencing how they process feelings and connect with others. In worship, this can make it harder for children to focus, regulate emotions, or feel secure enough to fully engage.

Why This Matters

By considering these hidden disabilities, we can make worship a place where every child feels safe, valued, and able to engage. Intentional worship practices help remove barriers for children navigating trauma or other hidden challenges, allowing them to experience God's love in meaningful ways.

How This Guide Helps

This guide offers practical ideas to make your worship times more inclusive. Every child is a spiritual being with the capacity to connect with God. By encouraging diverse ways to participate, we affirm their dignity and their special place in God's family.



Include Songs With Variety in Tone and Tempo



When we vary the tone and tempo of our worship music, we create a space where all children, including those navigating hidden disabilities like trauma, can explore and express many emotions in the presence of God. After all, God welcomes us with open arms, no matter what we're feeling!

How do we do this?

Use fast-tempo, exciting songs (e.g., "Glorious Day," "House of the Lord") to help kids express their energetic joy! These offer a healthy outlet for children who find it hard to manage heightened emotions and provide a simple refrain they can carry with them during the week. Pair these with slower, soothing songs (e.g., "Gratitude") to encourage calm and reflection, helping kids process and express deeper, more tender feelings.

Why do we do this?

Often, children's worship songs lean into feelings of fun and excitement—after all, we're here to praise God, right? While this is certainly true, we all have many more emotions to bring before the Lord. The Psalms remind us that it is normal—and GOOD—to offer God our lament, anxiety, and even anger. Kids with hidden disabilities like trauma may find it hard to identify or express their feelings productively. Authentic worship leans into the truth of our belovedness in God's presence with every bit of ourselves—our excitement and our lament, our tears of joy and our tears of sorrow.

Don't Pressure Kids to Stand, Sing, and "Do the Motions"

Encourage authentic expressions of worship in your children's ministry! For some, this may look like repeating the motions they've learned for the song, but for others, an authentic expression of worship will look different. That's okay!

How do we do this?

At the start of worship, let kids know it isn't "wrong" to sit down or choose different motions. There are many reasons why a child, especially one navigating a hidden disability like trauma, might need to be still and quiet during worship. For others, worship may be more meaningful when they create their own motions to the songs. Assure them they are welcome to express their worship in their own way, as long as it is respectful and doesn't distract others.

Why do we do this?

One of the most common complaints from children's worship leaders, particularly those working with older children, is that the kids won't stand, sing, and do the motions. However, worship is not "one size fits all." We all carry our own temperament, our own circumstance, and our own feelings into worship, especially if we carry the baggage of trauma. We need not force children to worship in the ways we are accustomed to. It doesn't have to look the way we expect.



Teach & Practice Reverence

Embrace a posture of reverence—yes, even in children’s ministry! Dim the lights, get quiet, and listen together for God’s voice.

How do we do this?

Spend a few moments each week, either at the beginning of your worship time or before prayer, describing reverence and why it matters. Use explicit instruction—something like this:

“When we worship and pray, we are talking to God - and that is a very special, very important thing to do. This is a place we can practice reverence - when we know something is so special, so important, and so holy like God, we can still our bodies and take this seriously.

Let’s ask God to help us quiet our minds and bodies so we can listen closely for the voice of God and open our hearts to His story. Let’s take a deep breath together as we begin...”

It might take several weeks for kids and leaders to get used to this quiet seriousness. Don’t get discouraged! Press on, and remember that ongoing training can be a powerful tool for helping all kids feel empowered in a worship environment.

Why do we do this?

It’s easy to assume that kids want as much fun as possible packed into the children’s ministry time. Kids do love fun! But for children with hidden disabilities such as trauma, church might be the only place they are invited to slow down and embrace reverence. Every child is a spiritual being, even those who may seem unable to connect deeply with God. It takes time and practice to learn to listen to His still, small voice.



Prayer Journals

Establish a journaling station that kids can use during worship and prayer.

How do we do this?

Every student can have their own prayer journal in which to write, draw, or scribble their thoughts to God. The journals can be as simple as copy paper stapled together! You can find several options for affordable journals on Amazon. As prayer and worship time begins, invite the kids to grab their journals if they choose and to write or draw their feelings or questions. Welcome their creativity here in all its expressions!

Offer them the opportunity to keep their journals private by taking them home, but you could also give them the option to share their journals with you by placing them in a special box. With permission, you can read their journals and respond each week to their thoughts, prayers, wonderings, and feelings.

Why do we do this?

For a child with a hidden disability, this sense of privacy can offer feelings of safety, allowing them to pour out their hearts without fear of judgement. Journaling helps children process emotions and discover how to bring their big feelings to the One who love them most.



Teach the Kids to Pray for Each Other



Explicitly teach a model of intercessory prayer, emphasizing compassion, confidentiality, and concern.

How do we do this?

Consider teaching about prayer for several weeks, emphasizing the importance of prayer in the life of both individual believers and the Church collective. As you teach, remind kids that we are called to bear one another's burdens and to bring our concerns before the Lord in prayer. Teach compassion - what would it feel like if you were the one needing prayer? How would you want to feel supported? Teach confidentiality - how

would it feel if your trust was violated? How can you best honor your friend's dignity? Teach concern - how can I express my care for this friend in prayer? Would they want my arm around their shoulders or my hand on their hand? By explicitly teaching a model of prayer, kids can feel equipped and empowered to pray for one another in meaningful ways.

Why do we do this?

The Church is called to share in the joys and sorrows of those in its community. For children with hidden disabilities like trauma, it can be hard to believe that others care about their feelings or experiences. Teaching kids to pray for each other helps them live out the Church's mission—to lift each other up, carry one another's burdens, and reflect God's love in their community.

Prayer Stations

Offer creative prayer stations with different ways to respond to God.

How do we do this?

Set up several stations with a variety of responses. As you expand your prayer stations to include more options, be sure to explain in detail what is expected in each area. Here are a few ideas to get you started:



Thankfulness Wall

Place a poster board in your worship space with markers or crayons close by to use. Invite the kids to write what they are thankful for on the poster during worship and prayer time.

Journaling

Invite all kids to write in their journals during worship or prayer, expressing their hearts on paper through drawing or writing to God.

Area for Private Prayer

Designate an altar or area of the room for private prayer. Let the kids know that anyone who chooses to pray in this area will be left alone to pray by themselves.

Area for Partner Prayer

Set aside an altar or area in the room for partnered prayer. Let the kids know that anyone who chooses to pray in this area is inviting others to pray with and for them.

Reading Corner

Place several Bibles (as many versions as you can gather!) in a cozy reading area in the room. Invite kids to explore the Story of God during an appropriate time of your worship experience.

Response Poster

Illustrate your sermon through a response poster! For example, write "Jesus is..." in the middle of a poster, and invite the kids to come write who Jesus is to them in the margins.

Why do we do this?

All kids love the opportunity to choose, whether it be their snack, their socks, or their next activity. Why not give them a choice in their worship and prayer? It's important that all kids (especially kids who struggle with feelings of worthlessness) be trusted to pray in ways that are meaningful to them.

Contemplative Practices

Contemplative practices are actions that help deepen our awareness of God’s work in our hearts and in our world. These practices can take many forms, but the goal is the same – to be fully present in our hearts, minds, and bodies in a way that welcomes wonder and listens for God.

How do we do this?

While there are many ways to practice contemplative prayer, here are a couple of ways that connect well with children:

Meditative silence

Set aside ONE minute in which you encourage your congregation to quietly listen for the voice of God. Build this practice from a few seconds to a minute, then from one minute to two minutes. You may find that the children in your group crave this kind of intentionality in their spirits!

Breath prayers

Choose a simple phrase and break it into two pieces, like this: “Emmanuel... God with us.” Teach the children to take a deep breath with you. On the inhale, pray the first half of the prayer: “Emmanuel.” On the exhale, pray the second half: “God with us.” Repeat this practice a handful of times, and remind the students that they can always return to this breath prayer during the week.

Why do we do this?

We may hear “contemplative practice” and assume that our groups will *not* respond to this. Challenging behaviors and off-putting attitudes can distract us from the fact that kids with hidden disabilities like trauma *are* spiritual beings. There’s a stirring deep within us all—a desire to meet with the One who made us.



Honor Their Worship— Don't Cut It Short

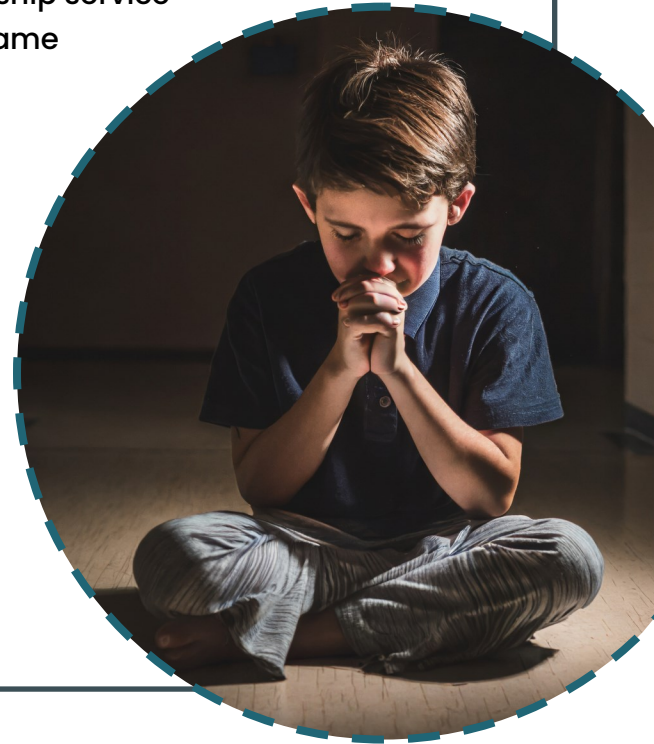
Children are equally as important as disciples of Jesus – their prayers and their worship are just as important as those of their guardian, and, as much as possible, we should protect their worship time as a sacred experience.

How do we do this?

When parents and guardians show up at the door to pick up their children after the main worship service is done, it's tempting to send children on their way as soon as we can release them. What would happen, though, if we honored their worship and prayer time by asking their guardians to wait a few moments? Respectfully request that parents and guardians allow their children to conclude their worship and prayer time without interruption. Coordinate with those leading the main worship service so that your services conclude around the same time. (We also want to honor the parents!)

Why do we do this?

For a child who has experienced trauma, offering this small gesture of respect can go a long way. It communicates that their prayers and their worship are just as important as those of their guardian. This is their connection to God. In this sacred space, their spirituality is deeply honored. There's always time for them to connect with God.



Involve Kids in Leadership



Invite kids to join in as leaders in your worship environment! There are many ways to involve kids. Look for their strengths and giftings, and help them to shine as they lead others!

How do we do this?

Consider a rotation schedule. Perhaps you might have a team of students sign up to create lyrics slides, to run sound or lights, to invent their own motions to the songs, or even to lead the singing on the platform! Train them into their new roles, and as they get more comfortable in their leadership, invite them to teach other students their job!

Why do we do this?

Whether from the platform or from their seat, leadership is a powerful motivator for participation. For children with hidden disabilities like trauma, this may be the first time they've been trusted with leadership. Kids are far more likely to embrace participation when they are invested in the experience!

Explore Liturgy

“Liturgy” is another word for a traditional, communal response in worship. For some churches, liturgical traditions are normative, but for others, liturgy feels like a foreign concept. Some pieces of liturgy have been traditions of the Church for hundreds or thousands of years! It’s important to choose liturgies and traditions that are meaningful to your group. This will help your children approach God as individuals, but it will also help them connect with their church as they worship in sync with the rest of the community.

How do we do this?

You can use just about any traditional liturgy with a group of kids, but here’s an easy one: Pass the Peace.

Have kids move around the room for about a minute, greeting one another in this way – “The peace of the Lord to you!” Each week, it’s the same greeting, and each person is invited into this simple and welcoming practice.

Why do we do this?

Children with disabilities often feel like outsiders wherever they go, but when you teach them the language of the Church, they can finally feel like part of the group. Traditional liturgies can serve as something of a “secret handshake” that binds the community together in common practice and common vocabulary. It’s something that everyone in the group knows about, and it makes them feel like they’re “on the inside.”



Intentional Posture



Take the time to teach a variety of worship postures and talk through what each of these postures might express to God. Invite the group to embody their response in whatever way feels authentic to them.

How do we do this?

Teach the significance of praying and worshipping with intentional postures: standing, sitting, kneeling, open hands, and more. Explore what each of these postures might be communicating: surrender, a cry for help, or a hand reaching for connection. Encourage your kids worship in whatever posture makes sense for them.

Use this [link](#) or QR code to download a PowerPoint presentation with images of people in different postures and a script for teaching children to communicate with God using their bodies.



Why do we do this?

One way to help kids engage in worship is by trusting them to make meaningful choices. Giving children autonomy in their worship promotes a sense of dignity and fosters an environment in which children with hidden disabilities can express themselves authentically and freely. When we allow children to make meaningful choices in worship, they are often more willing to stand, sing, or otherwise engage in the worship experience.

God Time

God Time is a dedicated time and space for children to meet with God. It can be a standalone activity, part of a worship set, or a prayer station.

How do we do this?

Select a portion of the room to be sanctified during the activity. Empty the space and rope it off with a rope or cord. Set an unlit candle in the middle of the space. Before beginning, explain the instructions in detail. For example:

“Today, we are going to do an activity called ‘God Time.’ This is a special time and space for you to meet with God. We have roped off this part of the room and asked God to sanctify it — or set it apart — as a space for us to meet with Him. Once we begin, I am going to light this candle, which will symbolize God’s presence. During the next song, if you would like to come and meet with God, please take off your shoes as a sign of respect before entering the space. Then you can pray by the candle as long as you’d like. You do *not* have to do this activity. It’s only if you want to. But please be respectful of others.”

If the children know how to pray for each other, you can designate part of the space for intercessory prayer: “If you want to pray by yourself, come to the right side of the candle. If you want someone to pray for you, go to the left side of the candle. If you see someone sitting on the left side by themselves, please come and pray for them.”

Why do we do this?

This is an opportunity for children to find peace as they bring their fears and worries to God. It is also a powerful way to teach children to care for each other as valued members of the body of Christ.

