



Holy Listening

Many situations a child faces cannot be fixed. They cannot, nor can we, stop the military deployment of a parent, make the child's parents get back together following a divorce or bring their loved one who has died back to life. The pain they face is their journey. Rather than try and fix their pain, the most helpful thing we can do is simply acknowledge the reality of the pain they face by listening.

Holy listening is when we listen without trying to fix the situation, without making judgments, and without minimizing the feelings of the child.

The goal of holy listening is to help the child feel comfortable enough to name the pain they feel without causing them to feel ashamed for having the feelings they have. When we practice holy listening, there is an air of sacredness and honesty. This allows a child

to name his or her pain, which is an important step in their healing.



When to Refer

Listening and being present with a child in pain is never going to harm a child in crisis. It is a basic need of all people of all ages. However, there are times and situations where professional help is also needed. If you ever feel that a situation is more than you can handle or if you wonder if a child needs more than you can provide, referring them to a child specialist is important and appropriate.



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IN TIME OF PAIN AND CRISIS:



HELPING CHILDREN COPE AND HEAL

The Reality

While we tend to think of childhood as a happy, carefree time, nearly all children will experience pain and hurt of some kind. Issues such as divorce, death, bullying, deployment of a parent, friendship struggles, and stress affect children each day.

These times of hurt and crisis can be simple or complex, and while we would rather children not experience pain or hurt, they can also be opportunities for children to learn important lessons such as how strong they truly are and how they can make good choices during times of stress. These times can also help develop coping skills that can be used throughout the child's lifetime, and children can experience God's healing touch and presence as they work through pain.

We, as the church, have a great opportunity to reach out to and journey with children during these times.

What Can We Do?

Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."
(Matthew 18:20, NRSV)

Coming Together With

The most important thing we can do, as the scripture reminds us, is to come together with a hurting child. Our willingness to gather together with a child in crisis creates a sacred space where God can be present and work among us, bringing hope and comfort to the situation.

Coming together with a child also demonstrates the power of being a faith community where no one journeys through life's painful experiences alone. When we come together with a child, he or she learns a powerful lesson: that their faith community and God are with them at all times and that they can depend on that now, and throughout their life.



Allowing Symbolic Language

Along with listening to the child, we need to help him or her find ways to name his or her pain. Children have a limited vocabulary and often have difficulty putting the emotions they feel into words. Rather than use words, children often use drawing, art, music, and play to express themselves.

Holy Listening Stones, like the ones pictured below, are sets of stones with random symbols on them that help children begin to express their feelings which can be difficult in times of crisis, either because they have a limited vocabulary or because the pain is so deep, they cannot find words to describe it. A complete set can be found on the First Steps webpage.

Rather than force a child to try and find words to express themselves, giving him or her some crayons and paper, a small plastic container filled with sand and a stick, a ball of clay, pipe cleaners, or finger paints helps him or her to express, through symbolic language, what he or she is feeling. Words alone do not work for children. They want to show us rather than tell us how they feel. Giving them tools to help express their feelings creates a relaxed space where they can share and where we can truly listen.

Prayer and Blessing

Once a child has shared his or her feelings in a sacred space of trust and care, he or she needs to be reminded God has also been present and God understands, supports, and loves them through the difficult time they are experiencing.

Allowing the child time to pray is important. Often lighting a candle and sitting in silence is as effective as a prayer spoken with words. Simply sitting in the presence of God brings much needed strength, hope, and comfort to a hurting child.



Giving the child the opportunity to pray on his or her own, rather than praying for them, helps the child feel God's love and presence. Sometimes children would rather draw a prayer, write in a journal, or sing a song rather than use words. Offering several styles of prayer is helpful.

Blessing the child after he or she has shared his or her feelings, reminds the child that you care and that the time you have shared together was sacred and holy time. A blessing can be as simple as a hug or as formal as a spoken blessing, and it is an important gift to the child.

A sample blessing is: "Remember that you are not alone. God is with you now and always. May God bless you with hope and comfort."