

PRAYING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Introduction

Some of the main ingredients that underpin any effective ministry to children and young people, including prayer, are:

- acceptance
- respect
- non-judgemental listening,
- sensitivity,
- discernment,
- patience.

In applying these values in the area of prayer, not only will you build trust and respect, but you will also be providing a good 'prayer' model so that children and young people can learn how to pray for others in a sensitive and responsible way.

Although it may seem obvious, it is important parents/carers are aware that prayer is an integral part of church life (particularly if they don't attend church themselves), and that on occasions you may pray with their child either corporately or individually at the child's request.

You can reassure any concerned parent/carer with the principles contained in these guidelines, or if a child is part of a club or Sunday school within the church this could be mentioned, for example, on the information leaflet given to parents/carers when the child joins the group.

In the unlikely event of a parent/carer requesting that their child does not participate in individual prayer, this must always be respected.

Praying

Prior to praying, always make sure you have the child's permission and always pray in an open area where other leaders and/or children are around. If there is a general invitation to come forward for prayer in or after a family service, then it will be helpful to have children's workers available to pray with the children/young people rather than relying on other leaders who may be used to dealing with adults. Only those authorised by the church leadership should be involved in this ministry.

The child should be asked if there is anything specific, they are requesting prayer for and listen to their reply. Speak quietly and calmly, never shout or raise your voice. Don't laugh at or dismiss out of hand if they want to pray for something you consider trite or irrelevant

(e.g., my cat's poorly). If they do not have specific needs or requests, then simply ask God to bless them.

Those praying with children and young people should always be alert to child protection issues and other concerns such as bullying. In these circumstances do not forget about or delay taking appropriate action because you are caught up with praying!

If you have prayed about a specific issue, it may be helpful to write it down afterwards and give it to the child so that, if they want, they can let their parents/carers know and remember it themselves.

If a child/young person becomes distressed, stop praying. Stay calm and gently ask them if they would like to say what has caused their distress. Depending on the child's response you could consider whether there are any gender issues or whether they would feel more comfortable with someone else

If unsure or the child/young person remains distressed do not continue praying but stay with them until they are calm, offering them reassurance and complete acceptance. Then talk to the child's parents/carers, assuming you have no child protection concerns.

Practicalities

When it comes to praying, consider your body language, particularly in relation to things like your height and the height of the child/young person. Try to ensure you are on their level rather than towering over them perhaps by both of you sitting down; but do avoid crowding.

Refrain from placing your hands on a child/young person's head as they may find this frightening or threatening. If you think they may appreciate something like an arm round a shoulder or their hand being held, always ask them if this is what they would like before doing it.

Some churches use substances such as oil on the forehead when praying for healing. Bear in mind that a child/young person may be uncomfortable with the use of anointing oil, so it is important to only go ahead with the child and parents' agreement.

Remember also that a child/young person may not, for example, understand things like 'speaking in tongues' and it is important therefore not to do anything that may cause confusion or distress.

Language

Use clear uncomplicated language. Reflect back what the child has said to you, to show you have understood their prayer request. If a child says they are feeling tired, you could reply "let us pray for you as you are feeling tired" not "I think you are depressed, let's pray about that". Keep the prayers simple and short so you can then be confident your prayers have been understood by the child.

Giving Advice

Avoid giving specific advice about problems involving decisions. A child or young person could be very susceptible to suggestion, particularly if they are distressed. Even if you believe you have heard from God about their situation, it would be far wiser to pray this through on your own or with another leader. Never advise a child/young person to stop taking medication or cease seeing professionals involved in their care or welfare.

Confidentiality

Never promise total confidentiality. Should a child/young person wish to disclose to you a situation such as abuse within a prayer ministry context, you have a duty to pass this on to your church's child safeguarding coordinator and possibly Children's Social Services or the police. You may need to gently give clear boundaries but reassure the child that if you share anything about their situation with someone else it will be on a 'need to know' basis only and you will make sure they are supported and cared for.

Deliverance / Exorcism

Any religious, traditional or cultural practice that causes significant harm to a child is a criminal offence and cannot be justified. One example of this is when children have been subjected to horrific abuse following accusations, they are witches or possessed by evil spirits. When practices such as these come to light, the statutory authorities may investigate and take appropriate action to protect the children involved.

Some places of worship believe that a child can have an evil spirit or is possessed when they display behavioural problems or are different in some way. The child may have learning difficulties, mental health issues, copied or unconventional behaviours, or be experiencing some kind of trauma such as culture shock at coming to live in a different country.

Children are easily frightened and very susceptible to suggestion. They may also be upset by shouting and will easily believe they are bad, wicked etc. A child should never be told they are demonised, possessed or oppressed by the devil or evil spirits.

Prayer for children should therefore always be carried out using the guidelines above.

Examples of good practice

Case No 1

When Thirtyone:eight and the Metropolitan Police provided training for Congolese leaders at the beginning of 2006, a woman told the group that in Congo she had been experiencing difficulty with her son. She was told that he had a demon and a pastor prayed for deliverance. She came to England and was told that he was autistic, and he was sent to a special school. In his teens he was becoming quite difficult and in particular quite unmanageable in the car. The woman related how she took her son to her Congolese pastor to ask him to pray the demons out. He told her that the lad did not have a demon but raging hormones. He was like any other young person of his age but

was not able to express himself. She went on to describe how he gave her a practical behaviour management programme, which solved the problem.

Case No 2

A parent, recently arrived in the UK from a war-torn African country, asked a pastor to pray for 'deliverance' for her child. The 3–4-year-old had no speech, though he had been heard to speak with his mother. It was explained that recent events in the family's life had affected the child and he was referred to SureStart (government support programme for the under 5s) and following attendance at a nursery where he received one-to-one attention he soon began to communicate. The pastor offered general prayer for the mother and the child, together with reassurance and care.

Case No 3

A mother asked the pastor to pray for deliverance because her child was having nightmares and was possessed. What was important to the pastor was to hear what the child had to say. He spoke gently with the child, asking about the nightmares. The pastor assured the mother that the child was not possessed and that given traumatic events in the family's life, the nightmares were hardly surprising. He then gave the mother some practical tips on how she could deal with the matter.

In 2007, HM Government published 'Safeguarding Children from Abuse Linked to a Belief in Spirit Possession' to help practitioners apply 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' to the particular needs of children who may have suffered abuse or neglect due to such beliefs. The key considerations in this guidance were based on government commissioned research undertaken by Eleanor Stobart 'Child Abuse Linked to Accusations of Possession and Witchcraft' (June 2006).

In 2012, the Department for Education published the National Action Plan to tackle child abuse linked to faith or belief. This serves as the latest guidance and can be downloaded <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-action-plan-to-tackle-child-abuse-linked-to-faith-or-belief>