

Kids and Teens With Mental Health Disorders... Barriers to Spiritual Growth

Stephen Grcevich, MD

President, Board of Directors, Key Ministry

Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Northeast Ohio Medical University

Senior Clinical Instructor, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine

Faith and Disability Symposium

St. Peter's United Methodist Church, Katy TX

October 13, 2012



Learning Objectives:

- Identify obstacles to spiritual growth when kids have common mental health disorders...ADHD, anxiety disorders, mood disorders and autism spectrum disorders
- Explore ideas for promoting inclusion of kids and teens with mental illness and their families at church
- Discuss strategies for parents/caregivers to promote spiritual growth at home when kids struggle with mental illness

What do we know?

- ❑ 22% of U.S. children entering first grade meet criteria for at least one mental health disorder
- ❑ 9.5% of U.S. children between ages 4-17 (5.4 million) have been diagnosed with ADHD...2.7 million U.S. kids regularly take ADHD medication (more common in 11-17 year-olds)
- ❑ 8% of teens ages 13-18 have anxiety disorders, most with onset around age 6 (only 18% have received treatment)
- ❑ 13% of U.S. kids have at least one developmental disorder
- ❑ One child in 88 in U.S. has an autism spectrum disorder

Carter, AS et al. *J. Am Acad. Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 2010;49(7): 686-698

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/data.html>

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/anxiety-disorders-in-children-and-adolescents/index.shtml>

Boulet, SL, Boyle CA, Schieve, LA. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2009;163(1):19-26.

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>



The barriers to church participation are different for kids with mental illnesses and their families!

Do our ministry environments and strategies for helping kids grow spiritually work if they have mental illness?

An individual with a disability is defined as a person who has a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment.

Americans With Disabilities Act (1990)

If a mental or physical impairment substantially limits a person's ability to pursue spiritual growth and participate in a local church, is that person "disabled?"



“It is our culture that disables.”

“When one is disabled, the problem is not really that they have impairments and social skill deficits. The issue at stake is that they live in an ‘ableist’ culture that rarely affords them the space or opportunity to make their unique contribution to society and does not lift up the value of choosing them as friends.”

Ben Conner...*Amplifying Our Witness* (2012)



Can a disability be a disability in some, but not all environments?

Common barriers to church participation and spiritual growth in kids with mental illness...

- ❑ Lack capacity for emotional, behavioral self-regulation
- ❑ Vulnerability to misinterpret risks in environment
- ❑ Differences in sensory processing
- ❑ Differences in language processing, communication skills (including non-verbal, social communication)
- ❑ Cognitive rigidity
- ❑ Past negative experiences of church
- ❑ Family stress, isolation
- ❑ Parents with “issues”

What is ADHD?:

- ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by an age-inappropriate degree of **inattentiveness** and **disorganization**, and in some, but not all instances, **impulsivity** and **hyperactivity**

Executive functioning as the fundamental difference in persons with ADHD?

- Executive functions describe a set of cognitive abilities involved in controlling and regulating other abilities and behaviors.
- Necessary in initiating goal-directed behavior, regulating emotions, delaying gratification, planning future behavior.
- Children with weaknesses in executive functioning have more difficulty foreseeing outcomes of behavior, adapting to new situations.

Hathaway WL, Barkley RA. J Psychol Christianity 2003, 22(2) 101-114

ADHD: Core differences...difficulties with attention, executive functioning

	Child	Teenager
Weekend Worship:	Difficulty sitting in worship service Attention depends on interest, relevance Environments too stimulating, too unstructured for many with ADHD	Sleep problems impact AM church attendance Uncomfortable with attention of group Transitions between age-group ministries difficult
Church Activities:	Reluctant to read Scripture out loud, participate actively, avoid plays, performances	May be better if “doing while talking” More difficulty avoiding negative influences Time management may affect attendance Need reminders to come
Spiritual Disciplines	More difficulty praying quietly May have more difficulty with Scripture memorization	Prone to seek peak religious experiences Roller-coaster spirituality Difficulty maintaining consistency with spiritual disciplines
Growing in faith at home:	Kids with ADHD may learn better 1:1 with parents	Expose teens to service opportunities Share personal experiences with them Encourage spiritual relationships outside home

Ministry strategies for persons with ADHD:

Environments

Children/teens:

- ❑ Registration/sign-in needs to be orderly
- ❑ Staffing for transition times before/after services
- ❑ Use of color, lighting
- ❑ Engaging, not overwhelming
- ❑ Communication strategies... reinforce key point(s)
- ❑ Use of touch, nonverbal cues
- ❑ Family worship experiences geared to kids?

Adults:

- ❑ Is signage, direction clear?
- ❑ Use of music, technology
- ❑ Physical environment shouldn't become a distraction
- ❑ Flexibility in dress code
- ❑ Simplicity in communication

Ministry strategies for persons with ADHD:

Discipleship

Children/teens:

- ❑ Church and parents as partners in teaching kids about God
- ❑ They'll learn and retain more in 1:1, small group situations
- ❑ Ministry resources need to be sent directly to parents
- ❑ Where can they be involved in meaningful service?

Adults:

- ❑ Connecting them with others in the church especially important
- ❑ Break Scripture into smaller, manageable parts
- ❑ Small groups offer multiple accountability partners
- ❑ Where can they be involved in meaningful service?
- ❑ You have to remind them if you want them to come

What can I do to help someone I love with ADHD come to faith, grow in faith?

My child:

- ❑ Spend time with your child one on one or as a family praying together, studying the Bible together
- ❑ Make Jesus, Scripture interesting by sharing from your experiences
- ❑ Seek opportunities for your child to serve in ways that fit their talents, gifts
- ❑ Attend church regularly

My spouse, sibling, friend:

- ❑ Invite them to church (or remind them to come)
- ❑ Go with them to a church where they're more likely to have a positive experience
- ❑ Pray, study the Bible, serve with them
- ❑ Connect them to others in the church who will accept them, follow up with them

How are kids with anxiety disorders different from their peers?

- They misperceive the level of threat, danger in their environment
- They think too much...eventually to the point that academic performance, family functioning, friendships, extracurricular activities are compromised...rumination, perseveration, indecisiveness, perfectionism

Anxiety Disorders: Core difference...predisposed to misinterpret risk in immediate environment, new situations

	Child	Teenager
Weekend Worship:	Difficulty separating from parents Visiting church challenging	Reluctant to attend without friends Uncomfortable with attention of group Transitions between age-group ministries difficult
Church Activities:	Reluctant to read Scripture out loud, participate actively, avoid plays, performances	Disclosure in small groups challenging New, unfamiliar places, experiences may be threatening...retreats, mission trips
Spiritual Disciplines	Prone to misperceive who God is... Prayer, process of confession in some traditions challenging	More prone to ritualism Common obsessions- doubting salvation, sinning against one's will Group disciplines more challenging
Growing in faith at home:	Parents can model faith, practicing disciplines as a positive coping strategy	Parents can sensitively expose teens to new service opportunities, encourage spiritual relationships outside home

Tips for church staff and volunteers:

Kids with anxiety

- ❑ Look for kids from established families in worship with parents
- ❑ Greeters can watch for problems when “drop-offs” occur
- ❑ Have a quiet place to meet with kids/parents in distress
- ❑ Monitor sensory stimulation level of kids’ ministry environments
- ❑ Leaders can watch for kids who are alone
- ❑ Offer to meet with parents when a child’s anxiety appears to interfere with ministry participation
- ❑ Explain that anxiety will decrease with experience, time (exposure)
- ❑ Possible areas of giftedness: Administration, organization, sensitivity to others

How are kids and teens with Asperger's Disorder different?

- ❑ Difficulties with reciprocal social interactions and restricted patterns of interests or activities
- ❑ Normal language development (in contrast to other kids with autism)
- ❑ Typically, average to high intelligence

Asperger's Disorder: Core difference...difficulty with reciprocal social interactions, restricted pattern of interests, activities

	Child	Teenager
Weekend Worship:	Sensory integration may be problematic...bright lights, loud music can cause distress	More difficulty navigating social aspects of church Less likely to be invited to church (few friends)
Church Activities:	Transitions, social expectations in church environments problematic May be easily irritated by peers	Difficulty picking up social cues in small groups, Very sensitive to teasing/rejection by peers, Negative perceptions of church difficult to change
Spiritual Disciplines	May be less sensitive to needs of others, prone to very mechanical spirituality	Reluctant to experiment with new spiritual practices, disciplines, prone to legalism, avoidant of group disciplines
Growing in faith at home:	Parents may struggle to engage child in spiritual discussions Difficulty with abstract concepts	Difficulty engaging in family service experiences Conflicts around church attendance may follow negative experiences

Tips for church staff and volunteers: Kids with Asperger's Disorder

- ❑ Be aware of sensory stimulation in ministry environments
- ❑ Partial inclusion an option
- ❑ May do better when serving alongside adults
- ❑ Provide opportunities to rehearse new situations, environments
- ❑ Disability awareness important in student ministry
- ❑ Tap into areas of potential giftedness

General principles of ministry with families of kids with mental illnesses...

- ❑ You don't need to create a "program" for effective ministry
- ❑ Kids with issues don't think of themselves as "disabled" or "special needs"...nor do most parents
- ❑ Goal is inclusion in ministry environments, activities effective in building disciples
- ❑ Most kids won't need "buddies"
- ❑ Win...Whenever a child with a disability or their family member experiences a meaningful connection with a local church

Four things your church can do to reach families of “kids with issues”

- ❑ Serve them...Church-based or relational respite care, offer support services, access for support groups
- ❑ Train your children's/youth staff and volunteers on strategies to help them have positive experiences at church
- ❑ Consider your ministry environments
- ❑ Child care to support involvement of families in ministries key to faith development

What Have We Learned?

- ❑ Kids with mental illnesses can be welcomed into church activities without having to establish stand-alone programs or “buddy systems”
- ❑ The way we do church often presents impediments to church attendance and spiritual growth in kids with mental illnesses and their families
- ❑ Family ministry approaches may be especially important among kids with more unique processing, communication, social interaction
- ❑ Families of kids with mental illnesses may represent the ultimate “low-hanging fruit” for evangelism, outreach

Additional Resources:

- Resource page on ADHD and spiritual development (includes video from Dr. Russ Barkley)
<http://drgrcevich.wordpress.com/teaching-series-adhd-and-spiritual-development/>
- Resource page on anxiety and spiritual development
<http://drgrcevich.wordpress.com/resource-page-anxiety-and-spiritual-development/>
- Resource page on Asperger's Disorder and spiritual development (includes video of 2012 Children's Ministry Web Summit presentation)
<http://drgrcevich.wordpress.com/resource-page-anxiety-and-spiritual-development/>
- Resource page on Pediatric Bipolar Disorder (includes link to 2010 Grand Rounds presentation at Children's Hospital Medical Center of Akron)
<http://drgrcevich.wordpress.com/pediatric-bipolar-disorder-a-guide-for-childrens-and-youth-pastors-and-volunteers/>
- The Mission Field Next Door (2011 Inclusion Fusion presentation with Katie Wetherbee) <http://youtu.be/PshzmYircCo>

**Provides FREE training,
consultation, resources and
support to help churches serve,
welcome and include families of
kids with hidden disabilities**

Stay in Touch!

Key Ministry Website: <http://www.keyministry.org>

Church4EveryChild...Steve's Key Ministry Blog: <http://drgrcevich.wordpress.com>

Diving For Pearls...Katie Wetherbee's Blog: <http://katiewetherbee.wordpress.com>

A Reckless Pursuit...Harmony Hensley's Blog: <http://arecklesspursuit.wordpress.com>



<http://www.facebook.com/drgrcevich>
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Key-Ministry/116940088329098>



<http://twitter.com/#!/drgrcevich>
<http://twitter.com/#!/KeyMinistry>



Questions?

Additional Slides

How might ADHD affect one's spiritual life?

Children/teens:

- ❑ Inhibition: sitting through a worship service
- ❑ Nonverbal working memory: remembering my Bible when it's time to leave for church
- ❑ Verbal working memory: the ability to pray silently
- ❑ Emotional self-regulation: immediately react negatively to demands from authority
- ❑ Planning, problem-solving: I'm not going to youth group on Sunday night because my homework's not done.

Adults:

- ❑ Can I use the computer without viewing pornography?
- ❑ Forgetting to register my kids for the weekend retreat
- ❑ The ability to memorize and meditate quietly upon Scripture
- ❑ I scream and yell at my spouse and my kids, overreact when imposing discipline
- ❑ Difficulty applying Biblical truths, wisdom in daily life

Problems with internalization of faith arising from ADHD:

- Persons with ADHD may have more difficulty maintaining a spiritually disciplined life
- May have more difficulty meditating quietly upon God
- More prone to give up on Bible study when it becomes tedious
- More difficulty delaying immediate gratification for long-term spiritual outcomes

Hathaway WL, Barkley RA. J Psychol Christianity 2003, 22(2) 101-114

Problems with stability of spiritual growth arising from ADHD:

- ❑ Greater vulnerability to negative environmental influences
- ❑ More likely to have intense spiritual experiences at VBS, camp, mission trips that fade when spiritual context is gone
- ❑ More prone to “roller-coaster” spirituality
- ❑ Miss out on volunteer, service opportunities if perceived as undisciplined, disorganized
- ❑ Drawn to religious contexts that are more participatory, action-oriented, relational

Hathaway WL, Barkley RA. J Psychol Christianity 2003, 22(2) 101-114

Challenges presented to the church by persons with ADHD:

- ❑ Style of worship...engaging, but not overstimulating best
- ❑ Kids, some adults find worship environments as unpleasant
- ❑ Church staff lack training, experience with kids with ADHD
- ❑ Church environments less structured than school
- ❑ Parents choose not to use, or physicians encourage discontinuation of effective medication on weekends
- ❑ Many church activities occur when medication has worn off or rebound is occurring

What advantages might ADHD provide a follower of Christ?

- ❑ Willingness to take chances for God
- ❑ May be very energized by topics or ministry activities that capture the imagination
- ❑ May be very effective in ministry teams when others have complimentary organizational skills
- ❑ Ability to engage others may help in sharing the Gospel
- ❑ Good at scanning environment for trends
- ❑ Is ADHD over-represented among senior pastors?

Specific Anxiety Disorders in Children, Adolescents:

Note: Kids may experience different manifestations of anxiety as they progress through developmental stages

- ❑ Separation Anxiety Disorder
- ❑ Specific Phobia
- ❑ Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- ❑ Social Anxiety Disorder
- ❑ Panic Disorder
- ❑ Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- ❑ Selective Mutism

J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry, 2007;46(2):267-283

Some observations...

- God created all of us as unique human beings...more kids in this generation are being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders and other social disabilities... accident?
- Churches are social institutions...we promote fellowship, discipleship...Where does that leave people who struggle with relationships?
- Church environments operate under “The Reverse 80/20 Principle”
- Jesus and the lost sheep...He pursues the “one” while protecting the “99”

Kids With Asperger's Disorder:

- ❑ Severe, sustained impairment in social interactions...
- ❑ Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests and activities
- ❑ Clinically significant impairment in social, academic, family functioning
- ❑ No delays in language development
- ❑ No delays in cognitive development...often have above-average to superior IQ

Issues seen in kids with Asperger's Disorder:

- ❑ Intense preoccupation with topics, objects takes on an odd or unusual quality
- ❑ May struggle with motor skills, coordination
- ❑ Difficulty with pragmatic language, differences in intonation, pace, volume, pitch (monotonal)...difficulty with implied meaning, figurative speech
- ❑ Difficulties identifying with experiences of others
- ❑ More likely to experience issues with attention, organization, obsessive thoughts than peers
- ❑ More likely to experience sensory processing issues

The Scope of the Problem:

- ❑ Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) in U.S. ranges from one in 80 to one in 240
- ❑ 4-5X more boys than girls diagnosed with an ASD
- ❑ The majority (59%) of children with ASDs **don't** have an intellectual disability
- ❑ Kids with Asperger's are more likely to be targets of bullying, have more difficulty coping with bullying

Source: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>

Barriers for kids with Asperger's/PDD/ social disabilities at church...

- ❑ Getting parents to bring them to church
- ❑ Church environments don't play to their strengths...
change in daily routine, unfamiliar people,
transitions, sensory issues, physical activity
- ❑ Uneven development complicates program
placement
- ❑ Very resistant to placement in "special needs"
ministry
- ❑ Experience of "Christian kids" at school

Applying family-based ministry model when kids have Asperger's/PDD/Social Disabilities...

- Parent as the “expert” to individualize strategies to promote spiritual development
- Coming alongside vs. “equipping”
- Defining your “win”...Whenever a child/family with a disability connects in a meaningful way with their larger family in Christ through the ministries of a local church
- Church as a shared family experience?
- Spiritual disciplines as routines...(establishing rhythm)
- Creating a place to experience an intentionally safe and supportive community

Tips for church staff and volunteers: Kids with Asperger's/PDD/social disabilities

- ❑ Consider impact of sensory stimulation in ministry environments
- ❑ Partial inclusion an option
- ❑ Consider service opportunities alongside adults
- ❑ Provide opportunities to rehearse new situations, environments
- ❑ Promote disability awareness in children's, student ministry
- ❑ Identify areas of potential giftedness

Hypothetical strategies for promoting spiritual growth...

- Tangible acts of service, modeled by parents, family members, other adults
- Assuming identified role at church
- Role of electronic media in presenting Jesus in an engaging way?
- Online ministry as strategy for overcoming barriers to live participation in church?

The “relationship” issue...

- ❑ Kids with Asperger’s/social disabilities have some capacity to grasp relationships
- ❑ There’s more than one spiritual pathway...intellectual, activist, servant, contemplative, worship and creation... in addition to the relational pathway
- ❑ “Give as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you can know.”

Final thoughts...

- ❑ Kids who are less neurotypical are likely to require more individualized approaches to spiritual growth
- ❑ Allow parents to take the lead...come alongside families by providing resources, ideas
- ❑ Identify their strengths/gifts/talents and give them opportunities to use them
- ❑ Many kids with social disabilities are desperate for friends, acceptance. What better place to find them, especially the Ultimate Friend...Jesus-than church?