



Hidden Disabilities 101

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“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?

Learning Objectives:

- Help leaders appreciate the scope of the ministry opportunity in reaching families of kids with hidden disabilities
- Explores obstacles that kids with emotional, behavioral and developmental disabilities (and their families) face in seeking to “do church”
- Review strategies churches can use to serve, welcome and include kids with “issues” and their families

What are “Hidden Disabilities”?

- A hidden disability (HD) is a serious emotional, behavioral or developmental disorder with no outwardly apparent physical symptoms
- Many hidden disabilities result in functional impairment in **some**, but not **all** environments.

Examples of Hidden Disabilities:

- ❑ Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- ❑ Anxiety disorders
- ❑ Autism spectrum disorders
- ❑ Developmental disabilities
- ❑ Learning disorders
- ❑ Mood disorders (depression, bipolar disorder)
- ❑ Attachment disorders (common among adopted, foster children)
- ❑ Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE)
- ❑ Brain injury: resulting from trauma, epilepsy, stroke

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>

So What?

- Families ***in the church*** affected by mental illness pray less consistently, more likely to have one or more members who don't regularly attend church.
- 38% of foster kids on psychiatric medication...of kids on medication, 73% on two medications, 41% on three or more medications
- **Best guess**: Kids with mental health issues and their families are at least 50% less likely to be absent from church on any given Sunday, compared to their neighbors

General principles of ministry with families of “kids with issues”

- ❑ 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”...but “floating buddies” may be helpful to your volunteer team
- ❑ Win...Whenever a child with a hidden disability or a family member experiences a meaningful connection with a local church



What barriers keep persons with hidden disabilities from coming to Christ or growing in faith?

Barriers to church attendance/participation in kids with hidden disabilities...

- ❑ Decreased 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”

Considerations for successful inclusion...

- ❑ Impact of sensory stimulation on self-control...how much is too much?
- ❑ How do you prepare kids for unfamiliar situations?
- ❑ Can kids with less well-developed social skills succeed in your environments?
- ❑ Impact of age group differences?
- ❑ What are the possible impediments to connecting with parents?

Environment shapes behavior!

The more sensory input a child has to process, the less mental capacity remains for self-control.

Consider...

- ❑ Visual input/clutter, lighting, use of color
- ❑ Use of pictures to assist in communication
- ❑ Effects of loud noise
- ❑ Touch...not everyone likes it
- ❑ Comfortable seating
- ❑ <http://drgrcevich.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/inclusion-fusion-2011-harmony-welcomingenvironments.pdf>

Space Planning & Sensory Issues

- ❑ Open check-in area with neutral tones and plotter images to reduce visual clutter



Space Planning & Sensory Issues

- Vineyard Student Union (middle school and senior high ministry)



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

Conclusions:

- ❑ Kids with hidden disabilities and their families represent a large, underserved population
- ❑ Most kids with hidden disabilities can be successfully included in your ministry environments without establishing a formal program or an excessive burden on volunteers
- ❑ Kids with hidden disabilities often have parents with hidden disabilities...connecting with parents greatly enhances likelihood kids will come to know Jesus, grow in faith

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>



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Questions?