

Counseling Children

by Earl L. Cook, with preface by Paul Tripp

Preface

I heard rather unusual noises coming from the waiting room at CCEF. I couldn't resist taking a look. There on the floor knelt Earl Cook, the oldest man in the building, carrying on a conversation with a little girl's doll. As the little girl watched and listened, she forgot how afraid she had been when she first entered the building. I remember walking away thinking, "This is what it means to incarnate Christ!" Earl is successful with children, not because he has a neat bag of tricks or snazzy techniques, but because he has a heart of humility and love.

Humility is important because it keeps Earl from thinking that simple gospel ministry to hurting, confused, or rebellious children is beneath him. It is also what allows him to crawl around on the floor, to play silly games, to ask funny questions, and to laugh at ridiculous jokes as if they were profound. Earl is focused on creating a context where God can transform the lives of children, and he simply doesn't care if he appears to be a buffoon. In those moments of drawing, laughing, and crawling, children begin to grasp for the first time the reality of the grace of Christ through this remarkable old man who has gotten down into their world and incarnated Christ's presence.

Love is important because Earl is more than a principle-mechanic with these chil-

dren. He is a man who loves Christ and loves children. His love is infectious and redemptive. He is not a circus clown: what he is doing is distinctly pastoral in its focus. He wants to love children to the Lord, to relate to them in a way that breaks down fear and makes the will of the Lord attractive. He wants them to see that God's love is greater than anything they have faced or ever will face in life.

The article that follows is not just about methodological expertise. It is a call to incarnate the patient, humble, condescending¹ love of Christ. Earl first shared this information in a counselor's oversight meeting at CCEF. Those of us who heard this and who have seen and heard Earl minister to young children were convinced that he should prepare it as an article for the *Journal*. I am so happy that Earl took the time to do so.

I recently went into Earl's office to see if he had a safety pin. (Earl is also the world's oldest Boy Scout.) I was impressed again that his office doesn't look like the other offices in the building. There are pictures all around drawn by Earl's children. On his desk is a pencil holder, obviously made by a child, and a box of sour lollipops that only Earl and young children could enjoy. I guess it's possible that Earl will grow up before he finally retires, but I hope it doesn't happen soon!

Take in the practical wisdom of a man

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¹In the good old sense of the word. Condescend: "to descend to a less formal or dignified level, to stoop, to waive the privileges of rank."

who has literally learned what he has learned on his knees. And don't just follow the methods suggested, but be committed to the incarnational humility and love that make them work.

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Introduction

Children have had a significant place in my ministry. As a teen, I was active in the children's ministry of the church. During college, I served three years in mission Sunday School in South Chicago. In my seminary years, I worked in teen ministry at a local church. In the

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subsequent twenty-five years, my pastoral duties always included Sunday School, Daily Vacation Bible School, and youth ministry. These areas have proven to be training grounds for demonstrating and sharpening God's gracious gift to me of working with children.

I want to share with you two critical lessons I have learned over these years. The first is that children experience many, if not most, of the problems in living that adults are confronted with: fear, anxiety, anger, obsessions, depression, compulsions, unstable emotions, confusion, selfishness, impulsiveness, suffering, controlling, manipulating, distorted self-perception, and relationship problems. Children may reveal these only on a very basic and behavioral level within the framework of their own lives, but if you are alert for the signs, you will detect such things.

The second lesson is that the principles of Scripture are as valid for children as they are for adults. Yet such principles must be presented on a level that children can understand because of the difference in how children think and process things. For instance, you do not talk to children about "total depravity," but about why they lie.

"Johnny, do you ever tell lies?"

"Well, maybe—sometimes, but not big ones like my sister. She lies all the time."

"Wow, maybe I need to talk to her sometime."

"Sure do."

"Can you tell me something?"

"What?"

"Who taught you to lie—Mom?"

"No."

"Must have been Dad then?"

"No, he didn't."

"Can you think of who did?"

"No."

"Can you think of a time when you didn't know how to lie?"

"I don't think so."

"Is it possible that when you were born you already knew how to lie, that you were born that way?"

"May-y-y-be."

"Do you know that is what God says, and He knows everything, right?"

"I guess so."

"Let me read what God says in Psalm 51:5: 'Surely, I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.' What do you think God is telling you in this verse?"

"That I was born a sinner?"

"Yes, that's right. No one has to teach us to lie, cheat, be selfish or mean. We are born that way. Do you know why a dog barks?"

"Because he is a dog and was born that way."

"Yes, and the reason we do bad things that make God and our parents and others unhappy is because we are born that way."

I have just explained "total depravity" to Johnny, and I will then offer him God's answer in Jesus. In a similar way, other teachings of the Bible can be made real for children. Children are able to grasp and apply these truths.

Take Billy, for example. At age five, with little church background, he came to Daily Vacation Bible School for the first time. Our theme that year was, "When I am afraid, I will trust the Lord." The Bible's stories taught Billy that God is present with us at all times and in all circumstances. At the end of two weeks, after the closing program, Billy's parents came and thanked me for helping their son. He had never gone to sleep without the light on because there were "monsters" under the bed and in the closet. Only the light kept them from coming out and getting him. Halfway through Bible School, he informed his mom and dad that they could turn out the light. "Why? Are the monsters gone?" they asked. "Oh, no. Jesus is here, and He is bigger than the monsters and will keep them from getting me!," Billy explained.

Remember that Jesus rebuked the disciples for trying to prevent mothers from bringing their little children to Him, saying, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19:14). In Deuteronomy 6, God stresses our responsibility to teach and train children in the truths of God that have been rooted in our own hearts. God has given us—and children—the ability to assimilate His teachings.

It is interesting to me that during the 70s, when I received counseling training at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) as part of the first generation, little attention was paid to working with children. In fact, the distinct impression I had was that you did not counsel children, but you counseled their parents. However, without conscious thought, deliberation, or the formulation of a theory of counseling children biblically, I found myself counseling the

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Forget that others are even there.*

children themselves. A significant portion of my twenty-plus years of counseling at CCEF has been with children. Let me assure you at this point that parents are vital in counseling children. It is my policy to have parents sit in and observe the counseling most of the time. The primary focus is the child, with the parents learning, by observation, how to understand their child, to get to the heart issues, to apply biblical truth in the child's life, and to reinforce at home the things being built into the child's heart and behavior during the formal counseling. Without the parents' understanding of what you are doing and without support at home, little will be accomplished in the life of the child.

To begin, how do you counsel a child? The same way you counsel an adult, taking into consideration the child's level of development and understanding. The following steps contribute to the process, at every point with the parent(s) listening, observing, and (as appropriate) participating.

1. Establish a relationship with the child.
2. Gather data, the facts of what is going on, both from the child and from the parent.

On a foundation of love and knowledge, you will be able to develop an understanding of the data, and identify the issues that need to be addressed. Is the child experiencing a difficult life situation, such as sickness, loss, being bullied, or a recent move? Is the child sinning by rebellion, grumbling, lying, temper, laziness, or fear? What heart issues are emerging? Pride, fear of man, selfishness, false beliefs, love of possessions?

3. Bring the principles of Scripture to bear on these issues by explaining them to the child.

4. Apply biblical truths by very specific suggestions and homework that the child and parent can do to bring about biblical change and godliness in the life of the child.

Monitor the process in further meetings until the parents have learned how to work with, and are comfortable working with, the child on their own.

We will examine these four steps.

Establish a Relationship with the Child

Your first approach to the child is crucial. Direct your attention to the child, not to the parent who accompanies the child. The child is the focus. Forget that others are even there. It might go something like this.

You stand inside the door of the waiting room and glance around.

"I'm looking for someone named Mary."

Looking at the girl, you smile and say,

"Could that be you? I'll bet it is."

Then you kneel down to get to her level. (I'm 6'2".)

"Hi, I'm Mr. Cook. You can call me that if you like, or a lot of my little friends call me Uncle Earl. Because I'm old, you can even call me Gramps if you want. What do you have there?"

"A doll."

"Is she special?"

"Yes."

"She is? Do you talk to her?"

"Of course, silly."

"What's her name?"

"Matilda."

"That's a nice name. Hello, Matilda, you have a nice name and a nice mommy."

(Then in a playful, high-pitched, pretending voice)
"Hello, Mr. Cook."

"Do you have a special name you would like me to call you, or is Mary okay?"

"Mary, or Mimi or..."

"Okay, Mimi, could you tell me who these nice people are whom you brought with you today?"

"My mommy and daddy."

"That's nice. What are their names?"

"Mommy and Daddy."

"That's great. Hi, Mommy and Daddy!"

*"They aren't **your** Mommy and Daddy," she might giggle.*

"That's right. What shall I call them? Mr. and Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes."

"Say, would you like to go upstairs to my office? Mom and Dad can come. I have a lot of pictures on my doors I think you would like to see. Other boys and girls drew them for me, and I like them."

After looking at her mom, the little girl says,

"Okay."

Notice that to this point the focus has been on the

child, not the parents. It will continue to be that way unless the child wants to include the parents. Most parents will catch the drift and cooperate. If not, you may have to speak to them alone by phone or in some other format. You might want to let them know ahead of time, though I seldom do this.

You may have to give up a bit of your dignity. (This is not a problem for me!) If I go into the waiting room and find the child on the floor playing, reading, or sleeping, I feel free to get down on the floor and wake them up by blowing in their ear or becoming involved in what they are doing. The same pattern of questions or approach outlined above can be followed on the floor. Some of the adults who are waiting to see a different counselor may find this a bit strange. So be it! The focus is on the child.

Once you enter your office with the child, you will want to look at the pictures and talk a bit about the children who drew them.

"I would like to put one of your pictures up, too, if you would draw one for me. Which chair would you like?"

"This one."

"That would be fine. Mom and Dad, would you please take those two? Thank you."

My final step in becoming friends has to do with Jesus.

"Mimi, I have a special friend I'd like to talk to before I begin talking with you. Can you guess who that might be?"

"Jesus?"

"Yes, it's Jesus, and I'd like to ask Him to be here and help us because He loves us and is very wise. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

"When I pray, I bow my head and close my eyes, and you can too if you like."

"Okay."

Offer up a simple brief prayer.

The above interaction is typical, but the responses and flow may vary depending on the child. Some children will be very shy and reluctant to talk. Just keep going. A little anecdote about another shy child and how you became friends might be helpful. But don't turn away from the child and place the focus on the parent. Cooperate with the child if she wants to include the parent. (She might look to the parent for answers to questions, wanting to sit on Mommy's or Daddy's lap, etc.)

People who specialize in counseling children often have elaborate setups in their office with play areas, interest centers, and one-way mirrors. However, these things are not an absolute necessity. The back of your door can be used for pictures drawn by children. On my desk is a pencil holder full of pens and pencils of various colors. Obviously made by a child, it attracts

every child that comes into the room. I tell them the story of how I got it: a ten-year-old boy who had big problems gave it to me after God helped me to help him with his problems. I also keep a box of candy or peanuts. The favorite seems to be "Way-2-Sour" blow pops. We suck on them together. We have fun getting Mom and Dad to try them too.

All of this may take half or more of the first session. Although my sessions ordinarily last one hour, I feel free to end early if the child has reached his limit.

We have focused so far on ways to establish rapport with the child. Let's consider for a moment the value of

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having the parent present in the counseling sessions. The parent provides a center of safety and security during the time the child is getting to know you and grow comfortable with you. The child is coming to a strange place to see a strange person! At best, it is a bit challenging, and for some it is a fearful experience. I happen to be a big man and am 71 years old. This can be intimidating. If you want to see the child alone, the child should be allowed to make that choice. There may be times when you want to speak with the parent alone. If, after a few sessions, the child seems at ease, he can be left in the waiting room with a book, game, or toy while you talk to the parent. Do not ever talk about the child in the child's presence if you are talking about serious matters, or are confronting the parent about something in his or her life that is having a negative effect on the child. If necessary, schedule a separate session with just the parents.

Another reason it is helpful for the parents to be present is that you become a model for them as they observe your work with their child. Many parents have difficulty establishing rapport with their children, and stepping into the child's world. Being present thus enables them to evaluate their parenting skills and to recognize issues which they need to address if they are to become more biblical and effective in working with their child.

Initially, the parent should be present primarily as an observer. As the counseling progresses, and changes are implemented in the patterns in the home in terms of structure, ways of relating, discipline, boundaries, and truth about the Lord, the parent should become more

actively involved in the sessions. Ideally, this will occur with the cooperation of the child.

The parents' presence provides a format for the strengthening of the parent-child bond. It is interesting to see the reaction of the child as Mom and Dad become responsive to the Word and make changes in their lives. The realization comes home that we are doing this together, and that all of us need Christ's mercy and help, and are under the authority of God and the Bible.

Finally, the parents are a rich source of confirmation of the information the child offers. They also can pro-

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vide additional or more complete information about situations. When the parent is present, the child is more honest in his reporting.

Gather Data

Contact the parents before the first session with the child to get a picture of the situation. What is the reason for bringing the child to counseling? When did the problems first appear? What events surrounded the beginning of the problem? What patterns have the parents discerned?

As said above, in the first and all subsequent sessions, the focus must be on the child. It is important that Billy understand what is happening to him.

"Billy, do you know what I do?"

"Talk to people."

"That's right. Do you know what I talk to people about?"

"No."

"Well, I talk to people about things that are happening in their lives that are making trouble for them, and I try to help them."

"How can you help them?"

"I have a book called the Bible that God wrote, and He tells us the answers to all our problems. So I help boys and girls and moms and dads find God's answers. That's called counseling, and that's what I do. Would you be willing to talk to me about any problems you have and look for God's answers with me?"

"Maybe."

"Good."

You might notice the child looking at a box of lollipops displayed prominently on the desk.

"Would you like one?"

"Yes."

"Pick the one you want. How about Mom and Dad? Give them one too."

(He does.)

"What's the best thing to do with lollipops?"

"Eat them."

"Yeah. I'll have one, too!"

It is important to involve the child in giving you the data. You will want to be able to talk with the child about it directly and comfortably. This begins with helping him to verbalize it in his own words.

One little nine-year-old boy was very embarrassed and would not identify the problem, even though he knew what it was. He asked his dad to tell me, and wanted to stand in the hall with the door closed while this happened. He was allowed to do this, and then was invited back in. His problem was thinking at times about ladies and the parts of their bodies, especially their breasts. Upon his return I asked him to let me tell him what his dad shared to make sure it was accurate. Note that I did not doubt the father but used this as a means of involving the boy in verbalizing the problem. In the context of much embarrassment, hesitation, and cajoling, he allowed this. It was the beginning of freedom to discuss the matter and think about what the Bible says about our bodies.

A variety of ways can be used to draw children out, depending on their age and willingness.

1. Ask direct questions. "Can you tell me the reason that Mom (or Mommy, depending on the age of the child) brought you to see me today?"

2. If there is no response, you can ask permission of the child to ask the parent who is with him. Note that the parent will be only too happy to chime in and fill in the details, and so must be encouraged to do this only as asked, so that the child can be directly involved in the counseling. Watch the child, during the parent's report, for facial expression and body language. You can learn much by his nonverbal response. Sometimes the child will break in with denials or anger. You will need to help him control this until the parent's account is finished. Notice the parent's tone of voice and attitude as well. Judgmental or gracious? Fearful or trusting? One-sided or balanced?

3. Use stories. "Once upon a time a boy named Billy had a problem. His problem was _____." If children are reluctant to verbalize their problems in the session, you might ask them to write it (age appropriate) for homework.

4. Use pictures. Some children like to draw, and you can benefit from this. A little eight-year-old girl had problems with anxiety and generalized fear. Asked to draw pictures of her fears, she drew a picture of a gob-

lin with power rays shooting out of its head. (I learned what goblins look like, and thanked her.) She also drew a picture of a phantom. (She had seen *Phantom of the Opera*, and it had triggered this fear.) Most significant was a picture of a house with a flagstone walk, obviously her house, with smoke and flames shooting out of all the windows and doors. These were most revealing. Pictures can be windows into the mind of a child.

5. Children have vivid imaginations which you can tap into. Ask them to make a picture in their mind of the problem and then describe the picture for you. I asked a little girl who had regular tantrums to describe a very recent one for me. I got a wonderful picture of

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her tantrum and was able to talk about it by using the picture. I suggested changes she could put into the picture and then talked about how these changes would make the whole picture different and better.

6. Mention friends. You can engage children by asking them what is nice about their friends and what is not nice about their friends, and then asking them to tell you what is nice and not nice about themselves.

7. You will want to find out how much of the "bad" behavior, such as tantrums, expresses conscious and deliberate attempts to control, manipulate, or punish others. The goal is to bring all behavior into the realm of consciousness so you can then begin to work toward helping them control it by choosing God's way instead of "my way."

8. Be inventive in seeking to engage the child in offering the data and identifying the issues to be handled.

Use the Bible Well in Teaching

With children, as with adults, the Bible is the foundation of the change you seek to bring about in their life. Children are capable of a strong faith, of being converted, and of becoming part of the kingdom of God. Have a children's version of the Bible in your office for use when you work with them.

With the anxious child, you might review one of the great Bible stories such as David and Goliath. Read it first so they know that it is coming from the Word of God. Then retell it, explaining it, dramatizing it, and building up suspense until you finally ask the question,

"How did David have the courage to face Goliath when none of his brothers or the king did?" ("Because God would help him.") "Yes. David said, 'My God and I are going to kill you.'" Become a storyteller. Children love stories. You can then explain that God is with all of us, and especially the child you are counseling. The wonderful knowledge and the intimate presence of God in Psalm 139 can be very precious to children when explained in ways they can understand.

"Susie, can you surprise your Mom or Dad?"

"Yes."

"Can you hide behind a door and jump out and surprise me?"

"Sure, that would be fun. Can we do it now?"

"It wouldn't be a surprise now because I will know you are doing it. See if you can surprise me next week. Now here is a hard question. Can you ever surprise God?"

"I don't know."

"Let's see what He says in the Bible."

(Turn to Psalm 139 and read with Susie, or let her read it if she can.)

"What does God say He does?"

"He searches me and knows me."

"Yes, He watches you and me so that He can see and know everything about us. Susie, help me a minute, okay?"

"Okay."

"Stand up and then sit down."

(Susie does it.)

"I wonder if that surprised God."

"I don't know."

"What does the Bible say?"

"He knows when I sit down and when I stand up."

"Yes, in fact it says that He knows what you are thinking.

He wants you to think good thoughts, and He knows where and what you are going to do today. That's what 'path' means. He knows the words you are going to speak, even the ones that aren't so nice sometimes. He knows everything about you. God is never surprised, and He watches out for you all the time. Do you think that God is surprised by the things you are afraid of or your anxious and fearful thoughts or dreams?"

"I guess not."

"No, He isn't, and best of all, He wants to help us with them. Would you like to know something else pretty wonderful about God?"

"Okay."

"There is no place in all the world that you can go or be where God is not there."

"I bet there is."

"Where?"

"In my closet?"

"Wrong."

"On the moon?"

"Wrong. Read some more for me."

(The child reads verses 7-12).

"What is God trying to tell us?"

"That anywhere we go He is there?"

"Right. What does that mean when you think about places you are afraid to go?"

Using the Bible with the child helps lead her through these kinds of questions.

Assign Homework

Children need practice if they are to build something new into their lives. This makes reinforcement of the things happening in the sessions very important. At the same time, the child is easily overwhelmed by a multiplicity of assignments. Thus, it is wise to pick out one thing that you wish to build into the child, and focus on it in the homework. For example, if you had a child draw pictures of his fears and place a sticky label that says "God" on the picture, you might ask the child to do the same thing the next time he is afraid. A variation would be to have a verse from Psalm 139 on the label, and place it on the picture. A good way to reinforce your teaching from Psalm 139 is to have the child's parent read the applicable portion of the passage each day with the child, and offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for being with him that day. The parent can also talk with the child about the events of the day and how God has been there in the child's and the parent's lives.

Homework can also be used in your efforts to probe into the heart issues. An example of this is how I once worked with seven-year-old Ann. She was often mean, would not share, and spoiled things if she could not have her own way. During the counseling sessions we talked about how this came from her heart, using Mark 7:21-23. We drew pictures of her heart without Jesus, showing her as selfish, and then we added Jesus to the picture and talked about how He could help her not to be selfish if she chose to ask Him for help. We also drew the consequences of letting her selfish heart rule her life without letting Jesus rule it. (By the way, I am not a great artist, and the pictures are quite elementary, not much above that of a seven- or eight-year-old. I usually let the children take these pictures home to remind them of what we have talked about.) For homework, Ann and I made a chart with "I CHOSE" at the top and then two columns underneath headed "MY WAY" and

"JESUS' WAY." Throughout the coming week Ann was to place in the appropriate column the various behaviors expressed. You can involve the mom and dad by having them remind her at appropriate times to fill in the chart. Parents will tend to do this when behavior is negative, so they have to be urged to place as much importance on the godly behavior.

Be creative but simple in the use of homework. Try to build on the things that are familiar to the child and

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on the child's natural interests (reading, drawing, acting, writing, playing, etc.)

Allow children to participate in developing the homework. Discuss it with them. A good question to promote their participation might be, "What can you think of that you could do this week to help you remember not to be selfish and to practice being kind?" Children can be very helpful in response to such questions.

Be sure the parent understands what you are doing and their part in it. Make a homework assignment for them and let both the child and the parent know that you will check up on them the following week to see how well they did.

Conclusion

As I reflect on this subject, I am flooded with memories of children and how God has touched them and their families. We have an awesome responsibility to heed this admonition of the Lord: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them" (Matt. 19:14). I reiterate: children experience most of the problems that adults struggle with. Children can also be touched and changed by the living Word of God when it is presented to them in a way appropriate to their age and development.

Can you counsel children? Try it. You might discover a wonderful gift and privilege given to you by our God.