

# Prayer for Children — some guidelines

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## 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 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.

Ask the child what they are requesting prayer for and remember to 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 (for example: "my cat is poorly"). If they do not have specific needs or requests then simply ask God to bless them. Having said this, a child or young person may want prayer for a specific reason. For example, following a church

service with a sermon on David and Goliath, they may want prayer for 'giants' they feel they may have in their own lives.

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 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 what has caused the distress and talk to another leader if appropriate. Before continuing to pray, consider with whom they might feel more comfortable. Are there any gender issues? 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 take care with this and only go ahead with the child and parents' agreement.

Remember also that a child / young person may not, for example, understand the use of '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.

## 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. Be careful what you say 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 within a prayer ministry context, a situation such as abuse, you have a duty to pass this on to your church's child protection co-ordinator / social services / 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

When consideration is being given to pray for anyone in the area most commonly known as deliverance or exorcism, they should always be referred to those within the church / denomination / movement authorised in this area of ministry who have recognised expertise and experience. Where this type of praying is being considered for a child or young person we would ask you consider the following notes of caution:

- i. Victoria Climbié was a vulnerable little girl who was being horribly abused by her 'so-called' carers, sustaining over 100 injuries to her body from which she eventually died. An Inquiry into her death found that her 'carers' managed to convince the pastor that she was possessed by demons and she was severely traumatised by 'deliverance' prayer sessions held at the church. Tragically Victoria came to believe she was demonised, evil and wicked.
- ii. 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 / oppressed.
- iii. It is important not to miss psychological or physiological factors such as behavioural issues, learning difficulties, mental health problems, copied or unconventional behaviours. In CCPAS' experience these are far more likely to be the cause of a child's difficulties and should be handled with care.

CCPAS has consulted widely on this issue and spoken to experienced church leaders from a range of different traditions including Pentecostal, modern church movements and a Church of England Diocese. Although some leaders could not say this type of prayer would never be used for children attending their church, they did recognise the necessity for those in authority within the church to handle such situations with wisdom and discernment. Every leader consulted expressed the need for caution, never acting on impulse, and never shouting at a child. Some also suggested that this type of prayer did not necessitate the child's physical presence.

Whatever your church's view, the interests and welfare of the child are paramount. In all your actions towards children and young people the greatest model is that of Christ himself. In all his dealings with children he was approachable, gentle and never frightening. In applying this model and following these guidelines on prayer, your ministry to children and young people can prove to be fruitful, effective and enrich the life of your church.

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