

Voices: The church must do more to protect children from abuse

May 2, 2018

Children seem to have a very special place in God's heart. On numerous occasions, Jesus welcomed children into his arms and used them to illustrate the type of person who enters the kingdom of God.

"Jesus called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ... See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.'" (Matthew 18:2-3, 10)

When we read these comparisons, we often think Jesus is pointing to a child's innocence or a childlike faith that readily believes anything. While Jesus may be alluding to those things, we have to remember that children in Jesus' world were extremely vulnerable. They were among the weakest members of society. Children were constantly getting sick. A majority of children did not survive to adulthood. They were also seen to have little value in society.

Flash-forward two thousand years and the situation is much improved. Pregnancies routinely result in viable children. We expect that children will survive to become adults. Children today are among the most prized members of society.

However, even our children are still very vulnerable to threats as they were in Jesus' day.

The ongoing work against child abuse

During the month of April, many of us observed Child Abuse Awareness Month. Perhaps you participated as well by wearing blue or buying a pinwheel for your yard. Even if you missed the awareness month, it is not too late to get involved because the work against child abuse does not end when May begins.

According to the Child Advocacy Centers of Texas, there are 65,000 confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect each year in Texas. Today, there will be 185 new victims of child abuse in our state. Even sadder is the fact that one in four girls and one in six boys will experience sexual abuse before their 18th birthday.

However, what really breaks my heart is that family members commit a majority of these acts.

How the church can thwart ‘the greater threat’

We often teach our kids about “stranger danger,” but that threat is minimal. The greater threat to children comes from their own home and family.

Even when we consider the sin of human trafficking, a topic which seems to be in vogue with the church these days, we need to recognize that a high percentage of trafficking victims are actually children and teens being trafficked by family members.

This is where the church must step in to help.

The church often prides itself on preaching “family values,” but too often

“family values” is reduced simply to talking about homosexuality, abortion and divorce. While each of those topics are certainly important for us to study and explore, there is too much silence from the church when it comes to abuse.

Are we teaching our families about verbal, emotional and physical abuse? In particular, are we teaching parents what each of these specifically looks like and not just saying, “Don’t be abusive”?

Are we offering parenting classes that use evidence-based practices and studies as the foundation rather than simply relying on someone’s experience of what “worked for them”?

Do we have ministries to assist struggling parents to help them avoid neglecting their children?

Are we talking with adults and children in our congregations about sexual abuse, or are we too afraid of the subject because it contains the word *sex*?

Are we teaching our children that they have the right to say no to any kind of physical touch they do not like, even if it is just a hug from a friend or family member?

After all, children have rights, boundaries and voices as well.

Make a difference

The numbers around abuse are so staggering that I guarantee every congregation will have at least some individuals whose lives have been touched by sexual or physical abuse. We need to be discussing this in the church and offering education about these realities.

Child abuse is a pervasive problem in our society, and it is an affront to God who created and loves these children. There are many actions available to

the church and to Christians for making a difference, but indifference, ignorance and inaction are simply not options.

And who knows? When you take steps to prevent or stop child abuse, you may end up becoming a guardian angel who saves a child's life.

If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected, report it to Child Protective Services by calling 1-800-252-5400 or reporting online at www.txabusehotline.org. Every adult in the State of Texas is required by law to report any suspected abuse or neglect.

Micah Titterington, MDiv, is the Director of Outreach & Legal Advocacy at [Family Abuse Center](#), a domestic violence shelter and resource center in Waco, Texas. He is also a former youth pastor.