

Trauma-Informed Care for Student Ministries

We all hope that our churches are places of love, acceptance, and belonging. For some students, they are, but for others, our churches may be spaces where they feel isolated, rejected, and unwanted. Their experience of church might trigger painful memories and be connected with hurt. The church may even be a place where they experienced trauma. Students may also be experiencing abuse or hurt at home and bullying or isolation at school. Trauma-informed care shows us how to work with and relate to students who have experienced these things. It also provides a framework for fostering an environment where anyone can thrive.

God made our bodies with the ability to protect ourselves through our autonomic nervous system. "Autonomic" means before we can consciously think, our brain automatically scans and takes in sensory information to assess for safety and respond accordingly. This assessment includes both internal stimuli such as sensory and body needs, and external stimuli such as environmental and non-verbal cues from others. Once the sensory input lets us know we are safe, we can connect with others, and when feeling safely connected, our whole brain is engaged to learn, heal, grow, and flourish. This is the hierarchy of brain function that God has fearfully and wonderfully wired in us.

Being trauma-informed starts with understanding how we are wired and recognizing the impact that trauma or stressful situations can have on individuals. It shifts us away from judging behaviors to having a compassionate curiosity about how an individual's life history and experience affect them. When we approach ministry with a trauma-informed understanding, we **1) meet body/sensory needs 2) foster felt safety and 3) cultivate connection**, in that order.

Let us begin with a scenario of what can happen when we do not thoughtfully consider these areas, resulting in someone feeling unsafe and disconnected in ministry. A new middle schooler walks through the church doors five minutes early before the youth group starts. There are no signs and no one around to direct him. He sees people running around from one corner of the church to another, stressed and trying to get ready, but no one stops to ask if he needs help. He finally finds the ministry room. Everyone is talking and laughing amongst themselves but he is ignored. He slides himself into the back row, looks down and takes out his phone, averting eye contact. At the end of the service, he walks away feeling highly anxious. He has been struggling with family problems at home and, rather than finding the place of hope and connection he was looking for, he now feels more alone.

How could we do this differently? Here are some practical ways to apply trauma-informed care in your student ministries.

1. Be curious to understand the need behind the behavior.

When you see a student being disruptive, unhelpful, or overly quiet and shy, do not label that child as problematic, even just in your own mind. Instead, become curious about what may be contributing to this behavior. Rather than thinking 'What is wrong with you?', ask yourself 'I wonder what is happening or what his story is?' For example, why was the middle schooler in the scenario looking at his phone? Instead of thinking he is just being disrespectful or disengaged, wonder how he may feel as the new guy sitting alone in the room.

2. Care for students' body and sensory needs.

Jesus met the physical needs of the crowds and fed them. So, too, students need to have their body needs met first for them to feel safe, connect with others, and grow. Think through how to meet their body needs as you plan. What time is your ministry? Are children going to be hungry? Tired? Perhaps you need to provide snacks or enjoy a meal together. Will they likely be antsy after sitting through service before coming to the children's ministry? Perhaps you need to start with movement like an icebreaker game that gets their bodies moving or singing together.


Once you start to engage, read the room and pay attention to their body language. If they are restless, telling kids to sit and behave will likely be ineffective. Instead, have a few activities to help everyone shift their body state. Play Simon Says, do a breathing exercise, or engage in a sensory activity like playdough or calming music. Offer alternate seating options, like a wobble seat, and fidgets to help kids engage in the lesson while moving their body in a non-disruptive way as needed. When creating your programming, think through how to engage students through movement and their five senses.

Attuning to your body's needs is also important. As a caregiver in student ministry, if you are out of sorts, you will find it difficult to care for others well. Check in with your body. Are you hungry? Angry? Are you anxious or tired? If so, find ways to care for yourself. Before jumping into ministry, set times of rest, give yourself ample time to prepare, have something to eat, and take a few deep breaths. Connect with someone you feel safe with, connect with God and pray.

3. Foster felt safety for our students.

Consider how leaders engage with the students and where large and small group meetings are held. A sense of safety is felt through visual cues, sound, sensory stimuli, non-verbal body language, predictability and having choices. Make your spaces cozy, not too loud, and well-lit with soft lighting. Do spaces allow for privacy? For activities, set clear ground rules that help students stay safe physically and feel safe emotionally and spiritually.

Have clear expectations of what is going to happen during each meeting and develop consistent, predictable routines. If someone seems uncomfortable participating in an activity,



provide an option to observe or other appropriate alternatives. Check in with the person privately at a later time to see if there are ways to increase felt safety for them. For the middle schooler example above, leaders could have been prepared well in advance to not seem hectic and to be available to guide him to the right place. It would help to have clear signs and soft music playing in the ministry room.

Students need to feel an even greater sense of safety during small groups and Bible studies so they feel comfortable to share. Establish what confidentiality looks like and what students should expect if they share something personal and vulnerable. No one should be forced to share. Leaders can respond non-judgmentally with empathy and reflective listening.

4. Cultivate deep connections.

While it is important to teach children and teens truths about God and his word, it is also important to help them feel connected to you and to each other while doing so. This goes a long way in students' learning and retention, and it also helps them associate God with the joy and safety they experience in your ministry.

Connections are made through non-verbal cues and the quality of our interactions. What is the tone of your voice? Is your eye contact warm and soft? For kids and teens, age-appropriate play is a great way to build relationships. Do you have fun, playful engagement with them and encourage them? Make lessons fun and interactive. Healthy touch, like a high five, shoulder bump, or special handshake, is also helpful for cultivating connection. Teens may also bond not just in hearing the lesson, but in performing acts of service together.

Connection begins at the door. With the middle schooler, someone could have greeted him, introduced themselves to him, and included him in a conversation. Do not make the greetings overwhelming, but make an effort to make your student ministry welcoming. Plan programs to foster new connections. Also make a plan for follow up with newcomers in a more personal way outside of the meeting times.

God designed us to thrive through security in relationships both vertically (with God) and horizontally (with other people). In God's original design before the fall, Adam and Eve walked with God and were naked and felt no shame (Genesis 2:25). Trauma-informed care means being curious about a student's story, empathic toward their experiences and connecting with them in a non-judgmental way. This helps students internalize the gospel. We can help them experience safe love and acceptance as they deepen their relationship with God and others in ministry around them. May we and our communities be known for the quality of our love and care.