



# 5 creative STRATEGIES FOR CHURCHES TO HELP KIDS IN POVERTY

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**A HANDBOOK FOR CHURCHES  
BY FAITH BOSLAND**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: My Eleven-Year Crash Course in Poverty

Chapter 2: Poverty 101

Chapter 3: How Poverty Affects Kids

Chapter 4: Getting to Action: What Makes a Good Strategy?

Chapter 5: Strategy #1: Afterschool Programs

Chapter 6: Strategy #2: Summer Reading Camp

Chapter 7: Strategy #3: Middle School Gender-Specific Afterschool Programs

Chapter 8: Strategy #4: Entrepreneurship Programs

Chapter 9: Strategy #5: Mentoring

Chapter 10: How to Partner Well with your School

Chapter 11: Tips and Ideas for Building Relationships with Kids in Poverty



## CHAPTER 1

### My Eleven-Year Crash Course in Poverty

Just over a decade ago, I made the change from church youth ministry staff to a small parachurch organization in Springfield, Ohio, a city of 60,000 not far from Dayton. My job at Springfield Christian Youth Ministries was to build relationships with city middle school kids and share Christ's love with them. I quickly learned a few things: one, that when we said "city" or "urban," we were talking about kids in high-poverty schools.

Springfield is a unique Midwestern city with a rich history - and a high concentration of poverty. I'd met and worked with kids in poverty in church ministry positions before, but now nearly every kid I met came from a single-parent (or no-parent)

## 4 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

home, had few material resources, and faced a long list of challenges. I started hearing statements like:

“I don’t see my dad because he’s in jail.”

“I live with my grandma.”

“Some kids said they’re going to jump me after school.”

“My big sister has a baby who lives with us.”

*In fact, it felt like I was hearing these statements every day.*

Besides how many challenging circumstances our city’s kids were dealing with, it also didn’t take long before I realized something else more troubling: **That a lot of our traditional ministry was not producing real change.** To be blunt, if we were giving kids in poverty what was essentially a pat on the head and a piece of candy, we weren’t going to change anything. We could have all kinds of fun with kids, build relationships, and even share the gospel with them, **but if we were sending them back onto a path of destruction with no help for change, were we really doing gospel work?**

These questions troubled me then and continue to trouble me – **because the reality is, as followers of Christ, we desperately want to help, but we don't always know what to do.** This book is intended as a starting point for those who find themselves in the same place I did.

### Getting our terms straight: Poverty

When I say poverty, I need to clarify that I'm not really talking about a lack of money. We've probably all had times in our lives when we were (or at least felt) "poor" – scraping together money for college tuition, pizza, or even diapers for our kids. Those are most likely instances of "situational poverty" – in other words, poverty brought on by circumstances, which probably has an end in sight: When you get that college degree, or a better-paying job, or the kids are in school, and so on. These times in our lives can help us identify with people in poverty, but we must understand that it's not the same thing.

When I refer to poverty in this book, I'm talking about generational poverty – poverty that has no real end in sight, poverty that's extremely hard to escape. As we'll explore in the

## 6 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

first couple of chapters, generational poverty in the United States is a complex web of circumstances and issues that shape children from the time they are born – and even before they are born. **The reason that no one has “solved” poverty, despite billions of dollars invested in government and nonprofit programs, is that it is tremendously hard and complex; it’s rooted in a mix of individual choices, inherited circumstances, and systemic injustice; and the “solutions” that often seem logical to us in the church may not be solutions at all.**

### Why I Write for the Church

I work for what you call a “parachurch” youth organization, but I worked in church youth ministry about ten years prior to that. As long as parachurches have existed, I believe there’s been an unspoken tension – maybe even spoken at times – between church and parachurch. The church may feel a sense of the parachurch being “too cool for church.” The parachurch may feel frustration at the church’s busyness with its own programs and disinterest in collaboration. I have lived on both sides of this tension working for both organizations.



I love the church. It's my own conviction that the church, the family created by God, is his primary strategy for meeting the needs of the world. I also believe that the parachurch can play a useful role in equipping the church in its area of expertise, honing in on community needs and resources, and providing on-ramps for the church to meet needs in the community in a coordinated way.

The parachurch is at its best when it serves as a bridge between the church and the needs of the world, not when it's replicating what the church is already doing or should be doing. When it comes to addressing poverty, the church is at its best when it can put aside its busyness, and at times its old way of doing things, to pour out its significant resources on the needs of its community, **not just in ways that feel good but in ways that change things.**

I write this book for those who are broken for the needs of their community's kids in poverty but just don't know where to start. I write this book so that we can channel our resources into

## 8 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

things that will really help change the story for kids, and into solutions that we can sustain.

I wish I could say that this book will give you all the answers. *Spoiler alert: It won't!* Rather, my heart for this book is to share with you the root causes and issues that hinder kids in poverty from thriving, and then let you get your creative juices flowing with thoughtful strategies to address them. Some of the strategies I share from our experience may be the right fit for your context, but chances are it won't look exactly the same. Even more, I pray that the Lord may guide you to another strategy I haven't thought of. By sharing root causes and issues of poverty and some ways we've begun to address them, I'm trusting that the Lord will guide YOU to the creative solutions that might be available in your church and community.

## CHAPTER 2

### Poverty 101

When we're talking about kids in poverty, we need to start with a clear understanding of what we mean by the word "poverty," and its ripple effect.

I believe that churches often struggle with this unspoken question: **When it comes to working with kids in poverty, what's our target?** Is it for kids to grow up and be like us? Is it for them to make the leap from poverty to become middle class? While we might not say it out loud, those beliefs may have a grip on our hearts and actions somewhere.

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, in their challenging book *When Helping Hurts*, get right to the (brutal) point: "The goal [of anti-poverty ministry] is not to make the materially poor all over

the world into middle-to-upper-class North Americans, **a group characterized by high rates of divorce, sexual addiction, substance abuse, and mental illness.**” (p. 74)

I would like to suggest that *the target for kids in poverty is to grow to their fullest potential, into who God made them to be*. As Corbett and Fikkert put it, “The goal is to restore people to a full expression of humanness, to being what God created us all to be, people who glorify God living in right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation.” (*When Helping Hurts*, p. 74)

The kids we serve may not go to college. (But we hope that many do!) They may not grow up to own a house in the suburbs and shuttle their kids to soccer and music lessons. They may not listen to our music or hold our political beliefs or share our love for the pour-over. *That’s OK*. We believe that each young person has a purpose in the mission of God. **Our job is not to make them like us; our job is to help them grow in God’s purpose in *their* context, not ours.**

However, even if our goal is not to make kids in poverty “middle class like us,” as we get to know them we begin to develop a nagging sense that there are fundamental needs they have that middle class or affluent kids do not. Bob Lupton, in his powerful book *Toxic Charity*, tells this very real and painful story about working with “fatherless boys growing up on city streets” in Atlanta: “Building relationships with street kids seemed so right and yielded so many positive changes, until young boys became young men and faced survival on their own. The need for immediate cash took precedence over school attendance. Basketball and outdoor adventure trips did little to enhance their earning capacity. Bible studies did not get them jobs. I watched helplessly as one by one my young friends were pulled under by the survival ethic of the street. Mercy ministry alone, as some call it, is insufficient.” (*Toxic Charity*, p. 40)

This brings us back to the question, if our job is not to make kids middle class, what exactly are we aiming for? If we’re working in a church context, I’m going to assume we have a good understanding of spiritual development, but we may be at a loss for what else young people in poverty need to grow into “a

## 12 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

full expression of humanness.” It’s my belief that, physically, socially, emotionally, and educationally, these are some of the best indicators we can shoot for, for kids in poverty in America to develop to their fullest potential:

- Reading on grade level (through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)
- Passing their classes and attending school (4<sup>th</sup> grade and older)
- Graduating from high school
- Readiness for college, trade school, or stable employment
- Forming healthy friendships
- Growing to find peace with their past and present
- Discovering their gifts and exercising them to serve
- Delaying sexual activity and parenthood
- Being able to resist drugs and alcohol
- Having skills to handle stress, anger, conflict, and violence
- Life and job skills like interpersonal communication, reliability, and personal finance
- Being engaged in a church

There are probably others you could add to this list, and while they’re all important and deserve our attention, I believe that the “Big Three” of this list are:

## **Reading on grade level through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade**

### **Graduating from high school**

#### **Being engaged in a church**

The rest of this book dives into how we, in the church, can impact these “Big Three” as well as other indicators on the list just suggested.

### **Two big strategies: Prevention and Intervention**

There are two major strategies when it comes to working with kids who are statistically at higher risk: Prevention and intervention. The words might be big, but I bet you understand the concepts already.

Intervention means addressing the problems that a kid **is already having**. An Intervention program might enter a kid’s life when they are arrested, become a teen parent, or are on the verge of dropping out of school.

Prevention, as you might have guessed, means addressing these problems before they ever start, to decrease the chances that they will occur. And prevention doesn’t just mean running programs where we tell kids not to get arrested, or to “just say

## 14 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

no.” It means building what we call (get ready for fancy words!)

**“protective factors:”** The qualities kids have or develop that make them less likely to get into big, life-altering, poverty-inducing problems like being locked up, getting pregnant, or dropping out.

We probably all know by instinct that kids who come from healthy, stable families, live in safe neighborhoods, and go to good schools are less likely to get into trouble. Unfortunately, no matter how much we want to, we as a church or caring adult may not be able to give these things to kids in poverty. However, there are other factors – which you probably recognize by instinct, but which research backs up – that we *can* influence, that will help kids stay on the right path. These protective factors include things like:

- Caring adult mentors
- Problem-solving skills
- Peer support
- Reading ability
- Positive activities and hobbies like sports or arts
- Church attendance



(For more on this subject, do a quick Google of “[40 Developmental Assets](#)” by the Search Institute, which has done excellent research on this subject for many years now.)

Think of Prevention and Intervention like the flu shot and Tamiflu. Tamiflu is necessary, because people are going to get the flu. But if you could only invest in one thing, you might choose to invest in the flu shot to keep people from getting sick in the first place.

When it comes to working with kids in poverty, some will feel called to Intervention work: Working with kids in juvenile detention centers, teen moms, addicted kids, and drop-outs. It is necessary work. It is also very difficult and time-consuming, and calls for incredibly gifted, called, and committed people. This is Kingdom work. We need people willing to do Intervention, to enter into some of the most painful and difficult work there is with kids. God does not call us to avoid the difficult work.

### **Why I (and this book) focus on Prevention**

It’s my personal conviction that the best long-term strategy for working with vulnerable youth is **to start as early as we can,**

**and to walk alongside them for as long as we can.** Kids in poverty need us to invest in them from a young age, and to continue to invest in them as they grow up. When these kids become older teens and young adults, when they have families of their own, they will still need support and mentoring; and that's why I believe that the church is the best possible environment for kids in poverty.

Personally, I also believe that it is a shame if the first time a young person from a challenging background gets attention is when they are arrested or pregnant. What could have happened if someone had given that young person the same attention five years earlier? Could they have headed down a healthy, less heart-breaking path, and never darkened the door of a courtroom?

There's one other, highly practical reason I believe the church would be wise to invest in Prevention programs: They are easier. Think about it – how many people in your church would have what it takes to mentor a young person in juvenile detention, addicted to drugs, on the fast track to dropping out?

Maybe one or two, but that is (in my own technical terms) one tough gig. Now think about this: How many people in your church could have read with that young person when he was 5? How many could have coached him when he was 7? How many could have played basketball with him when he was 11? I'm gonna guess that list is much, much longer.

Prevention is something the Church can do. It's not too hard! And by God's grace, it may keep that young man from ever going down the path of drugs and crime in the first place.

## RESOURCES:

*When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert (Moody Publishers, 2009) [Excellent book, but beware: My working subtitle as I read it was "This book hurts!"]

*Toxic Charity*, Robert Lupton (Harper Collins, 2012)

*Charity Detox: What Charity Would Look Like if We Cared about Results*, Robert Lupton (Harper Collins, 2015)

*A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby K. Payne (aha Process, Inc., 1995)

## CHAPTER 3

### How Poverty Affects Kids

Let's get specific. Poverty isn't just about not having money. We all know examples of people who grew up without a lot of money, but went on to be very successful. When we talk about kids born into generational poverty, there is a long list of issues at play in their lives from day one. Here are a few of those.

#### **Early childhood development: The 30 Million Word Gap**

*Words are free! So why do kids in poverty have so few?*

If you've always worked with older kids, and especially if you're a youth pastor, you'll need to bear with me for a minute. To understand what is shaping and influencing children in poverty, and to understand how they got to where they are as teenagers, you have to go way back - all the way back to the womb, in fact.

Research shows that one of the predictors of whether a child will graduate from high school is *their birth weight*. You read that right: Some kids, literally from the time they are born or even before they are born, will have to fight harder and have more support to have a chance at a healthy adult life. This means that good prenatal care, and staying off substances, is vitally important for moms to set their kids up for a chance at a thriving life.

On top of that, as a young child grows and develops, the development in their brain sets the stage for the rest of their learning lives. From birth to age three, our brains take in more than at any other time in our lives! What a parent or caregiver does, or doesn't do, has an enormous impact on that development: Do they talk with a baby who can't talk back to them yet? Do they sing songs or rhyme? Do they bring their young kids to the library, read to them, or even have books in their home? Do they make sure they're getting the right nutrition to feed that growing brain?

## 20 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

The reality is complex for families in poverty. Some parents are doing their very best to help their little ones develop. Many moms in poverty are young, some of them teenagers, and may not know to talk, sing, read, and play with babies and toddlers. Many moms in poverty are stressed out by finances, relationships, finding and keeping work, or being safe in their own neighborhoods, and may just feel too exhausted to do these things. Many moms in poverty have to hold down a job and leave care-giving responsibilities to someone else while she's at work, like a grandparent, neighbor, or even an older child, who might be content to let the TV do the babysitting. And many dads in poverty? Not only do they have the same factors going on as the moms, they are often just not there. (More on that in a few pages.)

The difference between a toddler growing up in middle class and a toddler growing up in poverty is so striking that research estimates that **by the time the child in poverty turns three, he will have heard 30 million fewer words than the child in middle class.** This research is so widely known that it's referred to simply as the "30 million word gap."

So it shouldn't surprise us to know that many, many kids in poverty, from the day they start kindergarten, will be playing catch-up. This sets the stage for them to lag behind year after year, and by the time they reach middle school, to check out on school. Some even say that in high-poverty schools, you find far too many "fourth grade dropouts:" Kids who (by law) will stay enrolled in school for a few more years, but as young as 10 years old, they decide that school is not their thing, and it's just a matter of time until they give up on it for good.

This is a case in point of why poverty isn't about the money: **Words are free!** So why is it that our kids in poverty have so few?

### **Reading Levels: A Vaccination Against Prison?**

You've gotten a good picture of how this unfolds. If you work with children in poverty, you need to memorize this statement and repeat it as often as possible: **"A child who can read at grade level by the third grade is unlikely ever to be involved in the criminal justice system."**

## 22 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

In my home state, Ohio, the cost to incarcerate an adult is over \$20,000 a year, and the cost to incarcerate a juvenile for a year is more than \$40,000! When I learned that third grade reading levels hold the power to essentially vaccinate a kid from ending up in prison, it was and continues to be transformational to my thinking. What if we, as a church and the body of Christ, supported reading for young kids the way we would approach an urgent medical or food or water crisis in our own community? Could we possibly hold the key to keeping children in our community out of prison?

The best thing is, you don't have to be an educator! Throughout Scripture, we see the Lord operate with simple things that are offered to him in faith – a staff, a jar of oil, loaves and fish. In other words, he uses what we've got, not what we don't have. Stop and think about that for a minute. Just because we don't feel like we can solve the problem doesn't mean that we don't have something to offer up in faith.



It's my conviction that the church can offer up *the simple things we have* that will help kids improve and maintain their reading such as:

- **Help kids practice reading.** Kids who practice reading become better readers – boom!
- **Give away books.** Did you know that 61% of children in poverty do not have children's books in their homes? What do you think is the likelihood that these children will struggle with reading when they hit kindergarten and beyond?
- **Make reading fun.** Many kids, especially older ones, don't like to read because they don't have access to books that interest them. What if we offered up a reading club around a topic that piqued their interest? (More on that strategy in Chapter 5.)

## Fathers: The Absence that has a Presence

*“The scariest day of my life was when my dad got out of prison. I ran and hid because I didn't want to meet him.” –J., 5<sup>th</sup> grade girl*

You can't talk about poverty without talking about father absence. I'm not talking about homes with divorced parents where children have a consistent, healthy relationship with their

dad, even if they don't live with him. Those types of families do exist, although they are rare.

I'm talking about when dad is just not there – he's incarcerated, or refuses to take responsibility, or doesn't even know he has a child. Possibly the child's mom or family members have kept him from a relationship with his child, and he's given up trying to build one. If he's present and Mom is supportive of his role, perhaps he is wildly inconsistent, promising to do things with his kids and then not following through. Or maybe he's involved in dangerous stuff: drugs, alcohol abuse, criminal activity, violence.

I've met many young kids who are heartbreakingly hopeful about their dads: When my dad gets out of prison he's going to take me to Kings Island. My dad's going to take me to Chuck E. Cheese's for my birthday. I'm going to move to Florida to live with my dad. We pray that their dad will step up and follow through on these promises, but we listen carefully as time goes on to see if these things actually happened and, without

disparaging dad, help kids process their feelings of disappointment and loss.

The reality is that when kids don't have a dad involved in their day-to-day life, and when dads simply aren't present in the neighborhood, it has enormous effects:

- **Economic:** Children in father-absent homes are four times more likely to be poor.
- **Emotional/Mental:** Kids without dads in their homes are more likely to be angry, have a poor self-image, or become depressed.
- **Behavioral:** Kids who grow up without a dad in their home are more likely to show aggressive behavior, be incarcerated as juveniles and adults, use drugs, and become teen parents.
- **Academic:** Kids without involved fathers are more likely do poorly in school, be truant, and drop out of high school.

Our own observation is that kids without a healthy dad relationship can have difficulty following authority and processing their own emotions. Boys especially seem lost about what it means to be a man as they become teenagers, and so they latch onto how media and culture describe masculinity: Rap

artists, gang members, bravado, disrespect of women. Rarely do they see an idolized version of a responsible dad, treating others respectfully, providing for his family, following through on his commitments.

## Trauma: The Invisible Injury

*“We assume that their heart is motivating their defiant actions; but really, their brain and body are motivating their actions to protect their heart.” –Betsy Linnell, Child Therapist*

If you're not in the social services or mental health world, you may not hear the word “trauma” a lot, but it's something that affects the behavior of many, many children in poverty. Let's define trauma as a situation or experience that causes great emotional distress and pain, and overwhelms a person's ability to cope.

The tricky thing about trauma is that it's not defined by the circumstance. Two people could experience the same terrible thing, **and yet only one of them may experience trauma as a result.** Here are some common examples of experiences that could produce trauma (but may not!):

- The death of a parent, close family member, or friend

- Sudden change in family situation (parent divorce, incarceration, being removed from parents)
- Abuse, including physical, sexual and emotional, particularly if it continues for a long period of time
- Growing up with a depressed, addicted, or alcoholic parent

Here's why you need to know about trauma if you want to serve kids in poverty: **Kids in poverty are more likely to experience trauma, and they're less likely to get the help they need for it.** People in poverty – meaning their parents, grandparents, and other family members – have a lower life expectancy than the affluent. We see many kids in poverty affected by the loss of a loved one, often something that could have been prevented.

Robert Putnam, in his comprehensive book *Our Kids*, writes: **“Even kids living at twice the poverty level ... are two to five times more likely than their less impoverished peers to experience such trauma as parental death or imprisonment, physical abuse, neighborhood violence, and drugs or alcoholism in the family – all experiences that have been shown to have negative consequences, ranging from**

**depression and heart disease to developmental delays and even suicide.”** (*Our Kids*, p. 114)

Moving suddenly due to an eviction, maybe leaving a lot of your possessions behind, losing a family member to violence, being removed from your parents – these are all things that are unlikely to happen when you grow up in a middle class or wealthy family, but are very real for many kids in poverty. I’ll say it again: Any one of these experiences could be traumatic for one child, but not for another.

What happens when a child experiences trauma? My friend Betsy Linnell, an experienced child therapist, describes it this way: “When trauma occurs, it essentially stops the brain from developing and instead focuses all of the brain on keeping the body safe. This changes the child’s behavior: they may become highly reactive, on constant alert (which looks like ADHD but it’s not), and demanding to be in control of situations.” What we see is bad behavior, defiance, or inability to focus or make wise decisions, but what’s really going on is a traumatized brain trying to protect itself.

This is really important for adults who work with children in poverty, because there are times **we just don't understand why a kid can't focus, why they would make such poor decisions, or why they are seeking stimulation all the time.** Sometimes, Betsy says, we set traumatized children up for failure when we put very strict rules into place, and when the child defies the rule, we treat them as sinful rather than recognizing that they are wounded and need our help.

Betsy says it this way: “We assume that their heart is motivating their defiant actions; but really, their brain and body are motivating their actions to protect their heart.” So Betsy’s recommendation when working with children who’ve experienced trauma, is to offer choices within structure; show completely unconditional love; and help children understand that if they choose bad behavior, they are choosing the consequence that goes with it. She also recommends simple, relationship-building routines like eating together, and to find kids’ passions and talents and help to fan those into flame.

The great news: Betsy says that healthy attachment, physical affection, and good relationships can help a traumatized brain release the very chemicals needed to reverse the effects of trauma. **That means that the church, at its best, holds the relational instruments of healing for the minds and hearts of children who need a safe place and safe people.**

### Health: It Matters, Too

*“I’m supposed to get my tonsils out, but I don’t know when my mom’s gonna take me.” –L., 7<sup>th</sup> grade girl, on why she’s missed so much school*

Remember from our early childhood section, kids born into poverty are more likely to start out at low birth weight, which puts them at risk from the beginning. Kids in poverty are more likely to have asthma, probably from exposure to low-quality air in their homes. They’re more likely to live in a family with a smoker, or become a smoker themselves as a teen. They’re more likely to live in an older, possibly unsafe home where they could be exposed to lead paint chips or dust, which can cause brain damage in young kids.



Kids in poverty are going to have poorer nutrition, and they're more likely to be overweight or obese. This one seems illogical to people at times: If families are poor and don't have money for food, why are they overweight? Think about it for a moment. Which food is the cheapest and easiest to prepare if you don't have a functional kitchen: Mac and cheese, frozen dinners, convenience store hot dogs, fast food. The grilled chicken and vegetables that middle class kids enjoy (or maybe complain about, but eat!) seem way too complicated for a poor family to make. Whose parents are paying for gym memberships and swim lessons, upper and middle class or kids in poverty? Whose kids are playing on sports teams, upper and middle class or kids in poverty?

These all sound like abstract issues, until you meet kids in poverty and realize how many of these issues affect them. And if their health is affected, it spirals into other areas of their lives, like school attendance (kids in poverty are four times more likely to be chronically absent), poor immune systems that make them prone to viruses, and even mental health.

## Housing and Mobility

*“Can I call my mom? We just got evicted and I’m not sure where I’m supposed to go after we’re done.” –A., 4<sup>th</sup> grade boy*

When I say “housing,” it might not trigger any particular emotions for you or me. But when you drop a child off at a home with broken windows, when they tell you they have to sleep on the floor because another family moved in with them, when you go inside and realize their family has no furniture, or when they suddenly have to move homes or even schools, you begin to understand the great effect that housing can have on a family in poverty. You understand that when they come to school, focusing on fractions or spelling words may not be the first thing on their mind.

In my city’s school district, where my kids attend, somewhere between one in three and one in five kids will change schools within a single school year. That means that no matter how hard a teacher in a high-poverty building works to address students’ learning needs and build relationships, much of that work will lapse when 20-30% of those students move schools.

## Violence: The Fearful Undercurrent of Poor Neighborhoods

*“My cousin shot my uncle and killed him, and my family has taken sides against each other. But I decided to forgive my cousin.” – S., 5<sup>th</sup> grade girl*

*“Somebody shot my uncle, and he died.” –L., 5<sup>th</sup> grade girl*

When I was a kid growing up in a rural community, the first “fight” I saw was in high school, when one kid pushed another kid into a glass display case. (Fortunately, nobody was really hurt, but it sure made for some excitement at our little school.) In the circles of kids we work with, if I asked a group of elementary school kids how many have seen a fight, I can guarantee nearly everyone would raise their hand.

For a while in my job, I led a fifth grade girls’ group at one of the highest-poverty school buildings in our city. I’ll never forget the day one of the girls mentioned hearing gunshots in her neighborhood, and suddenly every girl in the group had an experience to share: “I was in my driveway and I heard gunshots.” “Somebody shot at my house.” “Somebody shot my uncle and he died.”

## 34 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

Take a moment and imagine (if this hasn't been your experience already) what it's like to grow up in fear in your own neighborhood. Hearing a gunshot and wondering if it has killed or injured someone you love. Imagine experiencing violence in your own home, possibly having the police show up to your house.

Three years ago, one of our former kids was shot and killed in a church parking lot. Two years ago, a member of our high school's football team was shot and killed late at night during a party. Every time violence like this happens, there's a ripple effect of grief, anger, and fear on our community's kids. Each young person lost to violence has siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, friends, neighbors, who bear the scars.

Unfortunately, this is not unusual for kids who live in poverty: A report by the US Department of Justice (Harrell, Langton, et al) shows that **Americans living in poverty are more than twice as likely to be the victim of violence as higher-income Americans.** Whether it's domestic violence, drug-related violence, or just getting into a fistfight with

neighborhood kids, violence is a reality for kids growing up in poverty in a way that more affluent kids just don't experience.

## Drugs: The War that Rages On

*"My mom died in a car accident because she was high on drugs." –M., 6<sup>th</sup> grade boy*

Though all of these issues that touch kids in poverty are intertwined, drugs deserve their own category. Right now my community is being ravaged by a heroin epidemic: It's a horribly addicting drug, with strong batches on the street that are overwhelming our emergency rooms with overdoses, and tearing our kids' loved ones out of their lives. In the absence of other economic opportunity, selling drugs is a quick dollar for people in poverty. That means that kids in poverty may be living next to a crack house or drug dealer, with the possibility of violence always present.

We also know that where there are drugs, there is crime. When people are addicted and not in their right mind, they will steal from and even hurt others to get money to buy drugs. With illegal transactions going down, involving large amounts of money, between people in chemically altered states, bad things

are going to happen. And let's not forget that these drug dealers and buyers – maybe just a scary mugshot in our mind's eye – are probably someone's dad or mom, someone's uncle or aunt, someone's big brother or sister.

## The Positives: Why Pity is the Wrong Response

*They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated;*

*they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. – Isaiah 61:4*

*“I'd like to start a business where I hire kids who need help, and they could learn about business.” –T., 8<sup>th</sup> grade boy, entrepreneur*

This chapter was hard to write. Even I feel overwhelmed reading these words that represent realities. However, I write about these subjects not to depress or discourage us or make us feel pity for kids growing up in poverty. None of those emotions are going to be helpful for the kids we work with. A lot of what I've described is just their “normal,” for many of them the same as other kids in their school and neighborhood.

My point in writing about the challenges for kids in poverty is rather that we understand their reality and their context, so that we're better equipped to help them grow and reach their fullest

potential. Yes, there's a lot of brokenness in these kids' families and neighborhoods, and a lot of healing that needs to happen in their lives, but the same can be said for many families in any income bracket. Divorce, pain, addiction, anxiety, on and on – these painful realities are not limited to kids growing up in poverty. What kids need are strategies to help them break the cycle of poverty and rise to their fullest potential.

Although our highest aspiration is not for kids to become middle class, we can also say with confidence *that God did not create them to be locked up, with broken relationships, unable to support a family.*

I've talked to many 10-to-12-year-olds in town: None of them want to end up broke, in jail, dependent on the system, with broken relationships. And so the question remains, how do we help kids get where THEY want to go – or better, where God has created them to go – to a place of healthy relationships and families, responsible, with character, and rebuilding their own neighborhoods and community?

An “asset-based” approach looks not at what kids are missing, but what strengths they have. Let’s take a look at some of the assets kids growing up in poverty may have:

1) **The people in their lives who love them.** Just because a family looks broken from the outside, there’s a pretty good chance that someone in their lives loves them deeply. In fact, many adults are making tremendous sacrifices for kids in poverty – grandmas, aunts, uncles raising kids; moms working their hardest to regain custody; dads paying their child support. There are many people in poverty doing the best they know how for their kids.

2) **Generosity:** There’s often a spirit of generosity in poor communities. Friends, family, and neighbors in poverty often have to rely on one another for survival more than self-sufficient, middle-class families.

3) **Survival skills:** Chances are, kids in poverty have had to learn some skills that middle class kids just don’t have.

4) **“Realness:”** I’m not sure how else to say this, but kids in poverty are prepared to be real in a way that middle- and upper-



income kids often are not. I find they're more likely to ask direct questions, say exactly what they're thinking, or interact with an adult on an authentic level. I've talked with people who teach relationship education in area high schools, and they love teaching city school kids most of all because of those kids' directness. Suburban and rural kids often say what adults want to hear; urban kids say exactly what they are thinking. There is a mirage of competence and self-protection that middle- and upper-income kids often learn to project, and its absence can mean a receptivity to relationship and the gospel.

5) **Adversity:** You read that right. Research has shown that adversity in a child's life, when combined with the presence of an engaged, trusted adult who helps them process that adversity, can become a great contributor to that child's success and well-being. When kids have faced no adversity or struggle in their young lives, they are more likely to be overwhelmed by challenges later in life. We don't need to look any further than the cross to know that our God is not afraid of the darkest places. He specializes in using the darkest places to bring life and healing to the world.

6) This one is my favorite! **Potential for leadership and change in their own community.** These children will grow up to understand their community's deepest needs better than anyone else. I firmly believe that the greatest change in our community will come from the kids who've grown up in its soil.

Read these words in Isaiah 61:4:

“The Lord has sent me ... to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion....

They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
a planting of the Lord  
for the display of his splendor.

**They will rebuild** the ancient ruins  
and restore the places long devastated;  
**they will renew** the ruined cities  
that have been devastated for generations.”

**Look who is doing the rebuilding: It's the people who have lived through the greatest tragedy. Not those who have grown up in comfortable places, but those who have gone through adversity, who have experienced darkness, who**

**understand the great need of their community.** It's my belief that this redemptive promise is for our kids, and through the Lord's great redemptive work, they are powerful potential agents for change. This gives me tremendous hope for our kids who are growing up in adversity: they may be the ones God will use for the greatest impact on the world.

## RESOURCES:

*Children at Promise*, Tim Stuart & Cheryl Bostrom (Jossey Bass, 2003)

*Fist Stick Knife Gun*, Geoffrey Canada (Beacon Press, 1995)

*Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Robert Putnam (Simon and Schuster, 2015)

## CHAPTER 4

### Getting to Action: What Makes a Good Strategy?

A lot of you are ready to get up and do something: *Let's help!*

*Let's get to work! So... what do we do?*

From the beginning, I've wanted this book to offer not just an abstract overview of why kids in poverty have it so tough, but practical strategies to make a difference in their lives. So let's get to some solutions! Let me start with some general guidelines as you develop your strategy to help kids in poverty. These guidelines come from years of seeing what works and what doesn't work in ministry with kids in poverty. Use this list as a filter to run your strategy through, and help you think through obstacles or issues that may come up.

**A good strategy WILL:** Provide on-ramps for people besides you to get involved. You're going to need an army, not a lone soldier. This is a long, hard battle.

**A good strategy WILL NOT:** Be a one-man show. This point is so important I'm willing to say the same thing I just said, in different words.

**A good strategy WILL:** Build relationships with kids and families over the long term. This is a "Ministry 101" point, but it's vital enough it needs to be said. You can do a lot of "ministry" without building relationships, so don't skip this one.

**A good strategy WILL:** Address a real need in the community – not necessarily what is most convenient or what we like to do, but what the community really needs. If you don't know what the community needs, try asking your local school! I'm willing to bet they've got ideas.

**A good strategy WILL:** Have the whole church – including the senior pastor – on board. Maybe not actively involved, but behind the program, praying for the kids and families, talking it up. So when needs come up, or a light fixture gets broken, or

## 44 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

afterschool kids get into the Sunday school teacher's special stash of fruit snacks, your church will understand the heart of the program and react with compassion.

**A good strategy WILL:** Be sensitive to the needs of kids and families in poverty. You can overcome a lot of differences by listening to families and trying to understand their context. This happens through relationships, period. There is no shortcut!

**A good strategy WILL:** Consider how you will respond when material needs come up – a family is behind on rent and about to be evicted, the kids need clothes or shoes or glasses, or they are suddenly desperate for transportation. (See Chapter 9 on Mentoring for more on material help.)

**A good strategy WILL NOT:** Become a handout or relief ministry. I'm not saying you should never meet material needs, but it's an incredibly fine line to walk. Once you start handing things out, you shift the dynamic from relationship to material things. Keep your focus on helping kids. (More detail on this subject in Chapter 9.)

**A good strategy WILL:** Treat the kids and families you serve as your church's families. Build relationships. Include them. Invite them to things.

**A good strategy WILL NOT:** Perpetuate an "us and them" mentality. Whatever you offer, offer to all.

**A good strategy WILL:** Discover the assets of families in poverty, and build on them when possible. Does a family member like to cook? Could they make snacks or dinner at your afterschool program? Do they have ideas for how to make the program work better?

**A good strategy WILL:** Be sustainable. If you can't continue it for multiple years, then it's not a good strategy, period. By all means, you may try something and decide that it's just not working, or realize you need to tweak it. But if at the beginning stages you ask yourself, "What would be the best way to keep this thing going year after year?" you will go from good to great. The two key things to think about here are 1) MONEY (where will it come from?), and 2) PEOPLE (how will we keep people rejuvenated and willing to keep serving?)

**A good strategy WILL:** Likely start small. This is probably just common sense, but it's much, much easier to start something simple with a few kids and grow as you go, than to start with a big crowd and try to learn what you're doing in the midst of chaos.

**A good strategy WILL:** Only involve safe people hands-on with kids. *You MUST screen people before they become involved.* Have some type of background check system. Check references if you don't know a person well. Often a simple Google search will tell you if a person has an arrest record. This may mean some awkward conversations where you have to tell a potential volunteer they are not the right fit for your program. But for the sake of our kids, we cannot surround them with adults who are unsafe, lose their temper, do not follow our safety guidelines, or stir up trouble – just because we were afraid of having an awkward conversation.

**A good strategy WILL:** Be aware of what's already being offered in your community. Do your homework. Ask questions. Meet with others in the community. Even if you don't eventually



partner with others, an understanding of what's already being offered and what's not will open doors for you and build better bridges with your community.

**A good strategy WILL NOT:** Burn people out. (But it may push them out of their comfort zone!) Question: What is better for a kid, an intense program with a revolving door of exhausted volunteers, or a slow and steady method that continues for years? If your volunteers are exhausted to the point of wanting to quit on a regular basis, you need to re-evaluate how your program is structured.

**A good strategy WILL NOT:** Fix everything. As much as I'd love to say that your program will be the complete solution, your kids will all be on the honor roll, never get arrested or have babies as a teenager, and all go on to college and have happy families, there are no guarantees. Kids will still make dumb choices, some of them with serious consequences. However ...

**A good strategy WILL:** Make a difference. So much growth is small and incremental that you can't see it happening. But small things, over the course of a young person's development, CAN

change their trajectory. Opportunities offered, skills developed, and people in their corner – all of these have the ability to change the world for a young person.

## Your Context and the Rest of this Book

You may be like me and work in an area with large pockets of kids in poverty or near poverty. If this is your situation, keep reading to see if any of the following programs to address the needs of kids in poverty strike a chord with you.

If, however, you have only a handful of kids in poverty living in a middle-income area, Strategies #1-4 may not be very helpful for you, although the needs they address are important to understand. You may want to skip to Strategy #5, Mentoring, which is something you can start with any number of kids.

## CHAPTER 5

### Strategy #1: Afterschool Programs

*“Students participating in a high-quality afterschool program went to school more, behaved better, received better grades, and did better on tests compared to non-participating students.” – Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010*

*“My favorite thing about [my afterschool program] is that it makes me feel safe.” –M., 3<sup>rd</sup> grade boy*

**Why it works:** Ask any principal in any high-poverty school building and they will tell you the same thing: Kids need positive, safe things to do after school. They may also need a place to do homework (and get help if they’re struggling), read with an adult, and have a good snack or dinner. And the fact that they’re building trusting relationships with adults and finding hope for their lives takes it to a whole new level.

**Who it works best for:** Elementary school ages (program suggestions for middle school students are in the following chapters)

## Good-Better-Best Practices for Afterschool

**Best:** Enroll kids at the start of the school year. Don't run a drop-in program. We learned this the hard way. Our drop-in program became a revolving door of kids, and it just wasn't effective ministry. There may be ministries that can pull off a drop-in program, but we find enrollment-based programs to be much more effective. If you've been doing a drop-in program, this may seem like a big switch, but it really isn't that hard to make the change. If kids don't have much support from parents or guardians, you can help them fill out registration forms and contact their parent to get a signature. (And this gives you a chance to build parent relationships: Win!)

**Good:** Offer some kind of academic support, whether it's open homework help time or a reading club. We divide kids up by grade groupings, and by gender for the older ones. If you're offering open homework help, be prepared for what to do with

kids who say they don't have any homework and who would just like to be loud and distract the others. (Hint: Teachers always recommend that kids read every day!)

**Good:** Figure out a clear structure, communicate the expectations well, and stick to it. Kids are coming to you after a day at school. Some program directors have found it best to have the kids sit down and do quiet work first thing. Others like to give kids a little bit of free time before they settle down. For middle schoolers, a time of debrief and connection about their day is a great idea. (Works well paired with a snack!)

**Better:** Divide kids into groups of 3-5 times at nearly all times. When things go south and feel chaotic, it's almost always when everyone's in a big group.

**Better:** Get to know families. Your program may rise and fall on this. All kids have a context – it's called their family. You will have exponentially more impact on a child if you can impact their whole family.

**Best:** Hold your program after school the day of your mid-week evening programs, invite families to come for dinner, eat

## 52 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

together with program staff and others from your church, and make it an easy transition.

**Best:** Provide safe transportation, if possible. That church van or bus sitting out in the parking lot? This is a perfect opportunity to take it for a spin and bring kids from school to your building. Your attendance will be ten times more consistent! Just make sure it's got enough seat belts and if you're transporting little ones, you may even need some booster seats depending on your state laws.

### **How to get started**

**Identify your partner school and meet with its principal and/or counselor.** Get their input on what they would like to see in an afterschool program for their kids. Find out how you might be able to work together. (See Chapter 10 for tips on building a good relationship with a partner school.)

**Gather a team at your church.** Do NOT, repeat, do NOT run a program for urban kids by yourself! Your church MUST own it, or you will just have people complaining about why their Sunday school stuff has been moved or why the kids don't treat the

folding chairs with respect. You will feel really mad at those people, and the program will fizzle out after a short time. Pray for God to lead others to join you, talk to others about WHY you are doing it, and develop a plan as you build your team. If God wants this thing to happen, he will move other people too.

## The non-negotiables

**Adult-to-student ratio:** I am going to say this so many times you're going to be tired of it. **When you're working with kids in poverty, aim for a ratio of one adult for every three kids.**

This is a sustainable ratio, meaning you will be able to handle the issues that come up with kids. If you get your program started and it feels comfortable with fewer adults, great. If you've got very high-level volunteers, that might be fine. But if you're running one adult for every ten or fifteen kids, chances are you're going to feel more like a police officer than a friend, and you will soon burn out every volunteer you have.

**Train your volunteers.** You may assume that your volunteers know what to do in various situations, but you need to make sure that everyone is on the same page about program rules, the

## 54 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

schedule, discipline, and what they're expected to do. If you don't want volunteers yelling at kids, make that crystal clear, and communicate how to address discipline issues without yelling. If you're going to divide up responsibilities, be very clear ahead of time what the expectations are. Calendars help!

Some volunteers will not instinctively develop relationships with kids, or stay engaged with the kids, so you need to build in opportunities to do that. Even the best of volunteers can “clump” – hang around talking to the other adults instead of paying attention to the kids. We all need a gentle reminder sometimes.

So get everyone on the same page before your program has started up, and then schedule regular meetings (not too many, but enough to stay in communication) to listen to volunteers' observations and suggestions, and let the group brainstorm solutions to problems that come up.

**Structure:** There's a lot of room for creativity in how you structure your program, but the important thing is that you have one and it stays consistent. Some elements to include are homework time, a Bible teaching time, play time (whether free



or in a group), and of course food, whether it's a snack or dinner or both. You could also include enrichment activities, like arts or crafts or hobbies, science experiments, sports, service projects, etc. Go with your strengths and resources!

Within your structure, give kids options whenever possible. For example, during play time you could open up a basketball court, set out board games or Legos, have an air hockey table – all with volunteers ready to play with kids. Options are healthy for kids, and a great way for them to build ownership of the program.

**Academic support:** Whether you offer homework help, true tutoring (which is different from homework help), a reading club, or just help kids set goals for themselves at school, academic support shows that you believe school matters – which in turn rubs off on your kids. Don't hesitate to check report cards. **There are basically two ways to see report cards:** You can get grades directly from the school with written parent permission on your registration form, or you can offer a reward for kids who bring their report card in. (The reward option may

result in you only seeing the good report cards, though!)

Sometimes kids need to be held accountable for what's on their report card, by someone other than a parent. For kids in poverty, failing grades may be putting them on the fast track to dropping out of high school.

**Positive family relationships:** Any opportunity you can take to build with a child's whole family is a win for that kid, not to mention mom or dad (and you!) Parents or caregivers often come in to pick up kids weary and stressed out. Learn their names. Greet them. Ask how they're doing. A listening ear, a smile, a word of encouragement for a parent can go a long way, and also help you understand the context of the kids in your program.

**Child safety:** We know that no kid's life has been changed by safety alone, but that doesn't mean that safety shouldn't be one of our top priorities. Think about it: If a child is hurt or feels unsafe in your afterschool program, you will quickly lose families, create a bad reputation, lose your effectiveness, and risk shutting down. Even more, kids are often coming from unsafe neighborhoods and sometimes even unsafe homes, so we have a

wonderful opportunity to show the Gospel through a safe environment.

In fact, our basic program rule for kids is:

### **Safe Hands, Safe Words = Safe Place**

One way to ramp up the safety level of your program is (let's say it again!) having a 1:3 adult-to-student ratio. This will help you catch situations when a child might be getting too physical. If the kids aren't being adequately supervised, and nobody sees little Johnny punch or push or threaten a smaller kid, your child safety will be inadequate.

You'll also want to make sure your transportation is safe, your activities are safe, and above all that your volunteers are safe people. But your most likely source of threat or risk to kids will be other kids who've grown up without good physical or verbal boundaries. So to that end, good discipline deserves its own section. Here are some things we've learned.

### **Beyond Crowd Control: Tips for Good Discipline**

*Discipline your children, for in that there is hope;  
do not be a willing party to their death. – Proverbs 19:18*

If you work with kids, you need to be unafraid of discipline. It's possible for adults who experienced harsh discipline as children to feel ambivalent about using it. But discipline, when practiced right, is a good and loving gift that we give to kids who lack self-control or boundaries with others. Hebrews 12 tells us that God, our loving Father, disciplines us for our good. The book of Proverbs states over and over that discipline, correction, and self-control are life-giving and hope-giving to a young person.

That being said, when you work with children in poverty, you will encounter all kinds of situations that require discipline: The kid who can't control his hands or words, the button-pusher, the pot-stirrer, the defiant kid. You may not even arrive at the program before you need to exercise your discipline muscle – things may start to go south in the church van! So know that you're going to need to have a clear action plan, and plenty of well-trained volunteers (*let's say it together – 1:3 ratio!*), to handle these situations firmly, kindly, and in a life-giving way.

**Please remember that your volunteers may all have different**

**instincts when it comes to discipline**, so it's really important to get everyone on the same page ahead of time. Here are some quick tips – feel free to use these in your trainings.

**Five Discipline Strategies to Avoid:**

1. **Ole Yeller:** We've all found ourselves doing it, but try to avoid a yelling environment. The louder you (or your volunteers) get, the louder the kids will get. Even if you're not yelling in anger, it sounds angry, and kids will either become angry themselves, or tune you out. In larger group situations, lots of teachers use a bell or a harmonica to get kids' attention, rather than yelling.
2. **Clumping:** Clumping is when two or more volunteers stand around talking to each other rather than engaging with kids. It's great that your volunteers are friends, but it won't take long before this habit spirals into a discipline issue with the kids that no one is paying attention to.
3. **Buddy-Buddy Syndrome:** When we have buddy-buddy syndrome, we want to be the kid's friend (not a bad aim)

to the point of being afraid to be firm. A kid will do or say something they're not supposed to do, while watching out of the corner of their eye for our reaction. Buddy-buddy syndrome makes us fearful of offering up the life-giving correction kids need, for fear of how they'll react in the short term.

4. **The Five-Point Lecture to Nowhere:** Sometimes a well-meaning adult will want to give a kid a long-winded lecture about the young person's attitude, behavior, how the adult walked to school uphill both ways as a kid, or the price of gas in Asia. The problem with this lecture is, the adult is probably wasting their breath and tearing down the relationship with the kid. Most of us don't like to be lectured, especially an uninvited one. Kids don't either. **The best way to teach a kid respect is not to yell at them about their lack of respect, but to show it to them and others.** Maybe – *maybe* – after you've spent a long time building a relationship with a kid and listening to them, you'll have

the opportunity to drop some wisdom bombs that will be well-received.

5. **The Ping-Pong Game:** Sometimes you'll have a defiant kid who wants to argue. The worst thing that can happen is if an adult wants to continue the argument with them, back and forth into an endless, unproductive ping-pong game. Somebody needs to be the adult and end the argument – and (*spoiler alert*) it should be the adult.

### **Seven Discipline Strategies to Try:**

1. **Pre-emptive attention:** When you know that Bobby is likely to be unruly, head off bad behavior by assigning someone to engage Bobby in a game or do an activity together. You'd be amazed what a one-on-one game of catch can do for a kid with a poor attention span.
2. **Pre-emptive job:** A similar strategy to pre-emptive attention is to give Bobby a special job: Take the attendance. Wipe down the tables. Pass out the snacks. Just make sure the assignment seems like a privilege, not a punishment.

3. Ask questions and help kids problem solve: When two kids are having an argument or problem with each other, rather than just barking at them or telling them to stop, ask each kid to tell their side, without interrupting the other. Then ask them what might be a good solution. You might also ask them to tell you what the rules are, and hopefully you've done a great job communicating the rules to the point that everyone knows them.
4. When things get unruly, keep it low-key: Things will get unruly, even if kids are just having fun! Someone will take it too far, someone else gets mad, and soon there's yelling or pushing or just chaos. This is when adults need to quietly but firmly move kids away from each other, lower their voices, look kids in the eye, and then ask questions and kindly but firmly remind them of the rules. What doesn't work is to start yelling, heightening the tension.
5. When things get tense, Separate-Listen-Pray: Maybe two kids will almost be ready to fight. You may have a child who's prone to getting violent (with all the issues kids in



poverty have encountered, this is not unusual.) We find the best strategy is to separate the parties involved into different spaces altogether, listen to hear what's happened, talk calmly and kindly, and pray with a child.

6. Practice "Unconditional Like:" Kids need to know not just that they're loved, but that they're liked. As hard as it is to say, some kids are hard to like. Pray and ask God to show you the lovable qualities in each child, so that you can show them His delight in them.
7. Drop your defenses: As an adult, discipline is never about you "winning." **If you set up a power struggle between you and a kid, you may "win" but the kid and the environment will lose.** God's discipline with us is always an invitation. Take the opportunities you can to drop your defenses: Admit your mistakes, apologize, be silly with a kid, surprise them with kindness.

### **When Explosions Happen**

From time to time you may have a child who becomes angry to the point of "explosion," becoming violent or just disrupting

what the other kids are doing. When this happens, you need to de-escalate the situation.

1. Your first priority is safety. Isolate the person (or persons) who are exploding. Make sure each child has their own separate room. Do not take them outside if they're a risk to take off running – but if they're calm enough, going for a walk together could be a good idea.
2. Give them time and space to talk. You can let them know you're available, but give them several minutes to calm down before you try to talk, or just say, "Let me know when you're ready to tell me what happened."
3. When they've calmed down, let them tell you what happened. After they tell you, you can share what you observed. Take the time to pray, talk through a solution, brainstorm how they could handle the situation the next time, and discuss any consequences.

If a child is defiant, disruptive, or dangerous to others, we try very hard to brainstorm solutions for them to stay in the program. However, sometimes it's necessary for a child to take a

week off from the program. This communicates to everyone involved that you take everyone's safety seriously.

We always make sure the child and parent both know they are welcome back after a week, that they are loved unconditionally, and that there are clear expectations for their behavior when they return. We help them understand that they are choosing to take a week off based on their consequences, and that if they choose differently they can stay and participate.

You may have observed that all of these principles and suggestions require relational attention, but if not I will circle back around say it loud and clear one more time. **In order to have a high-quality program with kids in poverty, you MUST have enough well-trained staff to deal with discipline issues wisely, thoroughly, and (when necessary) privately.** In other words – keep a 1:3 ratio of well-trained adults to kids, and you will be well on your way to a great program.

## CHAPTER 6

### Strategy #2: Summer Reading Camps

*“Camp Boost was fun. I like reading books with my friends.” – K., 1<sup>st</sup> grade girl*

*“They both have learned so much this week, and I’ve seen positive changes in both of them.” –Camp Boost parent*

**Why It Works:** Research shows that kids who do not engage in reading over the summer will experience “summer slide,” or dropping down in reading level by the time school starts. Kids in poverty are the most affected, and some experts even think that the entire achievement gap among children in poverty could be chalked up to summer slide.

**61% of children in poverty do not have children’s books in their homes.** So when their teachers send them home for the summer with the parting words, “Read every day!” that is easier for some than for others. The good news: Research also shows

that it only takes reading an average of 4-6 books over the summer for a child to maintain their reading skills. *We can do this!*

The key to making a summer reading camp work is to make it fun. Get ready to have your mind blown: **If kids enjoy reading, they'll keep reading and get better at reading!** Each of the reading clubs we've used has a fun, enrichment component. That means it's a topic that kids may not get to learn about in school, but is something kids are interested in. Enrichment also introduces them to new content and new vocabulary, while sparking their interest in learning.

### THREE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO SUMMER READING

**Kids don't have books at home**

**Parents don't set aside reading time**

**Kids don't enjoy reading**

**What Summer Reading Camp looks like:** For the past four years, we've run Camp Boost Summer Reading Clubs. We like to tell people that it's like a Vacation Bible School with a twist

## 68 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

of reading. We run it in the same format as a VBS: 5 days in a row, to maximize volunteer participation. We hold it in the morning because that's when kids learn best, and also provide free breakfast and lunch at each camp. It enables anyone in your church to have a role even if they aren't a teacher!

<p><b>Summer Reading Camp may be a good strategy for your church if:</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> You have interested teachers in your congregation (7 is ideal, but think about including retired teachers, education students, your teachers' co-workers, stay-at-home moms taking a break from teaching, or homeschooling moms)</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> You have at least 7 classrooms available, including one appropriate for preschoolers</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> You can do Summer Reading Clubs in place of VBS (unless your church is <i>really</i> gung-ho about serving kids)</li></ul>

### Do's and don'ts

DO get your professional teachers involved. Retired teachers, college-age education majors, or stay-at-home moms who used to be teachers are great candidates!

## Strategy #2: Summer Reading Camps | 69

DO use a curriculum. (You can find all of the reading club curriculum we've used for free here on the [Community Alliance for Youth's Resources page](#), developed locally by terrific folks in Wittenberg University's Education Department.)

DO give kids choices. We like to offer two choices per grade group. (K-1, 2-3, and 4-5)

DO make the clubs fun! You can amp up the fun with game breaks and fun songs, but the important thing is reading club topics that kids consider fun. Our Camp Boost clubs to date have included:

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Preschool (with different theme days)

Snacktastics (learning about, making, and eating food)

Dinosaurs

Superheroes

Top Dogs (learning about kinds of dogs, caring for a dog)

Be a Star (drama club, putting on short plays)

Fashionistas

Comic Creations

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CSI (learning about evidence, fingerprints, etc.)

Top Chefs (more advanced cooking projects)

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Don't forget, all of these clubs' curricula (and more) are available for free download on the [Community Alliance for Youth Resources page](#).

DON'T put more than 15 children in a class. 12 or less is better!

DO keep a 1:3 ratio of adults to kids, or close to it, by adding teen and adult helpers to each classroom.

DO have a great support team for registration and check in, food, supplies, copies, etc.

DO background check and train all of your volunteers.

DO read the Bible with kids. We've learned that you don't have to get too "cute" with it – just read the Bible story together from a quality children's Bible (we love the *Jesus Storybook Bible* by Sally Lloyd-Jones) and ask a few simple questions. The kids will get it!



DO have a good, clear discipline system in place, and make sure that kids understand the Camp rules.

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## **Our Camp Boost rules:**

**We make Camp Boost a safe place**

### **Safe Hands, Safe Words**

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DO arrange for community visits and hands-on learning if you can. Field trips get a little complicated, but if you can get someone to visit related to the topic (therapy dogs, a chef, actor or drama teacher, fashion merchandiser, your city's police forensics unit), that will be very memorable for the kids and spark their learning.

DO set up a parents' area with a host if you can. It's a great way to connect with families who are bringing their children. Put on a pot of coffee, and if there's money for pastries or snacks, even better. We've held short (half-hour) parent workshops on topics like stress management, family communication, and discipline. There are usually just a handful of parents who stay, but for the

ones who do, there is some wonderful conversation that happens around the table.

### How to get started

Pray and build your team! Recruit your teachers. Make a school or community connection to get the word out. (A big banner in your front yard will help.) You'll need to recruit for the following teams several months in advance:

- Teachers (experienced ones)
- Classroom assistants
- Registration/check-in team
- Food team
- Opening/closing team (if you choose to have them)
- Safety/security team
- Parents' workshop team (if you choose to have them)
- Set-up/tear-down team
- Prayer team

This sounds like a lot, but some of these roles can double up; for instance, other team members can cover set-up and tear-down if you ask everyone to take a shift.

WHAT OUR CAMP BOOST LOOKS LIKE
MON-FRI, 9:00-12:30
8:30-8:45 "Morning meeting" for teachers and volunteers (have workers' kids supervised in a separate room)
8:45 Doors open
8:45-9:00 Breakfast served (and to anyone who arrives late as opening starts)
9:00-9:30 Big group – short Bible teaching, songs
9:30-12:15 Reading clubs in classrooms
11:15-12:15 Clubs rotate in for lunch
12:15-12:30 Big group, wrap up, dismissal

Each site that we run does things just a little differently, and you should adjust things to your context. Some sites run camp for 3 hours, not 3.5. Some don't do a big group closing, and dismiss from the classrooms instead. Some keep a gym or outdoor area open and let groups come in for game/exercise time. (This is more important for younger kids – older kids were often engrossed in their classroom activity and didn't want to leave, so we made it optional.)

## The non-negotiables

**Low classroom ratios (*let's say it together: 1:3!*):** What makes Summer Reading Clubs special is the attention, individual help with reading, and love kids get, that they can't always get in a school classroom. Our seasoned teachers love the opportunity to work with children in such a small setting. Speaking of which...

**Experienced teachers:** Recruit people who love to teach. In fact, these are the people we recruit first because so much of the camp's success depends on them. They will make your reading camp great!

**Choice of themes:** We've had great success setting up the camp so that each child (except for preschool) has two clubs to choose from. A kid's interest is a great starting place for learning! To make this possible with staffing, we group multiple grades together: K-1, 2-3, and 4-5.

**Offer breakfast (if held in the morning):** While some kids will arrive at camp having eaten breakfast, if you're working with kids in poverty, many will not. From the beginning we didn't want teachers trying to teach hungry kids, so every child has the

opportunity to eat a simple breakfast when they get to our summer reading camps.

**Offer lunch if possible:** Again, if you're working with kids in poverty, they may not be getting a nutritious lunch in the summertime. And for some kids, this may be the only opportunity they have to eat with adults around a table. Make the most of it!

**People who love kids:** This sounds like a no-brainer, but make sure the people you recruit love kids! My friend (and a Camp Boost director) Ros says, "I want my people to be the happiest people in the room. If you're going to show up with your grumpy face on, you need to find another ministry to serve in."

## RESOURCES:

Free activities for download at [www.crushtheodds.org](http://www.crushtheodds.org)

## CHAPTER 7

### Strategy #3: Middle school gender-specific afterschool programs

*“GirlPower helped me learn that people care about me, I do matter, I am not alone.” –K., 8<sup>th</sup> grade girl*

*“Manpower helped me have more confidence.” –M., 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy*

**Why it works:** If you’ve worked with middle schoolers for very long, you may notice that there is a big, big difference between working with boys and girls separately versus together. We’ve discovered there is enormous value in creating completely separate programs for middle school boys and girls. For middle school guys, having a “guys-only” space with positive role models who are paying attention to them is an incredibly rare environment. Particularly for guys who don’t have positive father figures (which is many of our kids in poverty), this type of space is valuable and treasured. I often tell others that so many young teenage guys in our city are just lost: They want to be

significant, but they really don't know what that looks like or how to get there.

For the girls, a girls-only space becomes a place to be real, to talk about what's going on in their lives, and to exercise without worrying about how they look in front of the guys. For both, it means spending time with positive role models who care about them.

What our GirlPower and Manpower programs look like:

- Meet weekly after school for about two hours
- Include a healthy snack – bonus points if you make the snack together (cooking skills!) Our girls especially enjoy this.
- Time for homework and homework help

**For the guys:** The guys' routine has been pretty simple – and they like it that way. Our Manpower guys have the option for homework help, they have a snack, they play basketball together, and then read from a book and have small group discussion. For your small group content, we love the book “Boys Won't Be Boys” by Tim Brown and the book of Proverbs

(which, after all, was written for a young man.) There are also a whole host of Youtube videos out there, including the website “I Am Second,” which tell real-life stories and can spur great discussion. If you have the option, service projects are another great idea to make a difference, build community, and help young men realize they have something to offer. They might even learn some valuable skills when you serve together.

**For the girls:** We have a whole toolkit of activities we’ve developed to get girls to talk, build empathy, and support each other. The best activities encourage listening and relationship-building, sometimes create laughter, and always give everyone a chance to share what’s going on in their life, whether it’s something big or small. The key word here (in case you haven’t noticed) is listening. Don’t just talk at girls – no matter how good your advice is. Let them talk, respond to them, get to know them, and you will find times and places to speak into their lives.

One regular, weekly component of our GirlPower program is journaling. We buy simple composition notebooks, which the girls decorate. Each week they have the opportunity to write



about what's going on their lives. When they're done writing, they leave their journals in one of two piles: One pile to stay private, and one pile to have a leader read what they wrote and write back. (We think this awesome idea came from the movie, *Freedom Writers*. But now it's a GirlPower tradition.) The girls nearly always want a leader to read and write back – often talking about serious things they don't want to say in front of the group.

**GirlPower or Manpower may be a good strategy for your church if:**

- You can find 3-5 volunteers to invest in them each week (We've made a great connection with a local university – college students are fantastic for this kind of ministry.)
- You can forge a good partnership with an area middle school, or if you have plenty of middle schoolers in your neighborhood

**RESOURCES:**

*Boys Won't Be Boys*, Tim Brown (Xulon Press, 2013)

Free activities for download at [www.crushtheodds.org](http://www.crushtheodds.org)

## CHAPTER 8

### Strategy #4: Entrepreneurship Programs

*“Biz Ba\$ics helped me learn to have a better attitude and never give up.” –N., 8<sup>th</sup> grade boy*

*“Biz Ba\$ics helped me think of ways to make money in a legal and positive way.” –S., 8<sup>th</sup> grade girl*

**Why it works:** We started an afterschool entrepreneurship program for middle schoolers because we wanted to support our middle school kids academically. Middle school is a time when many kids in poverty stop caring about school, realize that school is “not their thing,” or suddenly lose their motivation to do homework. I have looked at many middle school kids’ report cards and let me tell you, they are usually not pretty.

However, middle school is also a critical age because kids are suddenly more independent: They’re often walking home and choosing what they want to do after school, not just doing whatever a parent has signed them up for. So your afterschool

program, if you hope to draw middle schoolers to it, had better be engaging and spark their interest. We often say that you can't just have open your doors for "homework hour" and expect middle school kids to show up. There's got to be a hook.

For some kids, that hook may be the opportunity to earn money. When we first started our Biz Ba\$ics Entrepreneurship Program a few years ago, before the program had even started, kids at the middle school were calling it the "Money Club." Suddenly kids had motivation for showing up to an afterschool program. The kids themselves came up with an attendance policy: Every excused absence would cost you \$1 of profit from group sales; every unexcused absence would cost you \$2. The kids may have been harder on themselves than the adults would have been! But let's face it, that kind of consequence is real life, and if kids are learning now that attendance matters, that will be a great asset as they move into employment.

Beyond just getting kids to attend, teaching basic business and job skills is a vital asset for kids. We believe that even in poor neighborhoods – and maybe especially in poor

neighborhoods – the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well.

When an entrepreneurial person doesn't see an opportunity to make money, maybe because jobs aren't available in their neighborhood, they create an opportunity. Unfortunately, that opportunity is sometimes selling drugs, or theft. But we believe that by learning how to earn money in a legal, positive way, kids are finding hope and a way out of poverty that is not destructive to themselves, their families, and their neighborhoods.

### **Do's and don'ts**

DO let the kids keep the money they earn. This is vital!

DO let the kids make mistakes and learn – you can give them your best guidance, but ultimately they need to make their own decisions, even if it costs them. That's how business works.

DO help them reflect on what they've learned and what they'll do differently.

DO involve their parents or guardians in their business plan.

They might have a great skill to teach their kid, or have a relative or resource you don't know about.

DO think about skills that kids can continue to use after they leave the program, and possibly market in their own neighborhoods. This creates sustainable opportunities that aren't limited to their program involvement.

## How to get started

As with all of these ideas, step number one is to get your church on board and recruit a team.

**Curriculum resources:** We like the TREP\$ curriculum created by some teachers in New Jersey. You can order the kit online for about \$600. It's really well-written and once you buy the kit, you'll just need to replace the workbooks.

Junior Achievement also has entrepreneurship curriculum: "It's My Business" is a good fit for 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade kids, and "It's My Company" works well for 9<sup>th</sup> grade or older kids. Depending on your local JA representation, you may be able to get their curriculum for free. Both of these curriculum sets are colorful and appealing to kids.

Once kids are working on projects, they'll be doing a lot of hands-on learning (the best kind of learning!)

You can also look for other entrepreneurship curricula online – it seems to be a hot commodity right now, so you may stumble upon something you like better.

**Guest speakers and field trips:** It's a great idea to bring in guest speakers who have experience running a business. They can help kids with topics like customer service, attitude, interpersonal skills, sales presentations, budgeting, and so on. Research shows that communication is the #1 skill that young people need (and are lacking) to succeed in the workforce, so the more you can work on this, the better!

**Marketplace:** We've chosen to have the kids sell a fall product together (in our case, we've worked with a local baker and a local potato chip company.) In the spring, each kid chooses their own product – we've seen everything from homemade cupcakes, Mexican bottled sodas, bags of candy, handmade soaps, and more. Last year's top seller was a young woman with

a sewing machine who sewed small pillows out of bandannas – she sold all but two of her pillows and made well over \$100!

As kids make products for a marketplace, this is also a great opportunity for members of your church to come in and teach a skill or craft that kids can turn around and make to sell.

## RESOURCES:

TREPS\$ Entrepreneurship Curriculum, [www.trepsed.com](http://www.trepsed.com)

Junior Achievement, “It’s My Business” or “It’s My Company” curriculum

Free resources for download at [www.crushtheodds.org](http://www.crushtheodds.org)

## CHAPTER 9

### Strategy #5: Mentoring

*“I like having a mentor because we make each other laugh, and I get to go new places and have fun.” –B., 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy*

*Mentored youth are 46% less likely than their peers to use illegal drugs. (Public/Private Ventures research)*

**Why It Works:** There are a several reasons why a mentoring program is a great idea.

**Reason #1:** You can start with as little as one adult and one kid.

**Reason #2:** There’s been all kinds of research done about mentoring, showing that it significantly improves outcomes like high school graduation, staying off drugs and alcohol, and healthy relationships.

**Reason #3:** Unlike other age-based programs, it can follow the young person as long as he/she and their mentee want to



continue. At the time I'm writing, our longest mentor match is coming up on 5 years! That kind of long-term, consistent relationship has a tremendous impact on a kid's life.

**Reason #4:** Some people who are terrified by a loud, large group of kids, would be great at sitting down and talking with a kid one-on-one.

Mentoring takes a lot of work on the front end, but once you get a match up and running successfully, it can be one of the simplest and most fruitful youth development strategies out there.

## **Do's and don'ts**

While mentoring is one of the most effective, long-lasting programs you can do for kids, it's also one of the highest-risk. So my recommendation is to do it, but pay the highest attention to who you are allowing to mentor.

**DO:** Take your time in screening and training. We find it usually takes about 3 months from the time a mentor says they're interested until the time we match them.

DO: Require your volunteers to always go to a public place with their mentee. We don't allow mentors and mentees in someone's home unless another adult is present. You're protecting not only the mentee's safety, but also the mentor from possible accusations. (See the "Policies for Safe Mentoring" table.)

DO: Be selective. We require all mentors to complete a full FBI/BCI background check, a Motor Vehicle Records request if they'll be driving the student, as well as submit three references (not family members.) Do your homework! Check references! Even if you know the person, you must, must, MUST go through all the steps.

## POLICIES FOR SAFE MENTORING

Require a fingerprinting BCI/FBI background check

Require and check three non-family references

Require a MVR check for any mentor who will be driving their mentee

Mentors and mentees should always go to a public place where they are visible to others

Only hang out at a house if another adult is

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present

When transporting a student, the mentor should make a quick phone call or text to let someone else know when they leave/arrive at a destination

Only match mentors/mentees of the same gender

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DO: Sit down with the student and their family to thoroughly explain the program and expectations.

DO NOT: Be afraid to decline a mentor that you think would not be the right fit. If references are putting up red flags, or if you have hesitations about the person's character, past, or commitment, you can gently say no. As awkward and hard as that conversation is, it's a million times better than putting someone in a position where they might be a poor mentor to a child. If you are unsure about whether someone would make a good mentor, have them work in a supervised ministry with kids for a while until you can get a good gauge.

DO: Ask for a minimum one-year commitment from both mentor and mentee. (And the mentee's family.) Research has

shown that the longer the match, the better the outcome; and conversely, that matches under six months can actually do more harm than good.

## How to get started

Steps to make a mentor match:

1. Recruit the mentor: Ask people you know, and get them to ask people they know. You want to be sure you are recruiting trustworthy, committed people.
2. Mentor completes mentoring application, including three references: You'll want to ask for basic information, as well as questions about their interests and experience, why they want to be a mentor, and possibly their spiritual beliefs.
3. Mentor completes training: Our friends at One2One Mentoring here in Springfield have put together a great handbook that they're glad to share. You can out how to get the handbook on our website, [www.crushtheodds.org](http://www.crushtheodds.org).

4. Recruit mentee; conduct mentee/family interview: There may be a young person you know in your church, or you may be able to contact a school counselor or teacher for a family referral. When you sit down with the family, be sure to explain exactly what mentoring is and isn't. You'll want to go over how often they'll meet, the expectations of the student (to keep up their commitment to the relationship), explain how you select your mentors, and generally get to know the family better.
5. Mentor completes background check and Motor Vehicles Record check (MVR)
6. Mentoring supervisor checks all references
7. If all is clear, mentor and mentee are matched! Hold a match meeting, where mentor, mentee, and family introduce themselves, get to know each other, and set up a regular time to meet.

## Supporting a Mentor Match

We support our mentors with regular phone call check-ins on the following schedule:

## 92 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

First four weeks of match – one call or check-in per week

After first four weeks – one call or check-in per month

During the check-in (on the phone or in person), simply ask how things are going, and then listen for how often the mentor and mentee met, what activities they did, and how the relationship seems to be developing. We also listen for any issues that the mentee may be having, and help the mentor “troubleshoot.” That could be anything from difficulties in school or poor school attendance, family trouble or suspicion of abuse, or lack of other healthy activities. It helps to be aware of various resources in your community, like the homeless shelter, United Way referral, school counselors, and so on. You never know when a family you serve will need their help!

We also listen for basic needs we can help with – perhaps a student’s bike was stolen and they don’t have a way to school, or they want to attend basketball camp, or they need to find a job. We will often put the word out through our networks (this is where your church body is a great resource!), and generally can help in supportive ways. (But see “A word about gifts and

material help” at the end of this chapter.) Your goal is not to take over the mentor’s problem-solving abilities, but to listen for where he or she needs help, and offer what you can.

Above all, when supporting a mentor match, you want to encourage! I often find myself telling a mentor, “Keep doing what you’re doing. Even when it seems like nothing is happening, you have no idea what it means to this kid that you’re showing up every week.”

Sometimes a match needs to end. In my experience, this is usually when a mentee loses interest (indicated by not returning the mentor’s phone calls or texts). Sometimes it can happen when the mentor’s situation changes. In all cases, try to encourage continuing for at least one year, but if it’s clear that the match needs to end, reassure both mentor and mentee that that’s OK. If either mentor or mentee would like to be re-matched with someone new, we try to do that; but if that person was not upholding their commitment in the previous match, we do not. When possible, an “exit interview” is a great idea – sit down with mentor and mentee about what they both gained from

the relationship, and leave the door open for them to continue to have an informal relationship.

### **A word about gifts and material help:**

Mentoring, more than other programs I've described, opens the door for material gifts and help. It's very difficult when someone of material means is helping a student whose family has very little, not to want to give material help: The mentee's family is short on rent and is about to be evicted. Their car breaks down. There's no money for Christmas gifts. All of these seem like situations where anyone with compassion would want to give assistance, and sometimes it may be the right thing to do. You may give cheerfully the first time or two that these situations come up, only to realize it's a pattern that will continue year after year. **Anytime we give a material handout, it carries the risk of changing the focus from the mentoring relationship to monetary assistance.**

Here is a small example that gives a window of insight. A friend I know, who mentored a younger child in a school, used to bring a donut each week for her mentee – a simple gift just to



delight the little girl. However, one week she didn't have time to stop for a donut, and suddenly the child was upset. My friend realized that in this little girl's mind, the donut had taken on more importance than their relationship and spending time together. Children in particular can be such concrete thinkers that the donut becomes an expectation, and the lack of a donut means that they are not loved anymore. If this confusion can take place over a donut, imagine what can happen with larger, extravagant gifts.

Some mentoring programs forbid mentors from giving any kind of material help. My friend Jackie Mounts, who does our mentor training, always says that we don't want to stop a mentor from doing something God is leading them to do; however, mentors need to exercise much caution in giving material gifts or help. My word of advice to mentors is: *Always be a mentor first.* Your biggest priority needs to be on being a consistent, relational presence for a young person, not to "rescue" their family.

I cannot give you all the answers of how to handle this well. I only know enough to tell you to use much caution, and not to give things or money out of guilt.

These are just a few of the risks in giving gifts and material assistance:

- The gift becomes an expectation.
- The relationship dynamic changes: You become a benefactor, not a mentor.
- Other siblings may feel left out if you give gifts to one child but not all.
- You create a feeling of shame and dependence in the family, because they can't provide what you do.
- You enable a family in poverty to depend on handouts, by doing something they should be able to do for themselves.

**What you can do instead:** Jesus never told us it was OK to turn away from the poor – that's why you're doing this work in the first place. If your church already has policies in place about how and whom they'll help materially, lean on those. If you don't have policies, now is a great time to develop them. (And if you haven't read the book *When Helping Hurts* yet, it's a great place to start.)

Help and support the family in doing what they need to do for themselves. Do they need to go to the housing office, Job & Family Services, or the school office? Maybe the mentor or someone else from your church can help with a ride, or with paperwork. Help a young person find odd jobs to earn money. A little bit of support can go a long way to help a person in poverty take these steps, and then you will have helped them find the ability to stand on their own and most likely some dignity as well.

If you give gifts to your mentee, make them small but meaningful. Extravagant gifts feel good for a moment but generally are not healthy.

Show hospitality. Maybe you'll want to have the family over to your home, or do an activity together.

Pass along resources that may not come out of your pocket. A friend is giving away a bike, or hand-me-down clothes, and you ask the mentee's parent if they could use it. These kinds of gifts are just "good neighbor" gifts, not extravagant handouts.

## RESOURCES:

Sample forms (mentee interview form, mentor application, etc.) available on SCYM's website: [www.crushtheodds.org](http://www.crushtheodds.org)

## CHAPTER 10

### How to Partner Well with Your School

If you live near a high-poverty school building, whether an elementary, middle, or high school, it's a great idea to reach out as a church and learn how you can serve. Sure, every school can use support for its students; but in a high-poverty building, a large number of its students may be showing up without adequate school supplies, coats or gloves in the wintertime, or good nutrition out of school time. Even more challenging than the material needs they face, many students may be showing up without adequate attention, affection, healthy boundaries, or nurturing at home.

For school staff, the struggle to help these kids learn and make progress every day, when their basic needs may not be met, is real and overwhelming. Many teachers and administrators

## 100 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

worry about what their students are going home to after school: Do they have a safe, quiet place to do their homework? Will someone listen to them talk about their day? Will they get the chance to explore and learn from extracurricular opportunities like sports or the arts, the way that higher-income students do, or will their extracurriculars be TV, video games, and the streets?

For all of these reasons, we have never met an administrator at a high-poverty school building who refuses help from an outside organization – even a faith-based one. On the contrary, in our experience the response has always been, “Please come and help our kids.”

So when it comes to building relationships with high-poverty schools, I encourage you to go for it. Let me add to that encouragement a few words of advice that will help you have a healthy, fruitful relationship with your school:

- 1) Please respect the school’s boundaries about sharing your faith during school hours. We all want kids to hear the Gospel, but why push the envelope when you freely have that opportunity after school hours? We do not live in North Korea.

(Unless you do live in North Korea. Then, my bad.) We can (and should) connect with kids and their families freely in other settings. Crossing that boundary during school hours means you may cut off your own future relationship with the school, as well as others' relationships. Instead, put the emphasis on building a trusting relationship with your school.

2) Come with a heart to serve kids and schools and help them thrive. Please don't come out of a motivation to grow your own church, ministry, or program. That might mean some careful self-examination, not just for the person leading the charge but for the entire church leadership. Otherwise, over time you will run into the question, "But what is this doing for our church?" A better question to ask (in my opinion) is, "What is this doing for the Kingdom and for our community?"

3) Find out what the school really needs – and then do that. If they need extra school supplies, hold a school supplies drive. If they need classroom volunteers, find a few folks to go during lunchtime. The worst thing we can do is assume what the school needs, or just do what we want to do, and miss the school's real

need in the process. The key is to have conversations with the people you are serving before you try to meet their needs. And while we're on the subject of conversations ...

4) If you're starting a program for the school's kids (and I hope you realize by now, I think that's a great idea!) get the school's input before you do. Maybe their kids need help with a specific area. Maybe the school can lend support in ways you couldn't have guessed (like teacher communication, or transportation, or who knows). But either way, your efforts to dialogue and seek input before you start will go a long way in strengthening your relationship.

5) School administrators (especially in high-poverty buildings) are busy, busy people who are constantly putting out fires. You are probably about 37<sup>th</sup> or lower on their list of priorities for the day. Be prepared to call multiple times, reschedule meetings, or remind them of who you are every time you see them. Be prepared to perhaps not even be trusted or respected at first – your school administrator may have been burned by other outside organizations who did not follow



through on promises or did not do good work, and they will assume the same of you until you prove otherwise. Just be persistent, be kind, and be supportive. You may be the only person that day who is not coming at them with a problem or a demand, so take the time to encourage and speak a kind word.

## RESOURCES:

*Educating All God's Children*, Nicole Baker Fulgham (Baker 2013)

*The Last Dropout: Stop the Epidemic*, Bill Milliken (Hay House, 2007)

## CHAPTER 11

### Tips and Ideas for Building Relationships with Kids in Poverty

Here are some ideas we've accumulated by trial and error through the years, for building good relationships with kids in poverty. Some of this material is in other parts of the book. (But maybe you skipped ahead to this chapter and it'll all be new.

That's cool too.)

#### **Just show up**

We tell our volunteers over and over, 90% of what we do is showing up. For kids in poverty, especially older ones, it can take a long time to build trust. They may have had many people come in and out of their lives. They may have had many people overpromise and underdeliver. Just show up, show up

consistently, and keep showing up for as long it takes until you have earned a kid's trust.

## Examine your foundations

This one is tough, because motives are hard. But it's important to examine your own foundational motives for building relationships with kids. Here are a few possible motives that lurk beneath the surface when we work with kids in poverty:

- “These kids need me”
- “I can fix this kid”
- “I like kids”
- “I want to make a difference”
- “I feel sorry for these kids”
- “I feel good when I work with kids”
- “I feel good when kids like me”
- “I can be the one to rescue this kid”

Some of these motives sound good at first. (What's wrong with liking kids or making a difference?) Some have a grain of truth. (These kids *do* need you to be consistent.) Some may be fine as a starting point. Others are motives we would not say out

## 106 | 5 Creative Strategies for Churches to Help Kids in Poverty

loud, but if we look closely at ourselves, they may be present in our hearts and minds somewhere, and may pop up for a long time.

There is one and only one motive that will sustain your work with kids for the long haul: **We love because He first loved us. (I John 4:19)** And because we love, we're willing to work for justice in these kids' lives.

Any other motive, over time, will lead to discouragement when kids don't turn out the way we had hoped; possibly unhealthy relationships with kids, ourselves, and the Lord; and eventually, burnout.

### **Respond with respect, no matter what**

Kids can be critical – especially ones who have a lot of reasons to be cynical about adults. They may treat us indifferently for a while. They may even act in a way that seems disrespectful.

Chances are, they are testing us.

It's vital in these moments – especially in these moments – that we respond with respect. We can be direct and truthful with

a belligerent kid, but we must always do it in a way that communicates their value and preserves their dignity.

My friend Jackie Mounts, who has worked with court-involved kids for many years, tells a story of a young man she has always remembered. Coming because of a court mandate, teens were not always very enthusiastic to be in her program, and he was no exception. Week after week she would greet him respectfully and genuinely, and he would shrug it off, then act uninterested in the rest of the program until it was over.

But one week he didn't show up, and then the next. The following week when he walked in, Jackie greeted him warmly and told him she had missed him. His response floored her: "I've been coming here high every week. Because of you I realized I needed to go to rehab. You were the only person who really cared about me."

Jackie was astonished by what her simple, respectful greeting had communicated to him. She never forgot the lesson of how important it is to respond with respect, no matter what.

## If it's important to them, it's important to you

Sometimes it's easy to dismiss something that a kid is upset about:

“Oh, it'll be fine.”

“He/she probably didn't mean it.”

“It's not a big deal.”

To the kid who is feeling emotional about a situation, it *is* a big deal, and it's important not to dismiss their feelings. A better strategy is to reflect what you hear them saying, then help them talk it out and process the situation. Maybe as they talk, they will realize themselves that it's really not a big deal – but they will feel valued and heard along the way.

## Casually push back

Kids will say all kinds of stuff to you, sometimes throwing something shocking out to see how you'll react. It's important not to overreact when they do. It's also important not to ignore it.

Maybe a kid says, “I hate my family.” Maybe they even say it under their breath, so you’re not sure if they wanted you to hear it.

What you don’t want to do is overreact, raise your voice, start an argument, or lecture. “HATE?!? You should never say that about your family!” Suddenly you’ve shifted from a conversation to a battleground, I’m-right-you’re-wrong mode that will shut down dialogue pretty quickly.

Here’s a great question to use instead: “What do you mean by that?” And tone is important here: Not “WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?” with the accompanying “What is wrong with you?” face. Just a calm, curious question. And then listen hard in the conversation that unfolds.

For younger kids who may be testing out language or ideas or things that are a little edgy, it’s OK to push back and challenge them. Sometimes they’re doing it just to see if you notice – and you should. Just don’t challenge in a way that feels disrespectful to them or shuts down conversation. Most of the time you can do it with a smile on your face, and a gentle “Do

you really think that's a good idea?" and they will smile along with you.

Disclaimer: Casual push-backs are best done in an individual setting, not in front of a group of peers!

### **Treat them as they are – in God's eyes**

I asked my colleague Tyler Worley, who works with middle school boys and elementary school children, to guest-write this section:

“When I explain to guys constantly in detention at school, who have no self-esteem and are always being told they are bad kids, that I think they are great leaders in their school and community, they look at me funny. In a lot of cases they argue with me and try their best to convince me of how *not* special and bad they are.

“I will see them get in trouble and do something wrong and then look at me, expecting me to change my mind about them and treat them differently. They soon they find that I am



unwilling to change my opinion about them and they become even more confused, yet curious as to why I treat them this way.

“I don’t ignore their problems or pretend that they don’t exist. Rather, I help them address these issues in a way that identifies them as a great leader instead a bad kid.

“The key to why God called Gideon a mighty man of valor wasn’t based on Gideon’s report card or reputation. It was revealed in what He told him immediately before: "THE LORD IS WITH YOU!"

“As followers of Jesus, God has granted us the great privilege of helping others open the door of their hearts, take hold of God’s gift that He shipped to the front porch of their heart, and bring it inside, read the instructions, and enjoy it to the fullest!”

### **One last word of encouragement**

There are a lot of reasons not to attempt to work with kids in poverty. You might not be good enough. You might get it wrong. You might get hurt. You might see a kid go down a destructive path despite all your best efforts.

File this in the brutally honest category: There's a good chance all those "mights" will really happen. Those are real possibilities. We might not have what it takes to help a kid. In our best intentions we might hurt someone. We might invest years into a kid only to watch them crash and burn.

But nowhere in Scripture do I find a place where God lets His people off the hook because what He's calling them to is hard. In fact, that's kind of where He specializes: those situations where we know we're not good enough, and the problem is too big for us to fix. He really delights in taking over those situations.

I'm also continually reminded that God uses the simple things that His people offer up in faith: A rod. A jar of oil. Loaves and fish.

My observation, as we work with kids in poverty, is that it's the simple things we offer in faith that matter most. A smile. A conversation. A question. Our faithful commitment. Reading a book. Attention. These things, offered consistently in time to

children and youth, have enormous power, far more than it would appear on the surface.

My prayer of blessing over you: May the Lord encourage, strengthen, and fill you with everything you need as you and your church seek out the children in poverty in your community. May you be an instrument to help those children reach their God-given potential and rise to their fullest height. And may their lives become a channel of restoration for their families, their neighborhoods, and their cities. Amen.