

*Counseling  
Children  
through the  
World of Play*



*Counseling  
Children*  
THROUGH THE  
*World*  
OF *Play*

**DANIEL S. SWEENEY, PH.D.**

*Foreword by Dr. Garry L. Landreth*

*Wipf and Stock Publishers*  
EUGENE, OREGON

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Photo credits: Jonathan Reynolds

Designed by Beth Sparkman

Edited by Lynn Vanderzalm

Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 West 8th Avenue, Suite 3  
Eugene, Oregon 97401

Counseling Children Through the World of Play  
By Sweeney, Daniel S.  
Copyright©1997 Sweeney, Daniel S.  
ISBN: 1-57910-654-4  
Publication date: May, 2001  
Previously published by Tyndale House Publishers, 1997.

For Marla—  
God has given me  
a great gift in you.  
You are the wind  
beneath my wings.  
*Isaiah 40:31*



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# FOREWORD

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Who will help the children? And how can children be helped if they are not understood? Someone must step forward and begin the process of awakening the Christian community to the unique needs of children and the dynamics of the way they communicate those needs through play. Children are persons created by God. Most church staff members and mental health professionals readily acknowledge that people below a certain age or height are indeed children, but few know how to communicate with the person of the child. The fact that an individual is only five years old does not in any way make that individual any less a person. And that person (child) is just as deserving of respect, recognition, affirmation, understanding, genuineness, and the right to be listened to as any adult person.

Daniel Sweeney has accepted the challenge, stepped forward, and provided penetrating and perceptive insight into the world of children. I encourage you to let go of previously held views and limited expectations of children and allow the pages of this book to take you on a journey into the lives of children. Yes, they are children, but they are much more! They are God's creation—his best! To respond to children as anything less than God's best creation is to inhibit and interfere with God's intended purpose for children. Can a Christian parent, a committed church staff member, a caring teacher, a loving day-care worker, a spiritual choir leader, a Sunday school teacher interfere with God's plan for a child? Absolutely! And that person may not even be aware of having done so. When adults are not sensitive and appropriately responsive to the inner

person God has created in children, then God's purpose for the child may be stifled for that moment.

Play is the most natural thing children do, and if adults want to make significant emotional contact with children, they must understand the meaningful messages in children's play. Play is not simply play. It is the child's way of communicating that which cannot be verbalized because words are simply inadequate. If we are to be helpful to children, we must be willing to go to their level, see what they see, experience what they experience, feel what they feel, and wonder as they wonder. This can be done only by entering into their world of play. Only then will we be in contact with the inner world of the child.

Daniel not only tells the reader how to make this kind of significant contact, he skillfully shows you, in simple language, how to engage in the process of being with children and communicating with them on their level. This book will change what you do with children.

God has given us an awesome responsibility to nurture and develop the children he has placed in relationships with us. The pages of this book open the door to the inner world of children and provide a haunting reminder of missed opportunities to respond to children in more developmentally facilitative ways. Each one of us enjoyed playing long before we learned how to sit still and work. I believe God has a purpose in that. It was preparation for how we should be communicating with and relating to children. Children speak volumes in their play. This book will help you develop and utilize the play language of children to help them grow in ways God intended. This is a very practical book, containing information that can be immediately applied in relationships with children in homes, counseling, classrooms, and church programs.

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Regents Professor and Director  
Center for Play Therapy  
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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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When I first began writing this book, I was convinced that the Christian counseling community needed a book like this. I believed that I had something to communicate, but I was not sure that I could do it. I deeply appreciate those who believed in me even when I did not believe in myself.

When all is said and done, my accomplishments, degrees, and publications do not define who I am as a person. Being a husband and father and being a child of God are the truly meaningful aspects of my life. I all too often forget that being a husband and parent is more important than such temporal things as getting published. I am so grateful to my wife, Marla, for her patience, tolerance, understanding, and encouragement. You are truly beautiful. My children—Jessica, Michele, Renata, and Josiah—are incredible. Thank you for tolerating the many hours that Daddy spent in the “computer room.” I cannot express with words what being your father means to me.

What can I say about Dr. Garry Landreth? He has inspired me just as he has inspired thousands. I have learned so much from just being around him. His work is more than amazing; it is anointed. His name is mentioned many times in this book; I believe he is a pioneer in his writings and thoughts on children and play therapy. Garry, your love for the world of children and for your family and friends (I feel privileged to be numbered among them) is so special. I won't let the fire die.

My appreciation goes to Dr. Gary Collins and the American Association of Christian Counselors. Gary initiated my involvement in this AACC Counseling Library. Many people have helped

me in the various stages of writing and reviewing the manuscript for this book. My thanks to Dr. Garry Landreth, Dr. Linda Homeyer, Dr. Gary Kirksey, Mrs. Mary Mock, Dr. Paul Warren, Dr. Angela Sabates, Dr. Grant Martin, Dr. Lee Carter, and my wife, Marla. Your suggestions and support were great. Dr. Ross Tatum did a wonderful job in writing with me the chapter about medications. A special thanks to Keith Wall, whose editing and suggestions (and patience) were invaluable.

Many thanks go to Lynn Vanderzalm, my editor at Tyndale. I have learned so much about writing, editing, and publishing. Apart from deadlines (I am not sure I met a single one!), I actually enjoyed much of the process. Your work has been wonderful!

The photographs in the book are of volunteers and not of clients. My thanks to my own family and friends for your willingness to contribute. I also greatly appreciate those organizations that have provided permission for various materials to be reprinted.

I have felt so supported by my friends at the Center for Play Therapy and my “family” at Newchurch Christian Fellowship. Thank you, Larry Ford and Kelly Elliott, for everything.

Most important, I must acknowledge and thank the Giver of life, who has sustained me and my family through the writing of this book and the recent years, which have been so rough. My words and my writing are so incomplete and imperfect. Yet God has been so faithful. He truly uses the weak to accomplish his purposes. I pray that God will use this book to touch people and help children.

## WHO WILL SAVE THE CHILDREN?

*Randy Stonehill*

Cry for all the innocent ones  
Born into a world that's lost its heart,  
For those who never learn to dream  
Because their hope is crushed before they can start.  
And we shake our fists at the air  
And say, "If God is love, how can this be fair?"

But we are His hands, we are His voice,  
We are the ones who must make the choice.  
And if it isn't now, tell me when?  
If it isn't you, then tell me,  
Who will save the children?  
Who will save the children?

We count our blessings one by one,  
Yet we have forgotten how to give.  
It seems that we don't want to face  
All the hungry and homeless who struggle to live.  
But heaven is watching tonight,  
Tugging at our hearts to do what's right.

And we are His hands, we are His voice,  
We are the ones who must make the choice.  
And if it isn't you, then tell me,  
Who will save the children?  
Who will save the children?

As we observe them through our TV screens,  
They seem so distant and unreal.  
But they bleed like we bleed, and they feel what we feel.  
Oh, save the children.  
Save the children.

Now we decide that nothing can change  
And throw up our hands in numb despair.  
And we lose a piece of our souls  
By teaching ourselves just how not to care.  
But Christ would have gone to the cross  
Just to save one child from being lost.

And we are His hands, we are His voice,  
We are the ones who must make the choice.  
And it must be now, there's no time to waste.  
It must be you, no one can take your place.  
Can't you see that only we can save the children?  
Save the children.  
Save the children.  
Please save the children.

*Randy Stonehill, used by permission. © 1984*

# INTRODUCTION

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When I began to take my relationship to the Lord seriously during my first year of college, I decided to serve in the children's ministry at church. I worked with a class of two- and three-year-olds; three of us in charge of thirty-five bundles of energy. It was insane. But I loved it! As I grew older, however, I became more "sophisticated" and took on greater responsibilities in the church. I didn't have time for children's ministry. Years later, I wondered how I ever had the patience to work with such an unruly and undisciplined population. I thought, *I must have been nuts. How could I have enjoyed serving that age group?*

It's not surprising, then, that when I first became a counselor, I never intended to work with children. I found so many fascinating and stimulating areas of counseling and psychology. I was being challenged by the people who came to me for counseling at my church. I felt I must get further training, which I did—but not with children! That was someone else's job! I had my eyes on bigger and better areas of ministry and vocation.

Now, years later, as I focus on this book and the importance of ministering to and counseling children, I am challenged to acknowledge my former attitude. I had loved working with children when I first became a Christian. I could even say it was one of my "first loves." My hope and prayer is that for many of you reading this book, working with hurting children is indeed a love and a calling. Undoubtedly, loving and ministering to children are close to the heart of the Father.

I did return to my first love—working with children—as a pastoral counselor with a local church. I fumbled my way through

several years until I began to work in the area of foster care and residential treatment. I was still using cognitive approaches (“talk therapy”), but I was beginning to employ some games and art-therapy techniques. I was more successful but still did not feel that I was reaching my child clients. I spent a few years working in the area of forensic psychology, providing crisis-counseling services for psychiatrically impaired incarcerated adults. This experience solidified my belief that early childhood intervention could circumvent some of the adult problems I was encountering. Returning to the field of therapeutic foster care, I stumbled on play therapy as an approach for treating children. I was hooked!

In some ways, it was such a simple concept that I wasn’t sure how it worked—using play as a means to communicate with children. The idea that children do not have the verbal and cognitive skills that adults have and therefore do not communicate in the same way as adults made sense to me. If the natural medium of communication for children is play, then it must follow that counseling should focus on children’s communication medium and be at their level instead of forcing them to rise to an adult level. Could it be that using adult counseling techniques with children was one of those square-peg-in-a-round-hole things?

I strongly believe in working with children by entering their world (the world of play) rather than forcing them to enter mine (the world of thought and talk). You know, of course, from the title that this book focuses on using play as a means of touching and healing the wounded child. I will go into greater detail about this concept as the book unfolds, but let me give an example of how children speak through play.

Several years ago, my daughter Michele was going through a difficult stage and was being a challenge at home. This was, naturally, a concern to me—after all, it wouldn’t do for the daughter of a therapist and church counselor to have such troubles! We had recently had another child, which meant Michele had lost her baby position. As you might expect, she was feeling displaced, and her

behavior was making this clear. Soon I got the bright idea, *I'm a play therapist, so why not bring Michele into the playroom and let her express herself through play? Maybe I can even videotape it and have a good example to use in my play therapy training.* OK, I admit, I still was not quite with the program (focusing on the child and not myself). But eventually, I got a clue!

Michele engaged in “garden variety” play for much of the session—nothing extraordinary. However, when I gave her the five-minute time-limit warning before the end of the session, her play changed. This shouldn't surprise many counselors, since clients frequently “dump” issues at the end of a session. Michele proceeded to get a dollhouse from a shelf, place it in the middle of the playroom, and play house. She selected a few dolls and said: “This is the mama doll. This is the daddy doll. And this is the baby doll. The mama is cooking in the kitchen. The dad is reading the newspaper. And the little girl is building a shed in the yard because there's no room in the house.” (By the way, I was offended by her reference to the dad doll, since I rarely read the paper until after the kids were in bed!)

It doesn't take a play therapy specialist to figure out what Michele was saying through her play. The issue wasn't that I was reading the paper or that Mom was cooking; it was that she felt we didn't have enough time for her. The girl doll building a room outside of the house couldn't have displayed a more graphic scene of feeling displaced and left out. Michele was able to express herself through play in a way she could not possibly have done through talking.

Children simply do not say to their parents, “Mom, Dad, I am feeling very displaced by the birth of my new sister, and I am experiencing acute emotional neglect. Sibling rivalry issues are intensifying, and I could really use some intervention right now.” The way children let us know about these issues is by acting out. When hurting children respond to their emotional pain with inappropriate behavior and are referred to counseling, they desper-

ately need the freedom to express themselves in their own language—the language of play.

In my quest to learn more about the world of children and play therapy, I have had the honor and privilege of working with Dr. Garry Landreth at the University of North Texas. I currently work as the assistant director of the Center for Play Therapy, which Dr. Landreth directs. The University of North Texas program is the largest play therapy training center in the world. Dr. Landreth believes that it is his calling and mission to make this world safer for children. I share that calling, as I'm sure many of you do. My thoughts about children as well as my personal faith journey have been profoundly influenced by Dr. Landreth, who is my mentor, colleague, and friend. I hope that many of you will have the opportunity to learn from him as you continue to grow as child counselors.

Like Dr. Landreth and many of you who work with children, I have an abiding concern about the welfare of children in our world. Newspaper and television accounts provide daily reminders that children are not valued in our society as they should be. You have probably seen and heard firsthand how children are treated with disregard or even contempt. From violence, abuse, and neglect to the sad state of the education and welfare systems, we see how children are frequently mistreated. It is not just a political problem; it is a moral catastrophe. Yes, we must address ecological and financial concerns for the sake of our children's future, but it is more important that we attend to the hearts and souls of God's little ones.

Although a great deal of lip service is given to children's issues, children are simply not honored in today's society, certainly not as God intended. The current focus on "family values" in today's political and social arena testifies to this. Forming committees and increasing funding do not honor children; giving time, building relationships, and entering the child's world do. Children are all too often ignored, and the child's world is too frequently misunderstood.

This low priority may also be reflected in the mental health field and possibly in Christian counseling circles as well. One of the licenses I hold is from the state of California as a Marriage, Family, and Child Counselor (MFCC). A requisite for this license is a master's degree in psychology or counseling, and the course requirements are spelled out in the licensing legislation. Only one course in child counseling is required, yet I am licensed in California to diagnose and treat childhood disorders. It is clearly unethical for psychotherapists to practice outside the scope of their license or expertise, but these requirements arguably do not give the licensed MFCC therapist the necessary training. Shouldn't helping hurting children be a higher priority?

I have had the opportunity to present workshops on child-counseling issues at a number of Christian conferences. On several occasions, my presentation was the only one related to children. At the Second International Congress on Christian Counseling in 1992, well over one hundred fifty workshops were presented on various aspects of Christian counseling, but only six addressed child-counseling issues. At the International Congress on the Family in 1995, only one of twelve workshop tracks addressed children's issues, and even this was combined with parenting and adolescent presentations. Shouldn't helping hurting children be a higher priority?

I recently sent a letter to a national Christian organization that provides counseling education, and I advocated more training opportunities for those working with children. I made my case for the importance of ministering to the youngest members of society and their families. The response I received was disappointing. I was told that participants in the counseling program are asked to evaluate the training and make suggestions for specific issues they would like to see included. The organization's letter said: "Although the counseling of children and children's issue has been mentioned, it has not been high on the list of their perceived needs." The letter went on to state that the training organizers "try to keep in mind

what participants are requesting in light of what they have already received in their schools.” As noted, the academic requirements for counselors do not seem to emphasize child psychology or psychopathology. Is it true that Christian counselors do not perceive training about children’s issues to be important? Shouldn’t helping hurting children be a higher priority?

Christian bookstores and book catalogs are filled with books about counseling, self-help, and parenting. These are important. Nevertheless, very little training material is available for Christians counseling with children. Shouldn’t helping hurting children be a higher priority?

If the Christian counseling community gave greater emphasis to child counseling and children’s issues, perhaps we would see less need for counseling adults. As counselors, shouldn’t it be our goal to put ourselves out of business? It may never happen, but how wonderful if it did!

One reason I am convinced about the effectiveness of play therapy is because of what it has taught me about other areas of my life. My training and experience in child play therapy have made me a better father, husband, counselor, and person. My hope is that those who read this book will not only learn how to enter the lives of children and bring healing to their hurts but also learn something about themselves, about life, and about God. It would indeed be a blessing if we all could be more in touch with the child within us, for that’s where God’s kingdom is revealed.

This book is not intended to be just a bookshelf resource for Christian counselors who happen to have a child come up on their caseload. It is intended to help the person working with children to gain a broader perspective of the child’s world and to gain further insight into entering that world. From psychologists, social workers, and family therapists to pastoral counselors, group-home staff, and children’s-ministry workers, readers will find on the following pages truths that will help to touch hurting children.

Although we will discuss specific techniques and childhood disorders, understand that I am much more interested in the *process* of making contact with children. I believe that counseling is about *relationship*. It is *relationship* that brings people into God's kingdom, and it is *relationship* that brings healing to the emotionally wounded. If a counselor knows all there is to know about child development, child psychopathology, and child therapy techniques yet does not know how to make contact with children, how much benefit can there be? Relationship begins with making contact. Techniques cannot accomplish this.

What about this term I use—*making contact*? I like this phrase not only because it is common in play therapy literature but also because it conveys what Christ's ministry was all about. Scripture often tells us that Jesus was "moved by compassion" and that the "power of God was present" to heal. This does not speak of technique (how) but of relationship and motivation (who and why).

Perhaps I can give a childlike illustration of what I mean. One of our family's favorite books is *The Velveteen Rabbit*. If you are familiar with the story, you will remember that the Rabbit is having a conversation with the Skin Horse about what it means to be *real*. The Skin Horse explains that *real* is "a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real." The Rabbit wonders if it hurts to be real and what he would look like after becoming real. The Skin Horse responds, "These things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Becoming *real* is a crucial issue for children who are hurting. It is in the process of *making contact* with these children that we help them become real. Children need to know and believe that once they are real, they can't be ugly (or incomplete or labeled or damaged) except to people who just don't understand. It is an honor for any of us to be a part of this process.

I can't promise that reading this book will make you a great child counselor. I can, however, promise this: If your view of the world of children and the language of childhood grows, as I believe it can, you will be far better equipped to make this world better and safer for children. It has long been my hope and prayer that child counseling and children's issues will become the priority that I believe God intends. If this book can be a small part of that process, I will be truly grateful.

**PART ONE**

*Entering the  
Child's World*



# 1/ THE CHILD'S WORLD

*Know you what it is to be a child? It is to be something very different from the man of today. It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief.*

—FRANCIS THOMPSON

Spending time with children is delightful! Their perspective of the world is very different from the perspective of grown-ups. Children view the world without the cynicism, suspicion, and mistrust that many people acquire by the time they are adults. That's why it is so refreshing for adults to spend time with children—their simple, untainted outlook is captivating.

Recently, my five-year-old daughter, Renata, reminded me of how innocent and unpretentious children are. Although my family and I live in Texas, we do not have Texan accents, and beyond saying “y’all,” we do not use any common southern phrases. That's not true of our friend Becky, who peppers her conversations with regional terms and colloquialisms.

After spending several hours with us one day, Becky gathered her children to leave and called out, “Okay, kids, get your things together. We're *fixin'* to go.”

She was holding Renata at the time, and my daughter looked at her with a quizzical expression. Then she asked, quite seriously, “Is your ‘to go’ broken?” A child’s perspective is, indeed, different from that of adults!

Because the outlook, viewpoint, and insights of children are so fundamentally different from those of adults, it’s no surprise that the counseling techniques we use with them are not the same as those used for adult therapy. To bring healing to hurting children involves much more than theory or methodology. Healing also involves *empathy*, understanding our clients’ world. Part of empathizing with our young clients is learning—or relearning—to see the world as they see it. In their text *Counseling Children*, Charles Thompson and Linda Rudolph aptly note: “How wonderful it would be to return to the carefree, irresponsible days of childhood, with no financial worries, job pressures, societal problems—so the fantasy goes. Unfortunately, childhood is not the carefree, lighthearted, playful time remembered by many adults. Normal child development involves a series of cognitive, physical, emotional, and social changes . . . and the accompanying stress or conflict may lead to learning or behavior problems. . . . Add the stresses and conflict of a rapidly changing society—a society even adults find difficult to understand—and the child’s world does not look so appealing.”<sup>1</sup>

It is well worth the child counselor’s time to consider the nature of the child’s world. Think about how a small child perceives an adult—a monster with a small head. That’s because adults are so tall, and their heads are so far away. Yet most child counselors greet their little clients while standing up and extending a hand of greeting. Then when the children don’t want to leave their parents in the waiting room, counselors wonder why. Wouldn’t it be great if training in child counseling insisted that counselors meet the child on his or her level by crouching down in the waiting room? First impressions do make a difference.

As we begin to look at the world of children from their perspective, we as adults also gain a new perspective of our own world.

Developing a fuller and deeper appreciation for the child's world enables us to become better parents and counselors. Consider what one of our U.S. presidents, Herbert Hoover, had to say about children:

The older I grow, the more I appreciate children. Now, at my eightieth birthday, I salute them again. Children are the most wholesome part of the race, the sweetest, for they are freshest from the hand of God. Whimsical, ingenious, mischievous, they fill the world with joy and good humor. We adults live a life of apprehension as to what they will think of us; a life of defense against their terrifying energy; a life of hard work to live up to their great expectations. We put them to bed with a sense of relief—and greet them in the morning with delight and anticipation. We envy [in] them the freshness of adventure and the discovery of life. In all these ways, children add to the wonder of being alive.<sup>2</sup>

Wouldn't it be wonderful if it did not take us quite so long to arrive at such a fresh and genuine view of children and childhood? If you gain nothing more from reading this book than a broader understanding of the child's world, I will consider it a success. To that end, let's take a look at what the Bible says about children and then examine the world in which today's children grow up.

### **CHILDREN, THE BIBLE, AND SPIRITUALITY**

This is not a book about Christian counseling of children. Rather, it is a book about counseling children by entering their world (which is what Christ did for us), using a basic approach that is compatible with Scripture. Although as a Christian I am strong in some areas and deficient in others, following Christ is not a role I play only while in church or when I am called on to do "Christian counseling." It is—or at least should be—a way of life, a grid through which I view the world around me. This in turn means

aligning my counseling approach, techniques, and orientation with God's Word.

As I study Scripture, I find that what it says about children is primarily descriptive. As author and theologian William Hendricks notes: "Children are for real. They are people, even if people in the miniature. If there is but one way to God, they too will come by the message of Christ. It is instructive, and somewhat surprising, what the Bible says about children. Most of the biblical references to children are descriptive of some particular child. . . . An interpretation of biblical references to children would reveal the following conclusions. The childhood of important biblical figures is noted. Instruction of children by precept and example is commanded. There is a great compassion for the young displayed in biblical literature. As a whole, Bible references to children are descriptive rather than theological."<sup>3</sup>

Even though the Bible does not discuss children and childhood at length (and, of course, does not mention counseling children), the Christian counselor should not feel limited in his or her ability to minister to children. Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles correctly notes that "the entire range of children's mental life can and does connect with their religious and spiritual thinking."<sup>4</sup> Significant truths about child development and child psychology can and should be practiced in treating children. At the same time, scriptural truths about children (for example, that all children are born into sinful humanity) are not recognized in the field of psychology in general.

My basic supposition is that the Bible is all truth but not all truth is in the Bible. While the law of gravity is not explicitly stated in Scripture, I do not have difficulty believing it is truth. Though we must guard against heresy, we must also recognize the validity of some psychological truths that are not mentioned in Scripture. My approach to treating children is based on child-centered play therapy, which is compatible with biblical principles and has been proven effective even though it is not specifically addressed in God's Word.

William Hendricks suggests that "Christian theology should not

ignore or deny the insights of developmental psychology as to how much and what types of cognitive and affective experiences a child may appropriate at a given age. . . . Simply stated, developmental psychology can advise the sciences as to how the child learns and at what ages various types of learning usually occur. Christian theology must always insist on defining her own content."<sup>5</sup> Scripture provides us with this content.

The Bible includes several references that show us how the Creator feels about children. Clearly, children hold a special place in God's heart. King David tells us that children are a "heritage from the Lord . . . a reward from him."<sup>6</sup> Jesus instructed his disciples: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."<sup>7</sup> The Lord further instructs us that in order to enter his kingdom, we must be like little children.<sup>8</sup> The value of childlikeness in the pursuit of God is frequently mentioned in Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

This childlikeness in the approach to relationship with God is illustrated in these comments by Robert Coles, as he discusses children and spirituality:

It is hard, I think, for those of us whose religious life is merely a part of what we do, one of many commitments, to put ourselves in the shoes of people for whom the phrase "God's presence" has an utter, rock-bottom psychological reality. . . . In such people, I have felt, spirituality makes up the very warp and woof of psychology. . . . God's parenthood [is felt] so deeply and continuously that their every emotional moment seems God-connected. . . . No wonder such children ask so many favors of Him; turn to Him with passion and disappointment; beseech Him openly and in the secrecy of their private moments (not to mention their half-forgotten dreams); rail against Him or, more consciously, obliterate Him with doubt. When [a little girl] told me . . . that "God is in heaven, but He is in my mind, too," she was perhaps making the definitive

analysis of the relationship between young spirituality and young psychology—a fusion. Let others visit God on Sunday for an hour, or have their discreet moments of engagement with Him, spiritual in content, psychologically significant; for her, God is just what she once characterized Him as being, “a companion who won’t leave.”<sup>10</sup>

### THE CHILD’S WORLD IS UNSAFE

Children grow and develop where they feel safe. This is why a major goal for the child counselor should be to provide a healing environment marked by safety and stability. Unfortunately, the world beyond your counseling office is not safe for children. Abuse, neglect, violence, abduction, drugs—the list goes on. To be reminded that a child’s world is unsure and unpredictable, we need look no further than the national divorce rate, which continues to be around 50 percent. Since divorce doesn’t happen without trauma, how many children are affected? Thousands per day.

What is more, children themselves don’t view the world as safe. In fact, they are frightened about what the future holds. In 1995, Barna Research conducted a nationwide, random-sample survey of 1,023 children, with some alarming results. According to the survey: 47 percent of children report dim expectations about life, stating that they anticipate being unhappy in the future; 65 percent think their parents might die; 57 percent fear doing poorly in school; and 54 percent fear they might get AIDS. As a group, children aged ten through thirteen believe they are more likely to become victims of abuse or to die than they are to begin drinking or smoking.<sup>11</sup> Since children do not grow and progress when they do not feel safe, it is no wonder so many children and adolescents in our society are troubled.

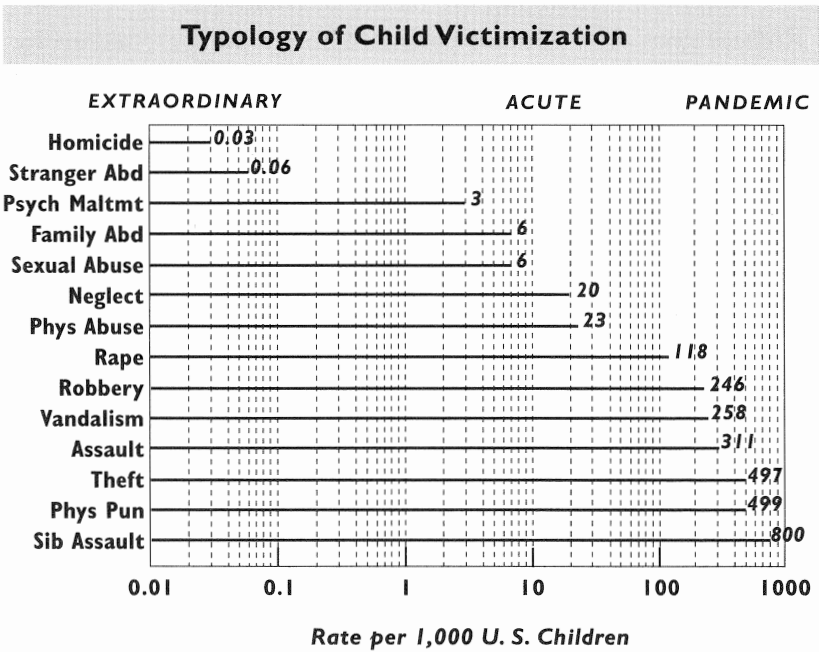
The March 1990 issue of *Redbook* featured an article entitled “Are Kids Growing Up Too Fast?” in which Dr. Lee Salk was quoted as saying, “Children are being shortchanged. We hurry them toward independence before they’re emotionally ready. We rush them out of childhood.”<sup>12</sup> Speeding children into adulthood not

only makes this world unsafe for them, but it is also a national tragedy with serious consequences. Television, the nation's leading baby-sitter, contributes to this. Several years ago, the National Coalition on Television Violence reported that the average child will see 52,000 murders and attempted murders on television by age eighteen. When you factor in cable TV and VCR viewing, the number increases to 72,000.<sup>13</sup> Since no efforts to restrict television violence have succeeded, it is likely this number will continue to rise. Dr. Ellen Wartella, research professor at the Institute of Communications Research, says, "Children see world events on the news; they're privy to the lives of adults through television programming and advertising. Even during the Saturday-morning children's hour there are announcements about drugs, alcohol, AIDS. Television *is* changing the nature of childhood."<sup>14</sup>

*Redbook* goes on to discuss parents who encourage children to grow up ahead of schedule. Fred Rogers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (who, by the way, is a superb model for a child therapist) commented about the irony of hurrying children into adulthood: "If we really want children to succeed and be productive people, we'll respect them as human beings and let them grow at their own pace."<sup>15</sup> As children feel society's push to grow up too fast, they lose their innocence. Commenting on the current trend to educate preschoolers about sexual abuse, Dr. David Elkind says, "Reading a book about sexual abuse to a three-year-old gives her the message that it's up to her to take care of herself. But there's no way she can protect herself against an adult, and she shouldn't have to think about this danger."<sup>16</sup>

*Redbook's* report stated that five- and six-year-old girls worry about getting fat, that significant numbers of twelve-year-olds are having sexual intercourse, that pediatricians are reporting stress-related behavior and health problems (elevated cholesterol and blood pressure, headaches, and stomach problems) in children as young as three years old, and that suicide rates among children are increasing at an alarming rate.<sup>17</sup>

In an article in *American Psychologist*, David Finkelhor and Jennifer Dzuiba-Leatherman state, “Children suffer more victimization than do adults, more family violence, and some forms virtually unique to children, such as family abduction.”<sup>18</sup> The authors divide child victimization into three typologies: (1) *pandemic victimizations*, which occur to a majority of children in the course of growing up and include sibling assault, physical punishment by parents, theft, vandalism, peer assault, and robbery; (2) *acute victimizations*, which are less frequent and include physical abuse, neglect, and family abduction; and (3) *extraordinary victimizations*, which are even less frequent and include homicide, child-abuse homicide, and nonfamily abduction. The following chart indicates the frequency of these victimizations.



Note: Abd=abduction. Psych Maltmt=psychological maltreatment. Phys=physical. Pun=punishment. Sib=sibling.

*Used by permission, David Finkelhor.*

## CHILDREN NEED COMPASSIONATE COUNSELORS

In the introduction to this book, I suggested that Christian counseling has not given child counseling the importance that I believe it should receive. Within this concern, perhaps we should ask the question: Is there a need for greater mental health interventions for children, or is it such a specialized area that only a handful of experts should be concerned? The secular psychological and psychiatric literature seems to indicate that children are getting short-changed—that is, they are not receiving the kind of therapy that would maximize healing and growth. I have no reason to believe that the situation is much different in the Christian counseling community.

According to the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, some 12 percent of children living in the United States, or 7.5 million children, are in need of mental health care.<sup>19</sup> In another report, research psychologist June Tuma indicated that from 15 percent (9.5 million) to 19 percent of the nation's children suffer from some level of emotional disturbance.<sup>20</sup> From 3 percent to 8 percent of these are seriously emotionally disturbed children.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, of these children needing treatment, somewhere between 70 and 80 percent are not receiving adequate mental health services.<sup>22</sup> In a survey of children's mental health needs and services conducted in a large metropolitan area, 38.5 percent were found to be at risk of psychiatric disturbance. Only 11 percent of these children received treatment in a mental health setting, fewer than in schools (37 percent) or medical settings (13 percent).<sup>23</sup> Surely, this level of need and available service is similar in cities and towns throughout the nation.

Despite the obvious need and current deficiency in meeting that need, training of child therapists continues to be inadequate. A little more than 10 percent of psychiatrists are committed to working primarily with children, and less than one percent of psychologists have a similar devotion.<sup>24</sup> Tuma reported that the clinical training received by the respondents to a survey she conducted was "less