

# Ministry, Minors, and Millstones: On Protecting the Children We Receive in Church

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On paper, we Americans are all about putting children first. You see it everywhere – from politicians who perennially promise “to leave a better world for our children and grandchildren,” to people who step out of public life to “spend more time with their children,” to otherwise divorcing couples who vow to stay together “for the children.” We want our children to have the safest car seats, the most educational toys, and the healthiest diets. Children are revered in America.

And yet.

The “and yet” is what’s so heartbreaking in a nation that supposedly cherishes children. The statistics are brutal. A [study from the Department of Health and Human Services](#) reported that in 2014, “CPS agencies received an estimated 3.6 million referrals involving approximately 6.6 million children.” Of these kids who were referred to CPS, 2.2 million were “screened-in,” meaning that their cases were accepted. To put that in perspective, that’s roughly the population of Houston. The number of CPS cases accepted by Child Protective Services in 2014 equaled the population of America’s fourth largest city.

Data on how many people who have suffered abuse as a child vary, but [at least one study](#) shows that 24.7 percent of women and 16 percent of men had experienced sexual abuse as a child. And these are just the *reported* numbers. The unreported numbers are of course unknown, but it doesn’t take a giant leap of the imagination to realize that it’s highly possible that *most* crimes like these go unreported.

Statistics like these make it all too clear that the church is not immune to this problem. In a church of any size, there are adults who were abused as children, and there are children who have been or are in danger of being abused. Deepak Reju writes in his book [On Guard: Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse at Church](#), “No other organization provides such quick and easy access to children. Sexual predators know this, so they show up at churches, eager to make themselves known and ready to serve” (p. 45).

This is not an issue on which the church can sit on the sidelines. The sheer magnitude of this evil means the body of Christ has no choice but to face it head on. But what are we to do?

Thankfully, this is an issue on which the Bible is not silent, so we start there. Take, for example, Matthew 18:1-6:

*[1] At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" [2] And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them [3] and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [4] Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

[5] "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, [6] but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (ESV)

Here, Jesus is making a point about the humility it takes to enter the kingdom of heaven. In the ancient Near East, children had much less status than in the twenty-first century West, thus making kids a perfect picture of humility. But by calling in a child to make his larger point about humility, Jesus underscores his view on the value of children.

First, to receive a child in his name is to receive him (v. 5). Jesus identifies with children, and the way we treat children is reflective of the way we treat Jesus. In the next verse, Jesus takes it to another level.

What the ESV translates "to sin" in verse 6 could also be translated "to stumble." Sin is certainly within the range of meaning here, but here the verb *scandalizō* is more broad than that. In this context, considering the upcoming penalty, and the fact that verse 8 talks about "if your foot causes you to [*stumble*]," "stumble" seems a more appropriate translation, and other Bible versions follow suit (cf. NASB, NIV). Jesus says that for whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in him to stumble "it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

This is not a light sentence, and the hyperbole expressed underscores the seriousness of the offense. Those who would seek to harm children in the church are so far off the mark that they would be better off with a heavy penalty – *millstone* heavy.

Two takeaways from this for any church's children's ministry are evident: (1) We must receive children in Jesus's name, and (2) We must not cause them to stumble.

To receive children in his name, the church must provide avenues for the discipleship of children. The threat of the millstone shouldn't make us step back too far. On the contrary, we should strive to do what Jesus urged and *welcome* children in his name. The church should always move toward children with evangelism – the starting point of discipleship – by introducing them to the person and work of Jesus. A church that keeps children at arm's length likewise keeps Jesus at arm's length.

We must reach out to children, but we also mustn't cause them to stumble. The world provides plenty of stumbling blocks for children as they grow, and the church cannot be one of them. Therefore, especially with regard to the issue of child abuse, the church must be reflective of Jesus and be a certain, safe place for children to thrive.

This is why OBC's children's ministry leaders are taking second and third looks at our child protection policies. This is why not everyone is permitted to enter some classrooms in the children's wing. This is why we require background checks of children's workers along with other vetting processes. And this is why we need more than one adult with children at all times.

Requirements like these can cause headaches – especially when volunteers are already lacking. But there are ways to protect children without keeping them at arm's length -- it just takes some effort on our part as a church. The benefit of protecting children in Jesus's name is not something only for those working in children's ministry – it's a charge for the whole church. How well we receive these little ones reflects how we receive Jesus.

Consider how you might play a part in helping both to receive and protect our children. Even if you're not able to participate directly in the children's ministry, your eyes and ears are crucial to maintaining a safe environment. As the saying goes, if you see something, say something. Together, we can create a receptive environment where children are taught to stand rather than stumble, and our path is marked by ministry rather than a millstone.