

# COUNSELING MANUAL FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN

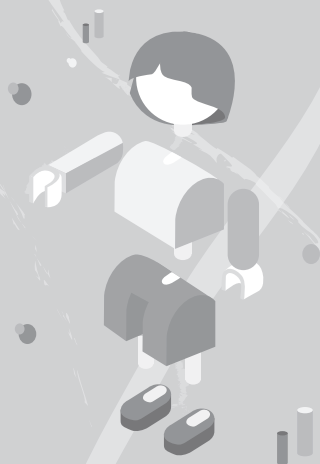
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# Prologue

Childhood is a wonderful stage, and the possibility of influencing children is one of the most extraordinary opportunities life offers. The way we approach children has evolved—and at times regressed—throughout time.

In the first century, we see stories like the death of hundreds of children by order of Herod, who was trying to find and kill only one: Jesus (Matthew 2:16–18). But we must understand that the view of children back then was very different from what we have today. They were second-class citizens—if we could even call them citizens. It was worse still if they were girls.

But then, a child entered the scene who would grow up to become the most influential human being in history: Jesus Christ. His message was so radical and fresh that he earned the love of many and the scorn of others. Among the many themes of his message, he spoke of the dignity of children.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God belongs to children (Mark 10:13–16), and that receiving and attending to a child is like receiving and attending Jesus himself (Matthew 18:5). He gave a stern warning to those who cause little ones who believe in him to stumble (Matthew 18:6), and also commanded his followers not to despise children (Matthew 18:10). He mentioned that to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must become like children (Matthew 18:3), and that God hears the praise of children

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(Matthew 21:15–16). No wonder his message was seen by many as strange, countercultural, and uncomfortable!

The Bible also tells us that children are valuable and that they are a heritage from the Lord (Psalm 127:3). Isn't it sad that today's society no longer views children the way it did one or two generations ago? It seems that for adults today, personal achievement and professional success are more important than caring and serving the next generations. But God doesn't think that way! He still sees children, loves them, and entrusts us to serve them.

It has been a long journey. A lot of time has passed from the first century until now, and children's value in each era of society has been perceived differently.

We wrote this book intending to reignite the conversation and remind you that children are not just there to be entertained until they grow up to become “productive citizens.” We wrote this book to remind you that God sees children in a very special way and that adults must care for them with responsibility and love. We wrote this to remind you that, as the Church, we are in a strategic position to bless, serve, and help the millions of children we are privileged to serve each day.

Jessica, Willy, and yours truly (Esteban) want to capture in these pages many of the experiences and lessons we've learned over the years—not only in the professional realm, but also practically, as parents. We've invited four professionals to share their insights on various topics. Each of them brings extensive experience in the field they write about. They are:

- **Mirtza Granados:** Journalist, currently pursuing a master's degree in mass communication, has worked for over 10 years in non-governmental organizations with at-risk children. She is also an organizational consultant for churches.

- **Karen Vindas:** Passionate about children and working alongside her parents. She has worked with children for 13 years and since 2009 has served as the general coordinator of the children's ministry at her local church—a church strongly committed to discipling new generations. She trains parents and children's leaders at the national level through seminars, talks, and radio programs. She is also a mathematics teacher.

- **Laura Gutiérrez:** Mother of two children, clinical psychologist and therapist since 2004. She also holds a master's degree in health psychology. She specializes in couples and family therapy and is the director of Psicointegra Costa Rica. She is also a university professor, member of the mental health commission of the College of Psychologists, and president of the Eastern Psychologists Association.

- **Neo Granados:** Has 27 years of experience in children's ministry. She has studied theology, primary and secondary education, and holds a Master's degree in psychopedagogy (educational psychology). She is the executive director of the ministry "SOS Teachers," and mother of three children.

You'll notice that some topics are repeated throughout the book from different professional perspectives. We encourage you to analyze all of them and build your own.



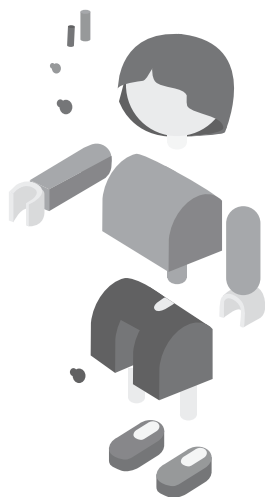
## **COUNSELING MANUAL FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN**

And we hope that from these pages you will gain tools for your work and motivation to inspire others with your passion for the next generations, whether from the front lines of formal, church-based, or family education.

**Esteban Obando**

# The Value of Children

By Karen Vindas, Neo Granados, and Esteban Obando





*“At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.’”*

—Luke 10:21 (NIV)

### Some Children We Find in the Bible

In 1 Samuel 1–3, we are told the story of a woman named Hannah. Hannah had a deep desire, a great longing: She wanted to be a mother. One day, while in the temple, she poured out her heart before the Lord asking Him for a child. The Lord heard her prayer, and in time, Samuel was born. Samuel had already been dedicated to God, and so, since he was still young, his parents took him to the temple to be raised under Eli, who was the priest at that time.

One night, while Samuel was still a young boy, he heard a voice calling his name: *“Samuel, Samuel!”* He quickly ran to the priest to ask what he needed, but the priest told him he had not called and sent Samuel back to bed. This happened two more times until Eli realized it was the Lord calling Samuel. Eli instructed him that the next time Samuel heard his name, he should place himself at God’s disposal and listen to whatever the Lord wanted to tell him. This is how Samuel learned to recognize the Lord’s voice and, while still a child, he was able to respond to his call by saying:

*“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”*

So here we have a young boy who learns to discern the voice of God and respond to his calling.

## **A Girl Who Shows Mercy Instead of Resentment**

In 2 Kings 5, we find the story of the Syrian commander Naaman, who had leprosy. What's interesting about this story is that an Israelite girl had been captured by the Syrians and taken as a slave to work in the house of this military chief. When this girl found out about her master's illness, she told his wife that there was a prophet in Samaria who could heal him. She had been ripped from her home and her life with her family, away from her people. She was taken as a slave. While we don't know all the details of the hard circumstances she must have endured, it was likely a very difficult life.

Yet despite all this, the girl did not hesitate to do good. She told her mistress that someone could bring healing to her mistress's husband. The girl acted out of compassion, not revenge. Though far from home and unsure of whom to trust, she knew there was a prophet in her land who could bring healing from God.

The story ends with the Syrian commander being healed—all thanks to this young girl who chose to act with mercy instead of resentment.

## **A Boy King**

I've always been struck by the life of Josiah (2 Kings 22–23). The first thing that amazed me was learning in Scripture that Josiah became king at just eight years old. As a very young boy, he was faced with a great task. The most

beautiful thing about Josiah is that he was a king of whom history would say:

*“He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord...”*

—2 Kings 22:2 (NIV)

It wasn't common for kings to do what was right! Most kings are remembered for doing evil and leading the people astray. But Josiah was different.

What made this young king different? Maybe it was his young age and lack of experience that led him to seek advice, make decisions carefully, and, most of all, have a heart sensitive to the voice of God. This becomes clear when, during temple repairs, the Book of the Law was found. When Josiah heard what the book said, he humbled himself before the Lord and asked for forgiveness: He realized they had not kept God's commands and had strayed from divine guidance. Josiah not only sought God's favor but led the people to seek the Lord wholeheartedly. Because of this, Josiah received God's forgiveness.

So here we have a child king, a young leader, a boy who did things much better than his ancestors.

## A Child with Divine Purpose

Zechariah and Elizabeth could not have children. Elizabeth was barren. But the God of miracles, at an unexpected time, gave this elderly couple a child. His name was John the Baptist. And John had a special purpose.

*“...for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the*

*Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.”*

—Luke 1:15–16 (NIV)

This child would be the one to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus. John, with his message of repentance, would prepare people’s hearts for the coming of the Messiah.

In studying the stories of children like these, I find Enrique Pinedo’s words meaningful:

“These boys and girls recorded in biblical history don’t appear as mere decoration or minor details, but as protagonists and active collaborators in God’s mission” (from *Childhood, Adolescence and Integral Mission*, p. 27). Keep this in mind every time you read their stories.

## Children in Danger

We also find in the Bible stories about children in danger, especially harrowing ones involving the killing of small children.

Take Exodus 1 and 2. Moses was a child in danger. The Pharaoh of Egypt wanted to prevent the Israelites from multiplying, so he ordered that all Hebrew male infants be killed. Moses was born under this decree of death. Dozens of baby boys were thrown into the Nile River by Pharaoh’s command and lost their lives. But God had a special plan for Moses! Not only was he saved from death, but God arranged for Moses to be raised in the palace, adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses was taught, trained, and prepared... because God had a purpose.

Moses' family also played a vital role in this divine care. A mother of faith who, despite everything, trusted God to preserve her son's life. A sister who didn't rest until she made sure her little brother was safe. That context, orchestrated by God, helped save Moses from certain death. And it also prepared him for the great task that, years later, he would fulfill by divine guidance: to be the deliverer of God's people.

### **Jesus: Also a Child in Danger**

Now there's the story in Matthew 2. Jesus was also a child in danger. Soon after Mary, Joseph, and Jesus settled in a house in Bethlehem, they were visited by wise men from the East. These men had traveled far, following a star that guided them to the newborn King of the Jews. The stir their visit caused must have signaled a major event.

They asked Herod where the child was so they could worship him. Imagine the scene: Herod's face changing when he heard that a king had been born. A competitor to his throne! After some inquiries, Herod politely dismissed the wise men, asking them to let him know where the child was—and claiming that he too wanted to worship this child.

The wise men found baby Jesus and gave him valuable gifts. But they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. When Herod realized he had been deceived, he ordered the massacre of all boys under two years old. He had to eliminate the future king somehow!

Bethlehem was shaken by grief as children were torn from their mothers' arms and killed. Matthew 2:18 references Jeremiah 31:15:



*“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

—Matthew 2:18 (NIV)

But God warned Joseph in a dream to flee with his family to Egypt, and they did. This way, baby Jesus was spared from death.

## Jesus and the Children

Let’s now look at what the Gospels tell us about children. In Luke 18:17, Jesus says:

*“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*

—Luke 18:17 (NIV)

After reading this verse, we can ask ourselves: What did Jesus see in children? What unique traits did they show? How did he view the faith of children compared to the faith of adults?

Jesus, who knew children well, saw in them expectation, wonder, surprise, trust, and humility. These are the very characteristics God seeks in people of all ages who are to “receive the kingdom of God.” This is a Kingdom that arrives unexpectedly, cannot be predicted, and demands our full surrender—with guidance only from the Father.

That’s how children are. In that full trust, children show how the Almighty can move and manifest his Kingdom among people.

Jesus presents children as models for adults. This was unthinkable for his culture and time! But children also represent the model of dependence. They can't do things alone. They need help and are not ashamed to admit it. In a way, Jesus is calling adults to do the same: to surrender, to fully depend on the Father. Receiving the Kingdom of God like a child is to open your hands to God's gift, received only by grace, through love.

Once, the disciples debated who among them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. They saw Jesus as a famous teacher and wanted to secure their position. This happens in churches even today.

But Jesus' followers were stunned by his response: He placed a child in their midst and said the most important in the Kingdom are those who are like children. Jesus said:

*"Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."*

—Matthew 18:4–5 (NIV)

## The Most Important in the Kingdom

The most important in the Kingdom are those who show humility, simplicity, and innocence. The most important are those who can be amazed by small things and can forgive and forget—even when other people, even their own parents, treat them unfairly.

So the Master gave his disciples a lesson they would never forget. Jesus dignified children and placed them as

models of purity, simplicity, and tenderness.

But Jesus pointed out something even more transcendent than merely describing children's qualities. His words compel us to take responsibility and commit ourselves to childhood. Jesus said:

“Whoever welcomes... one such child... welcomes me.”

Keep that in mind always: Whoever gives care and protection to a child does so for Jesus Himself.

Jesus' teaching is not only wise, it contains a warning he must not ignore. “Because of all this,” it becomes necessary that the church discern well the signs of the times and seriously include childhood in its theological, pastoral, ecclesiological, and missiological priorities (Pinedo *Childhood, Adolescence and Integral Mission*, p. 33).

## The Reality of Children in Our Continent

Currently, the situation of many children on our continent is far from satisfactory, with many facing conditions preventing their healthy development. When we observe the things happening in our countries, we cannot help but think about the children...

In places where...

- There is poverty, there are children playing beside trash with bare feet.
- Domestic violence occurs, there are children at risk of losing their mothers—or who have already lost them.

- Hunger persists, there are children who, due to lack of proper nutrition, will never develop to their full potential.
- There is internet access, there are digital natives facing the many “offers” of the web.
- Pornography exists, there are children blackmailed to produce or consume it.
- Natural disasters or armed conflicts occur, there are children who are mutilated or lose their lives.
- Human trafficking exists, there are children sexually exploited.
- Abuse happens in any form, there are children who suffer and endure it silently.

The list could go on and on because the situations where children are unprotected and are left at the mercy of all kinds of harm are countless. As a society, we have lost the most basic human instincts regarding the care of the youngest, the weakest, and most vulnerable.

## So, What Can We Do?

Our goal should not be merely to describe the suffering children endure today, but to think about what we can do. What can we do as parents, grandparents, teachers, leaders, and pastors for the children around us—and even for those far away whom we can still reach with acts of goodness?

As a society, we face a great responsibility: to put our

abilities and all our efforts toward helping children who suffer, who face need, deprivation, or risk in various forms.

Children within our churches are not immune. Today, what happens outside is also happening inside. Sometimes it's contained, supported, accompanied, and taught... but other times it's hidden, covered up, or denied. Perhaps the first step is to acknowledge we have a problem. To recognize we haven't always done things well, and that we need divine intervention to accompany, teach, and care for the next generations.

## Holistic Development

A healthy childhood is a sound childhood, providing everything one needs for a full and harmonious development. In the Bible, we find texts that speak of the importance of the development of children:

- About Samuel:

*"...the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people."*

—1 Samuel 2:26 (NIV)

About John the Baptist:

*"...the child grew and became strong in spirit..."*

—Luke 1:80 (NIV)

About Jesus:

*"And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."*

—Luke 2:52 (NIV)