

PASTORAL CARE OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Abstract:

This thesis deals with the issue of pastoring children with specific learning disabilities. It introduces the manifestations of specific learning disabilities and their basic classification, taking into account other types of learning problems and their framework characteristics. The uniqueness of pastoral work with children with specific learning disabilities is presented and examples of pastoral work are given. Emphasis is placed on creating a supportive environment with emphasis on the proclamation of God's Word. The Man was created in the image of God, endowed with God's love, and saved to eternal life in Jesus Christ. This message (the gospel) is also for the Man of today. However, it is also necessary to point out that each of us has different gifts, different abilities and different possibilities to receive this unique message. Therefore, when proclaiming the love of God, it is necessary to approach each person individually and to adapt the proclamation to the possibilities of the recipient of faith. Particularly with children, there is a need for a strong individualization of the approach, since the child's discovery of God and the child's journey to faith are very fragile.

Keywords: evangelism, pastoral care, children, spiritual care, learning disabilities.

The importance of spiritual care

Since children with Specific Learning Disabilities (hereafter referred to as SLD) are less likely to experience educational success and more likely to experience setbacks or at least difficulties in integrating into society, it is important that the church provides an environment in which they can feel safe. A kind of protected space where they can share their problems, express their emotions and, most importantly, feel empathy and a sense of being accepted for their difference. Children with SLD may be at increased risk of developing emotional disorders e.g. depression, anxiety disorders, and feelings of hopelessness. Emotional distress then affects overall mental health and physical well-being (Maturkanič, 2021).

Specific learning disabilities

Specific learning disabilities refer to a heterogeneous group of cognitive disabilities that affect the acquisition, understanding and use of learning skills. Despite these difficulties, SLDs are not associated with low levels of intellect, mental retardation or sensory impairment. However, these impairments do result in difficulties in learning, the ability and subsequently the willingness to learn and succeed in school and, in adulthood, difficulties in everyday life. It is important to recognise that these are disabilities of neurological origin that affect how children acquire, process and use the information and often, although partially compensated for, persist throughout an individual's life. Processing and expression difficulties can affect their ability to communicate effectively and understand social interactions, which can affect their engagement with peers. At times, misunderstanding also leads to feelings of exclusion and consequently greater fear of communication and isolation. Sometimes children with SLD have narrow but more intense interests that also set them apart from their peers and make it difficult to engage in shared activities. Children with SLD may be more susceptible - in an attempt to fit in, to manipulation and are more vulnerable to bullying (Kolář et al., 2012).

The most well-known specific learning disabilities include:

1. Dyslexia - here, reading skills are affected, such as problems with letter recognition (confusion) and the resulting difficulty in decoding words and overall comprehension of the text; this is one of the most common learning disabilities. If not diagnosed early, it causes serious difficulties in the initial practice of reading and understanding the meaning of sentences.
2. Dysgraphia - a specific disability of the graphic form of written expression

that affects the ability to write, where the child has difficulty remembering the shapes of letters, often confusing them, difficulties can also manifest themselves in geometry, often occurring in combination with dyslexia.

3. Dysorthography - a specific spelling disability characterized by an impaired ability to learn to spell (grammatical rules, spelling, and punctuation).
4. Dyscalculia - a disability of mathematical skills, it is a less common disability that manifests itself in difficulties in basic mathematical operations, basic mathematical facts, and understanding value or abstract mathematical concepts.
5. Dyspraxia - a motor impairment, which includes, for example, difficulty in acquiring complex motor skills or general motor clumsiness (Kolář et al., 2012).

Along with specific learning difficulties, attention deficit disorder and developmental dysphasia must also be taken into account:

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is not directly an SLD, but often co-occurs with other disabilities and inherently affects children's learning skills. It is manifested by hyperactivity, impaired concentration, and reduced ability to follow instructions and to perform or complete tasks.

Attention deficit disorder (ADD) has similar symptoms to ADHD but without the hyperactivity symptoms. Children, on the other hand, escape into daydreaming.

Developmental dysphasia - is a specifically disturbed development of speech, which is uneven and not age-appropriate, manifested by a difficult ability or inability to learn to communicate verbally (unintelligible speech, speech impediment, mispronunciation of consonants, agrammatism), even if the conditions for speech development are adequate. Difficulties in graphomotor, auditory and visual processing, disturbed spatiotemporal orientation, impaired motor skills, and possibly cross-laterality. Symptoms may partially persist into adulthood.

Children with SLD are often confronted with difficult acceptance in their environment. These problems stem from their special educational needs. They face these difficulties in both peer and social interactions, often there are communication misunderstandings - both verbal and non-verbal, and social clumsiness and inappropriate behaviour are often evident. Children with SLD are often unable to read and comprehend non-verbal communication and sometimes their responses are inadequate - this leads to rejection and exclusion from peer groups, followed by social isolation or outright ridicule and difficulty

making friends. This results in a negative self-perception and lowered self-esteem and confidence. This in turn leads to reluctance or fear of joining a collective and social interaction. Subjectively, they perceive feelings of stress, anxiety and overload (Kolář et al., 2012).

For children with SLD, it is imperative to provide targeted interventions, adapt the content of education to their capabilities in the educational process, or support with assistance, modification of tasks and assessments, and often individual education plans, where the possibilities of modifying the educational process are precisely described. It is also essential to recognise that although children with SLD have difficulties in certain areas of education, they often have artistic talents and these need to be strengthened and developed.

Addressing the specificities arising from the impact of SLD on the educational process involves a multifaceted approach such as early diagnosis, provision of appropriate intervention, individualised support and the creation of an inclusive learning environment. Often feelings of frustration will manifest themselves in behavioural problems such as disruptive behaviour or defiance. It is necessary to identify the source of these behaviours and provide appropriate support with targeted interventions when the behaviours can be alleviated.

Concerning as well children with SLD, it is necessary to take an individualized approach to gifted children, who are also at risk of certain segregation. Intellectually gifted or exceptionally talented children are those who show exceptional ability in one or more areas. These children have high intellectual abilities, strong curiosity and critical thinking skills. They often show an interest in particular topics or areas and can go to great depths in their exploration, devoting a great deal of time to this exploration and often making it the main topic of their conversation. Gifted children may experience heightened emotional sensitivity and intensity, may show strong empathy, and often have an extensive vocabulary. A highly individualised approach is required for such gifted children, providing more challenging educational stimuli, as - if their intellectual needs are not adequately met - they exhibit the symptoms of children with SLD, such as restlessness, disinterest and escape into the inner world. Social and emotional aspects are also specific - they may experience unique challenges as they may struggle with asynchronous development, often perceiving their difference (Kolář et al., 2012).

It is crucial to adapt the process to suit the child's needs, given that these children face different challenges, there is a need for support in building self-esteem and self-confidence, and an emphasis on promoting inclusion and emotional well-being.

Evangelism

Although this work is primarily concerned with the pastoral care of children, it is impossible not to mention evangelism, at least in the basic definition, since it forms, together with pastoral care it creates the basis of the proclamation of the Word of God. It can be defined in a broader sense as a complex and dynamic act of spreading the message of the Gospel; it is an invitation and sharing of the Gospel, an experience of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (Rahner, 2009). The primary task of evangelism is to proclaim the good news of salvation and to facilitate a personal relationship with Christ. To actively engage in evangelism - whether by giving a personal message, bringing the message of faith, or explaining Christianity in all parts of the world - in its diversity of cultures and peoples (cf. *Mt* 28,19-20). The process of evangelism is primarily about reaching those who have not yet heard or received the Gospel. It is about introducing them to the basic message of Scripture, offering them the opportunity to respond to the message of salvation and through that faith to receive eternal life, sometimes in a difficult season of life (Tomiczek, V., Thurzo, V., Dobříková, P., 2022; Dobříková, P., Horniaková, D., Thurzo, V., 2022). Especially now, Christians are in a situation where they are seeking a new evangelism of Europe - a renewal of their Christian roots. By evangelism, we mean sharing God's message and awakening faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour (Maturkanič, 2021).

Pastoral care

It includes caring for an individual or community, providing spiritual support and guidance in spiritual life, and nurturing spiritual growth. In the form of preaching and worship, religious education, interpretation and teaching of the Bible, and administration of the sacraments. One of the basic tasks of pastoral care is also to support in times of crisis, whether of faith or life, to promote the spiritual growth of individuals and communities.

Pastoral care is understood as the ongoing spiritual guidance, support and care of the entrusted community. Pastoral care also includes possible therapeutic services, sometimes in collaboration with experts in the field. Sometimes pastoral care extends beyond the community in question to highlight and address social problems and promote social justice. Pastoral care supports people during transformational transitions e.g. birth, baptism, marriage etc.

Pastoral care can also be divided in terms of the individual:

1. Individual pastoral care - where personal support is provided, usually by the pastor (parish priest) and based on the personal and spiritual needs of the person being ministered to. This includes prayer, listening, guidance in matters of faith, counselling where appropriate, offering support in dealing with crisis, sacramental rites and rites of passage.
2. Congregational pastoral care - pastoral care is provided to everyone in the religious community, caring for the spiritual aspect of the community as a whole, creating an environment in which members have the opportunity to grow spiritually while receiving the support and encouragement they need. This includes pastoral visits, the formation of support and education groups (e.g. children's groups, youth groups, Bible classes, prayer times), and pastoral counselling.

In the context of pastoral care, it is also possible to speak of *crisis care*, where pastoral activity focuses on supporting an individual or a community in trauma. This includes prayer, offering comfort, and guiding needed spiritual care. This can also include the work of hospital chaplains, which involves working with doctors, or marriage counselling, which involves supporting couples in a time of crisis in their lives.

Pastoral care can also take place *outside the religious community*, then it is possible to talk about having a social outreach and social justice. This includes supporting the needy in the surrounding community by, for example, organizing a food bank, helping the homeless, helping to advocate for human rights, or organizing or supporting helping projects.

Pastoral care takes many forms and possibilities and *can be adapted to different religious traditions*, which may vary according to the needs of the community. Pastoral care and evangelism are interconnected vessels - both roles are essential in fulfilling the mission of the Church to proclaim God's Word and bring people to Jesus Christ (Maturkanič, P., Jiříšťová, Gruber, Šuráb, Majda, 2023).

Specifics of spiritual care for children with specific learning difficulties

When motivating children during spiritual care, it is essential to keep in mind the aspect of their spiritual growth. Due to the diversity of issues, it is necessary to consider appropriate practices:

- *Perception of individual specifics* - each child must be perceived as unique, as he or she has his or her perception of the world around them, interests, and experiences. It is necessary to get to know the child better to better understand

individual needs. In this way, we gain the opportunity to incorporate practices that reflect their experiences and opportunities to experience and fully embrace God's message.

- *Collaboration with special educators, teachers, or therapists* - to use their insights, knowledge, and procedures that would lead to grasping the process of working with a given child. The key is to adapt the methods used to the needs and abilities of the children.
- *A safe and supportive environment where they will not be afraid to express their opinions, ask questions, and share thoughts and feelings.* It is essential to encourage open communication without negative evaluative comments - this too leads to a greater willingness to engage in pastoral activities and so take an active part in their spiritual growth. To build a personal supportive relationship, to show sincere interest and willingness to help.
- *Positive reinforcement* - it is very important for children with SLD to experience success, so it is essential to highlight every success and skill, even small ones. The sense of success (which is often not experienced elsewhere, or minimally) is a source of self-confidence and willingness to engage in further activities.
- *Alternatively, in some cases, individualised or small group teaching is preferable, at least initially* - there is more room for creating a supportive environment, taking into account the individual pace, or removing shyness when asking questions (the child will not feel "stupid" for not knowing or initially not understanding something). Individual support, such as listening, empathy, and help with crisis management, is very important for children with specific learning difficulties, as their environment often fails to provide it.
- *Interactive activities link multiple senses such as sight, hearing, and touch, as more resources are more fun* - it's good to use visual aids such as pictures, movement, music, acting out stories, role-playing, and experiencing situations for themselves to help them experience and embrace biblical truths. Use of current technology e.g. appropriate videos, apps, and online resources.
- *A clear retelling of Bible stories and parables that bring out the lessons and truths of faith in an accessible way.* Using questions and encouragement to lead children to think and relate what is being told to their own lives and problems.
- *Addressing content* - it is essential that the topic discussed is relevant and graspable for the child in question, interconnectedness with everyday experiences - to show how God's guidance is evident in everyday situations and how He can be our conscious support and hope in concrete circumstances.
- *Alternatively, divide the tasks into several parts* - to track progress and experience a sense of achievement. Celebrate the completion of a unit to motivate a

desire for personal growth. It is also important to communicate clearly and simplistically, to use clear, concise and simplified language when introducing spiritual concepts, and to give concrete examples from everyday life - but care must be taken to ensure that the message is not lost. Frequent repetition and reinforcement are good, repeating the main message, stories, and Bible verses. It is best to do this in different contexts.

- *It is important to form peer groups and create an experience of belonging*, for example through Bible classes for children, worship services, interest groups, cooperation, and social connections, creating an environment where they can learn from each other, as well as be an emotional support in times of crisis. Also important is patience, empathy and understanding of the specific expressions of these children. Awareness and building a positive self-image, fostering a sense of belonging, and developing social skills such as experiencing (or practising) empathy, communication, cooperation and conflict resolution.
- *Involve the family in evangelism* by providing leadership or materials, workshops, and training sessions to continue the discussion, and spiritual direction and to ensure continuity and support beyond the formal setting. Encourage open discussion, collaboration and communication.
- *Experience prayer and prayer moments* where children can actively participate and experience faith. Use repetitive individual prayers or chants or songs.
- It is also necessary to emphasize that pastoral care does not only address educational or social needs but also and above all *involves the spiritual and moral growth of the child*.
- When pastoring children, it is important to use fun games and activities that *promote team cohesion*, serve as a tool to engage children in meaningful discussions, promote fun learning, and memorization, and illustrate the pastoral nature of pastoral care. They also help to reinforce spiritual learning and create a positive and welcoming environment for spiritual growth.
- *At the end of the meeting, I recommend creating a circle of children*, decorating the centre with pictures or visual aids on the topic discussed, or decorating it nicely. Then each child squeezes the hand of the child standing on his/her right side and wishes him/her something nice as a farewell - it should be personally related to the child, e.g. "Have a nice day and I wish you to stop having a toothache...", or "I wish you God's help in your maths exam". Wishes are to be received silently without comment. (Portmann, 2018, Šimonovský 2015).

Suggested games and activities to strengthen awareness of belonging

- *Common puzzle* - a large e.g. quarter is cut into as many parts as there are children, everyone paints their part according to themselves, then everything is glued together like a puzzle and hung in a visible place - a demonstration that children belong together.
- *Bible riddles* - divide the children into teams and each team draws a story or character from the Bible and together they pantomime it and the others guess.
- *Memory Relay* - children divided into teams are given a verse to memorize. As the team recites the verse, each member says one word until the verse is complete. The length of the verses depends on the number and ability of the members.
- *Building a church tower* - children will be given blocks or materials for building (or they can get them on their own - as a symbol of their search for faith). The children then build the faith tower one by one and try to build a stable tower together, adding their own experiences or opinions about the importance of unity and working together as they lay their part in the construction.
- *Drawing* - the team draws a slip of paper with a word or name from the Bible (e.g. Bethlehem, Jonah, comet) and the members of that team draw one line from the picture on the paper and the other participants guess the concept, trying to be successful before the team draws the picture.
- *Collaborative art projects* - together they paint a picture on a given theme or create a collage, ceramic product, fabric product, etc., and each child contributes to the creation of a collaborative work.
- *Riddles* - solving a riddle together based on individual clues that team members have.
- *Knot* - children stand in a circle, hold hands with two different people in the circle and without letting go, try to untangle the "human knot".
- *Minefield* - set up an obstacle course with objects scattered around the room, one child is blindfolded and the other child guides them through the "minefield" using instructions without the blindfolded child touching the objects.
- *Tug-of-war* - but teams do not tug and compete with each other, but work together to move a heavy object (Portmann, 2018; Šimonovský 2015).

Learning support

- *Bible Crumbs* - a game based on stories, characters and teachings from the Bible. Using question papers, they repeat the stories they have read, discuss them and deepen their knowledge and understanding of Scripture (due to children with SLDs, pictures can be used instead of written text).
- *Search* - children search for relevant Bible verses or objects related to certain stories based on clues (again, it is possible to use pictures or physical objects hidden around).
- *Who am I?* - write the names of various biblical characters on pieces of paper and attach them to the children's backs and they, by asking questions to others, find out the name of the character. Again, the difficulty of knowing the characters must be adjusted to age and ability.
- *Storytelling Relay* - we will divide the children into teams and each team will be given a Bible story. The first child starts to tell (maybe one or two sentences), then storytelling continues with the next child, and so on...until the story is finished (Portmann, 2018, Šimonovský 2015).

Development of spirituality

- *Parables* - on the themes of the selected parables, the children act out a skit, which they bring into their own lives, i.e. how they can use the lessons in their own lives.
- *Fruit of the Spirit* - write the fruits of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22-23): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control on individual relay batons and hold a race where each team member carries a baton labelled with one of the fruits - the passing of the baton demonstrates the passing of these gifts in our lives.
- *Another variation of the Fruit of the Spirit* - create cards - one set with the names of each gift and another set with representations of the gifts, children find pairs and discuss how they show up in our lives. These cards can be made by the children themselves - especially with the artistic representation, the children engage their imagination and spiritual perception.
- *Prayer circle* - sit in a circle and begin with a simple phrase e.g. Dear God... and proceed around the circle with each child adding their contribution to the prayer - either a personal short prayer or just saying what they can be grateful to God for. It is also good to include team sports, board and social games, and cooperative puzzles (Portmann, 2018, Šimonovský 2015).

All games must be adapted to the age of the children, the pastoral objectives and also to the possible manifestations of SLD. Playing games is fun for the children and in a non-violent way they acquire knowledge of the Bible, experience a sense of belonging to a Christian community and experience spiritual encouragement.

Conclusion

It is not uncommon for children with SLD to experience feelings of frustration, feelings of inadequacy, failure, or low self-esteem, and to be at risk of social isolation or bullying. And it is pastoral care - outside the preaching of God's Word - that can provide a welcoming environment where they experience a supportive community, where they feel accepted and understood, and where they are not afraid to show their emotions, but can openly share their problems and concerns. Help build positive self-esteem and awareness of their worth as a unique image of God's presence. To create a supportive environment for them to integrate into social groups within the faith community and then master the transfer of this skill to other social groups (Akimjak, 2015). Pastoral care includes a spiritual and religious component that provides children with a sense of purpose, values and ethics. Providing total care and creating a supportive environment, helps to significantly improve the overall development and integration of children with SLD into society, developing their potential and enabling them to reach their full potential. Pastoral care conducted in this way can be a decisive factor in the overall development of a given child's abilities and play a crucial role in their overall future direction (Hlad, Konečná, Žalec, Majda, Ionescu, 2022; Hlad, Judák, 2019).

Comprehensive pastoral care is essential for children with SLD as it provides emotional support, contributes to building self-esteem and self-confidence, develops social skills, is based on individual support, and provides moral and spiritual guidance, which leads to the development of educational, emotional and social skills. Family connectedness and cooperation are also important (Judák, 2010).

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