



The Newborn Promise Podcast: The Blue Bonnet Child Near You

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Callie Grant: Welcome. You are listening to the Newborn Promise Podcast for building up new families in Christian faith.

Callie Grant: Hello, and thank you for joining us today. I'm Callie Grant, your host for a discussion with Meg Calvin on the blue bonnet child near you. You might be a pastor, church volunteer, teacher, or family member who knows a child who is in difficult or even abusive circumstances. You might know them as the child who often disrupts a group setting or maybe you know a child who holds back, who seems fearful or emotionally harmed.

Callie Grant: Many of us feel unequipped to help such children. Meg Calvin offers us a loving perspective and practical steps for helping them. She is the children's ministry director at the First United Methodist Church in Winfield, Kansas. She hosts a variety of outreach programs that draw a diverse community to her church and it's there, in the front line of these ministries, that she has learned so much. Now she has written about her many experiences to share them with others. Her gift is keeping this difficult subject full of light and hope.

Callie Grant: Her husband Garrett, and young daughter Henley, help Meg in her mission by giving her the encouraging support she needs at home. So welcome Meg. I am so glad you have tackled this topic in a loving and encouraging way. Thank you for being with us today and sharing all of your ideas and experience with us.

Meg Calvin: I'm excited to talk about it too, and hopefully be helpful to others who are listening and wanting to do more.

Callie Grant: Yes. Well let's start with the title of the book you wrote. The Blue Bonnet Child: Finding Grace in Poor Soil. Explain who a blue bonnet child is and how you came up with that analogy.

Meg Calvin: So a blue bonnet child is a child from a neglectful or abusive home. The way that this simple analogy came to me was from my grandfather and he talks with the richest, most soulful southern drawl that you can find in Texas. And he's also a gardener. And so conversations about soil and flowers and tending a garden

were regular in our family, because my dad also had lands escaping business. And while I was in seminary, we kept being trained. Lots of time was spent training us to partner with parents as the primary faith nurturer. And while this is all well and good and very, very, very much needed within the local church, my heart kept asking the question about what about these kids from troubled homes who no matter how hard I try to partner with the parent, they're going to need the church to step up as a supplemental family to them? What about those kids?

Meg Calvin: So I was at home in Texas visiting and my grandfather and I were driving along and we passed a dirty old highway. And, of course, the field was covered in blue bonnets and in his deepest, richest, soulful southern drawl, my grandfather's said, "Oh be," which I don't know what that word means, but it means I'll be. And he said, "But I'll be, isn't it something how pretty the blue bonnet flower is considering how poor its soil is?" And it jolted something in me and I said, "Come again?" Because I do not have a green thumb whatsoever. I said, "Come again?" And he says, "The blue bonnet, the poorer the soil, the more unkempt the soil, the more beautiful the blue bonnet will grow." In that moment, that became the analogy for a big part of my vocational calling.

Meg Calvin: I began, instead of using these kids as kids of broken homes, which is never helpful to call them that, or kids on the wrong side of the track, or kids on the margins, whatever word we want to use that carries a more negative stigma. It was so much more beautiful and so much more hopeful to start talking about them to my volunteers and in my seminary classes as blue bonnet children. Regardless of the poor quality of their home life, that Christ has the final say in how they blossom through life. And the local church can be a supplemental family that showers them with God's grace as they grow. And so that is ... My grandfather gets the credit for that one.

Callie Grant: Oh, I love that. There's such wisdom in that. I mean, God's world has ... It's like an amazing classroom that teaches us about human nature and his ways with us. It's beautiful that you picked up on that for children that are so close to your heart. Tell us what kind of signs you look for in your ministry to discern where children are coming from because not all signs are visible.

Meg Calvin: So some red flags that I look for, and thanks to partnering with safegatherings.com, our volunteers look for these too. The first is very subtle, but are there interactions with their parents respectful and age appropriate? And how are their parents' social interactions with others? Another red flag would be to listen to how other kids describe a blue bonnet child or a kid that you are somewhat worried about. What do other kids say about him or her at school? How is that child acting away from your care?

Meg Calvin: A third one to look for is how quickly a child emotionally explodes with anger or rage or how quickly a child shuts down emotionally out of sadness or fear or just nerves, how quickly that happens. A fourth red flag to look for would be an inability to focus. This is after I feel as a teacher, as a minister, that I have done

everything in my power to set him or her up for success in the learning space. Is my lesson well planned? Am I tapping into different learning styles? Is it age appropriate? Is my space set up well to learn in or worship in? Or are the surroundings distracting? Is the child sitting by someone that is distracting or not helpful? Did the child just have a Red Bull before he came into my program?

Meg Calvin: So once I've checked all those other external and internal factors, once all those factors are checked and the only thing left is, huh, you're still not focusing. Your parents haven't missed mentioned anything to me about a learning deficiency of any kind. Then in that moment I might be in thinking there's something else going on here like this child's never with us mentally. I only go there to that red flag, like I said, if I have done everything in my power as a teacher to set that student up for success.

Meg Calvin: The fifth one to look forward would be if I see some similar odd quirks, subtle behaviors among all siblings. So if it's ... Yeah, that's self-explanatory. If all three or four kids in the family have no affect on their faces or if they all flinched when I try to give them a pat on the shoulder. If I'm saying the same thing in all the siblings, all the kids in the same household, that's a red flag.

Callie Grant: That makes sense.

Meg Calvin: And last, another less subtle one, is the child's topic of conversation. And usually teachers can tell, oh, this kid is just saying that to sound cool in front of his friends. And then I've noticed anyway, there's a difference when a kid says inappropriate things very often and it's not just to try being cool or try on a different identity. It's because that's what he or she is exposed to, sadly. So listening closely to what are they talking about?

Meg Calvin: And then some less subtle signs of abuse. And again, some of these might be news to some people that haven't taken a course with safe gatherings or other similar learning venues. And of course there are others, but I think these ones I just shared are maybe some that others don't always think of. And I think when they are ... There's more than three of them in one child. It's, it's definitely worth praying for the spirit to guide you if to make a call to DCF or whatever it's called in your state.

Callie Grant: Yes. That's the very important step, as you say, after you've exhausted all the other possibilities. So what is that experience like?

Meg Calvin: The biggest thing to remember is that when I call CPS or DCF, it is not my job to validate the concern I'm bringing to them. It's not my job to prove that it's true. That's the professionals jobs, and it's my job to report what I've seen. So I think sometimes people are afraid and intimidated to not make a call.

Callie Grant: It's a tough call.

Meg Calvin: I hope and pray that anyone who's listening, who's seeing a kid's face come to mind as I talk about these signs, I pray that he or she will feel encouraged and just I'm empowered by the Holy Spirit to make a call and know that you don't have to prove it. You have to just report it. And also know that if you are in a tight relationship with the family, you will remain anonymous unless you're a state mandated reporter, you will remain anonymous. But from my experience they will ask you, at least in our state, they will ask you, "Do you want to remain anonymous or do you want us to fill you in on what we find?"

Callie Grant: Well, and they're so professional about how they handle that sort of information.

Meg Calvin: Yes. So professional.

Callie Grant: Well, one wonderful thing about your program is the way that you train volunteers and others in a really practical approach that you have called the AAA approach to helping children to be aware, to advocate, and articulate. And we won't confuse that with the car agency, like you said. Describe to us how the AAA approach works.

Meg Calvin: Yes. So, the first step would be to be aware, and we break this down in the book by asking yourself, how self-aware am I as a minister, as a teacher, as a caretaker? Am I aware of my weaknesses, my strengths, my own needs to honor how God wired me? Am I aware of my personality, my preferences? Am I aware of these things so I can set myself up for success when I'm teaching or serving? And the other step to be aware is to be aware of how the Holy Spirit is moving. Is my prayer life and study life and my worship life, is it strong enough that when I'm being nudged by the Holy Spirit, it's easy for me to realize it? And for advocating for their needs, and so three here would be, we want to arm kids with take home tools and self-regulation and spiritual disciplines so that they can advocate for themselves regardless of the poor choices made in their house.

Meg Calvin: And then another way that the local church can advocate for kids of troubled homes is to have strong community partnerships with some of my favorites that I learned from and connect families with all the time is Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Parents As First Teachers, those kinds of things. So, where you can stand strong and focus your time on making sure your ministry is theologically sound, but you're also being the church and the way that you are sending parents to experts in other ways to help them.

Callie Grant: Super.

Meg Calvin: And then the last one to advocate is to, this is simple really, is just to make a point to stand up for a kid. Even in just the conversations of cleaning up after your programs. Just stand up for that kid. And especially, especially if the kid is present and the parents are present. I compliment the heck out of that kid in front of their parent, for all kids, but especially, especially blue bonnet kids. I

make a point if the parent says something like, "Oh I'm glad he's like that for somebody," or, "Are you sure it got me about my kid?" I made sure I make sure to step back into that conversation and I give that kid a positive narrative. "Oh yes, every day. Every day that I see him, he is responsible and kind."

Callie Grant: That sounds great. Okay. So far we have covered, be aware, advocate, and now for the last part of your AAA approach, tell us about articulate.

Meg Calvin: Yes. We know that kids require mentors of the faith to give language to what they're experiencing. So when kids enter your church or your classroom or your Big Brothers, Big Sisters Club, whatever, wherever you serve, when kids enter your building, they immediately feel that something's different hopefully. And so it's your job and God is counting on you and equipping you to articulate, to give language to what they are experiencing here and how they can take that, the healing power of the Holy Spirit home with them.

Callie Grant: Those are all awesome, Meg. Thank you. What about the children who don't come from troubled families or abusive circumstances but just have special needs or behavioral problems? What about working with them and their parents?

Meg Calvin: I like the imagery of a two legged race. We both want that children, that child, to be successful emotionally and intellectually and physically. We both want that to the same amount. I'm at the beck and call of those parents and those guardians because I can trust their motives. I can trust their efforts. I can trust their wisdom. And in every conversation I will share 100% transparently all the time because I know this parent knows how to care and provide for this child and is working harder than I am to love this child well. I know that my sharing will not lead to harm to the child at home. Unlike a blue bonnet child, a child with behavioral problems from my experience, less community partnerships and less resources will be needed to help this child succeed because obviously the parent in this situation, if it is a healthy functional home, the parent's doing more than I am, doing more of a lot of the legwork to help this kid succeed.

Callie Grant: You're so competent and accomplished and you have great experience and great ideas, but what has been the hardest part for you in working with blue bonnet children, particularly from a spiritual standpoint?

Meg Calvin: Okay. Particularly from a spiritual standpoint. Theologically, the most difficult part is sitting with the fact that God loves the abuser as much as the abused. And that this healing grace that also runs after the victim also chases after the abuser. This is tough. This is really tough.

Callie Grant: Oh, I can imagine because especially they're right there physically with you and you see them all the time.

Meg Calvin: Yeah, they're in our, as I shared before, we have a community meal at our church that's thankfully been serving lots of people for almost nine years now and some of, the majority of the guests are lower income families. And there was one gentleman there, I know there's more than one, but this one I know for sure about because we worried about him. He has a record as a registered sex offender. I had to take two shifts off from serving because I can't right now, I can't be in the same space as this young man, as this early 20 something man. And so that is tough. And I am praying for the Holy Spirit's guidance on that one. So I had to take a little break from serving. But I will be, I'll gather my gumption and grit and go back.

Meg Calvin: But as I serve these families from troubled homes, I come back to Matthew 10:16 where it speaks of how the disciples were called to be wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove. And I think that God wants me to move forward in service knowing that we are all capable of good and we're all capable of evil. And also, we must hold each other accountable to acting justly. Sometimes what that looks like is calling DCF. Sometimes what that looks like is a family being separated. Sometimes what it looks like is the parent's going to counseling or whatnot.

Meg Calvin: And sometimes it looks like, okay DCF's not going to do anything but our church can. So you sir, you child that I'm loving and serving right now, for the next six years that you are in school and part of our program, you can count on a church family to be your supplemental family. We're going to love on you and we're going to see you. Even if we just see you a hundred hours a year, those a hundred hours will be full, and full of grace and full of love and equipping that will carry you through your lifelong after you leave our church.

Callie Grant: That's really powerful Meg, and it reminds me of something I read in your book. You wrote "Thanks to the grace of Christ poured on by the supplemental family of faith, the blue bonnet child's poor soil did not have the final say in how they blossomed." Just so beautiful and it really brings your analogy full circle, that imagery of the supplemental family helping that blue bonnet to blossom. It's just beautiful imagery. You also wrote, "Children are not the church of tomorrow. They are the church of today." And I love that because it summarizes why so many people like you pour their heart and soul into children and family ministry. Thank you for sharing so much with us today about your experiences and the blue bonnet children that you've known and helping us equipping us to help the ones that we might know or encounter that God might bring into our path.

Meg Calvin: Yes, you are so, so welcome.

Callie Grant: Would you close us in prayer about the important things we've discussed today?

Meg Calvin: Yeah, yeah, that's great. Dear awesome God, I thank you so much for the gifts that you've given each of us to serve others. I pray for the listeners and I pray for the children in their care. And I pray that you would help us to be aware of

how your Holy Spirit is counting on us to move in those blue bonnet kids' lives. I pray for any fear or doubt that you would remove those things so we could act and make a difference. I asked for your forgiveness when we have ignored at your divine nudge, when we have missed the mark. And I pray that if anyone listening today, I pray for myself, if we have missed your nudge in some way, that you had at knock again. Knock again on our hearts, that you would nudge us again to act and we will be used.

Meg Calvin: And I pray for anyone who is listening today that if this interview was hard to listen to, if this topic is hard to talk about for some reason, that they would just be hugged by you. That they would be comforted, that your grace would cover them Lord, and that they would be resilient in you and with you. And I thank you God that you have the final say in how we be all blossom into life. It's in your name we pray, for always and forever. Amen.

Callie Grant: Thanks again for listening to the Newborn Promise Podcast. For more information about building enough new families in Christian faith, visit <http://www.grahamblanchard.com>.