

Christian Lesson Plans for the Children's Sabbath



Following are lesson plans for children and youths from preschool through high school. They are adapted from Children's Sabbath lesson plans written by the Rev. Dr. Susan Willhauck for the 1998 Children's Sabbath resource published by the Children's Defense Fund.

These lesson plans may be used before, on, or after the Children's Sabbath weekend. They may be used instead of your customary curriculum during the Christian education time, adapted and woven into your customary curriculum, or used at another time designated specifically for the Children's Sabbath. Some of the lesson plans may be combined for congregations who have students from several age groups in the same class.

You may also want to review the Curriculum and Guide for an Interfaith Session on Ending Child Poverty Now in the 2019 *Uniting Hearts and Voices to End Child Poverty Now* resource. It may be used instead of the high school lesson below, and has useful background information for leaders, especially of the middle school and high school lessons.

2019 Children's Sabbath Lesson Plan for Preschool Children

Theme: God Cares!

Scriptural Passage: Luke 18:1, 7. Jesus told them a story so they would not lose heart. Will God be slow to help God's people?

Focus: God has promised to take care of us. God's people can take care of others.

Lesson Objectives:

The children will learn:

- How people care for babies
- How God loves and cares for us
- How children are important to the church
- God's promise for us and how we care for others

Materials

- Baby doll or dolls
- Baby doll blanket
- Other doll items such as a baby bottle and clothing
- Permanent marker
- Large square of canvas fabric
- Washable paints and paper plates,
- Crayons
- Old file folders (or cardboard)
- Children's scissors
- Glue stick
- 1-inch wide ribbon cut into 3-inch long strips
- Masking tape

Follow-up Suggestion:

Donate the baby dolls to a program serving children in poverty, such as a homeless shelter or Head Start center.

Preparation

1. Wrap the baby doll in the blanket and place it somewhere in your classroom.
2. Set out canvas, paints, and a paper plate for each paint color. Write "Little Hands Need Our Help" at the top with permanent marker.
3. Photocopy the "God Loves Me" button (see page xx). Make one copy for each child.
4. Cut out circles the same size as the button from the file folders or light cardboard. Cut ribbon strip
5. Set out the copies of the button, scissors, glue stick and crayons.

Overview

1. Gathering, Prayer, and Introduction
2. Baby Doll Demonstration
3. Activity: Handprint Banner
4. Snack
5. Activity: Make Buttons
6. Closing: Song and Prayer

Gathering, Prayer, and Introduction

Read the Bible verse. Say a prayer. Introduce the lesson, saying “Today is a special day in our church called Children’s Sabbath. Today everyone in our church, from the youngest kids to the oldest grown-ups, is remembering how important children are and how we as a church care for all children.”

Baby Doll Demonstration

Tell the children that there is something very special in the room. Ask them to see if they can find it. Tell them the “keep the secret” when they find it. Have all children look around the room and identify the baby doll as the special object.

Pick up the baby doll and invite the children to join you in a circle. (You may wish to have more than one baby doll, such as a girl and a boy, or dolls representing different ethnic groups.)

Ask the children what is needed to take care of a baby. They may share answers such as feeding the baby, giving the baby a bottle or nursing the baby, diapering the baby, and dressing the baby. Ask them what other things adults do to care for babies. Help them name things like rocking the baby, putting the baby in a car seat, taking the baby to the doctor for check-ups and when it is sick.

Talk about how babies need love and a good start in life. Have the children pass the baby doll around the circle with each child taking a turn at rocking the baby, cuddling with it, dressing it, or acting out some way to care for a baby such as putting it in a car seat. Set a time limit for each child to hold the baby doll before passing it. Talk about how God loves all children and how God cares for us.

Activity

As the children finish holding the baby doll explain that it is time for the baby to take a nap. Pretend to put the baby to sleep in a safe place.

Invite the children over to the table where you have set out the canvas and paint. Explain that they will be making a banner for the church. Read the heading on the sign: “Little Hands Need Help.” Tell the children that they will be putting their handprints on the sign to remind the grown-ups that God loves children and wants grown-ups to take good care of children.

Have the children dip their hands in the paint on the paper plates and then place them on the canvas. Help them wash their hands after making the handprints.

Snack

Tell the children that grown-ups aren't the only ones who can help children. Children can be helpers too! Invite the children to help you set out napkins and cups for snack. Invite them to set the snacks at each place. Pour the juice once the children are seated.

Activity

Remind the children of God's special love for each of them and that one way that we feel God's love for us is through the people who love us and care for us. Ask the children to name some of the people who love them. Then ask the children to go to the table where you have set out copies of the God Loves Me buttons. Have them color the buttons. Help children cut around the circle. Help them glue the button to the file folder or cardboard circle that you have cut. Attach two strips of colorful ribbon to the bottom of each button. Tape the button on each child with masking tape as they prepare to leave class (after the closing).

Closing

Have the children join in the singing of "Jesus Loves Me." Close by having the children hold hands while saying the following prayer with you. (You say a few words at a time, and then pause while the children repeat them.)

Dear God,

Thank you for helpers big and small.

Thank you for Jesus who loves us.

Thank you for the love that our church shows for children everywhere.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



2019 Children's Sabbath Lesson Plan for Elementary Students

Theme: God Is So Good!

Scriptural Passage: Luke 18:1-8a

Focus: God is just and will care for all God's people. God's justice is greater than that of a human judge.

Lesson Objectives:

The children will learn:

- How adults, youths, and children can help children
- How a widow received justice
- That God's justice is great
- One way to work together to help a child who is living in poverty

Materials

- Several pictures of adults, youths, and children helping children. (If possible, collect photos that show adults, youths, and children in your congregation helping children. Alternatively or in addition, cut pictures from magazines or print from the internet.)
- Strips of colored construction paper (2-3 inches wide and 8-10 inches long)
- Markers
- Glue sticks
- Chalkboard or newsprint
- Containers (small cardboard boxes, cartons, or or canisters like oatmeal boxes) and materials for decorating them—stickers, tissue paper, magazine pictures, pennies.

Preparation

1. Review the lesson plan and decide if you will want to modify it, depending on the age of your students.
2. Collect the pictures of adults, youths, and children helping children.
3. Cut strips of construction paper and gather other needed materials.
4. Write the list of new words on chalkboard or newsprint. The words include: parable, widow, persistent, judge, opponent, and justice.
5. Make copies of the Think Sheet for early arrivers and copies of the playlet "I'll Be Back" on page xx# for every student.
6. Contact a local organization that is serving children living in poverty to offer your help in providing a modest amount of funding for needed items or another need.

Overview

1. Gathering, Prayer, and Introduction
2. Make a Paper Chain
3. Circle Time
4. Application: Make Collection Boxes
5. Game: Widow's Relay
6. Closing: Song and Prayer

For Early Arrivers

Distribute copies of the Think Sheet on page 9. Children can work together or alone to complete it.

Gathering, Prayer, and Introduction

Gather the students and ask if anyone knows what special day it is in your church. (If no one knows, tell them it is the Children's Sabbath.) Ask them what the Children's Sabbath is and why they think your church celebrates it. (If necessary, add to the students' responses or, if none responds, explain that the Children's Sabbath is a weekend celebrated each October by churches, synagogues, and other places of worship where adults and kids all celebrate how special every child is, learn more about children who are experiencing big problems, and think about how God wants to us to help make things better for children, and then together the church takes actions to help solve the problems and make things better for children.)

Make a Paper Chain

Invite the students to a table where you have placed markers, construction paper strips, glue sticks, and pictures of adults, youths and children helping or interacting with children. Ask the children to think of one word that describes what the helpers are doing in each picture, such as care, teach, pray, and listen. After they have chosen a word, invite each child to write that word on one of the strips of construction paper. Help younger children write their words. Invite them to link the strips together under the heading "Link Together to Help Children."

Circle Time

Call the children to sit in a circle with you. Point to the new word list you have written on the chalkboard or newsprint. Discuss the meaning of each word. Ask the children to help you define them:

- Parable: A kind of story that Jesus told to teach something important about God and people
- Widow: A woman whose husband is dead
- Opponent: Someone who is against you, is on the other side and trying to win against you.
- Persistent: Not giving up
- Judge: Someone who makes decisions about questions brought before a court
- Justice: when things turn out right; fairness

Read Luke 18:1-8a to the children. Ask them to listen for some of the words listed on your sheet. Pass around copies of the playlet. Choose a student to be the judge and another to be the widow. These should be students who can read. Ask the remaining students to play the part of the crowd. For younger classes, have another adult read the script with you as the students play the crowd.

After you have finished acting out the playlet, talk about the parable. Ask the children how the widow finally got justice.

Make the point that Jesus was contrasting God and the judge. Jesus told the parable to teach how much more God cares for us than the judge. God is good and will bring justice much more quickly than the judge.

Ask what we can learn from this parable. Talk about how we need to be persistent in seeking justice and how God greatly cares for all people. Ask the children to name ways that your church cares for children.

NOTE: This playlet could be used in worship, involving the congregation as the crowd.

Application

Invite the children to make collection boxes, decorating the various containers that you provided. Explain that your class is going to collect money to help other children in your community. Describe the program and need that you have identified.

Send the boxes home with the following note attached:

Dear Parents:

Our class is going to [describe your option]. Please have your family collect coins for three weeks and then have your child bring his/her box back to class on [insert date]. Thank you,

[signed with your name]

Game

The Widow's Relay requires some open space. You may wish to go outside or to a larger room for this activity. Have the children form two teams. Ask a volunteer to be the judge. Have the two teams line up beside each other in two single file lines. Have the judge stand some distance away.

Explain that the two teams are the "widows" and that each person must make three trips to the "judge" before he or she can tag the next person. On each trip the widow must do something different. For example, on the first trip the child may run; on the second trip the child may skip; on the third trip the child may hop on one foot. The judge should watch each widow to make sure she or he does three different styles. On the third trip the widow must tag the judge, then go back and tag the next person in line. This person becomes the widow, and the relay proceeds until one team is finished.

After this active game, talk about how God is so good and faster to act for justice. Talk about how it required persistence from each person to finish the relay, and we need to be persistent to keep working for justice, to make things fair for all children.

Closing

Remind the children to take home their collection boxes and save their coins and bring them back. Teach a song such as "God Is So Good," and sing it together.

Have the children join in the following prayer, repeating each phrase after you say it.

Dear God,
Thank you for answering our prayer
and caring for us.
Help us to make this a better world.
Help us never to lose heart.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Playlet: I'll Be Back: The Parable of the Widow and the Judge

Judge [in a big voice]: I am an important judge. I am not afraid of anything or anybody. People are afraid of me. I sit in my court all day long and people do what I say.

Crowd: [oohs and aahs]

Widow: I am a widow. My husband died and I am the only parent there to care for my family. People in my city don't think widows are very important. I have a problem and I'm going to see if this judge can straighten it out.

Crowd: You go, girl!

Judge [to the widow]: What do you want?

Widow: Judge, someone is treating me unfairly and I need you to help.

Judge: Go away, I don't have time for this.

Widow: Okay, but I'll be back. [Widow leaves.]

Crowd: She'll be back.

Judge: On with the next case.

Widow: [returning to the scene] Judge, judge, I have a problem.

Judge: What are you doing here?

Widow: [fiercely] I want justice.

Judge: Case dismissed! Get out of here!

Crowd: [Whisper to each other angrily.]

Widow: [Leaves slowly, like she doesn't want to.]

Judge: I am a very important man. I have no time for widows. I don't care what God thinks.

Widow: [returning] Judge, please listen to me. I'm not going to stop until you do.

Judge: Okay, okay. You're just going to bug me to death if I don't. I'll see that you get justice in this matter.

Crowd: [cheers]

Think Sheet

1. List some things that all children need to grow up healthy and safe.

2. Draw a picture of people in your church caring for children.

3. Find these words from today's Bible lesson: *(Words can go up and down, side to side, or diagonally)*

Judge

Parable

Widow

Justice

Heart

Pray

God

W	A	J	U	D	G	E	B	P
I	C	U	D	E	F	G	H	R
D	I	S	J	G	K	L	M	A
O	N	T	H	O	O	P	Q	Y
W	R	I	S	E	T	D	U	V
W	X	C	Y	Z	A	A	B	C
D	E	E	G	F	H	R	I	J
K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	T	R
P	A	R	A	B	L	E	S	T

2019 Children's Sabbath

Lesson Plan for Middle School Students

Theme: God loves children and justice

Scriptural Passage: Luke 18:1-8a

Focus: What we can do to care for, love, support, and seek justice for children, especially those living in poverty.

Lesson Objectives:

The participants will:

- Reflect on themselves as children and on what all children need
- Learn how God loves justice
- Learn what is needed for youth in the church to help bring justice for children

Materials

- Crayons and markers
- Newsprint
- Cardstock weight paper or poster board
- Equipment to play the song "Lean On Me" (e.g., smart phone and speakers, CD and CD player)

Preparation:

1. Write the slogan "End Child Poverty Now!" vertically down the side of a piece of newsprint or poster board. Hang it on the wall of your classroom.
2. Make photocopies of the handout, "Opening Our Hearts, Hearing Their Voices—Stories of Child Poverty" on pages 16-18.
3. Make postcards (enough for each student to have one, plus extras if they will be distributing them to other church members) by printing <https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ECPN-postcards-2019.pdf> on cardstock. [You can also have a photocopy shop make the copies.]

Overview

1. Gathering, Prayer, and Introduction
2. Bible Study
3. Application: Opening Our Hearts, Hearing Their Voices
4. Activity: Create an Acrostic
5. Activity: End Child Poverty Now Postcards
6. Closing: Song and Prayer

Gathering, Prayer, and Introduction

Bible Study

Invite a student to read the passage from Luke 18:1-8a. (You may wish to use the Playlet on page 8 to engage your students in acting out the parable.) If you think it would be helpful, ask for volunteers to define some of the less familiar vocabulary, like widow and persistent.

Invite the students to write a paraphrase of the passage. Explain that it means to write in their own words what the parable says. They can use words and images from our day. For example, they could substitute a single parent who works hard but is living in poverty instead of the widow, and a member of Congress as the judge. The students can do this individually or in pairs or small groups, depending on what you think will work best for your class.

When they are done, invite the students to read their paraphrases aloud.

Opening Our Hearts, Hearing Their Voices—Stories of Child Poverty

Distribute the handout “Opening Our Hearts, Hearing Their Voices: Stories of Child Poverty.” Invite three volunteers to read the three stories.

When the reading is done, invite the students to take a minute in silence to let the words settle into their hearts and minds.

Then, discuss how Jesus told this parable to his followers so that they would “not lose heart.” He also used the parable to contrast the unjust judge with God who loves justice and is not slow to act or care.

Ask the students to think about the parable and its intention to encourage us not to lose heart.

- What are ways that the poverty which is experienced by nearly one in five children in our nation might cause a child to lose heart?
- What are ways that working hard but still being in poverty might make a parent lose heart?
- How might working for justice as someone who wants to end poverty cause someone to lose heart?
- What is the parable’s message for people in those situations?
- What might it look like for us as God’s people to take action in response to child poverty?

Activity

Have the students create an acrostic-type verse from the slogan “End Child Poverty Now!” Explain that through the National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths, congregations throughout the country are turning their attention this weekend to what they can do to call for action to end child poverty in our rich nation. On the piece of newsprint you have hung on the wall, write verbs, “action words,” that your students suggest to describe what they need to do to work for an end to child poverty. For each letter in the slogan, they should think of an “action word” or phrase. Plan to display your acrostic on a bulletin board.

For example, one acrostic might look like this:

E-explore causes	C-commit	P-partner	N-network
N-never give up	H-heal	O-open hearts	O-organize
D-don't accept stereotypes	I-involve	V-vote	W-welcome
	L-love	E-educate others	
	D-discern	R-relate	
		T-try and try again	
		Y-yearn for justice	

Activity

Explain that there are nine policies that members of Congress could pass that would help reduce child poverty in our nation by more than 57 percent. Some would help increase employment and make work pay for families with children. Others would ensure that children's basic needs (like food and housing) are met when families fall on hard times.

Distribute the End Child Poverty Now postcards. Invite the students to write their own messages in the blank message space. Tell them the names of their senators and invite them to choose one to address their postcard to. Provide the address and have the students write that in, too. Distribute postcard stamps and have the students stamp their cards. Promise to mail them on Monday.

Plan with the students to distribute postcards to members of the congregation. Decide if they will make a presentation (for instance, during the coffee hour or during the "minute for mission" in worship, or at another time). Or, perhaps they will just hand them out after worship on the Children's Sabbath or on a following weekend, since the Children's Sabbath is intended to stimulate year-round action for children and justice. (Secure appropriate permission to follow up on those plans.)

Closing

Play the song "Lean on Me." Encourage the students to sing along. They may wish to create dance movements to accompany the song.

Close by praying:

Loving God, you have given us so much love through people in our lives. We know that you love all children and that you love justice. Help us to show your love and work for your justice, especially ending child poverty so that all children have what they need. Amen.

2019 Children's Sabbath Lesson Plan for Senior High Youths

(Note: You may prefer to use the Curriculum and Guide for an Interfaith Session on Ending Child Poverty Now provided in the 2019 Uniting Hearts and Voices to End Child Poverty Now resource. Review this lesson plan and that resource and determine which will be most engaging for your class.)

Theme: Finding Faith and Not Losing Heart

Scriptural Passage: Luke 18:1-8

Focus: There is a great need to end child poverty in our rich nation. We can be faithful to the cry for justice.

Lesson Objectives

The participants will:

1. Learn facts about child poverty
2. Learn about God's justice
3. Reflect on where we can find faith and how we can embody faith
4. Engage in advocacy to end child poverty

Materials

- 5-6 feet of "butcher" paper
- Scissors
- Pens
- Newsprint and markers
- Index cards (optional)
- Bibles (at least one for each two students)
- Equipment to play the song "Something Inside So Strong" (e.g., smart phone and speakers, or CD and CD player)

Preparation

1. Gather and set out newspapers and magazines.
2. Write the title "Do Not Lose Heart!" on the butcher paper and hang it in the classroom.
3. Review the background material on ending child poverty now in the 2019 Children's Sabbath resource.
4. Make copies of the handout "Opening Our Hearts, Hearing Their Voices—Stories of Child Poverty."
5. Make postcards using the template here (print them on cardstock or take them to a photocopy shop.)
6. Gather and place Bibles around the room.

Overview

1. Gathering, Prayer, and Introduction
2. Bible Study: Group work with scripture
3. Application: Finding faith mural, postcards to members of Congress
4. Closing: Song and prayer

Gathering, Prayer, and Introduction

Bible Study

Invite one of the students to read Luke 18:1-8 aloud. If numbers permit, divide into small groups or pairs. Otherwise, remain as a large group. Give each group newsprint and allow them time to answer the following questions on their newsprint:

- What are the main ideas of this parable?
- What does it say about God?
- What does it say about us?
- What does it say about the world?

Have each group select a spokesperson to report their answers to the large group. Then ask the group to name and talk about places and times where evidence of faith can be found. Ask them where they have seen people acting faithfully in bringing about God's justice. Ask, "If Christ returned today, where would Christ find faith?" You may ask them to write their answers on index cards and pass them in to you. You may then wish to read some aloud to the group.

Application

Activity 1

Create a mural under the heading "Do Not Lose Heart!". Distribute the handout, "Opening Our Hearts, Hearing their Voices—Stories of Child Poverty." Invite three students to read the three stories.

Invite the students to think about and share where faith could be found or what being faithful would look like in those situations.

Invite them to think about what demands for justice might be made in those situations.

Remind them that the parable Jesus told was to encourage his followers not to lose heart, and to remember that God's intention is for justice. Ask them where in those situations they can imagine one would lose heart. Ask them what kind of justice God might want to see in those situations.

Invite the students to write phrases on the banner under the headings "Grant me justice!" "Do not lose heart!" and "Where faith is found" that connect the parable and the stories and the students' and the congregation's commitment to justice on this Children's Sabbath.

Activity 2

Explain that there are nine policies that members of Congress could pass that would help reduce child poverty in our nation by more than 57 percent. Some would help increase employment and make work pay for families with children. Others would ensure that children's basic needs (like food and housing) are met when families fall on hard times.

Distribute the End Child Poverty Now postcards. Invite the students to write their own messages in the blank message space. Tell them the names of their senators and invite them to choose one to address their postcard to. Provide the address and have the students write that in, too. Distribute postcard stamps and have the students stamp their cards. Promise to mail them on Monday.

Plan with the students to distribute postcards to members of the congregation. Decide if they will make a presentation (for instance, during the coffee hour or during the “minute for mission” in worship, or at another time). Or, perhaps they will just hand them out after worship on the Children’s Sabbath or on a following weekend, since the Children’s Sabbath is intended to stimulate year-round action for children and justice. (Secure appropriate permission to follow up on those plans.)

Closing

Play the song “Something Inside So Strong.” Beforehand, tell the students that the song is played at Freedom Schools coordinated by the Children’s Defense Fund each summer. The song is a reminder to children in poverty and facing other difficulties, to parents who like the widow in the parable are demanding justice, and to all who are working for change to stay strong and persist.

Close in prayer:

Dear God, Thank you for sending Jesus to remind us not to lose heart but to pray to you, trusting that your will is for justice. Help us to persist like the widow as we demand justice with and for children and families who are impoverished and facing other injustice. Amen.

Opening Our Hearts, Hearing their Voices – Stories of Child Poverty

No Place to Call Home

“We slept in the car. We had to, because we had no home. I slept in the back seat. My sister laid in the front. My mom laid in the front. Her head was back. My sister’s head was on the side. I laid flat...We went to IHOP and we only got one pancake and we shared it. That was our breakfast.” – Jasmine, age 7

Life is Harder

“My dad did not have enough money to buy his car license. So the cop took his car away. He can’t drive anymore. Now it is harder for him to get to work, and sometimes he is late. So he does not get as much money as he used to get. Now we have to go walking everywhere. We get tired. Our life is harder. We can’t get as much food. Sometimes my mom has only beans, and I don’t like beans so I just don’t eat. Sometimes I get hungry. It’s harder for me to go to sleep and I’m tired in the morning.

When I grow up, I was thinking to be a doctor. But now I think that I won’t be able to do anything, because I won’t even have food or shelter.” – Alan, age 10

Wow, We Get Cereal!

Shoes told the story of the McKee family’s descent into poverty. Those of Skyler, 10, and Zachary, 12, were falling apart—tops flapping loose above the worn remnants of soles from which they have largely detached. Their sister, Jordan, 14, wore the varsity coach’s shoes when she played volleyball at school.

Less visible was hunger. The children and their parents, Tonya and Ed McKee, of Dowagiac, Michigan, sometimes went without food when Ed’s unemployment insurance ran out and the family was not yet receiving food stamps. Skyler said he gave the birthday money he got at church to his mom for groceries “and I told her she didn’t have to pay me back.” Skyler confided that sometimes his stomach growled. “It’s hard, not easy like it was before where we had money and could do stuff. Now we don’t go anywhere... Sometimes we don’t have food and we just don’t eat.”

Their mother Tonya shared, “Ed and I went hungry some nights so we could feed the kids. A lady here in town has brought us food several times and went shopping for us several times. And our parents helped when they could. Otherwise, we didn’t know where the next meal would come from. One of my friends brought over some cereal and milk one day and the boys said, ‘Wow! We get cereal!’”

Going Hungry in a Nation of Plenty

What does it mean to be food insecure or, as the U.S. Department of Agriculture phrases it, to not have “adequate food for active, healthy living?” For too many families, food insecurity means tough calls about who will and will not eat. For Jeannette’s family, it meant sacrifice. Her parents struggled to afford regular nutritious meals. When resources were limited, they chose to go without so Jeannette would have enough to eat.

Food insecurity means stress and worry over where the next meal will come from. It drove Florencia to keep her eyes peeled for loose change. Nickels and dimes could add up to a bag of chips from the corner store—something for her little brother to eat.

Food insecurity can also mean physical pain, stomach pangs and gnawing hunger. For Eva and her sisters, it meant drinking big glasses of water to feel full on nights when there was no dinner. No child should go to bed with only water to fill her stomach.

An extensive body of research has spoken: Food insecurity threatens children’s health, ability to learn and path to adulthood.¹³ Lawmakers must invest in policy solutions proven to address child hunger, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP helped combat food insecurity among more than 18 million children in 2017—a quarter of our nation’s children.

“I have faith. But I also have politics.”

In 2014, eight-year-old Alexander lived with two older siblings and his mom in a single-room apartment. Alexander’s family valued time together, but this time came at a price. So savvy Alexander started saving money. “I want to buy one hour of your time,” Alexander told big brother Julio, who was then 24 and working up to 16-hours a day at two full-time jobs. “How much for one hour to play with me?” Julio wept at Alexander’s question. And he prayed. And then he became active in a local Fight for \$15 campaign to raise the minimum wage in Emeryville, CA. “God, he believes in justice,” he said. “I have faith. But I also have politics.” There were marches, strikes and a big victory: city council members voted in 2015 to increase the minimum wage. The subsequent bump in Julio’s pay changed his life—and Alexander’s. Julio could afford to work less and spend more time with his little brother. Now, he often picks up Alexander from school. Sociologist and writer Matthew Desmond shared Julio’s story and the stories of other low-wage workers in a New York Times Magazine article. A common theme in the workers’ experiences? Higher wages translated to improved financial security, improved health and improved lives. And research confirmed that children receive some of the biggest benefits of an increased minimum wage—declines in rates of low birth-weight babies, infant mortality, teen births and teen alcohol consumption have all been linked to higher minimum wages.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Baby dolls, tiny trucks, toy food and dress-up capes. Scattered about the ballroom of a motel in Northeast Washington, D.C., and captured in a Washington Post column by Petula Dvorak, these hallmarks of child's play are not merely a sign of productive imaginations—they're evidence of a larger poverty crisis.

Twenty minutes outside the city's downtown, a stretch of budget motels along a major highway serve as overflow shelters for homeless families in our nation's capital. They have strict rules about where children are seen and heard. Signs dotting the hallways announce "No Playing on the Hotel Premises" and children are forbidden from gathering in common spaces. The Homeless Children's Playtime Project, a local nonprofit, reserves event spaces to carve out areas where children can be children, but the lack of space and high cost of reserving ballrooms and conference halls means pop-up playtimes are limited.

Away from the hustle and bustle of Capitol Hill where big deals are made and bills become laws, the motels—and the 1,000 homeless children within them—are largely out of sight and out of mind. Other shelters are similarly isolated. Until it closed in October 2018, the city's largest family shelter was D.C. General, a former abandoned public hospital whose neighboring buildings included a jail and morgue. Out of direct view and tucked into the nooks and crannies of a dense city, it is too easy to overlook homeless children.

Until tragedy strikes.

Eight-year-old Relisha Rudd was abducted from D.C. General in March 2014. For months, Relisha's disappearance dominated the news cycle and brought national attention to D.C. General. City officials, pundits, locals and anonymous online commenters heaped blame on Relisha's family, her teachers and her social workers. But assigning blame did nothing to bring Relisha—who loved art and baby dolls and would exuberantly spell V-I-C-T-O-R-Y on her school's cheer team—home. Five years have passed and Relisha is still gone.

Why do we fail to see our poor children until their faces stare at us from a Missing Child poster? Why do we blame parents rather than challenge our broken, unjust system? Other Relishas live everywhere among us: homeless because housing is too expensive and jobs pay too little; unaccounted for because affordable quality child care is out of reach; finding pockets of playtime in motel ballrooms because play is otherwise forbidden; hurting because poverty hurts.

It's time to stop assigning blame and start taking action. We must make poor children's struggles visible to policymakers at all levels of government and lift up evidence-backed poverty solutions including a higher minimum wage, transitional jobs programs, child care assistance and housing vouchers for struggling parents. We must keep children front and center, invisible no longer.