FOR BUDDIES

When a child is struggling

Behavior is communication. When a child stops doing what the group is doing, they're usually telling you something is too much: the noise, the lights, a change in the routine, or someone moving too fast. Your job is to read the signal and give them a way out.

Signs a break is needed

Most hard moments give warning. Learn what it looks like for the child you're with. Common signs:

- Rocking or pacing
- Covering ears or eyes
- Making more noise than usual
- Flapping hands or fidgeting more
- Hitting or biting themselves
- Getting very quiet or turning away
- Heading for the door

When you see them, act early. A walk in the hallway, a few minutes in the sensory room, or just a quieter corner often stops things before they build. Pointing to the picture schedule helps too, because it reminds the child that this part will end and something better is coming.

If a child has a meltdown

- **Stay calm.** Your voice and body set the temperature. Speak slowly and quietly, or not at all.
- **Make the space safe.** Give the child room, and move anything that could hurt.
- **Don't talk them through it.** Questions and reasoning are more for an overwhelmed child to take in. Wait.
- **Never hold a child down.** If you ever feel you'd need to, call another adult instead. Churches that want more preparation can look into crisis prevention training, often called CPI.
- **Afterward, don't make it a big deal.** Offer water, a quiet activity, and a fresh start. Tell the parents what happened and what seemed to help.

If a child runs

- Follow calmly. Running after a child at speed usually makes them run faster.
- Know your exits before the first Sunday. Keep outside doors closed and ask another adult to watch them.
- Most children run because they're overwhelmed. Once they're safe, think about what set it off and change it next week.
- A picture schedule helps here too. It shows the child that church ends at a certain point and they will go home.

If a child doesn't want to join in

- Don't force it. Pushing usually turns a no into a meltdown.
- Try a "first, then" card: first this short thing, then the thing they like.
- Offer a smaller version of the activity, or a job. Handing out supplies or holding the picture counts as taking part.
- If they'd rather watch from the edge of the room, let them. Children take in more than you think.

Talk with the parents. Parents know what calms their child and what sets them off. Ask, and ask again as you get to know the child. Make it clear you're asking because you want their child there and want Sunday to go well. Every child can be loved, cared for and supported during their hour at church.