

Helping Kids With ADHD to Grow Spiritually

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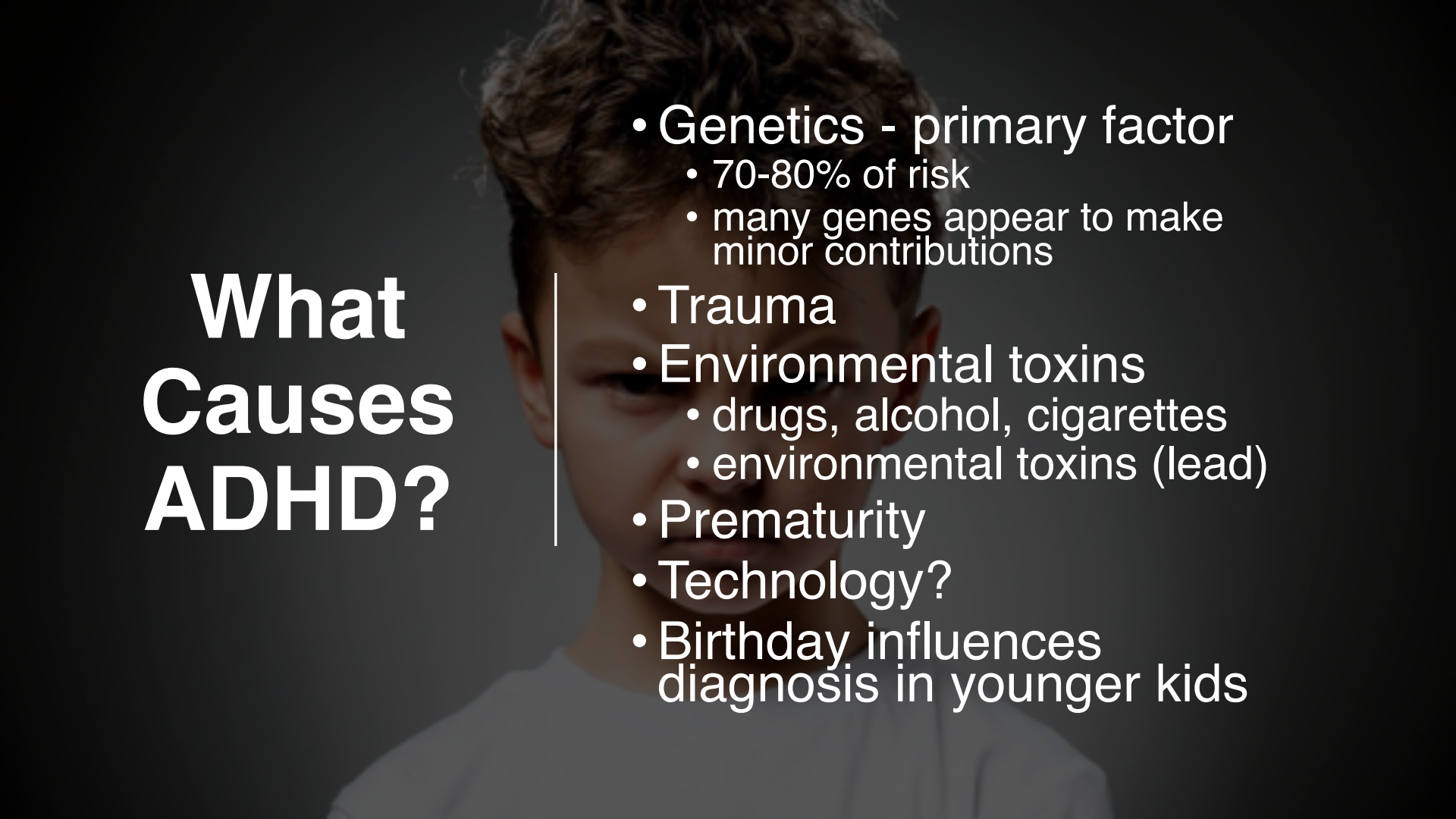
Learning Objectives

- Explore how observed differences in brain function in kids with ADHD impact learning, social interactions and family functioning.
- Identify how executive function deficits associated with ADHD impact church participation and engagement in activities that promote discipleship, along with strategies to help them grow spiritually.
- Consider how kids with ADHD may possess gifts and talents useful for serving and growing the church



What is ADHD?

- A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by an age-inappropriate degree of...
 - Inattentiveness/disorganization
 - Impulsivity
 - Hyperactivity
- Hyperactivity tends to disappear first as children mature, impulse control improves next
- Difficulties with managing time completing tasks, delaying gratification, setting priorities, disorganization most likely to persist into adulthood.



What Causes ADHD?

- Genetics - primary factor
 - 70-80% of risk
 - many genes appear to make minor contributions
- Trauma
- Environmental toxins
 - drugs, alcohol, cigarettes
 - environmental toxins (lead)
- Prematurity
- Technology?
- Birthday influences diagnosis in younger kids

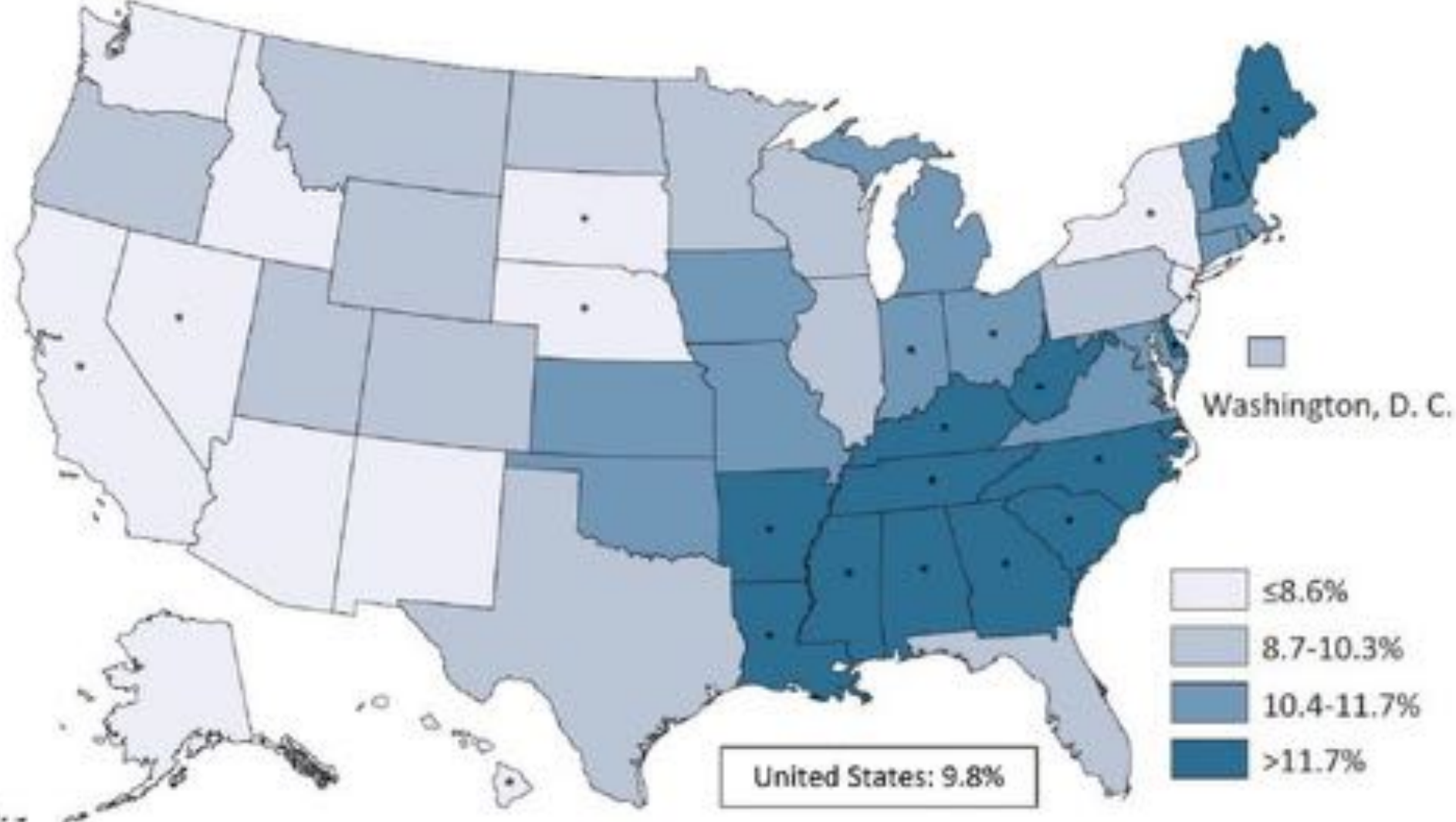
ADHD facts and figures:

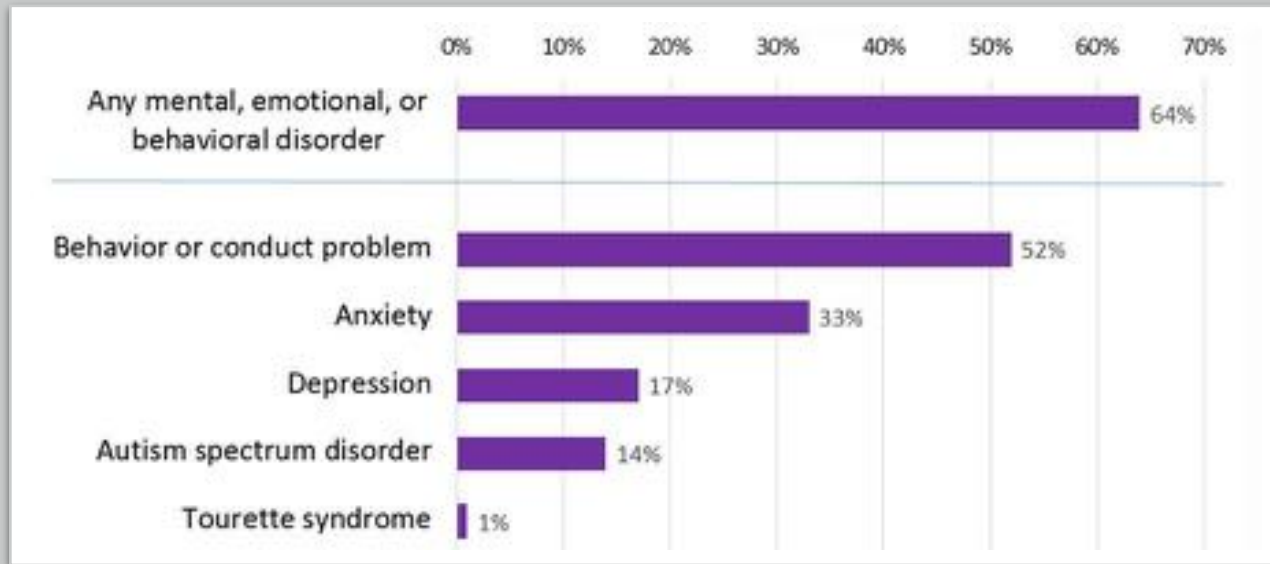
- 11% of U.S. kids ages 4-17 diagnosed with ADHD...88% continue to carry the diagnosis
 - 1 in 4 teen boys, 1 in 8 teen girls have been prescribed medication
- Highest prevalence in southeastern U.S.
- Percentage of kids being treated has been flat in recent years
 - 10% + increases year over year in adults with ADHD since COVID
- Boys are 2-3X more likely than girls to take medication
 - More adult women than men take medication
 - More adult women take medicine than girls under age 10
- Many have “comorbid” mental health conditions

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control



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Kids with ADHD often have other mental health conditions

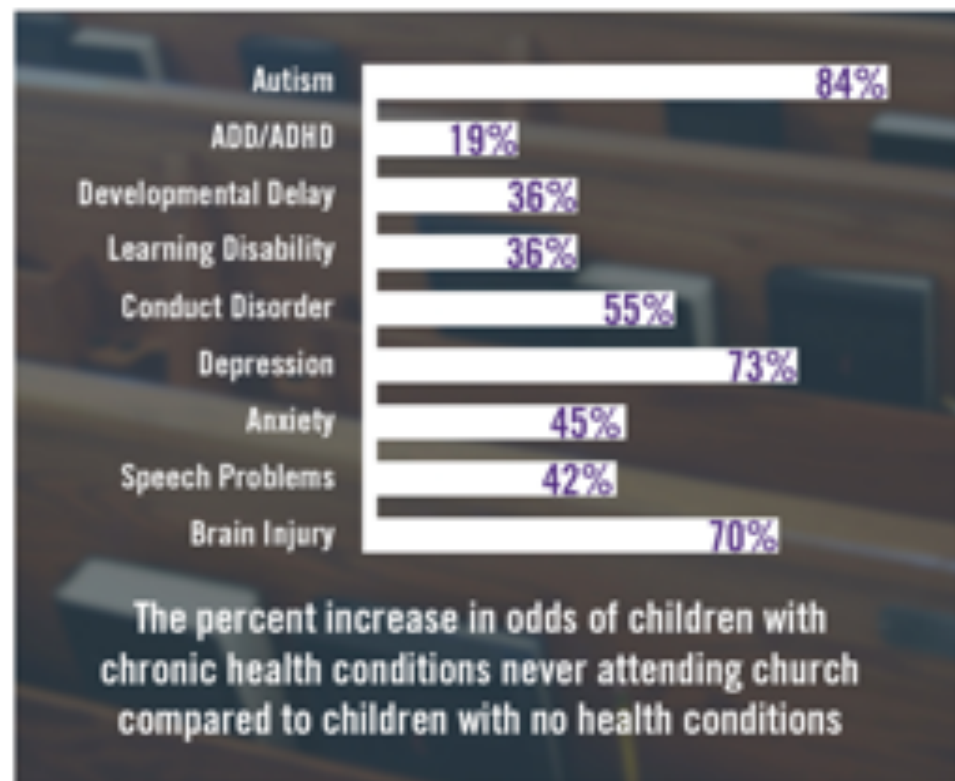
Danielson ML et al. *J Clin Child Adolesc Psychology* 2018, 47:2, 199-212.



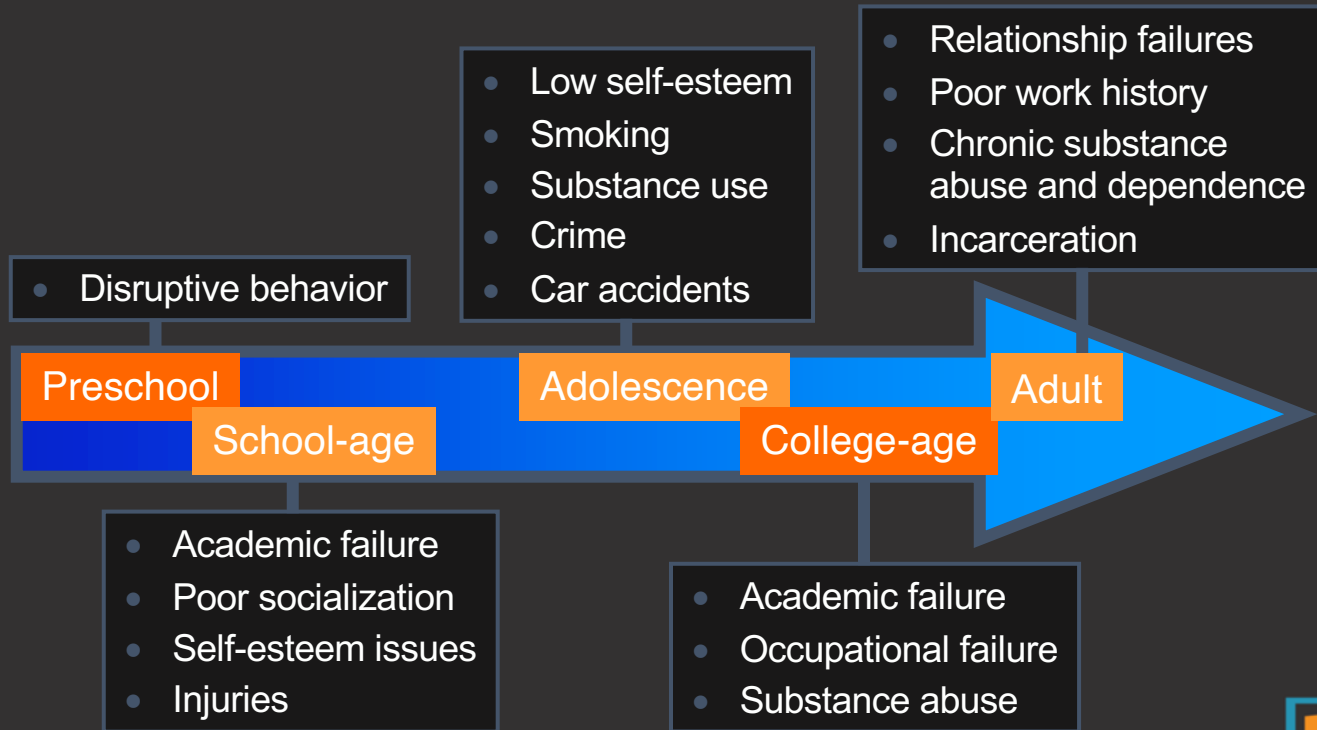
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Relationship between disability and family church attendance

Common mental health
conditions associated
with marked reductions
in church attendance



ADHD impairment across the lifespan

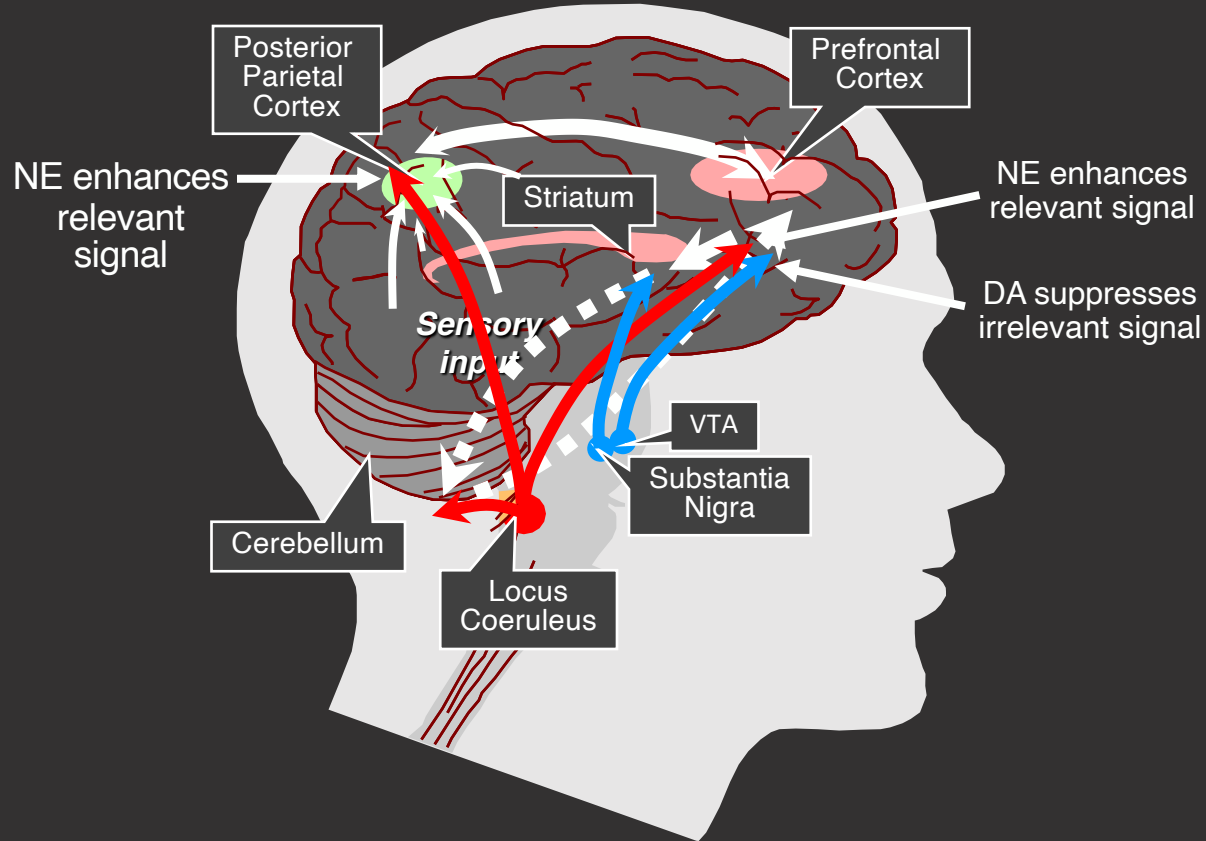


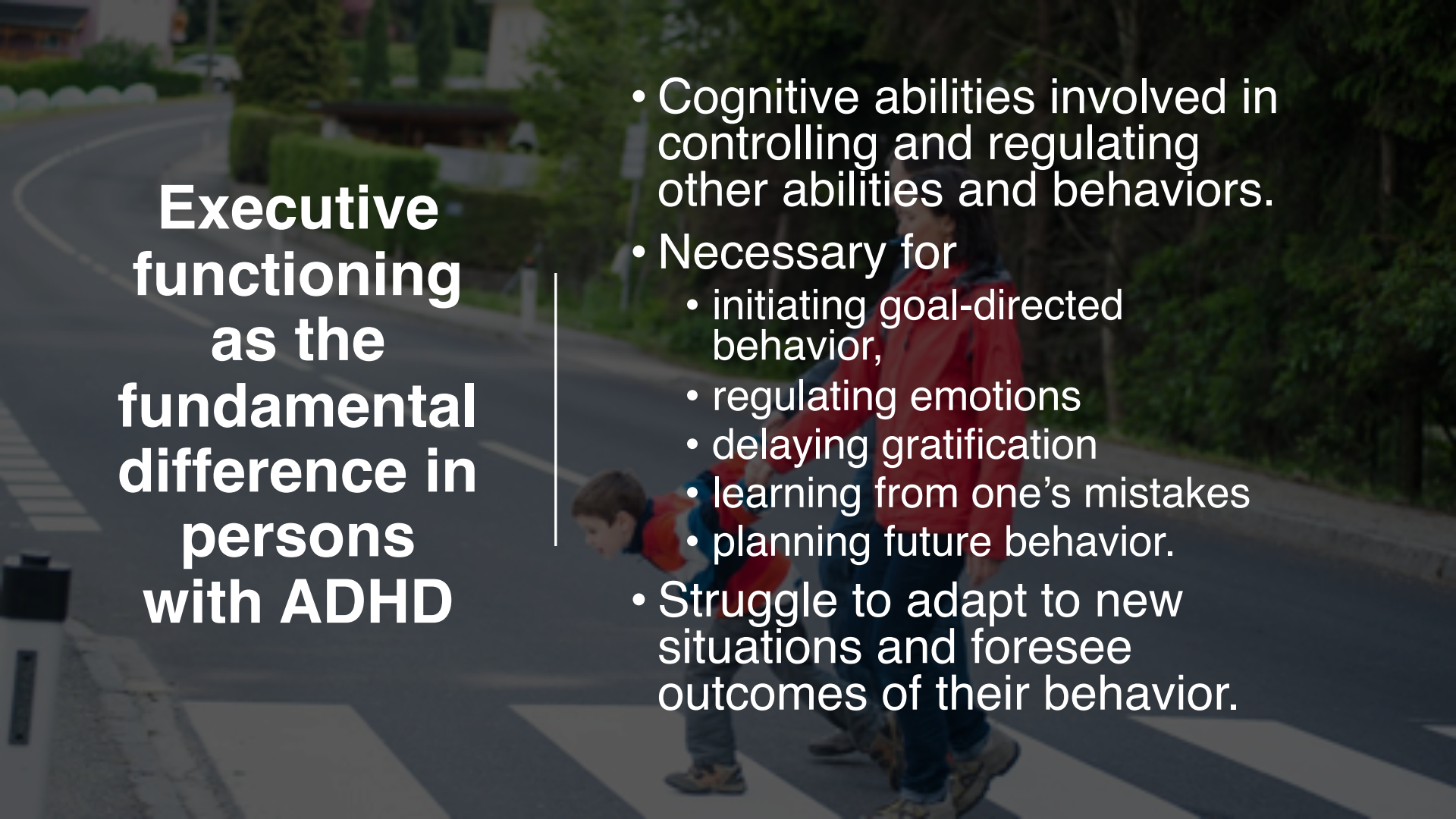
Slide courtesy of Joseph Biederman, MD.



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Catecholamine Mechanisms in ADHD





Executive functioning as the fundamental difference in persons with ADHD

- Cognitive abilities involved in controlling and regulating other abilities and behaviors.
- Necessary for
 - initiating goal-directed behavior,
 - regulating emotions
 - delaying gratification
 - learning from one's mistakes
 - planning future behavior.
- Struggle to adapt to new situations and foresee outcomes of their behavior.

Five Key Executive Functions

- Behavioral inhibition
- Verbal working memory
- Nonverbal working memory
- Emotional self-regulation
- Reconstitution





Impacts of ADHD on church participation

- Before they arrive at church...
 - Getting ready & the car ride
 - Showing up on time
- Sitting through adult service
- Self-control in children's ministry
 - Gravitate to peers with ADHD
- Defiance to authority figures
- Struggles in teen years with time management, prioritizing church



**Unique
challenges
presented to
the church
by kids with
ADHD:**

- Church environments are generally less structured than school
- Churches rely upon ministry volunteers who lack training as educators
- Parents, physicians often withhold effective ADHD medication for weekends
- Many church activities occur when ADHD medication has worn off

**Why
“structure”
helps people
with
executive
functioning
deficits**



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“Structure” and kids with ADHD

- Intentionally reducing demands on cognitive function to maximize capacity for good decision-making
- Considerations in developing a “structured” environment
 - Minimize need for decision-making
 - Limited number of clear rules, expectations
 - Consistent accountability
 - Few distractions

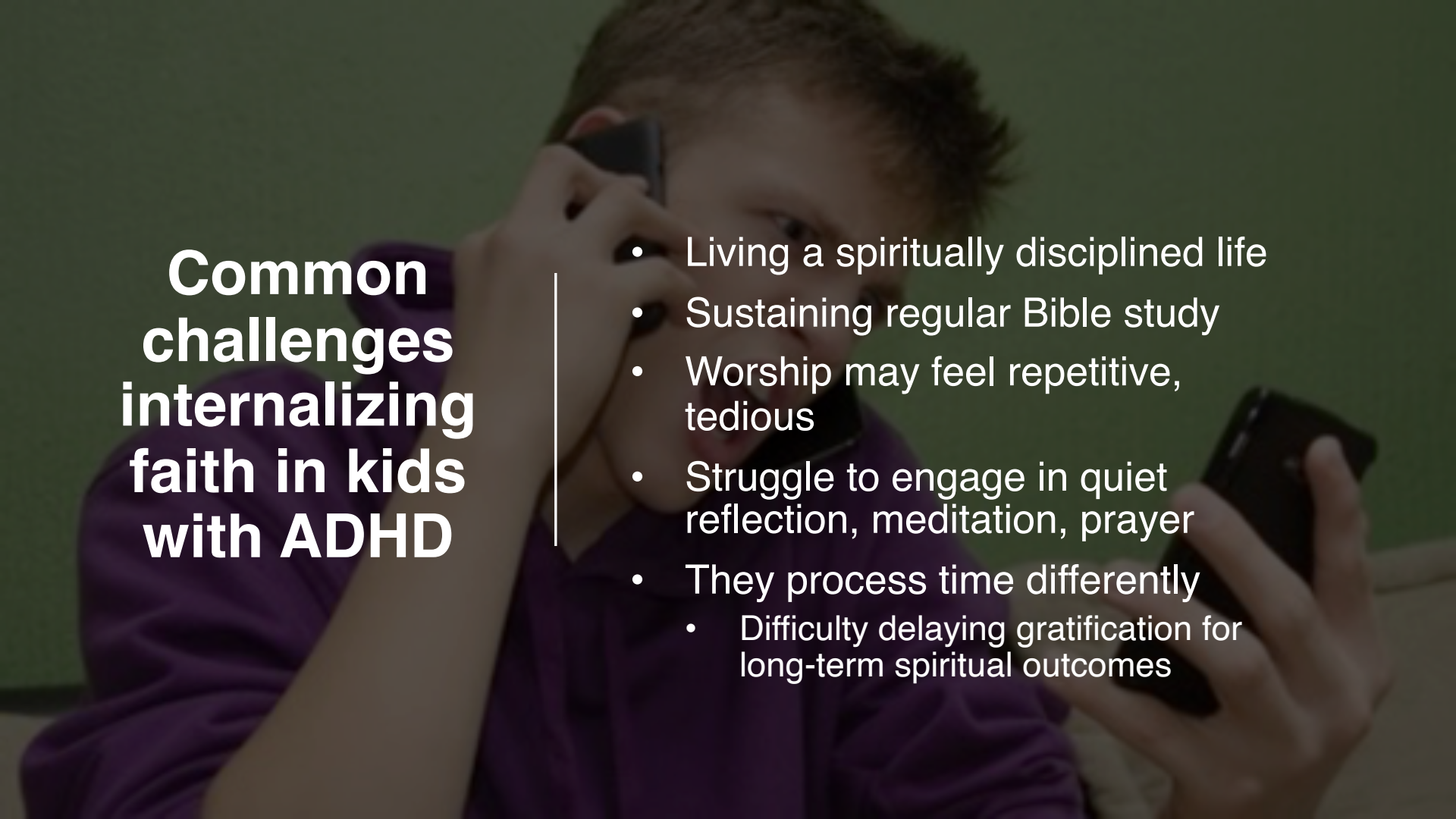


Welcoming ministry environments

- Promote focus, attention
- Help attendees prioritize important takeaways
- Support in processing directions
- Supports kids in maintaining self-control

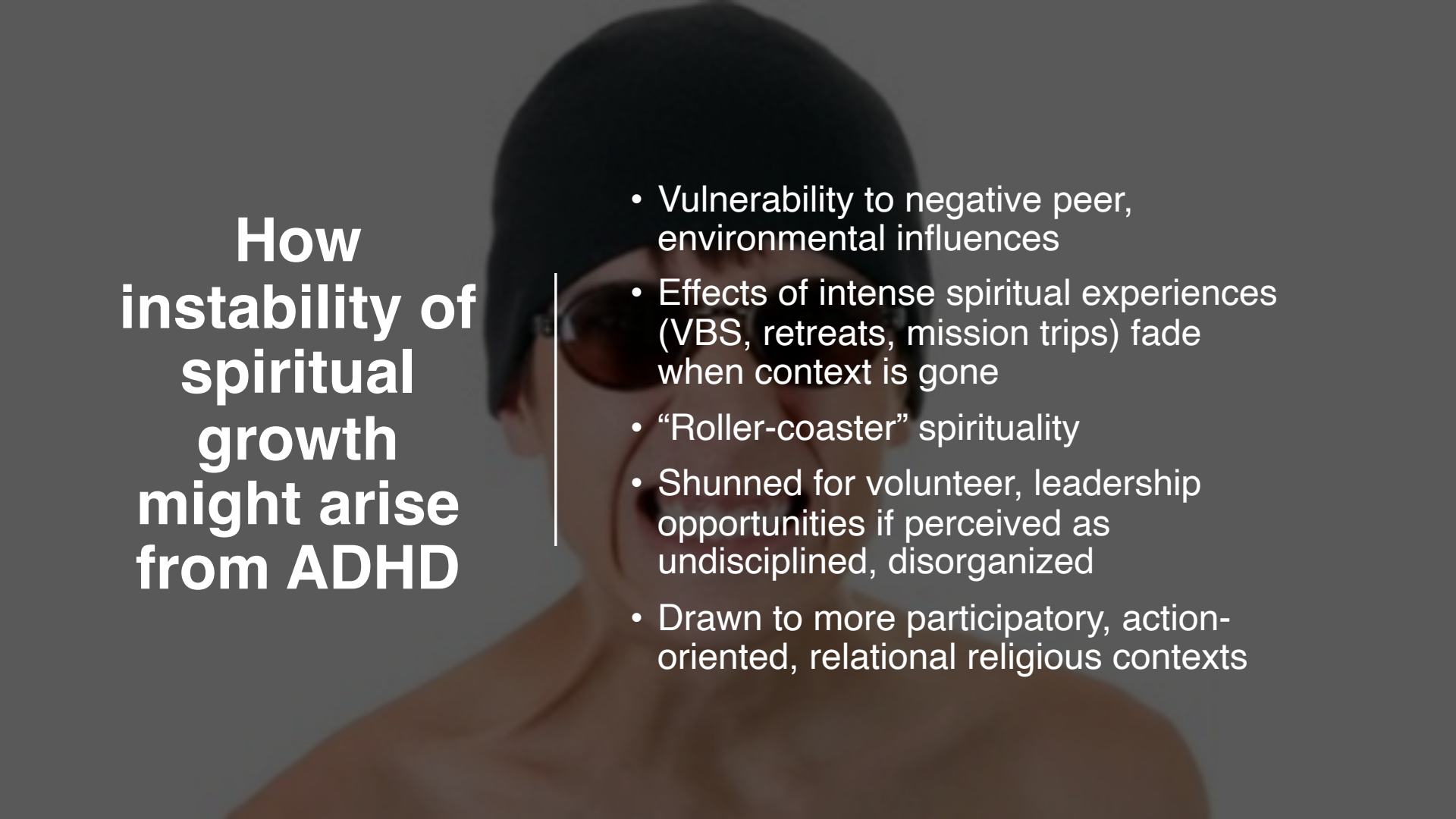
ADHD inclusion strategies (children/youth)

- Registration/sign-in needs to be orderly
- Staffing for transition times before/after services
- Use of color, lighting
 - Engaging, not overwhelming
- Communication strategies
 - Reinforce key point(s)
 - Use of personal stories, experiences
 - System for getting helps, resources to parents



Common challenges internalizing faith in kids with ADHD

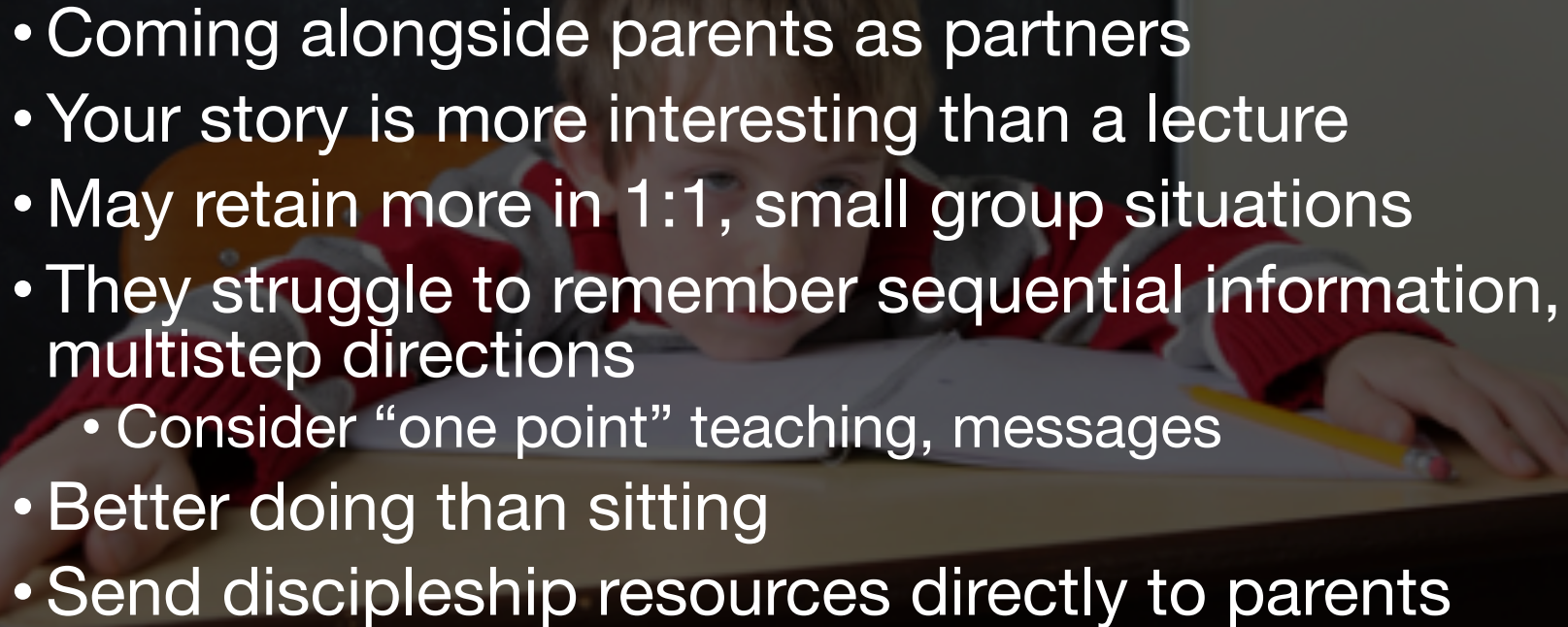
- Living a spiritually disciplined life
- Sustaining regular Bible study
- Worship may feel repetitive, tedious
- Struggle to engage in quiet reflection, meditation, prayer
- They process time differently
 - Difficulty delaying gratification for long-term spiritual outcomes



How instability of spiritual growth might arise from ADHD

- Vulnerability to negative peer, environmental influences
- Effects of intense spiritual experiences (VBS, retreats, mission trips) fade when context is gone
- “Roller-coaster” spirituality
- Shunned for volunteer, leadership opportunities if perceived as undisciplined, disorganized
- Drawn to more participatory, action-oriented, relational religious contexts

Discipleship strategies for children, youth with ADHD

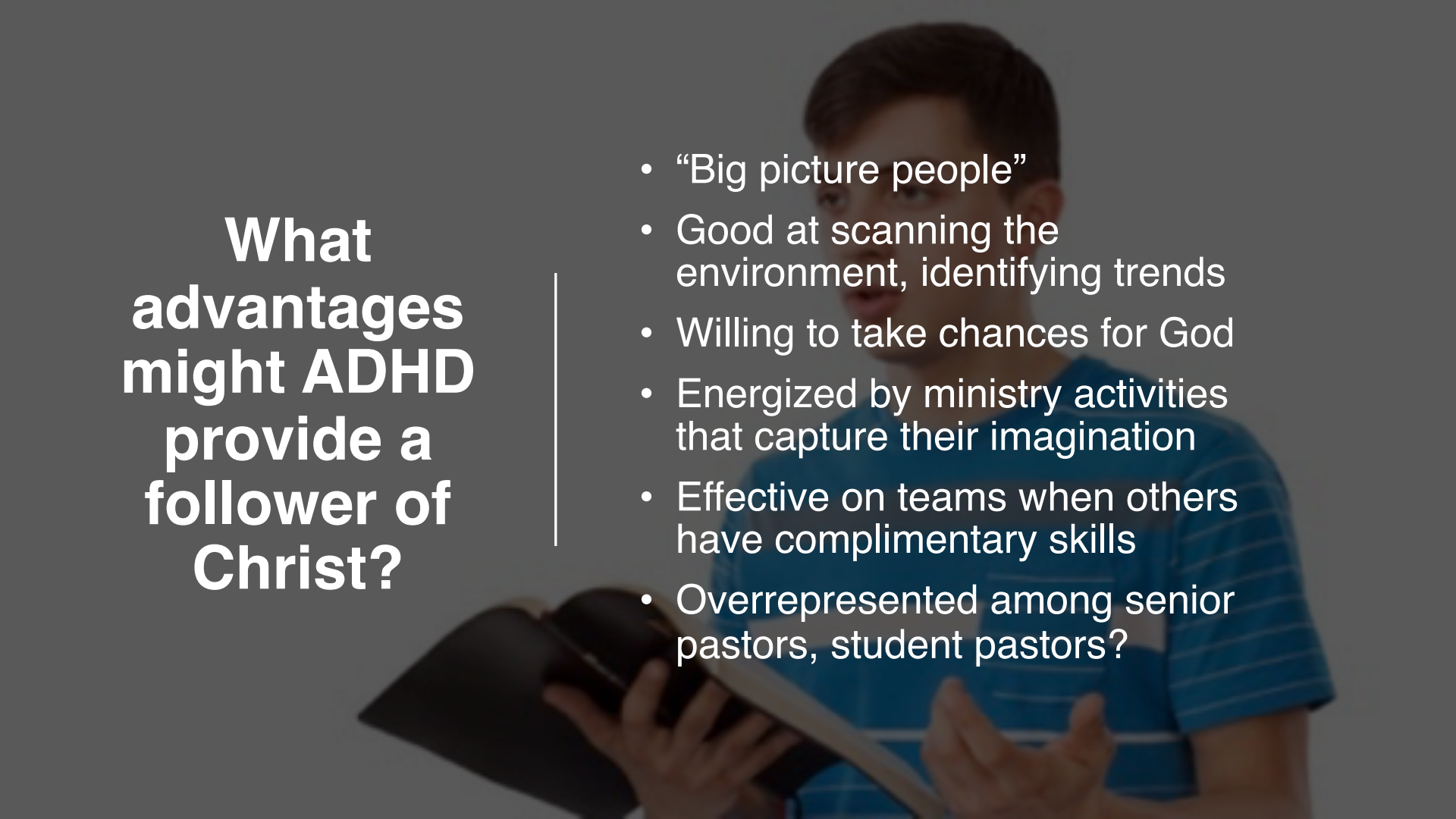
- Coming alongside parents as partners
 - Your story is more interesting than a lecture
 - May retain more in 1:1, small group situations
 - They struggle to remember sequential information, multistep directions
 - Consider “one point” teaching, messages
 - Better doing than sitting
 - Send discipleship resources directly to parents
- 
- A young child with light brown hair, wearing a red and white striped long-sleeved shirt, is sitting at a wooden desk. The child is looking down at a white sheet of paper on the desk. A yellow pencil is visible on the desk to the right of the child. The background is dark and out of focus.

Discipleship strategies for older youth with ADHD

- Connections with others especially important
 - Small groups offer multiple accountability partners
- Break Scripture into smaller, manageable parts
- Study guide format for sermon notes
- Doers as opposed to listeners
- Need more reminders if you want them to come

Strategies for parents to help children with ADHD grow in faith

- Spend time with your child one on one or as a family...
 - praying together
 - studying the Bible together
- Make Jesus, Scripture interesting by sharing how you've applied what you've learned
- Seek opportunities for your child to use their talents, gifts in serving
- Cultivate habit of attending church regularly!



What advantages might ADHD provide a follower of Christ?

- “Big picture people”
- Good at scanning the environment, identifying trends
- Willing to take chances for God
- Energized by ministry activities that capture their imagination
- Effective on teams when others have complimentary skills
- Overrepresented among senior pastors, student pastors?

Key takeaways

- ADHD is the most common mental health condition in the school-age population
- Kids with ADHD are capable of meeting expectations of parents and adults – but need to devote a disproportionate amount of their cognitive capacity to do so
- Executive function deficits are predictive of challenges remembering and applying Scripture, maintaining a spiritually disciplined life
- Ability to see the big picture, capacity to hyperfocus when interested and engaged, fewer inhibitions about sharing their faith may be very useful in ministry





Questions?

Help from Key Ministry

- Training
 - Disability and the Church 2024
 - Video training
 - Disability Ministry Video Roundtable
- Free training, consultation to churches
- Resources
 - Networking with other ministries
 - Special Needs and Disability Ministry Leaders Group on Facebook
- Someone to come alongside your ministry!



Connect with Key Ministry

- keyministry.org
- Facebook: Key Ministry
- Twitter: @KeyMinistry
- Catherine Boyle – Director of Mental Health Ministry
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