

The Whys and Hows of Toddler Church

Over the past ten years the market for activities for pre-school children and their parents has grown extensively and includes everything from gymnastic classes to sign language. The traditional community parent-and-toddler group, however, is still very popular as many parents enjoy the opportunity to meet and make friends at the same time as their children.

On average a UK child has just 1,277 days between birth and starting nursery education. '52 per cent of children under four years old access some form of parent-and-toddler group via churches.' (Source: Children's Workforce Development Council, 'More than Sundays' report, 2009 available from the Family Matters Institute). These groups can be an effective place to introduce small children and their families to the simple, yet awesome, truth that they are loved by God.

Why?

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:16: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes,' and therefore it is important that, where possible, church-run toddler groups should not 'hide our light under a bushel' of being just another good community service! It is helpful for all parent-and-toddler groups to have a policy and practice document which simply outlines how the group works and gives details concerning health & safety issues etc. This is an excellent place for groups to clearly state their Christian motive and intention:

All groups are for the under-fives and their parents/carers and are Christian-based pre-school groups that are part of church programme.

How groups intend to do this can then also be outlined as part of the policy.

Christian teaching will be offered:

- *through optional attendance at special church services for parents/carers and toddlers to celebrate the major Christian festivals, eg Christmas, Easter, Harvest etc.*
- *at the conclusion of every session of the weekly toddler service*
- *during circle time*
- *by open invitations to all services and activities at (Church Name)*

Every group policy requires regular review and updating, so it is possible to amend an existing document to include a church policy. However, it would be good practice in such instances to make existing members aware of such changes. If a registration form is used, a declaration statement saying that the policy has been read can be included with a signature of acceptance and adherence.

How?

Having stated your intention, how you then go about sharing the gospel may be determined by various factors, including who, when and where? Gather the people together who will be key in doing this, eg group leaders, group helpers, corps officer, parents etc, in order to discuss what is best for your group. The main rule of thumb is always to *keep it simple* - after all, there is nothing complicated about the gospel message in itself.



Here are some ideas that you could try:

1. If you already have a song time in your group, you could introduce some songs with Christian words to well-known tunes so that parents and children are able to join in. Song sheets with the words outlined or a group songbook can be helpful to assist parents in learning the songs and singing them at home! Resources such as *Let us All Clap Hands* (Scripture Union) and *Say and Sing* (Scripture Union) contain lots of good material. It might be that you could write a simple song that is specific to your group and can be used as a welcome or home-time activity.

eg (Tune: 'Frère Jacques')

We are tweenies, we are tweenies,
Tweenies for God! Tweenies for God!
Thank you all for coming, thank you all for coming,
Let's have fun - everyone!

(Tune: 'Twinkle, twinkle')

God loves you and God loves me,
We are in God's family.
He is with me every day,
He will hear me when I pray.
God loves you and God loves me,
We are in God's family.

2. Musical instruments and homemade shakers are a lot of fun and are a good way of introducing songs to praise God. However, their use can be very noisy and chaotic, so be prepared for just about anything and make sure that there are enough instruments for all the children to have one each. Again, resources such as *Let us All Clap Hands* (Scripture Union) and *Say and Sing* (Scripture Union) can be used, or you can write your own praise songs. If you are not confident in doing this, children's worship CDs can be used to good effect and the children can play instruments along with them.

eg (Tune: 'The wheels on the bus')

Listen to the drums go bang, bang, bang,
Bang, bang, bang! Bang, bang, bang!
Listen to the drums go bang, bang, bang,
Praising God!

Listen to the shakers go shake, shake, shake...
Listen to the bells go ting, ting, ting...
Listen to the trumpets go toot, toot, toot...
Listen to us all make lots of noise...

(Tune: 'London Bridge is falling down')

We are clapping praise to God,
Praise to God, Praise to God!
We are clapping praise to God,
For he loves us!
We are shouting praise to God...
We are playing praise to God...



3. If you have a story time in your group you could use this to introduce well-known Bible stories or stories which illustrate a moral lesson. Christian bookshops have excellent resources for this. Make sure that any storytelling is very visual and very interactive and that you keep it short and sweet. *Remember the rule of thumb is that a child is able to concentrate for approximately one minute per year of age, eg two-year-olds listen for two minutes.*

4. Games and rhymes may also be used effectively to teach or reinforce a Bible story or Christian ideal, and again these are given in resources such as the *Tiddlywinks* (Scripture Union) series. Parachute games are especially enjoyed by this age group and are good for emphasising lessons about sharing and working together.

5. Using simple prayers with shouted responses or actions are also a great idea, but writing and drawing prayers are not the best option for this age group. Using a prayer for home time is a simple but effective way of introducing a Christian element into your group. Each of the *Tiddlywinks* (Scripture Union) books contains a page of Welcome and Home Time ideas or you can create your own.

Tiddlywinks (*The Big Red Book*, Page 94, Scripture Union)

God helps us care	(Right arm cross to left shoulder)
And love	(Left arm cross to right shoulder)
And share.	(Uncross arms, out to front together, move to sides)
God is with us everywhere.	(Large circle arms to represent world)
Thank you, God!	(Hands together)
Amen.	

You could also try creating a way of saying 'Amen' that is special to your group.

eg Prolong saying the 'Ah-' by getting the children to slap on their thighs and then clap together for '-men'; or start with hands together and as you say 'Ah-' open hands wider apart before clapping back together on '-men'.

6. Craft activities can be a very useful way of getting children to make something that relates to a Christian story or message and are effective reminders that are then taken into the home. Try where possible for parents/carers to be hands-on with this, so the leader just acts in a supervisory role.

Tiddlywinks (Scripture Union) books include craft ideas and photocopyable take-home sheets.

The internet is also an excellent place for finding good craft ideas. Some useful websites are:

- www.pinterest.com
- www.preschooleducation.com
- www.dltk-kids.com
- www.enchantedlearning.com
- www.daniellesplace.com
- www.crayola.com



7. All or some of the elements outlined above can be used to create a weekly/monthly act of worship that can either form a whole-group session or be used at the beginning, middle or end of a group. Make sure that any posters or literature you produce are very clear that this group is a mid-week church activity and that it will include a short act of worship.

eg During this group there will be a short Christian-based service for you and the children to join in with which will include a little story or thought, some fun songs with instruments and prayers.

Produce a typed service sheet that contains all the songs, prayers etc that you want parents/carers to join in with, so that they know exactly what is happening and are comfortable with it.

Ideas for weekly programmes are given in resources such as *Tiddlywinks* (Scripture Union). However, sometimes it is easier to plan your own curriculum using a 'pick 'n' mix' approach based on your group. The seasons, the Christian calendar or things that pre-schoolers are learning, eg colours and numbers, are often a good starting point.

8. If your group is already well established you may feel it would be quite difficult to suddenly incorporate a weekly Christian element, and therefore you might prefer trying to hold a short toddler service to celebrate the major Christian festivals, ie Christmas, Easter, Harvest etc. Special invitations can be given out the week prior to the service and, where possible, attendance can be made optional by holding the service in your main church hall. If this is not possible, invite them to come earlier or stay after your usual meeting time.

For ideas of what to include in your service, see notes 1 to 5.

Here are some very useful resources that include lots of ideas to help with incorporating the gospel into your toddler groups:

Let us All Clap Hands (Scripture Union)

Say and Sing (Scripture Union)

Tiddlywinks (Scripture Union)

In conclusion...

- Start where you are - YOU CAN DO SOMETHING!
- Keep it simple! You don't have to have a degree in theology to lead a toddler service - just a love for God and for children and their families!
- Learn from others. Don't try and reinvent the wheel - copy good ideas and use the excellent resources already available.
- Be well organised so that you are always ready for the unexpected. Working with under-fives is never predictable and you need to be ready to *go with the flow* especially when you get the musical instruments out! Also make sure that you have sufficient craft materials for everyone. It is better to have too many cardboard cut-out penguins than not enough.
- It is vital that you are aware of all points appertaining to current Health & Safety policy, child protection and food hygiene issues and that you and your helpers are appropriately trained.
- Sow the seeds of God's love carefully, prayerfully and faithfully...
God will harvest!

