

## **Childhood Ministry That Makes a Difference**

In a frightening newspaper story, a couple rescued their two sons, ages 4 and 5, from their burning home. Everything else they possessed was destroyed, but the parents were grateful that their sons survived even with severe burns. We know that we would make the same choice.

We value our children because we love them. We know that they are a precious gift for the present as well as the future.

Because children are so highly valued by their parents, churches that hope to reach families with children must give priority attention to their preschool and children ministry. The church that is mindful of ministry with children does more than “provide for the children” while the adults engage in meaningful learning and worship experiences. The church that desires to make a difference will put its resources to work in ministry to preschool and grade-school children and their families.

**Childhood ministry makes a difference in the children.** Researchers such as George Barna and Thom Rainer have documented that the majority of people make their life-long, faith-shaping choices when they are young. In a world that is competing in creative ways for the attention of our children, the church must offer meaningful, stimulating, age-appropriate learning and worship experiences. They also need teachers who will reveal the nature of God through their relationships with the children.

Children’s attitudes toward church and God are well formed by the time they reach adulthood or even their teen years. Children respond to an attractive and safe space for learning and worshiping. They eagerly anticipate the special time spent with their caring and committed teachers at church. A child’s enthusiasm can even energize the reluctant or weary parent who is thinking about skipping church today.

Quality church experiences become especially critical for the child whose parents do not attend church or practice faith in the home. The church that reaches out to these children and their parents find a mission field “white unto harvest.” If most faith decisions are made when people are young, then the vital church must give serious attention and resources to ministry with children from birth.

**Childhood ministry makes a difference for the family.** Many well-meaning churches have assumed the teaching responsibility of parents, and many caring parents have relinquished their faith-nurturing role to the church. Today’s families come in all shapes and sizes. All of these families need support, encouragement, and assistance in their God-given responsibility to impress God’s commandments on their children (Deut. 6:7).

Childhood ministry involves helping parents to grow in their faith and knowledge of God and providing assistance in how to communicate their faith as they nurture their children. The church needs to plan how they will supplement the parents’ home instruction when the children are in church.

The congregation that gives serious effort to reaching children whose parents are not involved in church also must give equal ministry effort to reaching those parents. Offering “a cup of water” is good but “providing a well” is better for nurturing a child’s growing faith. Parents who live their faith have a greater impact on a child than a church experience alone can provide.

**Preschool and children ministry makes a difference to the church.** In today’s world, most parents are looking for quality experiences for their children in school, sports, music, as well as church. Children likewise have come to expect innovative, stimulating learning experiences.

The church desiring to reach young adult couples must have a first-class preschool and children ministry—adequate and attractive space, quality programs, family-friendly worship, as well as a safe and secure environment. It has been well documented that these elements have the highest consideration of parents who are selecting a church.

Today’s parents are looking for a church where their children will be happy with teachers who truly care about the children and are prepared to have meaningful, appropriate learning experiences with them. After they find a church that meets that criterion, then they consider the other aspects of a church’s ministry.

**A quality preschool and children ministry is a challenge.** A church can provide a multitude of activities without accomplishing the task of building Christian lives. Preschool and children ministry must be more than child-care, entertainment, and activities. It must be more than providing “care” while parents are engaged in learning or worshiping. Both church staff and lay leadership must know what preschoolers and children need to learn at each stage of development so that a curriculum can be designed to provide a strong foundation for conversion and discipleship. Every time children are at church they need to be taught from the goals and expectations set by the parents and church for the nurturing of their children.

**Some disturbing trends in our churches undermine quality preschool and children ministry:**

- ◆ Lack of adequate safety or health policies for the care of preschoolers and children
- ◆ Rotating teachers—convenient for adults but unsettling for children
- ◆ Entertainment activities rather than teaching or worshiping experiences
- ◆ Programmed activities without a purpose
- ◆ Competitive programs which by their requirements exclude some children
- ◆ Lack of family or multi-generation experiences
- ◆ Weakening of missions education ministries for children
- ◆ Choice of literature which is not educationally or theologically appropriate

For more information about how to provide a quality preschool and grade-school children’s ministry, consider reading *Enduring Connections: Creating a Preschool and Children’s Ministry* by Janice Haywood.