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# **Enduring Connections**

**Creating a Preschool and  
Children's Ministry**

**JANICE HAYWOOD**



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## Introduction

The pastor of a large church once said, “I learned as a pastor that if the preschool ministry was not going well, the rest of the church probably was not going well either.” After many years of ministry in a variety of churches, this observant pastor had identified one often-reliable barometer of church health.

Why would preschool and grade-school ministry be such an indicator of the state of a church? (For the purpose of this book, the term “preschoolers” refers to persons from birth until they enter first grade. “Grade-schoolers” refer to persons in grades 1–6 or 6–11 years of age.) My personal assessment is that childhood ministry touches families in profound ways. When a caring church values and nurtures children, church members also encourage and nurture the faith of all of the family members.

Preschool and grade-school ministry is very labor-intensive, requiring a large number of committed volunteer leaders to meet the physical, emotional, and faith needs of their precious children. When a church gives prime attention to ministry to “the least of these,” they are more likely to care about other details of ministry as well. The reverse is not predominantly true.

Increasing numbers of ministers and laypersons are recognizing the importance of their childhood ministry to the health of their church.

- Parents value their children. Not only do they want the “very best” for their children, but they seek assistance and encouragement in their parental role.
- Ministers recognize that an effective, safe childhood ministry attracts young families.
- Churches understand that faith is built most effectively from childhood, and strong churches can help build strong spiritual foundations.
- Insightful parents, ministers, and church leadership acknowledge that if the church is to impact our pagan world with the hopeful gospel message, we must begin with children.

### Childhood Ministry Makes a Difference in the Lives of Children

Several prominent researchers<sup>1</sup> have documented that the majority of people make their lifelong, faith-shaping choices and form their values when they are young. In a world competing in creative ways for the attention of our children, churches must offer meaningful, stimulating, age-appropriate learning and worship experiences. They also need teachers who will reveal the nature of God within their relationships with the children.

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People's attitudes toward church and God are often well formed by the time they reach early 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 motivate even the reluctant or weary parent who is thinking about "skipping church" that day.

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 finds a mission field "ripe for harvest" (Jn. 4:35b). 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 Families**

Many well-meaning churches have assumed the primary faith-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 them [God's commandments] on your children" (Deut. 6:7).

Preschool and grade-school 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 intentionally how it 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 the well" is better for nurturing a child's growing faith. Parents who live their faith will have a greater impact on a child than a church experience alone can provide.

### **Childhood Ministry Makes a Difference to the Church**

In today's world, most parents are looking for quality experiences for their children in school, sports, and music, as well as church. Children likewise have come to expect innovative, stimulating learning experiences in all of their activities.

The church that desires to reach young adult couples must have a first-class preschool and grade-school ministry. Adequate and attractive space, quality programming, family-friendly worship, as well as a safe and secure environment are elements that are of the highest consideration for parents who are selecting a church. Today's parents are looking for a church in which 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.

One youth and children's minister explained that she had asked for the children's ministry to be added to her youth job description several years earlier. As the children's ministry under her leadership became more intentional in its teaching and discipling, and as the children later became youth, they were ready for a deeper faith experience than the youth in the past were. A church that gives serious attention to the faith formation of all ages might discover that it has more spiritually mature members in the future.<sup>2</sup>

### Childhood Ministry Makes a Difference to the Kingdom

Faith formation in the Old Testament Hebrew nation rested primarily on the parents (Deut. 6:6–9), but the Jewish community was an extension of the family. God instructed parents to teach the children the commandments and to include the children in all of their faith practices. This preparation insured the development of individual faith as well as the spiritual strength of the Jewish nation.

Jesus taught us in Matthew 18:3–4 that “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus went on to explain to his disciples that “whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Not only do children need us to teach them and model a Christ-following lifestyle, but also we need them to remind us of what our relationship with our heavenly parent is at its essence.

When we read Jesus' blessing of the children in Matthew 19:13–15, we often envision a kindly Jesus taking a break from his busy schedule to enjoy the children. The Jewish blessing was very a powerful ritual that was more than a pat on the head. When Jesus placed his hands on the children and blessed them, he was initiating in them a force that would forever empower their lives. Jesus was asking for God, on the behalf of the children, to bring good into their lives. Because the parents had such respect for this great teacher, they believed that a blessing from him would carry great meaning because of his obvious relationship with God.

We, too, can bless the children through our words and through our relationships, but we have to understand the influence that we have. As we bless children in our families and in our church ministries, we set in motion a power in their lives that will connect them to God and to other believers. In Mark 9:36–37, Jesus teaches his disciples (and us) a very valuable lesson about God.

He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these

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little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

What does “welcoming children” mean? When we are teaching children or including children as an important ministry, we are in the very presence of God. When children are welcomed into our midst, God is in our midst. When children are excluded from church activities or are given less than the best teachers, facilities, and instruction, we are shortchanging God.

A church can provide a multitude of activities without developing Christ followers. Preschool and grade-school ministry must be more than childcare, entertainment, and/or activities. It must be more than providing “childcare” while parents are engaged in learning or worshiping. Church staff, parents, and lay leadership must know what preschoolers and grade-schoolers need to learn at each stage of development so that a curriculum can be designed to provide a strong foundation for Christian 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.

##### Myths about Effective Childhood Ministry

The success of any ministry is often evaluated by many different criteria. Here are some of the common myths about what makes an effective preschool and grade-school ministry:

*Myth 1: “If such large numbers of children are coming to (activity), then it must be effective.”*

Some people measure success by the *number of people* who participate. If large numbers of children are involved in a ministry, then they judge it as successful without measuring the results of the involvement. However, some adults who attended church as children know very little about the Bible or the application of biblical truths to their lives. The church they attended knew how to draw children, but did not know how to disciple them. Children will respond to many activities at church, especially if their friends attend, regardless of the content received.

*Myth 2: “If this church has a large, wide variety of programming for children, then it must be effective.”*

Parents often look for a wide *variety* of events or activities. They want music, missions education/action, Bible memory, Bible study, camps, fellowship activities, discipleship instruction, sports activities, weekday preschool programs, after-school childcare, etc. As a result, some churches think that they must provide every program, ministry, or activity parents and children desire. In reality, very few churches have the resources to provide a wide array of ministries while maintaining the quality and integrity of the content of the programs they already provide.

*Myth 3: “If children are having fun, then it must be effective.”*

Some people look for churches with innovative, entertaining, or “fun” events. Children will respond to fun activities at church, especially if their friends attend, regardless of the intrinsic value of the content received. I call them “empty calories.” Most children would choose a diet of their favorite junk food, but we have an obligation to provide a balanced diet with good nutrients that will contribute to a healthy development. Likewise, all fun is not learning, but all learning can be fun when balanced between good content and engaging teaching methodology. Churches often use cute gimmicks to attract children and their families to the church because they can get immediate results; but after the families are in church, no substantial spiritual nourishment is provided.

*Myth 4: “If there are many opportunities for my child to be at church, then it must be effective.”*

Some parents count the *number* of events or activities provided for preschoolers or grade-schoolers. They want events happening at the church several times a week, especially for the grade-school child. They believe that children’s schedules need to be heavily programmed much like those of teenagers, and what better place to have children “dropped off” than at church! This is often true of families who home school and depend on the church for the socialization aspects of their children’s development. However, churches that rely on volunteer (often parent) leadership for the most part will find that providing a rigorous schedule of activities for children will “burn out” the leadership core as well as the children. Again, the quality of the program offerings suffer.

*Myth 5: “If this church teaches (specified content), then it is effective.”*

People often evaluate the *content* of the programs based on their pet content. They want programs that have certain content, regardless of how effectively it is taught or how many children are involved. They are looking for specific content such as Bible memorization, biblical content, rote memorization of Scripture and/or doctrine, or other content that meets their standard of excellence without consideration of appropriate educational or life application needs of children and without consideration of a balanced, comprehensive content. Content is important, but the way the content is taught or presented affects whether the children engage the content and integrate it into their lives for more than an hour or two.

### A Better Ministry Strategy

While all of these measures have some importance, other criteria may indicate the depth and strength of a church’s ministry to preschoolers, grade-schoolers, and their families. As I have ministered in seven churches and consulted with hundreds of churches and ministers in the past thirty-three

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years, I have identified some of the measures of successful preschool and grade-school ministries in a variety of churches. The church personalities, styles, and sizes are diverse; but the core values are quite similar in the congregations that successfully connect children to God, children and parents to a community of faith, and childhood ministry to the mission and/or vision of the congregation.

These churches are interested in more than activities and numbers. They want to make a significant difference in the spiritual lives of children, families, and the church; so, they have moved beyond both mediocre programming and “edutainment” fads to embrace a ministry strategy that is both foundational and inviting to children and families. They have ministered to children who have grown into youth and adults as faithful Christ-followers. They have attracted, encouraged, and equipped families to be the faith nurturers of all of the family members. They have grown churches that embrace all members from the youngest to the oldest, and they have thrived.

Many churches are discovering that childhood ministry is deeply rooted in relationships. They are committed to proclaiming Bible truths and stories with integrity rather than simply providing programming that has a biblical theme. They recognize that childhood ministry is first and foremost family ministry. They have found ways to be inclusive of children in their congregational experiences rather than always providing a separate event just for the children. They recognize that “family ministry” is not just providing activities for all ages of family members, but it includes providing experiences in which the whole family can participate together.

This book is written especially for the minister or layperson who guides the childhood ministry in a church—a person who passionately believes in building “Enduring Connections” between a child and God, and a child and a faith community. Those “Enduring Connections” are rooted in relationships with parents, teachers, ministers, and others who care deeply for the children and live and speak of their faith.

Each chapter poses a question that will guide you in evaluating or beginning such a childhood ministry that weaves *Enduring Connections*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, Calif.: Issachar Resources, 2003), 43; and Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman), 1997, ix.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 65.

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## PART I: THE CHILDHOOD MINISTRY

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### CHAPTER I

## Does Your Church Have a Focused Goal or Vision for Preschool and Grade-school Ministry?

Every church needs to answer these questions:

- What do we want preschoolers to know about God and experience before they enter first grade? How can we best help them to accomplish that?
- What do we want grade-schoolers to know about God and experience before they enter seventh grade? How can we best help them to accomplish that?
- What will our role be in encouraging and equipping families?

A congregation's answers to these questions will guide the structure, programming, scheduling, and content of its ministry. When a church knows what it wants to accomplish, it has direction for getting there.

This is "easier said than done." The majority of churches have only a vague notion of what they are trying to accomplish with their children and families. At worst, some congregations have "time slots" that they fill with a variety of activities that are appealing to children and parents. However, the programs often are not connected with each other in any way even though they are ministering to the same group of children. Teachers seldom are aware of the content of other ministries, and sometimes they are rotating in and out of classes, even unaware of what was taught or experienced in the previous session of the same ministry.

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Many churches simply repeat the programs that they have traditionally provided, only tweaking or updating them slightly from year to year. Other churches look to a “booming” church in their community or even another city and attempt to repeat the programs that church is doing in an effort to replicate the perceived success. They have not given serious consideration to evaluating whether they are effectively laying strong faith foundations with children in their church because most of them have not discussed nor determined what that would “look like.”

Instead of scheduling a series of activities, programs, or ministries with preschoolers and grade-schoolers, what if a church began envisioning how they could help preschoolers, grade-schoolers, and their families to become all God wants them to be? What if they were intentional in planning a “curriculum” that addressed all of the aspects of spiritual formation, especially the foundational portion of the preschool years and the grade school years?

### God’s Vision

In Matthew 22:37–40 Jesus told us what God desires from all people. Put simply, we are to love God and love others. The question that every congregation needs to ask is: What is being done to help children to love God with all their hearts, souls, and minds? Is the ministry focused on God? Does it help the children to love God more? Is the ministry outwardly focused, encouraging children to love others—all kinds of “others”?

If you start with God’s vision of how to live out that great commandment in *your* church and *your* community, your ministry vision will be unique. The people, resources, gifts, and even the context of your church will make God’s vision for your church different from that of any other church. Instead of simply adopting what another church may be doing and then asking God to bless it, consider asking God what his vision is for your church and letting him guide your journey.

This discovery of God’s vision begins with prayer—a lot of prayer, not just a “bless us” before the meeting starts and at the end. Begin by imagining what God could do in your childhood ministry. Don’t be afraid to dream God-sized dreams. By seeking first “his kingdom” rather than your own, you will find that God will be able to guide you to his future.

The discovery also may mean visiting other churches that seem to be thriving through living out God’s vision for their church. “Priming your vision pump” through these visits needs to be followed by evaluating what “learnings” God might be guiding you toward. Explore how you might adapt rather than adopt elements of what other churches are doing that seem applicable to what you want to accomplish in your ministry.

### Talking It Out and Putting It Down

Depending on the organizational structure and church polity, each congregation needs to involve the people most affected by the ministry. One

suggested grouping could be a Childhood Ministry Team (see chapter 12). This team of key preschool and grade-school leadership and representative parents would begin the process of determining the vision for the church's ministry to preschoolers, grade-schoolers, and their families by considering several things:

1. Assess what your church is doing very well. If you are fortunate, you have some leadership with passions in certain areas of childhood ministry. People with passion give much time and energy to sharing that passion with children and other leadership. However, you need to be realistic about how well the current ministries are being implemented. Are some age groups doing well while others are struggling? Are some existing programs energized while others are "tired?" Get input from parents and leaders as well as children. Assessment can be done through interviews or surveys (see appendix 1).

Build on your strengths. Many times churches begin by attempting to strengthen their weaknesses first. Congregations have a limited amount of resources, and if they funnel their energies to weakest areas, the strong areas often begin struggling. A wiser course is to make the strong programs that support your vision and your goals even more effective and appealing. As people are energized by the results of these efforts and additional leadership emerges, the weaker areas can be addressed. Sometimes the ineffective programs need to cease, and sometimes they can be reinvented or revitalized.

2. Look at the church's vision statement (if there is one) and discuss how the preschool and grade-school ministry helps to accomplish what the church has identified as its unique role in the world. If your church does not have a vision statement, then seek God's vision for the preschool and grade-school ministry. What hope or support could your church offer to children and families in your community, town, or city? Look within the family needs in the congregation, but also look outside the congregation. What ministry needs in your community are you uniquely equipped to meet? Here are examples of vision statements:

- To encourage, equip, and empower parents and leadership to be purposeful in the Christlike development of children (see Lk. 2:52).
- To assist and guide children in all areas of development so that they will come to know Christ and have a personal relationship with him.
- To integrate childhood ministry into every aspect of the church's ministry: education, missions, worship, fellowship, and evangelism.

The vision statement will give the guiding team its overall direction and basis for selecting and implementing programs, as well as for eliminating existing programs that do not support the vision.

3. Guided by the vision, the team also will be ready to develop a list of what they want preschoolers and grade-schoolers to know and experience before they move to the next age grouping. This process will take

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considerable discussion, negotiation, and—eventually—consensus. Initially consider broad concepts, skills, or experiences rather than a detailed listing of Bible content, skills, activities, etc. For example, the team may list valued concepts and experiences:

- Bible skills appropriate for each age level
- Inquirer’s classes for third through sixth graders
- Worship orientation sessions before 4-year-olds attend congregational worship services (or whatever age begins congregational worship)
- Outreach activities for unchurched children
- Mission education and/or mission action activities for children
- Intergenerational Bible study experiences

Next, the team may compose a list of Bible concepts and Bible skills that will be taught at each age as they consider the developmental needs of preschoolers and grade-schoolers. Some churches weave those concepts throughout all of their ministries to that age group. Appendix 2 has a sample portion of one church’s document that guides the teaching of their preschoolers and grade-schoolers.

4. Next consider how to equip leaders/teachers and parents to accomplish the vision. This will involve another listing based on the vision. For example, a team might plan the following:

- Parent education workshops/seminars four times a year
- Family Bible study classes for all ages once a quarter
- Age group leadership training once a month
- Outreach activities for unchurched families

After the list is made, the team would do well to prioritize the equipping activities since most churches tend to list more than they can realistically execute with excellence.

5. Before adding further detail to the annual plan, take the vision and the broad listing of the plan implementation to a larger audience to involve more people in “owning” and supporting the ministry. Again, depending on the church’s organization and operating procedures, the report might be presented to a church coordinating team or to all parents and leadership. Make sure that the plan has the support and input of the church staff, especially the pastor in most churches, before presenting it to the larger group.

If you encounter resistance, consider the validity of the opposition and either take the time to discuss the issues until the opposition is dispersed or redo the plan before proceeding.

6. Once you have reported to the larger group(s), made adjustments based on any input, and secured official approval (if needed) to proceed, you are ready to make annual plans.



### Annual Planning

Many churches seem to plan from one activity to another, but a yearly plan will move you from an activity-based to a vision-guided ministry. Armed with your vision, the listing of what you want the children to know and experience in your church, and the leadership/parent training events needed, the team is ready to determine the yearly plan. Not only will you determine the activities to accomplish your vision, but also you will calendar them, prepare a budget, and secure resources needed to accomplish them. Some churches choose a theme or a focus for their yearly programs, activities, and emphases chosen from the identified priorities in the visioning phase. For example, you may champion a family emphasis that will feature activities or programs that include the whole family in some way. Not every program will be multigenerational, but there may be elements of how to involve the family in the child's learning experience.

For example, one church chose a family emphasis several years ago. They planned a family activity for each quarter. At Christmas, families constructed a tabletop family nativity built from pre-cut stable kits and a variety of materials for the figures. The church even created a family vacation Bible school that was multigenerational rather than age-graded. They planned ways to communicate what the preschoolers and grade-schoolers were learning in their Bible study, missions, and music programs throughout the year. They made suggestions for how the learning could be expanded at home during the week. They sought ways to make the worship services more family inclusive, with children participating as worship leaders from time to time.

Regularly occurring ministries such as weekly Bible study, music/choir programs, or discipleship ministries will need adequate planning and support. Coordination of these ministries will be essential for them to be complementary to each other. Basically the same children will be involved in all of the programs, so rather than being competitive, each ministry needs to have a unique role in what the church wants to accomplish in the life of the child. Of course, some repetition will remain, but that should be planned to reinforce the concepts and experiences. The plan must give each ministry a unique contribution to the faith formation of the preschoolers and grade-schoolers without being simply redundant.

The ongoing programs will be the heart of the church's ministry, so give adequate attention to the actions necessary for implementation. Work out the details of:

- *Scheduling*—Determine weekly or monthly regularly scheduled time (including the duration of each session), launch date, and ending date (if applicable). Discuss any necessary variation from the weekly/monthly schedule for interruptions due to holidays, summer, or other break.

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- *Leadership*—Follow the procedures of your church for identifying and securing adequate, competent leadership. If you cannot discover the kind of leadership needed to provide an effective ministry, delay the launch until you can enlist leadership, or reorganize the groupings until additional leadership can be secured.
- *Space*—Often multiple programs use the same rooms. Determine which rooms scheduled programs will use. Facilitate the cooperative usage of the rooms with the leadership of the various programs. Shared space conflict can be minimized if guidelines are determined from the beginning.
- *Literature*—Select quality literature for each program/ministry. Find the literature that best matches your vision and values. Preschool and grade-school literature marketing is a prolific business, so know what you want your preschoolers and grade-schoolers to learn, and select the literature that most closely matches your criteria (see chapter 11). The team may want to include some of the leadership in the process.

Next, the team will set the dates for the activities/events they have selected that are not regularly scheduled programs. Be sure to check the church as well as community calendars to avoid creating obvious conflicts. It is easy to feel that the planning is done when a date is on the calendar, but the preparation phase is only the beginning. Determine what needs to be done to make it happen, and write down those actions for the team that will eventually carry out the event.

Hopefully, you will be able to submit a budget to the team or group in your church that determines how the church income will be spent. Use your annual plans to itemize the dollar amount that would realistically support the ministry plan. Many childhood ministries do not have the money they need to have excellent programs because they have not captured a God-sized vision that is clearly communicated to the church. This is your opportunity to communicate your vision as well as what it would take to provide this excellent, visionary ministry. Sharing your vision, your plans, and especially the benefit to the church itself will more likely secure the funds needed for implementation. If you receive less money than requested or needed, adjust your plans based on your priorities.

Once the plans and the budget are finalized, implement the rest of the plan as outlined in chapter 12. Periodically, the planning team needs to evaluate the effectiveness of the annual plan and make necessary adjustments or additions.