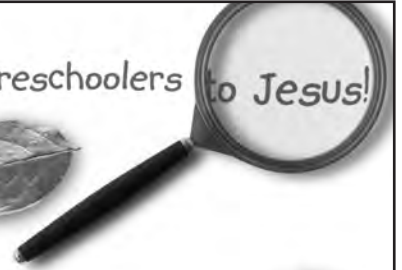


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*These articles are recommended for use in parent education classes.

**If your church does not use Gospel Light curriculum, modify these articles to reflect your curriculum.

Instant Teacher Training Posters 231

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CD-ROM

Provides modifiable forms, Workshop Participant Notes, Leader Notes and PowerPoint Slides

Why Preschoolers Matter

By Wes Haystead, M.S.Ed.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

Matthew 19:14

The most striking thing about Jesus’ encounter with these little ones is not that He interrupted an adult meeting to take time for some children. Nor is it surprising that He physically picked up the children and loved them. The remarkable part of this incident is Jesus’ words. Most adults would have said something like “Let the little children come to me, and don’t prevent them, for someday they will grow up and become important.”

Jesus saw something in childhood besides the future. He recognized worth and value in the state of being a child, for He told the waiting adults in the crowd that children are important for what they are right now—“For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

We adults always seem to be looking to the future. This push for preparation robs childhood of much of its essence, as parents and teachers urge little ones hurriedly through the present in search of a more significant future.

The Future—Now

“I know it’s hard for a three-year-old to sit quietly and listen, but I have to start getting him ready for later when he will have to sit still.”

“If he’s going to be a success in life, he’ll have to go to college. And to make sure he can stay ahead in

school, I’m going to teach him to read before he starts first grade if it kills us both!”

“If a child is going to grow up with an appreciation for the great hymns of the church, you just can’t start too young to teach them.”

These and many similar statements are used repeatedly by parents and teachers who are earnestly concerned about helping young children get ready for future roles and demands. However, these well-meaning adults sometimes actually do more harm than good, because in their long-range view of growth they have lost sight of the value of just being a child.

Children are more than people in transition, waiting for some future date of real meaning. The qualities that come from being young are not flaws or imperfections; rather, childhood is a marked and definable stage of development.

You may think, *An adult has so many capabilities and accomplishments far beyond those of a child.*



Why Preschoolers Matter

Surely the years of productive and responsible adulthood are more significant than those of infancy and early childhood. But what adult experiences could replace the laughter of children that gladdens the hearts of all who hear? How many hours of labor would it take to equal a little girl's smile? What a sterile world this would be were children not present to add their unique joys and sorrows!

The Value of a Child

Has any parent ever seen more deeply into him- or herself than when holding a newborn child and looking into that child's eyes? All the writings and research of humankind couldn't provide the insights that come with observing the experiences of a child starting out on his or her own unique adventure. The child's fresh enthusiasm for everything seen, the child's honest questions and powerfully simple logic—all combine to peel the scales from our encrusted adult eyes.

What is the value of a child—as a child?
Incalculable!

This is no plea for attempting to stop the progress of maturation. This is simply a call to recognize that just because a phase of life is brief and is replaced by another more sophisticated, we should not rush past it; for if we bypass the unique stages of childhood, we strip each succeeding developmental stage of some of its finest ingredients. The best preparation for any phase of life is the proper completion of the previous one. The second coat of paint must always wait for the first to dry. Harvest never begins when the first green shoots appear in the spring. Human life has an aching void when childhood is squeezed away.

Is this what Jesus had in mind when He took a small child in His arms and said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3)? Is there a place in our homes and churches for children to be children? Do we wholeheartedly accept them as they are, not as we wish they were? Do the rooms and materials we provide sound out "Welcome!" to a young child? Are the adults who surround young children deeply sympathetic and understanding of what these special years are all about?

Or do we merely see little ones in terms of their potential, enduring them until they get old enough to really matter? Is the church's objective in providing children's ministries a means of attracting their parents or of getting ready for the church of tomorrow? Is our goal to train young children to act like miniature adults because their noisy spontaneity might somehow mar our sacred corridors?

W.C. Fields wrung many laughs from his famous line, "Anyone who hates dogs and kids can't be all bad." But have you ever met a person who wanted to live in a world where everyone shared Fields's dislike of children?

It's far better to follow the Lord Jesus' pattern with children. His loving response to children lets us see into His heart's feeling of the worth of a young life.

Childhood is not a disease to be cured or endured. It is a God-ordained part of human life with value and significance that continually enriches the experiences of those who may have forgotten what it is like to see the world from a fresh, unspoiled point of view.

Organizing Your Preschool Ministry

This section contains concise and practical information that can help you build a quality ministry for young children from the ground floor up. There are two ways to find specific information you need:

1. Use the index at the back of this book to find specific information you need.
2. Read the section containing information on the subject you need help with.

Procedures are suggested for the following categories:

Programs and Curriculum: Gives an overview of the kinds of preschool programs your church may choose to provide and gives tips on choosing which programs will most benefit your church and community. Includes guidelines for choosing curriculum and how to group children within various programs.

Staff: Describes everything you need to know about staffing your preschool programs. Includes recruiting tips, job descriptions, screening and application forms, scheduling and training ideas, as well as tips for handling some common staff problems.

Facilities and Supplies: Provides complete descriptions of the well-equipped environment for young children. Includes basic supply, equipment and furniture lists; room diagrams and tips for handling specific room problems.

Health and Safety: Describes vital information for making your preschool classrooms safe for children. Includes suggestions and tips for keeping rooms clean, safety guidelines, check-in forms and ways to respond to illnesses and emergencies and more.

Parents and Family: Gives guidelines for communicating with parents and making it easy for parents to communicate with you. Describes parent handbooks and brochures, record-keeping forms, plus ideas for family support and outreach.

Programs and Curriculum

Choosing Which Programs to Offer

Now more than ever, young children (and their parents) are encouraged to participate in a multitude of activities. As you survey the programs offered by churches and other organizations in your community, you will likely find an abundance of classes, enrichment activities and other activities! How can a church decide what to offer? How can you know which programs will best meet the needs of the families in your church and community? In your role as a paid or volunteer director of preschool ministry, you may have been asked to coordinate specific programs; or you may have the option to develop programs as you and others determine the needs of your church. For either situation, certain guidelines should be followed as you minister to the young children in your church.

1. Make a mental or written list of the different kinds of programs churches typically offer for young children and their families. Include programs such as Sunday School (on Sunday mornings or Saturday evenings or even during the week), second-hour programs, weekday programs, day care and special events (Mothers' Morning Out, Vacation Bible School, parenting classes, etc.). In addition, you may wish to consider special-interest programs such as art, music or soccer classes. (Note: While many churches offer a weekday preschool or day care as part of their overall ministry to young children, this book is not intended to provide complete resources for organizing and administering a preschool or day-care program.)

2. After listing the wide variety of potential program categories, narrow your focus. For each program you already have in place, write a brief one- or two-sentence description that answers the question, How does this program benefit young children and/or their families? For example, if you provide Sunday School classes, you might write "Sunday School classes benefit young children by teaching Bible stories and verses and introducing children to basic truths about God, Jesus, the Bible, prayer and the Church."

3. Evaluate your overall ministry by considering such questions as:

- When do children and their families have opportunities to build relationships with each other?
- What programs help build bridges to children and families in our community?
- How do parents develop biblical parenting skills?
- What programs could meet the special needs of single parents or working parents?
- How do the programs for young children help fulfill the purpose or vision statement of our church?

In order to answer these questions and evaluate the preschool ministry of your church, it's helpful to get the input of other people in the church. Ask parents of young children to complete the questionnaire on page 11. (Modifiable questionnaire available on CD-ROM in this book.) In addition, you may want to invite parents, past leaders, other staff, teachers and leaders in existing programs to a one-time meeting at which you brainstorm together possibilities for your preschool ministry. Pray together, and ask God's wisdom and direction.

4. Determine what your short-term (one to two years) and long-term (three to five years) goals are for ministry to young children and their families. Consider what you can realistically provide based on the resources and size of your church. Don't be afraid to dream a little and explore new ministry ideas. To begin a new program, it's often easier to start with a short-term trial (for example, a midweek program that meets once a week for six weeks rather than the entire year). And if you implement a program for six weeks and then discover it didn't work as well as planned, you are not committed for an entire year! Realize, also, that even if a program has been in place for many years, it's OK and probably beneficial to consider updating or reworking it (or even discarding it).

Choosing Curriculum

Once you have determined the programs your church will provide, begin looking for curriculum resources for each program. Request catalogs from church suppliers or look on the Internet. You may also ask for recommendations from children's pastors at other churches. While it's often tempting to create your own material, it's

easier to recruit staff if you can assure them of appropriate and complete resources. It is less time-consuming for teachers and leaders to adapt material to the specific needs of the children in their classes than to develop and write material entirely on their own. Even the most creative individual eventually runs out of ideas. And the time it takes for a person or team to write curriculum comes out of some other area in which this individual or team might have been serving in your church.

If you are choosing curriculum for several different programs, as much as possible look for material that is consistent in philosophy and doctrine. While there may be more than one valid approach to learning, it is far more effective to train teachers to do one way well rather than to expect them to become skilled with varied materials that may be built on differing, even conflicting, educational and biblical principles.

For programs that are intended to provide regular Bible teaching such as Sunday School, use the curriculum guide on page 12. (Modifiable guide available on CD-ROM in this book.) For other programs, adapt the curriculum guide to create a personalized checklist.

Parent Questionnaire

**Modifiable
on CD-ROM**

1. What programs at our church have your children participated in during the last six months?
2. Which of these programs would you like your children to attend again? What did you like about them?
3. How could these programs be improved?
4. In what specific ways have our church ministries helped improve your child's life? Your family life?
5. In what ways would you like further help for your child and/or family?



Compare Your Curriculum Options

Curriculum _____ Age Level _____

Use the following rating scale and questions to rate your curriculum options:

5 = Superior 4 = Excellent 3 = Good 2 = Fair 1 = Poor

Bible Content and Usage

- _____ Is the curriculum designed to teach the Bible as God’s inspired and authoritative Word?
- _____ Is there balanced coverage of the Old and New Testaments?
- _____ Does the overall plan of the curriculum point students to faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, and also nurture and guide them to “grow up in Christ”?
- _____ Does the material present Bible truths in a manner appropriate to the abilities and development of the students’ age levels?
- _____ Are hands-on Bible usage and skill development encouraged at appropriate age levels?

Teacher

- _____ Does the curriculum challenge the teacher to prepare spiritually for the task of teaching?
- _____ Is the material clearly arranged to show the teacher an understandable and logical lesson plan?
- _____ Are the Bible-learning and life-response goals specifically and clearly stated for each lesson?
- _____ Does the material provide the teacher with a variety of Bible learning activities from which to choose?
- _____ Are the materials clearly presented, enabling the teacher to be prepared with a reasonable amount of effort?
- _____ Are there enough ideas and suggestions to adapt the material for longer or shorter sessions, larger or smaller groups, or limited equipment?

Student

- _____ Is the vocabulary appropriate for the age and abilities of the students?
- _____ Does the curriculum provide a variety of ways for students to participate actively in the learning process?
- _____ Are the student materials attractive and do they encourage involvement?
- _____ Do the teacher resources provide a variety of attractive aids to stimulate student interest and involvement?
- _____ Are the Bible learning activities appropriate to the cognitive, spiritual, social and physical development of the students?
- _____ Does the curriculum speak to issues relevant to the student’s everyday life?
- _____ Does the curriculum provide materials and suggestions for ways students may understand the responsibility and joy of sharing Christ?

Family Outreach

- _____ Does the material provide ideas for making and sustaining meaningful contact with both students and families outside the classroom?
- _____ Does the take-home paper contain activities that assist the family in relating the student’s learning to everyday life?
- _____ Does the curriculum encourage outreach and church growth?

Grouping Children

Grouping young children is a significant part of planning and organizing your programs. Every church needs a well-thought-out policy about grouping and promoting young children. This policy needs to be clearly stated and communicated to parents and teachers. You can best group children by following certain guidelines.

1. All children and teachers benefit when classes are maintained at sizes similar to each other.

Attendance records can help you do an effective job of determining class divisions. The maximum number of children that should be in any preschool classroom is as noted on the chart below (for safety, two teachers should be present in each classroom):

An overcrowded group of three-year-olds next door to a nearly empty room of twos is not effective teaching. Each year evaluate the dividing line

between the classes. Just because the current age-level divisions worked well last year does not mean they will be appropriate this year—unless, of course, your church can devise a system to get young couples to evenly space the arrival of new babies. (Note: During the summer months, if you regularly have fewer children attending than during the school year, you may wish to combine several ages in one class.)

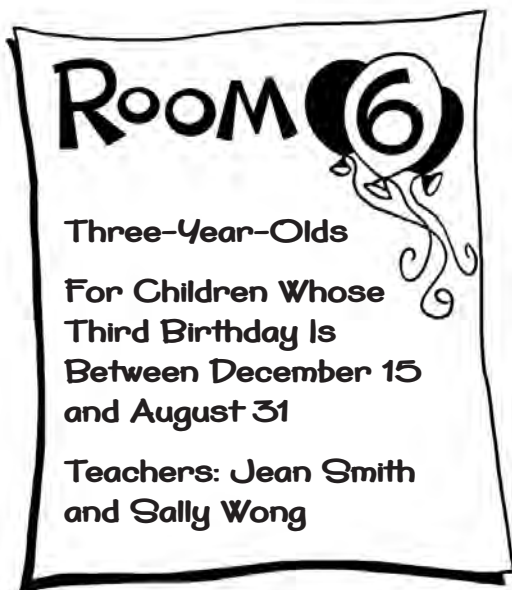
During the school year, when a class has grown so large that it needs to be divided, create a smooth transition in the following manner:

- Have the new teachers sit in the class with the current teachers to observe and become better acquainted with the children.
- For several weeks, ask the new teachers to assume some of the teaching responsibilities.
- After several weeks, when teachers and children are well acquainted, create two classes with two or more teachers leading each class.

Ages of children	Teacher to child ratio *	Maximum number of children per room
2-year-olds	1 to 3 or 4	12 to 15
2- and 3-year-olds	1 to 5	16 to 20
4- and 5-year-olds	1 to 6	20 to 24
Kindergarten	1 to 6 or 8	20 to 24

*See pages 17-18 for more information on teacher/child ratios.

2. Age is the safest criteria to use in dividing classes, and it is not necessary that the same date be used in dividing all classes. In order to maintain balanced class sizes, it is perfectly reasonable to have one class include a 13-month span while the class next door has only an 11-month span. To avoid confusion, clearly post on the door of each class the specific age range of that group. (Modifiable sign available on CD-ROM.)



3. Children benefit more by being in a smaller group with more personal attention than by being in a large overcrowded group. In the example of an overcrowded room of three-year-olds next to a really empty room of twos, everyone would benefit from placing the younger threes back with the two-year-olds where they could receive more individual care and guidance.

4. The oldest preschool class needs to align its policy with the local schools so that children are promoted into the elementary division when the child is ready to begin first grade.

If a parent decides to hold a younger child out of kindergarten for a year, it is best that the child remain in the preschool class at church until he or she actually enters first grade. Teachers who have older children in their class need to be alert for enrichment ideas to keep these children from getting bored with activities designed for younger children. Your curriculum may provide kindergarten challenge ideas, but if not, teachers can add materials to Bible learning activities (greater variety of blocks, interesting art materials, etc.) or plan ways for children to use their increasing interests and abilities in reading and writing (dictate comments or stories, look at the words of a Bible verse in your Bible, etc.). (See more information about meeting the needs of kindergartners on p. 16.)

5. Plan ahead to make promotion of children from one class to the next a positive experience. Children move from one class to the next as a group at the start of the school year (or another time of year designated by your church policy). If you are using an electronic system, your church may run an automatic promotion routine that moves all children in a selected range of classes up to the next class.

Designate a specific Sunday as Promotion Sunday or Graduation Sunday, coordinating this day with the elementary-age classes. On Promotion Sunday (or any Sunday on which children change classes from one age level to the next, or when a new team of teachers begin teaching) children begin classes with their current teachers and at an announced time are escorted to their new classes for a get-acquainted time with their new teachers. Another option is for children to simply attend their new classes on Promotion Sunday. Whichever option you choose, be sure ahead of time to send parents information specifying the date of Promotion Sunday and the teachers' names and locations of all classes. In a large church, it

will be helpful to have additional greeters available to help parents find their child's new classroom and to display class lists with maps in a variety of visible places in high traffic areas. (Don't forget to give ushers, greeters at welcome booths, etc., the appropriate information for guiding visitors to the correct places.)

Some parents may request that their children be moved ahead to an older class before Promotion Sunday. While occasionally a very small church may be able to accommodate such parent requests, it is usually best to keep children in their appropriate age-level class (the same age group with whom the child will later attend school) to avoid overcrowding caused by unplanned promotions. Discuss with the parents and teachers how the child's needs and interests can be met in the classroom.

6. At least one class (or department in a church with more than one class for each age level) needs to be designated as a "holding class." In a holding class, children are received from a younger group more than once a year (for example, near the time of their birthdays) but are promoted out to the next older group all at one time. As a general rule of thumb, the class of two-year-olds (or the class of three-year-olds if two-year-olds are kept in the nursery) works best as the holding class. The holding class requires a very adaptable staff, since this class may be very small at the start of the year but may grow continually as children continue to be promoted into the class throughout the year.

It is best not to promote children into the holding class one at a time on their birthdays but to have periodic promotion days when all those who have reached a designated age or developmental milestone (walking, potty-trained, etc.) are moved to the next class as a group. Teachers

in both classes can then prepare themselves, the parents and the children to make the promotion a positive experience. Children find it easier to make the change if accompanied by at least one friend.

Questions and Answers

Q. My church is too small to have separate age-level classes. We combine all our preschoolers into one class.

What should we know about how to combine mixed ages effectively?

A. Many small churches find it necessary to combine ages. Large churches may find it necessary to combine ages if their classroom space is limited or if unexpected growth takes place. Mixed-age classes provide benefits in younger children learning from older ones and older ones gaining from the opportunity to show responsibility.

First, consider the safety of the children in the mixed-age class. Evaluate the equipment and materials used to make sure they are safe for the youngest children who will be in the class. If materials are used which are not safe for the youngest children, they should be brought into the classroom for a specific activity and then used only under close supervision.

Second, provide curriculum for the age level of which you have the most children. Teachers can then adapt the activities for younger and/or older children.

Third, with classes of mixed ages, it is vital to provide the recommended number of teachers so that the youngest children are cared for adequately and the oldest children are challenged appropriately. An understaffed group of mixed ages is likely to provide a significant amount of negative rather than positive learning.

Q. Some churches include kindergarten children with elementary-age children. Is this a good idea?

A. Preschool classes have traditionally included all children who have not yet started first grade. However, many educators, parents and church leaders now feel that kindergarten children fit better with younger elementary children than with older preschoolers.

The main reason for this view is that most children by this age have already had extensive classroom experience in day care and/or preschool before beginning kindergarten. No longer is this the age when most young children encounter their first group learning situation, and many kindergarten children already possess some of the cognitive skills (beginning reading, writing, math, etc.) previously introduced in first grade.

However, there are valid reasons to be cautious about attempting to merge kindergartners with elementary-age children. Kindergartners still need the informal, physically active session plan that is the hallmark of preschool. And children of this age still learn most effectively through hands-on experiences coupled with a teacher's guided conversation. Attempts to accelerate them into groups, activities, materials and schedules designed for older children might harm the children's development. In most cases, the emotional, social, physical and cognitive needs of kindergartners are better met by providing them with one more year of preschool activities, guided by teachers who are aware of the great learning strides being made in this exciting year of life.

Q. We provide programs for children for more than one hour on a Sunday morning. What are the special needs of children that we should consider?

A. As you develop the schedule for the total morning, remember that flexibility is key! Realize that the children in your care will not be able to sit still for long periods of time. The youngest will likely not be able to sit still for any period of time! Be sure to alternate quiet activities with activities that allow children to exercise their large muscles (active games, blocks, playground play, etc.). If children attend a portion of the adult worship service before a session begins, provide a large-motor activity at the beginning of the session.

Read "Schedule: Guidelines for Making Your Class Schedule Work" on pages 204-206 for a recommended Sunday School session schedule. Sessions that take place either before or after Sunday School typically provide a combination of activity centers, Bible story and worship times, snack and/or supervised outdoor or indoor play. It is best if all sessions in which young children are involved focus on one Bible story and verse in a single morning. Then children are provided with the repetition so necessary for young learners and are less likely to become confused by information from one or more Bible stories.