

CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH

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Without children, a local church will grow old. The once bustling lobby and sanctuary grow quiet and still. The remaining congregation ages year by year until merely a handful of senior members remain. The church becomes increasingly unattractive to new families searching for a church home and, in the end, must close its doors.

That was the condition of the Malvern Baptist Church when Nick Kidwell inquired into renting space from the historic church. With only fifteen senior members left attending services and no children, Malvern Baptist stood as an edifice of quiet stone with no echo sounding off its walls. The multiple classrooms that once served as the training ground for the next generation were now leased to outside tenants to help cover the upkeep costs for the two-hundred-year-old church building.

But everything changed the day Valley Creek Church and its forty children poured through the stone doorway, up the stairs, and into the sanctuary. The sound of family and the cry of an infant over the patter of feet brought life and, with it, joy. The original members of Malvern Baptist shared how much they loved seeing the kids all around. Life is what children bring to a church. Though Malvern Baptist's membership dwindled in the preceding years to the point of death, in the months since Valley Creek was planted dozens of adults and children now call Valley Creek their church home.

When your church is flush with children it is easy to take them for granted or even complain of too much running around or noise during the service. *"Would somebody please get that crying baby out of the sanctuary?"* But hundreds of churches hope and pray that even just one family with children would join their congregation to give them a needed shot in the arm.

It is vitally important that we celebrate and welcome the children that pass through our doors. It is also critical that we protect and guard the children in our care, looking to partner with their parents in passing on the gospel to the next generation.

Welcoming Children into your Church

Jesus welcomed the little children that the administratively minded disciples tried to turn away. “Let the little children come to me,” Jesus told them (Matt. 19:14). Children are not a bother; they are a blessing we must welcome. When a family steps through our church's front door, let's ensure they are greeted with a smiling face and helped to find their way. Remember, the first two minutes of a new guest's experience shapes initial impressions of your congregation. Families with kids want to know, “Is there a place for my children here?” A warm greeting to the parents and a joyous welcome of the children, along with directions to your children's ministry, answers a resounding “yes.”

It helps if the entrance to your children's ministry is clearly visible from where folks first come in. If your ministry is hidden down a hallway, decorate the entrance and add fun signage that directs families in the right direction. Have children's ministry staff on the lookout for new families, ready to escort them through the registration process and guide them to the proper classrooms. If children participate in the service, post families on the lookout for guests with children ready to greet and guide them to a seat in the sanctuary, offering to answer any questions they have.

Adding events to your church calendar that include children, such as a summer Vacation Bible School, hosting a homeschool ministry, starting an Awana program, or hosting children's sporting programs, all communicate—children are welcome here.

We recently began a ministry for eighteen to thirty-five year old adults. The ministry we call 20-30 is for both single and married people. By offering childcare, we drew in some young married couples who would otherwise not have come. Childcare communicates an awareness of the needs families have. It provides an opportunity for mom and dad to receive ministry and a safe place for children to form lasting friendships.

These goals require that we think through our Children's Ministry relationally. As we do, we must also think through our Children's Ministry through the lens of security.

Safeguarding the Children under Your Care

Protecting our children is a serious responsibility. Jesus taught, “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42 NIV).

Every time we gather children, whether for instruction or simply to watch over them, we are responsible for their safety and well-being. Carpeted, child-safe rooms ensure active and curious children are less likely to

injure themselves. Holding to a policy of turning away sick children can reduce the spread of infections. Monitoring snacks vigilantly can help prevent a severe allergic reaction.

Outside of these housekeeping safety measures are the more serious safety concerns such as protecting against sexual predators and preparing an emergency response plan. The best defense against child sexual abuse is a comprehensive plan that includes training, background checks, screening volunteers, and classroom safety policies. Deepak Reju wrote a helpful book, *On Guard: Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse at Church*. In this accessible resource, Deepak outlines eleven straightforward strategies to protect children from abuse.

Providing a copy of Deepak's book to all your key children's ministry leaders and teachers and reviewing it with them equips your team to ensure they know how to keep the children safe. Training through an organization such as MinistrySafe (ministrysafes.com) is available for your parents and workers, which will help them identify the grooming behaviors of sexual predators.⁷³

While local fire codes require churches to prepare for the event of a fire with adequate exits, fire alarms, and classroom evacuation maps, most churches are not prepared or know what to do in an active shooter incident. FEMA offers an online free active shooter preparedness course called *Active Shooter: What You Can Do*. Encouraging your teachers to take this online course will help them protect your children in the event of an active shooter incident. Bottom line, we need to protect the children under our care.

Discipling the Next Generation with Gospel Truth

I love Asaph's declaration in Psalm 78 when he says, "We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done" (Ps. 78:4). While it is clear from Scripture that passing our gospel faith to children is primarily the responsibility of parents, Asaph calls the congregation of Israel to partner with parents. Asaph understood the importance of passing on the glorious deeds of the Lord to the next generation and partnering with parents in this task. We (that is, the congregation) will not hide them (the glorious deeds of the Lord) from their children (the children of the gathered people of God.) Whether your church offers a formal children's ministry or includes children in the main service, we share a responsibility to disciple the next generation. The gospel is the most glorious of all God's glorious deeds, and it alone has the power to transform the hearts of our children and ensure the life of our church carries from one generation to the next.

⁷³ In fact, the importance and value of this training is so significant that Sovereign Grace Churches makes this training available for partner churches at no cost to them.

Asaph wrote,

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments
(Ps. 78:5–7).

The most effective training plan for the next generation is a cooperative strategy where the church equips the parents for their role as the primary discipler and then partners with them through the teaching the church offers. If children remain in the sanctuary for the main message, the preaching pastor must remember that children are in the service and address them in the message on a regular basis. For churches with an organized children's ministry, keeping your teaching gospel-centered will ensure the children receive that life-transforming truth. A curriculum with a home component can facilitate a robust partnership between church and home.

The Gospel Project offered by Lifeway is a gospel-centered chronological Bible study for adults and children. *The Gospel Project* is designed so that adults and children study the same content. *The Gospel Story Curriculum* offered by New Growth Press also provides a gospel-centered chronological Bible study for the classroom. In addition, the companion family devotionals, *Long Story Short* and *Old Story New* provide parents with prepared family devotions that follow the classroom instruction. By using one of these programs and encouraging parents to use the family devotions, you can ensure the children of your church understand how to apply the gospel to their lives.

Putting it All Together

Should a guest family with children walk into your church and receive a warm greeting at the door, experience a well-organized, safe children's ministry, and discover help for their role in discipling their children, they are likely to return the following Sunday. Families who are equipped and well cared for are far less likely to leave your church. Why is this? It is because churches that provide such care are rare. We want our children to grow up with a positive outlook on their church experience—a place of friendship and discipleship where gospel seeds were sown in love which later sprouted and transformed their hearts.

Two hundred years from now, if you've provided a safe, welcoming environment and solid gospel discipleship for parents and children, the patter of little feet and the newborn's cry will yet echo off your walls. New families visiting will find a home, and their children will grow up to take the place of the generations before them.