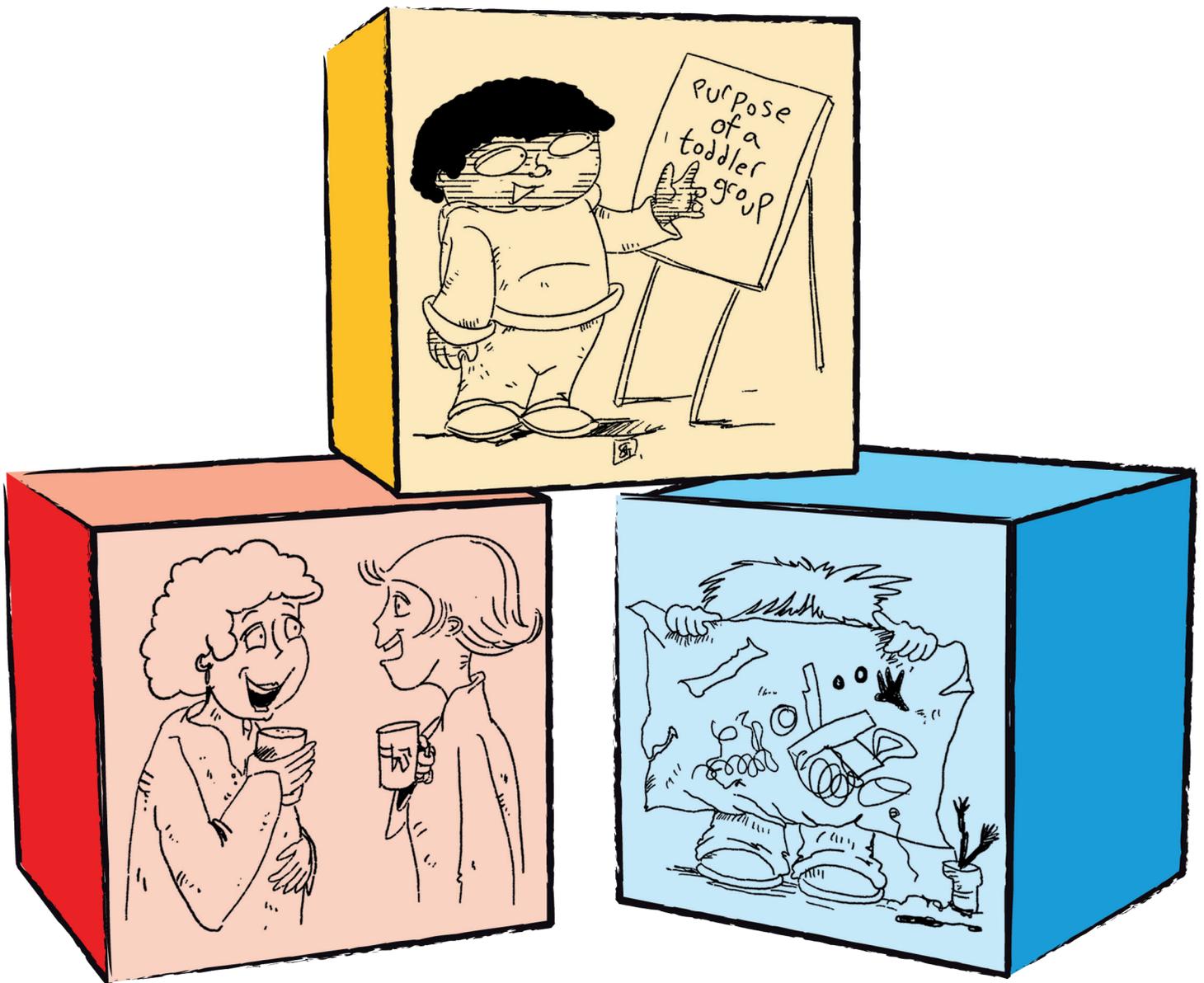


# BUILDING

# BLOCKS

A training resource for those in church-based toddler groups



Carer And Toddler Strategy (CATS) consultative group:

Baptist Union of Great Britain, Fegans (Parent and Toddler Groups Together), Go Project, Scripture Union, The Salvation Army



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# DEFINITIONS

The term '**toddler group**' is used in this training resource to refer to any group attended by infants and toddlers with their carers, whether they are parents, grandparents or other carers.

References to '**parents and carers**' refer to any adult accompanying a young child.

The leaders, co-leaders, helpers and anyone else involved in running the toddler group will be called the '**team**' or '**team of leaders**'.

These terms are all intended to be inclusive but are being simplified in this training resource, for clarity.

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# MEET THE EXPERTS

The Carer And Toddler Strategy (CATS) consultative group includes members of Christian organisations and practitioners from across different denominations, including Baptist Union of Great Britain, Fegans (Parent and Toddler Groups Together), Go Project, Scripture Union, and The Salvation Army.

Between them, the contributors have a vast array of knowledge, understanding and bright ideas for running and resourcing toddler groups. More importantly, they share an earnest desire to encourage, equip and support all those who are, or who plan to be, involved in leading such groups.

Even as this document has been prepared, they have learned much from each other and been re-enthused and inspired for this vital work. It is their hope and prayer that you will likewise be inspired, helped and encouraged to discover God's vision for your toddler group.

## **Naomi Buckler**

Naomi has run her church toddler group for more than six years and has worked for Care for the Family as their Parent and Toddler Project Manager, speaking at conferences and editing the 'Playtime' newsletter for toddler group leaders.

## **Alison Dayer**

Alison is an evangelist and under-5s specialist for Scripture Union. She visits toddler groups to provide support and Christian input and co-ordinates Scripture Union's under-5s training programme, regularly training church volunteers working with this age range.

## **Nick Lear**

Until recently, Nick was a Mission Adviser for the Baptist Union of Great Britain where he was responsible for BUGB's National Children's Strategy. He is now Senior Minister at Colchester Baptist Church.

## **Carolyn McQuaker**

Carolyn leads the Go Project founded in 2004 to support and resource God's people to realise and fulfil their own, unique missionary potential, wherever they find themselves, in particular by encouraging collaborative working and partnerships.

## **Lindy Rose, Rachel Gotobed, Maureen Ross, Jenny Doncaster**

Lindy, Rachel, Maureen and Jenny are, or have been, involved with family work within The Salvation Army, Adult and Family Ministries.

## **Claire Wells and Gaynor Pritchard**

Claire and Gaynor set up 'Parent and Toddler Groups Together', a toddler group network in Tunbridge Wells. This has grown into a successful annual conference, and a website ([www.ptgroupstogether.org.uk](http://www.ptgroupstogether.org.uk)). Claire is a regular seminar speaker on working with under-5s. The network is now part of her role within Fegans.



# THE IMPORTANCE OF TODDLER GROUPS

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’

He called a little child, whom he placed among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes a humble place – becoming like this child – is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’”  
Matthew 18:1-5 (*Today’s New International Version*)

Toddler groups are amongst the most exciting and significant starting places for mission and evangelism that exist in the United Kingdom today. But, frequently, their outreach importance and potential are undervalued. *Building Blocks* aims to encourage and equip group leaders and helpers (the ‘team’) to be more effective and better supported in this vital ministry.

Are you planning to start a new group? Or looking to review the focus, direction and achievements of an existing one? *Building Blocks* will help you to extend and refresh your vision for the fantastic potential of your group, as well as giving you practical advice, resources and encouragement for moving forward.

Are you longing to inspire church leaders to a better understanding of how toddler groups can, and should be, an integral part of your church’s mission and evangelism? Their active support and participation is of vital importance to ensure the toddler group is part of the mainstream life of the church.

Want to inspire your church leader?

- 1 Read ‘Mission through carer and toddler groups’ (in TRAINING EXTRAS).
- 2 Give a copy to your church leader(s) and urge them to read it for themselves.
- 3 Make an appointment to discuss its implications or invite your church leader to a toddler group planning meeting.

## Toddler groups in churches

It is estimated that between a third and a half of all children in this country, aged under-3, attend a toddler group on church premises regularly. That’s around 700,000-800,000 of them! Toddler groups can present a powerful opportunity for sharing faith with all who attend, from the very youngest to the oldest. The mission potential of a toddler group is for both adults and children.

Toddler groups thrive because there are many people dedicated to providing a safe, caring and welcoming environment where parents, grandparents and other carers, along with their infants and toddlers can begin to experience the love and reality of Jesus Christ. There are countless individuals and churches who owe a debt of gratitude to these leaders and helpers for their dedication, love and sheer hard work. Many people in churches today can trace the beginnings of their own journey of faith to an initial contact through a local toddler group. So, ‘Thank you!’ on their behalf!

“*Building Blocks* will help you extend and refresh your vision”



Tom was keen to get his Mum involved in finger painting.

These figures are taken from the Open University research paper *Pre-school Provision in Baptist Churches* by Gill Goodliff, 2006

# GET THE BEST FROM BUILDING BLOCKS

When you are busy running a group it can be easy to get bogged down in the detail and day to day tasks of making it all work. This training resource invites you to:

- Take a step back and look again at the bigger picture of what it is that you want to achieve;
- Consider how well you are doing;
- Think about the steps that you might take to get to where you want to be.

*Building Blocks* will help you and your team develop your skills and provide a reservoir of good ideas and resources to enable you to implement your plans.

We've planned *Building Blocks* so you can use it on your own, or in a team, but you will get the most value by using it as a TRAINING COURSE. There are four short modules, which you could probably cover in a couple of sessions. If you run a group on your own, why not find some nearby church toddler groups and go through it together?

## The *Building Blocks* training course

### Section 1 Shaping the vision

It has been said that if you aim for nothing you are bound to hit it! This section looks at:

- Defining and shaping the vision for your toddler group, within your team of leaders;
- Defining and shaping the vision for your toddler group, with your church leadership;
- Sharing that vision with others, especially amongst the wider church family.

### Section 2 Developing spirituality and faith

Our spiritual life is an essential part of our nature as human beings and we all develop faith in something, or someone, to make sense of our existence and experience. This section introduces:

- An understanding of the different aspects and stages of spiritual and faith development;
- Practical guidelines about how we can nurture children's growth in faith, through learning about and experiencing Christ;
- An opportunity to reflect on your own spiritual growth and maturity.

### Section 3 Engaging with parents and carers

This section looks at aspects of building on the relationships that will develop with the adults (parents, grandparents or other carers) attending your group:

- caring for the parents and carers;
- deepening relationships;
- making the transition from toddler group into the wider church family;
- parenting courses.

### Section 4 Sharing faith through toddler groups

Is yours a new group, defining your intentions from the outset? Or an established group, wishing to review your position? This section enables you to:

- Reflect on how much specifically Christian input there is in your toddler group;
- Review how effective this is, for your group and community;
- Set goals for the future;
- Consider the importance of relationship;
- Look at the practical aspects for a Christian based programme;
- Think through the most appropriate elements for your group.

The *Building Blocks* TRAINING EXTRAS are exactly that, supplementing and building on the ideas explored in the course.

“When you are up to your neck in alligators it is difficult to remember that your original intention was to drain the swamp.” (old proverb)

### Using the sections as a training course

- PLAN to MEET as a team of leaders, over several sessions.
- AIM to EXPLORE one Section each time.
- WORK through the Sections in SEQUENCE.
- TAKE your TIME: only move on to the next Section when you are ready.

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20 (*Today's New International Version*)

# SECTION 1:

## Shaping the vision

### The theory of toddler groups

#### Take a moment...

If your toddler group is run by, or led by, Christians, it is important to remember that you are *already* sharing your faith, just as you are, by showing Jesus' love to the wider community. As we live our lives, we are often being watched by others who may wonder what being a Christian is all about.

Jesus said to his followers, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Matthew 5:14–16 (*Today's New International Version*)

So, if you are seeking to bring light to families in your community, you will want to be intentional about sharing Christ with those who come. These questions will help you and your group leaders develop a vision and think through the process of becoming 'intentional'.

#### EXERCISE

If you already have a toddler group, do you think it runs:

- Mainly for the children?
- Mainly for the adults?
- For both, equally?
- Variably, from week to week?
- Something else...?

#### EXERCISE

If 'The mission potential of a toddler group is for *both* adults and children' (see page 5), how could this affect:

The vision or intentions of the team of leaders?

The way the toddler group is planned, week by week?

#### Good news!

You are already sharing your faith, just as you are, by showing Jesus' love to the wider community.

# Turn vision into action

To help you plan how your toddler group can develop and fulfil its vision, it's good to go through one step at a time. We've called these steps:

**Place** → **Purpose** → **Process** → **Personal style**

By the time you've been through these steps, you should know what makes your group unique, what you want to achieve – and how you want to achieve it!

## Place

Every toddler group is set in a different context.

Is your group:

- Run by the church, in a church building?
- Run by the church, in the community?
- Run by the community, in a church building?
- Run by the community, in the community?
- Or some other context?

Every group is set in the context of its own particular community and place – whether it's Dover, Anglesey, or John O'Groats. Each community has its own particular needs and profile, with its own particular individuals, and with its own space.

What is special and distinctive about *your* community?

## Purpose

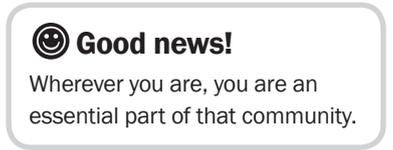
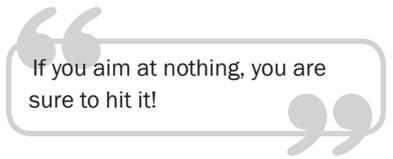
Every toddler group has a different purpose.

Is your group:

- Run primarily for the children to improve their social skills, motor skills and so on?
- Run for the parents and carers to meet and interact with other parents and carers?
- Run to impart parenting skills?
- Run to help parents and carers explore the spiritual side of life?
- Run to introduce parents and carers to church?
- Run for some other purpose?
- A combination of these?

Your group leadership team needs to think and pray through this and agree it together. In order to do this you need to ensure that you understand the needs and aspirations of the group members and the community you are seeking to reach, as well as that of the church.

Reviewing your purpose and activities is a great opportunity to involve members of your group and community in shaping and increasing ownership of their toddler group.



*Matthew's plans for more jelly, ice cream and messy play were well-received by the rest of the toddlers.*



## ? THINK!

- Who is the group for? Parents and carers? Toddlers? Church people? The community?
- What is the group for?
- How well does it meet the needs of parents, carers, toddlers and the wider community?
- How does your purpose fit with the church's purpose? (for instance, a vision statement or mission statement)

## EXERCISE

On your own write down what you think your group's purposes are.

Compare your list with others in your team.

Consider:

How can we consult existing group members about their needs and aspirations?

How can we consult with others, eg church, community?

Now let's think about how to put your plans into action...

### Process

Every purpose needs a process to make sure it happens. Go through 'Taking it further – Process' (page 13) to help you and your group decide what processes you need to put in place.

Once you've been through this, check: does the process fit your group?

Does it fit with your church or organisation's strategy?

### Personal style

Every group has its own identity which will change and develop over time. Go through 'Taking it further – Personal style' (page 15) to help you and your group decide what personality you want your group to have.

### Putting it all together

As a team, write down your conclusions about

Place

Purpose

Process

### ☺ Good news!

Just as different groups can have different purposes, so they can have different processes – and that's fine!

- Pray as a church and as a group for God's guidance.
- Remember, it is not down to you to do what only God can do!

Personal style

Review when you next meet and modify, if necessary.  
Plan an annual celebration and review to keep your vision fresh and relevant.

### Case study one - a developing vision

*Busy Bees* was a thriving group of around 60 families, meeting in a small independent evangelical church, on a new housing estate. Although it was run by church members, there was no obvious Christian input, other than the chance to get to know people over tea and coffee.

One of the team went to the first toddler group conference run by Care for the Family, and came back with a vision for reaching parents and carers more effectively. From this, a *Parentalk* course was set up, and run in the toddler group leader's home. This meant the group leaders got to know parents from the group on a more personal level.

At the next conference, two of the regular team went together, and this was much more effective in helping them to encourage the rest of the team to make changes. A regular Bible story was introduced, as well as a team prayer time after every session. The team started to meet together regularly to plan the sessions.

With changes to the team, over time, there were opportunities for reviewing the original vision and including fresh perspectives. A welcome pack was put together that made the church-based ethos of the group clear to newcomers from the start.

*Busy Bees* found training events invaluable in helping to promote good practice and to make changes.

### Case study two - Lunch-box Alpha

Consulting existing group members can prove very fruitful as one church found. In reviewing their toddler group, a survey was carried out amongst existing group members to find out what they wanted from the group. From this exercise it emerged that they would like the opportunity to explore faith further in a manner, time and place that fitted their lifestyles.

So the idea of 'Lunch-box Alpha' was developed. This took place following the morning toddler session, for those who wanted it. Other members of the church came in to look after the children for an hour, whilst their parents and carers shared a simple, lunch-box meal and went through an *Alpha* course adapted for their personalities and learning styles.

This proved to be one of the most fruitful outreach projects this church had run for years. It required no additional arrangements of dates, travel, or child care and was run amongst a group of people who already knew each other and were experiencing similar periods of their lives as parents and carers of young children.

### EXERCISE

As a team, write a case study of your toddler group. Be encouraged – and challenged!

*continue overleaf*

“ Plan an annual celebration and review to keep your vision fresh and relevant. ”

continued...

“The key to successful networking is shared vision – otherwise things can drift or lose momentum after a while. Of course it also will need commitment by someone who likes to network in order to keep things going!”

Claire Wells, Fegans - Parent and Toddler Groups Together

You might like to send your case study to the Care for the Family 'Playtime' project, to encourage others: [www.engagetoday.org.uk/playtime](http://www.engagetoday.org.uk/playtime)

## Involving others

### Your church

Having your church leader involved will make a big difference to your group, as they will be able to help get the rest of the church involved. You will be much more effective when the toddler group *and* the rest of the church share the same vision and are working together, towards a common goal.

### Visitors

Getting people along to visit, even if it is only once a year, will be an encouragement to you and an inspiration to your guests. Most people will never come unless you ask – so try asking! If you have a particular task for them to do, maybe making tea and coffee, helping with the clearing-up afterwards, or taking photos, they may be more likely to come: everyone likes to be wanted!

### Networking

Meeting up with leaders of other toddler groups for prayer and mutual support will be very beneficial. Many groups operate in isolation, but this means that they miss out on the opportunity to share ideas, discuss troubling issues, and to encourage each other in the vital work of meeting the needs of local families. And the groups, who have joined a network, say that the chance to pray together is a great blessing.

Communication is vital. Take every opportunity to let people know what your group is doing.

### Communication ideas

- Regular articles in a church bulletin or community newspaper
- Display photos on the wall
- Display crafts
- Invite people to visit occasionally
- Show short video clips in a church service
- Arrange a prayer partnership between the toddler group and, for instance, the women's fellowship
- Give regular reports to church meetings

## EXERCISE

Decide on one thing extra you will do to communicate more effectively. Do it!

“Meeting up with like-minded people was an enormous encouragement, and each occasion spurred me on for literally years.”

Judith Wigley from *Pretty much everything you need to know about working with under-5s*, page 154 (see TRAINING EXTRAS, Resource bank)

Websites with advice and ideas for starting a network:

Care for the Family *Playtime*  
[www.engagetoday.org.uk/playtime](http://www.engagetoday.org.uk/playtime)

Parent and Toddler Groups Together  
[www.ptgroupstogether.org.uk](http://www.ptgroupstogether.org.uk)



The church had never realised there were so many uses for a paper plate!

## A church leader's perspective

by Richard Hardy

Many church leaders find it hard to engage with their toddler group, perhaps partly because church leaders are often male, and feel ill at ease attending a group of mostly women and small children. Also there can be an incorrect perception that toddler groups exist mainly for the benefit of the children.

As a church leader myself, I found there were great benefits in being involved. Here are my suggestions for encouraging your church leader to come along and support you.

1. Point out the number of families who regularly attend, particularly those with no other connections to 'church'. Most church leaders long for opportunities to reach people in their community, but many fail to see the openings that toddler groups provide.
2. Demonstrate how the toddler group will help the church fulfill its mission statement (if you have one!).
3. Show that getting involved with toddler group events will enable the church leader to:
  - Use their gifts and skills as a communicator, for instance to connect people to the true meaning of Easter or to talk about how the church welcomes new children;
  - Make it easier for you, as the leaders of the group, to have meaningful conversations, since those who attend will feel freer to comment;
  - Be recognised and seen as approachable. It always surprised me how little input it took for me to be regarded in this way.
4. Assure them, if possible, that much of the preparation has been done, and let them know you value their involvement.

Use wisdom about which leader you ask. Some churches have a person responsible for children's work and they may be more gifted and able in this area and easier to relate to than someone with wider responsibilities. Remember that Sunday is not always a good time to ask! You could make an appointment a few weeks beforehand, and then follow that up so they don't forget!

Remember, if you want to inspire your church leader:

1. Read *Mission through carer and toddler groups* (in TRAINING EXTRAS).
2. Give a copy to your church leader(s) and urge them to read it for themselves.
3. Make time, or even a formal appointment, to discuss its implications or invite your church leader to a toddler group planning meeting.



### Richard Hardy

Richard is now Care for the Family's Head of Church Relations, but for many years was a church leader involved with his church's toddler group. He is eager to share his tips on how to involve church leaders.

### Sowing Reaping Keeping

To find out about this evangelism resource, go to TRAINING EXTRAS, Resource bank

### Training extras

*Mission through carer and toddler groups* – a short resource for you to print off and give to your church leader that shows the effectiveness of mission through toddler groups.

# Taking it further - Process



## How are you going to deliver the group's purpose?

What resources are you going to need?

What support are you looking for from outside the group?

How are you going to allocate responsibilities within the group?

**There is a huge potential through just spending time with people. Section 3 looks at building strong relationships, but what initial ideas come to mind?**

How will you find out who needs help?

How will that help be provided?

What resources could be made available?

How will you communicate with:

- The parents and carers?
- Each other in the team?
- Your church and community leaders?

**Sections 2 and 4 look at ways to introduce both children and adults to faith, but perhaps initial ideas are already springing to mind that will help you achieve your vision.**

How will you encourage people (your team, church members, group members) on their journey of faith? Giant leaps scare people – so what small steps would work?

It is easy to overestimate what can be accomplished in one year; and to *underestimate* what can be accomplished in five! What goals would you like your group to set today?

# Taking it further - Personal style

Place → Purpose → Process → **Personal style**

**Every group has its own identity which will develop and change over time. What do you want yours to be like?**

What sort of atmosphere do you want to create?

How open and explicit are you going to be about your Christian faith?

## What is the style of your group

How do you welcome people?

How often do you have a song time? Craft? A story?

Do you pray in your group?

Do you have visits from a photographer? From the fire service? The health visitor?

How do, or could, you keep in touch with people who have left?

## EXERCISE

Write down the things that make your group special and different.

### Good news!

Remember, this is **your** group. It is OK for there to be no other group anywhere else, just like yours. As far as your group members are concerned, yours is the best group in the world, so build on that!

# SECTION 2:

## Nurturing spiritual life and faith

### The spiritual life of young children and adults

We are all spiritual beings. God created humans with a desire to search for something greater than themselves. This spiritual aspect can be expressed and explored in terms of:

- Awe and wonder
- Pleasure and delight
- Mystery and wonder
- Awareness of God (or a higher authority)

Spiritual awareness has been described as the 'ooh and aah' element, which may be experienced at various moments, such as seeing a mountain top view, watching a sleeping new born baby, watching a butterfly, walking through a storm.

What makes you respond spiritually, giving you the 'wow' factor?

Young children are seeing many things for the first time. For them, there is a fascination and excitement over the smallest sights – a smooth stone, the switching on and off of a torch, the first daffodil. They express their spiritual awareness by their responses – stopping to stare, collecting objects, repeating an action that gets a response, sharing their discovery with an adult.

When have you seen young children express their spiritual awareness?

As children grow, they become used to all sorts of things around them and our culture tends to dull our spiritual sharpness. By the time we are adults, we need special occasions or exceptional sights to feel this spiritual awareness, unless we nurture it.

Ways to nurture spiritual awareness for adults include:

- Consciously search out the 'wow' factor in daily life
- Look at details – and marvel about them
- Close your eyes and focus on your other senses
- Bring the natural world (God's creation) into daily life: walk outside, have plants or animals in the home, go to special places
- Give yourself space to think in silence or with gentle music
- Meditate on words from the Bible
- Do something creative: sing, paint, dance, write poetry

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart...”

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (*Today's New International Version*)

“A definition of spirituality might be 'an innate sensitivity to things beyond and yet part of everyday life'.”

Gill Dallow *Touching the Future*  
BRF 2002 p80



Everyone was thrilled when the Minister turned up!

Young children need opportunities to explore and nurture their spiritual life. You could do this through objects you bring in or activities you engage in. What could you do in your group? Here are a couple of ideas to get you started. See how many you can add to the list!

- Bring in flowers
- Enjoy special foods together

Our spiritual experiences open up our awareness of, and give us a connection with, something greater than ourselves. For Christians, this 'something greater' is God. As we nurture our spiritual selves, we can become more aware and open to God's presence in the world we live in. Our faith enables us to give a form and definition to our spiritual life. Where the spiritual life is weak, there may be a lack of interest in exploring faith. So nurturing the spiritual lives of the families we meet, helps them to become more open to questions of faith.

## How faith develops, from baby to adult

Faith is often seen as just being a religious idea, but current thinking is that everyone has faith in something or someone. Faith can be seen as the depending on, or placing trust in, something that is the most important and central concern of an individual. This could be an object, a person or an idea. The individual's thoughts, values, attitudes and aims focus on this central concern, providing a sense of meaning and stability. For some the faith focus is God; for others, family (or even money or football).

Some people have faith in the same thing throughout their lives; some change, as their lives change. But just about everyone has faith in something. For Christians, faith is in God.

But the way people approach their faith changes as they mature. James Fowler suggested a theory of faith development based on how people's attitudes and understanding change as they grow throughout their lives, due to their life experiences, education, personality, friendships and critical events.

### Babies' and toddlers' faith

All babies and young children develop their early understandings of faith through the love and care of the adults around them. As their basic needs for food, warmth, cleanliness, comfort and love are met, a baby learns to trust and to receive and give love. This is the basis for healthy emotional development and faith development. At this age faith is based on the relationship with the carers and concepts of God develop from these relationships.

Think about the babies and toddlers you know. How can you help them to:

Be safe?

Have their needs met in your group?

Feel loved?



"A definition of faith might be 'the commitment or belief and resulting actions that we put around our spirituality like a framework'."

Gill Dallow, *Touching the Future*, BRF 2002 p80



*Stages of Faith*, James Fowler, HarperCollins 1995

### Training extras

A summary of 'Faith development'



Karl was worried that the water looked colder than at his last bath time.

## Young children's faith

Around two or three years of age, children begin to think about the world around them and what they have been told. This is the time of 'why' and 'how' questions. All that the trusted adults (and some others) tell them will be believed. They enjoy hearing stories and understand them literally and often very powerfully, whilst being unable to understand the difference between fact and fiction.

Their reasoning skills and understanding are very limited and symbols are seen to be 'magical' or taken literally. (Think of the implications of communion: 'This is my body'!) So care must be taken to explain in appropriate ways. At this age, the faith of the adults who care for them is very influential on the child's faith. So, most children with Christian parents take on Christian beliefs, seeing Jesus as a friend and God as Father.

Share some of the things that young children have said that show how literal they are. What issues are raised by their literal understanding and lack of reasoning skills, for your toddler group?

## Children's and young people's faith

From the age of around seven, children's thinking skills begin to develop. This enables them to begin to distinguish between fact and fiction, whilst still understanding symbols literally. Stories are seen as important, but reflecting on their meaning is not. The views and beliefs of their friends are most important; belonging to, and acceptance by their friendship group is vital. So it is important to have Christian friends if children are to get a sense of belonging to the church. Jesus is seen as a friend, and is beginning to be understood as Saviour.

From around the age of 11, thinking skills and emotional needs change again, allowing for abstract thinking and some reflection on meaning. The questioning that results often leads to conflicts with authority. Increasingly they become able to see other perspectives, but the need to develop their own sense of self means this may not be expressed easily.

Faith is based on relationships with a wider group, including family, school, friends, and influences from the media. (There is a high drop-out from church, prompted when the most influential friendship group includes non-Christian friends at school and in the community.) Where Christian faith remains, the church is seen as an extended family and leaders are held in high regard, with Jesus seen as Lord and God as Almighty. Although many people move on from this stage in their late teens, many adults remain at this stage throughout their lives.

## Adults' faith

In late adolescence, the emphasis becomes more focussed on choosing, learning and making decisions for themselves. Earlier faith may be dismissed as 'incomplete' or 'secondhand', with a rejection of the faith group and there may be a search to find faith for themselves. Once faith is 'found', the person may feel they have all the answers and reject other possibilities. Faith is personal, with responsibility taken for what is believed. A personal relationship with God is often seen as important. Some adults move into this stage much later in life, and many also remain in it throughout their lives.

As adults mature they become more aware of their own limitations and less sure of their earlier judgements. Previous attitudes and experiences are reassessed and new understandings reached. There is a greater openness to the views and values of others; there is an increasing ability to accept uncertainty. Symbols, stories and rituals are seen as having new meanings that add depth to the religious experience. God can be accepted as complex and in control whilst allowing free will.



Finally the tunnel opened for the train after the fifteenth attempt.

“...it is important to have Christian friends if children are to get a sense of belonging to the church.”

“In late adolescence, the emphasis becomes more focussed on choosing, learning and making decisions for themselves.”

A few individuals develop their faith further as they reach later life. Their lifestyle may be self-sacrificial with a strong desire to love and help others. Faith is focussed entirely on God and service.

Few people move through these stages smoothly and many remain at one stage for long periods or permanently. Others, due to circumstances, move rapidly between stages. Many people spend long periods in the transition between stages and may have characteristics of more than one stage.

### **? THINK!**

Spend some time looking back to see how you can recognise changes in your own faith, throughout your life. You may choose to share your own faith story with those of others in your group.

In your toddler group, you will have adults at different stages of faith. What aspect of the Christian faith will these people be looking for most?

How can you share that with them?

## **Helping young children and their carers to grow in their spiritual life and faith**

The key way in which we can nurture the faith of both the young children and their adult carers is through being open about and sharing our faith. Taking opportunities to share something of God's story helps people to know what we believe and why we do what we do.

It may be that you would wish to focus on telling the stories of Christmas and Easter or have simple Bible stories on a more frequent basis. Stories that emphasise God's love for his people help young children relate this love to their own experience of being loved. For adults these stories can remind them of things long-forgotten and prompt questions about God.

It is important to remember that the children need to be able to understand the concepts but be prepared to include some elements that encourage the adults to reflect on their understanding and experience. An example would be the story of the lost sheep in Luke 15:1-7. Children will be able to understand that the shepherd loved his lost sheep and wanted to find it. Adults can take on board the idea that God loves each person as much as the shepherd loved the sheep.

### **? THINK!**

How could both children and adults relate to the story of David and Goliath?



*"They don't look like 'cymbals' to me!" said a disappointed Phoebe.*

“For many young children and their parents and carers, their greatest need is for friendship and companionship.”

**Acceptance and love**

For many young children and their parents and carers, their greatest need is for friendship and companionship. Being at home all day with a young child can be very hard for many adults. Having a safe and welcoming place to go where the needs of both ages are met is a lifeline for many. A Christian toddler group can provide this. By doing so, the toddler group nurtures the faith of the family.

The young child is met with love and acceptance. They have a safe place to play with adults who care and protect them, bolstering their early development of faith. As they grow they begin to explore their group, trying out new activities and beginning to learn about friendship. The stories they are told, the activities they do and the relationships they form are linked to the people they encounter and the place where they meet. They learn that this is *their* group and they belong to it, taking on the views of the important adults they meet there.

For their parents and carers, the chance to talk with others who understand their experiences is vital. They can be loved and supported and feel that they and their children are accepted. This allows them to feel that they belong and are in an environment where it is safe enough to take risks. These may be to explore faith or to share their worries and concerns. It can be very affirming and value-giving to have someone who gives time to listen, empathise and sympathise, as well as providing opportunities to receive more practical help and support. Friendships made in toddler groups often last for many years and can be part of a longer process of supporting a family and gradually bringing them into God's family.

As Christians, prayer is a fundamental aspect of all we do. If we want to share our faith, with the families we are ministering to, then we need help from God's Spirit. We need to pray for ourselves as we work and also for the families we meet. Being available to pray with the families is often very welcome. Many people are grateful for offers of prayer. Ensuring that there is a quiet space for a parent or carer to be prayed for, whilst their child is watched by a trusted adult, can be very welcome and helpful. Even where someone does not want to be prayed for directly, most people are grateful for offers of prayer. Some groups have a prayer box available so that families can request prayer, anonymously if they choose: this can increase people's awareness of God and the help that is available for them, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

What faith and spiritual needs are you meeting in your group?

What other needs do you feel you should be meeting?

“For their parents and carers, the chance to talk with others who understand their experiences is vital.”



*“And please help Bob the Builder find Spud's hat...”*

# SECTION 3:

## Engaging with parents and carers

### The practice of toddler groups

Toddler groups are a fantastic way for the church to start engaging with families in the local community. The adults who come to your group may be the parents of the children they bring, grandparents or uncles or aunts, or they may be nannies, au-pairs or childminders. Many will have children of their own, including older children already at school. Even if the child usually comes with a childminder or a member of the extended family, remember to include their parents. In particular, grasp the opportunity to reach dads. You can include them by inviting them to special events, or by sending them information.

### Jesus' call to reach our community

"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'" Matthew 9:35-38 (*Today's New International Version*)

### EXERCISE

Discuss the following questions, and make a note of your answers.

How many adults do you have contact with?

What percentage of the church's overall contact is that?

Is this reflected in your church's budget?!

Where are the people in your community?

How could you get involved in people's lives?

“People become Christians through knowing people who are Christians.” John Hattam, *Families finding faith*, Scripture Union/CPAS 2000

“Buildings are one thing, but connecting with people and building relationships is the real purpose of the church.” Judith Wigley, *Pretty much everything you need to know about working with under-5s*, Scripture Union 2005

How can your toddler group meet the following needs: for parents and carers; for toddlers; or for the toddler group team?

- A sense of destiny: 'My life is significant, I make a difference.'

- A sense of dignity: 'I'm a person of value, I matter.'

- A sense of intimacy: 'I need to love and be loved, to be missed by people.'

- A sense of security: 'I feel safe and protected.'

## Learning from Jesus

Jesus was brilliant at meeting people where they were. Did he confine his ministry to what happened on the Sabbath in the synagogue or special meetings and expect people to come to him? No! He went out and got involved in their lives, loved them and cared for them. He made them feel special. He listened and talked to them about the good news of the kingdom in ways they could understand.

We do not have to look far to find harassed and helpless families! Some may already be part of the parent and toddler family. But many of those who have small children walk up and down the high street or local shopping mall, or worse, have effectively become prisoners in their own homes as they struggle to raise their children. They are often alone in the daytime. It is good to bring such people together and this cannot be denied. But, when a toddler group or church views this ministry through the eyes of Jesus, the results are potentially world-changing. Individual lives – and subsequently the community – can be changed for good!

## Making the transition from toddler group to church

Research by Colin Cartwright (*Appreciating the Art of Toddling*) shows that the groups who are able to work with their church are most effective in seeing people who start at the toddler group eventually becoming a full part of the church community. Get your church involved in order to provide resources, vision, and prayer. You may need to guide, equip and even train them – they probably will not know how to help you.

Colin Cartwright identified five factors increasing evangelistic impact in toddler groups:

1. Longevity: the longer a group had been running, the greater the impact.
2. *Alpha* (or a similar group) running alongside.
3. Parenting groups.
4. Christian parents and carers within the group.
5. Size of church played a minor factor (partly because bigger churches are able to run courses such as *Alpha*).

Toddler group work falls into many categories. How do you see your group?

- Children's work?
- Community work?
- Working with families?
- Evangelism?
- A combination of some, or all, of these?
- Something else?

Read Colin's full paper at  
[www.cbayouth.co.uk/  
artoftoddling.htm](http://www.cbayouth.co.uk/artoftoddling.htm)

### Training extras

*Mission through carer and toddler groups* an article by Nick Lear, for church leaders, to show why toddler groups really matter.

Would others in your team of leaders give the same answer?

Would others in your church give the same answer?

## ? THINK!

### Involvement

- Do parents and carers help with setting up and putting away, making drinks, crafts?
- Are parents and carers involved on the committee, helping with fundraising, feeding back ideas?
- Do you offer activities to parents and carers outside of the toddler group, such as holiday events, trips out, buggy services, special event evenings?

### Help and support

- Do you run parenting courses?
- Are health leaflets available?
- Do parents and carers know who to talk to about problems or for advice?
- Do you follow up parents and carers who have not attended for a while?
- Do you have someone nominated to oversee care and support?

There are many things that we can do in toddler groups that will help to deepen relationships with the parents and carers so that we can start to share our faith.

## Caring for the parents and carers

How prepared are you regarding the pastoral needs of your group? Would you know how to support a family going through bereavement, perhaps having lost a child to sudden infant death syndrome, miscarriage, or stillbirth? Don't wait for a crisis to prepare yourself. Speak to people with pastoral expertise in your church, local health visitors, social workers and midwives for information. For example, there may be an annual memorial service for bereaved parents. Care for the Family provides resources for bereaved partners and bereaved parents, as well as stepfamilies, single parents, and parents of additional needs children.

There are many ways to show care. You could give out birthday cards – for the adults too! Some groups like to give a small gift of a Bible story book. Homemade cakes and 'real' coffee at snack time show a little extra care. And you can show extra practical support to expectant mums, who will often be struggling to cope with a toddler too.

The best thing you can do for your parents and carers is to love them. And if you love them, it's only natural you will want to pray for them.

### Prayer ideas

- Pray as a team before or after each session
- Have a 'prayer box' where people can add prayer needs
- Pray about each person and family represented on your registration list
- Set up a prayer partnership with, for instance, your church's women's fellowship
- Ask and encourage your church to pray regularly for your group at the beginning of each year or term

## Deepening relationships

Toddler groups are not always the easiest environment to get to know people well. How could you expand the reach of the toddler group and create opportunities to get to know each other better?

Care for the Family  
Tel: (029) 2081 0800  
Web: [www.careforthe  
family.org.uk](http://www.careforthe<br/>family.org.uk)



“Don't wait for a crisis to prepare yourself.”

Here are some ideas that toddler groups have already tried – and recommended to others:

- **Parenting courses.** Have you run these? What course did you use? Did you find it helpful? Is there a different course which might suit your group better?
- **Debt counselling.** Your local Citizens' Advice Bureau or library may be able to recommend an adviser.
- **Single parent courses or get-togethers.** Arrange for suitably qualified and CRB-checked church members to babysit.
- **Cookery classes.** Vary the programme to include basic recipes with reasonably priced ingredients, or something more exotic and unusual.
- **Family fun days.** This may be a whole church event. It is very easy to invite friends to come along. Hire school grounds if the church is not suitable. Hire a bouncy castle; arrange face painting; organise football, rounders, races and other games; have a barbecue or a picnic. The possibilities are endless. (Remember to plan an indoor programme too, in case the weather is unkind!)
- **Table for two!** Give a weary mum and dad a romantic evening out, a good meal and a baby-sitting service.
- **Marriage support.** Run courses such as *21st Century Marriage* (Care for the Family); or *The Marriage Course* (Nicky and Sila Lee at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton) to help parents sustain good relationships.
- **What's happening in a child's world?** Invite a speaker who is well-acquainted with what is going on in the world of the children and youngsters.
- **Belly dancing!** Such fun! Try *Yellow Pages* or ask at your local library to find a teacher.
- **Pamper evenings.** Bring in a beautician or manicurist to pamper your mums. Indulge with a chocolate fountain and strawberries. Invite someone to give a talk about what is real inner beauty.
- **'Colour me beautiful'.** Find your nearest image consultant on [www.colourmebeautiful.co.uk](http://www.colourmebeautiful.co.uk)
- **'Daddy and Me' groups.** Run on the same lines as a toddler group but for dads and granddads, with their children and grandchildren, often on a Saturday morning. Don't forget the bacon butties!
- **Preparing your child for school.** Invite a reception-class teacher to advise the new nervous parents! How can they make the move to school a positive time for their children? And what will it feel like for the parents too?
- **Helpful talks on parenting issues,** such as coping with tantrums, children who do not sleep well, avoiding battles over food.
- **Childhood ailments.** Find a sympathetic doctor or health visitor to advise and reassure.
- **First aid courses.** Even qualified first aiders need to learn different skills for babies and children. Invite a trainer from St John Ambulance [www.sja.org.uk/sja/](http://www.sja.org.uk/sja/) or the Red Cross [www.redcrossfirstaidtraining.co.uk/](http://www.redcrossfirstaidtraining.co.uk/) to run a course for your parents and carers and group leaders.
- **Raise funds** to support needy parents and carers and toddlers, in your locality, in this country or overseas. Look for a project that will be meaningful to the parents and carers and the children in your toddler group.
- **Contact Centre.** You may be able to facilitate the meetings of children with a (non-custodial) parent. Sometimes such meetings have to be carried out in a supervised setting. Contact Centres are set up through the Family Courts system. They require specific training of volunteers and specific operation of the centre, giving contact time for parents and children requiring supervised access arrangements.

Which of these ideas could you try?



So are you going to try the belly-dancing classes?

Share any ideas you have found to be successful with other toddler groups. We're not in competition with each other!

## EXERCISE

Plan out a programme of events that you would like to do for the next couple of years. What do you need to do to get this off the ground?

Decide to start with at least one extra activity or event. What will it be?

Ask your church what they could do, to support you.

## CHALLENGE

If you could make a difference in the life of one of your families, what would it be?

## Parenting courses

These provide a wonderful opportunity to get to know parents on a much deeper level, and at the same time offer proven practical help that will be enormously beneficial to both parents and children.

There are a number of parenting courses available on the market that have been used to good effect within churches for many years. For people who are confident in leading small groups and dealing with sensitive issues in an appropriate way, these may be adequate. They have some excellent material contained within them. However, most do not offer training for facilitators.

If you want to run an accredited course in the community, then best practice suggests that facilitators are trained before running a parenting course which meets National Occupational Standards. This means that there is an assurance of the quality of the programme, it will be recognised by statutory and other voluntary organisations, and it can be widely used in the community as a whole rather than solely within the church community. Some courses offer accreditation for parents.

There are many different options, and you will need to choose what is most suitable for your circumstances. Here are some tips from toddler group leaders:

"Realise just how scheduled the lives of preschoolers can be. One group wanted to offer a *Parentalk* Coffee Morning series but the mums and babies were already committed to baby gym, baby French, signing, swimming and various other groups. Timing is critical for events or even interested people will not attend. You really have to know your target group and community - and work with them to find the best option."

"Avoid calling the sessions a 'Parenting Course'. Many parents feel disappointed and inadequate already. They don't want to feel that they are complete failures who need a course to enable them to be better parents."

"A warm comfortable environment will help. Eating together allows people to relax. Providing food helps parents to feel valued."

"A questionnaire beforehand allows you to find out what parents really want to talk about - which can be very helpful for advertising."

### Training extras

Reviews of three parenting courses:

- *21st Century Parent*
- *Parentplay*
- *Parentalk Parenting Course*



Laura took her parenting course homework very seriously

“If you are in contact with other toddler groups, ask them what they are doing. Some parents attend several groups so it may not be wise to run a parenting course if there is already something up and running at another group.”

## EXERCISE

Spend five minutes sharing your experiences of parenting courses.

What difference did they make?

What things did you have to learn ‘the hard way’ as a parent that a parenting course might have helped with?

### **How could we reach more parents and carers?**

*Little Fishes Toddler Group* is in an affluent middle class area with busy parents and busy children. Most families appear to be financially secure, with many parents working part-time, and leading busy lives. The toddler group would like to create deeper relationships.

What difficulties can you foresee?

What opportunities?

What research would you suggest they do?

What new ideas could they try?

**Repeat the exercise but, this time, consider the toddler group in a poorer area with many families facing varied challenges.**

What difficulties can you foresee?

What opportunities?

What research would you suggest they do?

What new ideas could they try?

**Repeat the exercise but, this time, consider your own toddler group:**

What difficulties can you foresee?

What opportunities?

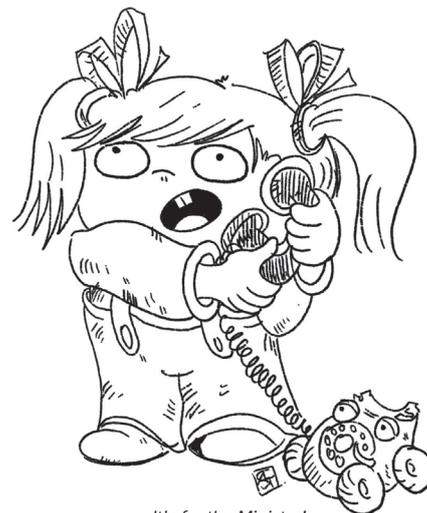
What research would you suggest?

What new ideas could you try?

**How are these three groups the same?**

**How are these three groups different?**

**Have you found any ideas that would apply to any group?**



*It's for the Minister!*

# SECTION 4:

## Sharing faith through toddler groups

All groups will be at different stages in the process and methods of sharing their faith. Many groups have been sharing him naturally or intentionally, or both, since their inception. Others may be more tentative in this area. Some choose not to say anything explicitly; others long to be more open about their Christian faith, but are not sure where to start.

### Sharing faith naturally

Talking about Jesus in a Christian-led toddler group should be relatively easy. After all, we believe he is already there. The very presence of God at work through Christian leaders, showing his love in action, has a far-reaching effect.

The best way to introduce Jesus is naturally. Don't make a big deal of it. Get to know the children and their parents and carers well, so they are comfortable to share aspects of their lives. Great opportunities to bring Jesus and faith into the conversation can come from these relationships. If respect and trust already exist, what is shared has credibility – even if it is not accepted. Personal experience can never be denied but let your conversations flow naturally and not be contrived or manipulated. Parents and carers must never be made to feel that they are being 'Bible-bashed.'

The natural introduction to Jesus is made through who you are. In our interactions, attitudes, conversations, and the level of interest we show, we are giving an image of what it means to be a Christian. Each of us is a free sample of Jesus!

This attitude means that we will listen actively to parents and carers about their perceived needs, rather than imposing something on them that we think they need. At all times, allow parents and carers to make their own choice about participating in whatever you have planned.

### ? THINK!

Think about the statement: 'Each of us is a free sample of Jesus.'  
What sort of free sample do you think you are?

What sort of free sample do you want to be?

### 👤 EXERCISE

With a partner or in a small group, share...  
What is your experience in sharing faith naturally?

## Sharing faith intentionally

When the atmosphere and ethos of a toddler group is focussed on the people who come along, endeavouring to understand who they are, demonstrating real interest and concern alongside a consistent loving attitude, it is right to introduce programme elements to support the underlying Christian beliefs and values. Introducing programme elements of the Christian faith into a toddler group intentionally will only have real impact on the lives of the adults and children when they are shown genuine acceptance, interest, care and concern as individuals. If parents and carers do not sense these attitudes, no amount of well-prepared and presented Christian input will help them in their journey of faith.

Even if you have included specific Christian content in your group for some time, reflect on these questions, as a team of leaders. How ready are you to talk about Jesus with the parents and carers and children in your toddler group?

Do you:

- Provide a safe and happy environment for children to play, learn and interact?
- Provide a welcoming place, of trust and safety, for all parents and carers to make friends and feel supported?
- Offer a listening ear, a lifeline to families in crisis, support for parents and carers having a tough time, empathy with those dealing with the ongoing demands of young children?
- Care about developing long-lasting relationships for young families looking for friendship and support?
- Make people feel special through attention to detail, such as birthdays, remembering special occasions, difficult situations, knowing their names?
- Offer prayer for particular circumstances?
- Pray together before each toddler group session, highlighting any special concerns without breaking confidences?
- Hold regular planning meetings?
- Demonstrate a genuine love for each other as a leadership team?
- Keep church members informed and praying for you and those who attend?
- Inform and involve your church leader as much as possible?



Amelia was wondering whether Mummy had eaten all their shopping.

## EXERCISE

### Discover your 'readiness rating'

As individual leaders:

On a scale of 1-10 (with 10 as 'completely ready to talk about your faith')

Score your personal feeling of readiness

Score the team's readiness

As a team:

- Compare your scores;
- Discuss the reasons for your decisions.

What can you do to improve the 'readiness rating' of individual leaders?

What can you do to improve the 'readiness rating' of the whole team?

## Sharing faith effectively

Many church groups hesitate to introduce specific Christian teaching through lack of courage or over-sensitivity to those who attend. Parents and carers, however, will know the group is run by the church or by Christians. Most are open to Christian themes and activities, especially if they are enjoying what is already being provided. It really depends on how it is offered and presented.

### Where do we start?

Groups vary in approach concerning Christian content. These range from including one short aspect of Christian teaching such as a simple one-line prayer at the end of a sing-song, to a 30 minute toddler service involving songs, rhymes, games, craft, story, drama and so on.

One good way to introduce Christian teaching is through celebrating the main Christian festivals and special days such as Christmas, Easter, Harvest, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day. There are sample programmes provided with ideas for some of these occasions in TRAINING EXTRAS.



*It wasn't quite 'Ode to Joy' but the children made up for with enthusiasm what they lacked in musical ability.*

## EXERCISE

Where is your group with regard to including Christian-based activities, ranging from hardly any Christian content to an intentional section of specific Christian input?

Review the list of activities from one of your recent toddler group sessions. Which would you describe as 'Christian'?

## Preparation

Plan ahead but be ready for the unexpected: working with young children is unpredictable and there is often a need to go with the flow. It is possible to be well-organised, efficient and flexible.

Build a team of dedicated people to organise, lead and help in the toddler group. This will spread the workload and offer flexibility for those who are, themselves, carers of young children. Involve your church leader, parents and carers and other supporters too, in discussing what is best for your toddler group.

Keep it simple. Prepare and rehearse what you are going to do in advance, however short this is, to avoid the frantic pain of rushing around trying to gather resources at the last minute.

Have people available who do not have specific responsibility for leading, but who are ready to see opportunities and act upon them to help people feel comfortable. Their role can include introducing people to each other, being a friend to those who are shy, offering practical support to a parent struggling with four young children, and so on.

## EXERCISE

If you had a 'dream team' of leaders, what sort of person would be in it?

What gifts and abilities would they have?

What personal qualities would they need?

What practical skills would be useful?

How can you become that person?

How can your team become a 'dream team'?

## Planning your programme

### Programme themes

Plan your own programme around a theme, such as 'Mothers' Day'. Different times of the year can prompt services about the seasons; there may be events in the church calendar to suggest ideas; and early years learning suggests themes such as 'colours', 'numbers', 'growing' or 'moving on'.

Think about your own situation, resources and the atmosphere you want to create. Then choose or create activities that are just right for your toddler group.

Include action songs, instruments, rhymes, craft, simple prayers, a very short Bible story presented with expression (usually as a retold story), and with supporting visual material.

### Programme ideas

#### 1. Songs

Introduce some songs with Christian words to well-known tunes so that parents and carers and children are able to join in.

- Choose songs which have just a few words or lines to join in with.
- Use songs that stimulate activity with instruments or movements.
- Choose a mixture of secular songs and Christian songs.
- Make it personal: use children's names in the singing.
- If you use a microphone, allow the children to sing with it, occasionally.
- Don't worry if children lose interest and begin to drift away. Focus on those remaining and draw the session to a close before too many lose concentration.

Try these words to the tune of *Twinkle, twinkle little star*:

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

God loves you and God loves me,  
We are in God's family.  
He is with us everyday,  
He will hear us when we pray.  
God loves you and God loves me  
We are in God's family.

### Programme ideas

1. Songs
2. Musical instruments
3. Story time
4. Games
5. Rhymes
6. Prayers
7. Art and craft
8. Circle time
9. Snack time

### Training extras

*Music time* has some general tips on using songs and instruments.

### Training extras

Ideas for weekly programmes are given in resources such as *Tiddlywinks* (Scripture Union). Sample programmes and lists of resources for toddler services are contained in TRAINING EXTRAS.

To assist parents and carers in learning the songs in your group and singing them at home:

- Make a giant song book (at least A2 size, for easy reading from a distance);
- Display song words on *PowerPoint* or using an overhead projector;
- Print sheets of song words to take home.

Resources such as *Tiddlywinks: Say and Sing*, Scripture Union; and *Songs for Little Singers* Wakefield Diocesan Resource Centre, contain suitable material. See TRAINING EXTRAS Resource bank.

## 2. Musical instruments

These are great fun and a good way of introducing songs to praise God. Things can get very noisy and chaotic so be prepared for just about anything, making sure there are enough instruments for all the children to have one each. It is always wise to teach a sign for 'stop', before you get going, such as the leader raising one hand or putting a finger to the lips. Rattles, shakers and flags can easily be made, and involving parents and carers in making them can also increase their sense of belonging and ownership as well as providing opportunities to discuss worship (or anything else!).

Try these words to the tune of *The wheels on the bus* and use musical instruments as you sing:

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,  
Shake, shake, shake! Shake, shake, shake!  
Listen to the shakers go shake, shake, shake,  
Praising God!

Listen to the bells go ting, ting, ting,  
Ting, ting, ting! Ting, ting, ting!  
Listen to the bells go ting, ting, ting,  
Praising God!

Listen to the trumpets go toot, toot, toot,  
Toot, toot, toot! Toot, toot, toot!  
Listen to the trumpets go toot, toot, toot,  
Praising God!

Listen to us all make lots of noise,  
Lots of noise, lots of noise.  
Listen to us all make lots of noise,  
Praising God!

This next song uses musical instruments in the last verse. If you give out the instruments before the song, make sure the children leave them on the floor until you give them a signal to pick them up and start playing. Sing to the tune of *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,  
Praise to God, praise to God!  
We are shouting praise to God,  
For he loves us!

Why not write a simple song that is specific to your toddler group that can be used as a welcome or home-time activity?

Invest in a few children's worship CDs. The children can play instruments along with them.

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

## Training extras

See 'Top tips for storytellers'

### 3. Story time

Use this time to introduce well-known Bible stories. Christian book shops have excellent resources for this. Make sure that any storytelling is visual and interactive and keep it short and sweet. A story will engage the imagination and emotions of the child.

A rule of thumb is that a child is able to concentrate for approximately one minute per year of age, so a two-year old will listen for about two minutes. It is not a hard-and-fast rule but it is a useful estimate when planning the length of your story.

Remember you want to engage the parents and carers as well as the children. Make a general statement at the beginning of the story that catches their attention. For instance, if telling the story of Jesus calming the storm at sea, start with something like: "Sometimes in life there are such big things that need to be done, that they seem just too big. This story is about how, with God's help, we can deal with the big things..."

### 4. Games

These can be used effectively to teach or reinforce a Bible story or Christian ideal. Again, ideas are given in resources such as the *Tiddlywinks* (Scripture Union) series. Games for very young children need to have few, simple rules that everyone can understand and follow. Keep your games inclusive: do not have games where children are 'out', for instance, in 'Simon says'. Parachute games are especially enjoyed by this age group and are good for emphasising lessons about sharing and working together.

### 5. Rhymes

Action rhymes can involve everyone. In this rhyme, you can improvise actions to go with each verse or use the rhyme as the structure for your group-time, following each verse with a game, prayer and so on.

God made me and you.  
I can jump, how about you?

God made me and you.  
I can dance, how about you?

God made me and you.  
I can pray, how about you?

God made me and you.  
I can sing, how about you?

God made me and you.  
I can love, how about you?

(Taken from *Tiddlywinks: The Big Green Book*, Scripture Union, page 51; used by permission.)

### 6. Prayers

Praying with young children is a privileged opportunity when leaders are able to introduce children to God. Prayer is about two-way communication: it is about children talking to God and about learning to recognise him talking to them. Many young children will build a very real relationship with God through prayer – but it may not look and sound like an adult way of praying.

Children's praying is very immediate. For instance you may like to bring a bunch of flowers to the group and look at them together. You will not need to wait till a formal prayer time to say, 'Thank you, God.' And children will respond naturally and eagerly if you then prompt them by asking: 'What else shall we thank God for today?'



*The children all paid close attention to the first point, not realising there were five more.*

Drawing simple pictures of people that a child or parent is concerned about; tying ribbons to a prayer tree, putting pebbles on a pile before a cross or in a bucket of water to take care of something worrying are all simple but meaningful ways of allowing children and adults to explore prayer. Lighting candles may not be advisable around toddlers!

Using simple prayers with shouted responses or actions are a great idea. Using a prayer for home time is a simple but effective way of including a Christian element into your group. Each of the *Tiddlywinks* (Scripture Union) books contains pages of 'Welcome time' and 'Home time' ideas or you can create your own.

God helps us care,  
And love,  
And share.  
God is with us everywhere.  
Thank you, God,  
Amen.

Possible actions for this could be:

God helps us care, (*Bring one arm across your body, to put a hand on your opposite shoulder.*)

And love, (*Repeat with the other arm.*)

And share. (*Uncross your arms; hold arms out in front with hands together; move to sides.*)

God is with us everywhere. (*Make large circles with your arms, to represent the world.*)

Thank you, God, (*Hands together.*)

Amen.

(Taken from *Tiddlywinks: The Big Red Book* Scripture Union, page 94; used by permission.)

## 7. Art and craft

Creative activities are a stimulating way for children to learn and remember a Christian story or message. The art or craft activity could be used: for retelling a Bible story, such as making a model sheep that could be 'lost' and found again to demonstrate the parable of the lost sheep; or to enable children to link the story with their own lives, for instance decorating cardboard spectacle-shapes to illustrate Jesus healing a blind man.

If the children are encouraged to take the item they have made home with them, then it will remind both the adults and the children of the story and how it related to Christian themes. Also, working on crafts together is a good opportunity to build relationships. Encourage parents and carers to be hands-on with this and act in a supervisory role. Include a short written verse or prayer (written in lower case) on the craft item, as a prompt for the adults.

For a young child, the process of doing and making is more significant than the end result. And it is important that the children do as much as possible themselves: they will remember the topic or message more effectively if they have made the item, rather than sitting alongside an adult who is doing most of the work.

One example would be to paint and decorate a small flower pot and then plant a bulb ready to flower at Easter. This is both creative and colourful and, as the bulb grows and flowers, is a daily reminder of new life and growth. These could also be made as gifts and given to elderly or housebound neighbours, involving your group in connecting with other parts of their community.

## 8. Circle time

Circle time is all about communication. The 'circle' shape is important as it includes everyone and brings them into a position where they can see and join in with what is happening. Participation by everyone is crucial to the success of Circle time and many groups choose to go to a separate area or clear away the toys beforehand, to avoid distractions. This time is key to developing a sense of belonging and group ownership. Encourage parents and carers to be part of the circle and not just spectators. This can be a real time of sharing if parents and carers want to be involved.

Circle time is an opportunity to share special moments together. Newcomers can be welcomed by name, birthdays celebrated, new births announced and a 'thank you'



"It's Mary and Jesus and the donkey",  
said Keiran proudly.

### Training extras

Go to TRAINING EXTRAS  
Resource bank for details of  
craft ideas and resources with a  
Christian focus.

### Visit these websites for great craft ideas:

[www.preschooleducation.com](http://www.preschooleducation.com)  
[www.dltk-kids.com](http://www.dltk-kids.com)  
[www.enchantedlearning.com](http://www.enchantedlearning.com)  
[www.daniellesplace.com](http://www.daniellesplace.com)  
[www.crayola.com](http://www.crayola.com)

prayer said. There may also be sad times for which the group as a whole need to find an expression of shock, grief or sorrow.

Occasionally the shared news in Circle time will spill over into conversations afterwards. In one group, following a sudden infant death, parents and carers shared their experiences of stillbirths, late miscarriage and other tragedies. Circle time had developed into one-to-one conversations between supportive adults, while their toddlers were playing with other children.

### 9. Snack time

Snack time is an opportunity for parents and carers and toddlers to come together, practising social skills, learning healthy eating habits and enjoying eating and drinking together. It can be a way of sharing faith naturally together, too, as everyone thanks God for his provision.

If possible, sit the children at an appropriate-sized table on individual chairs and offer healthy snacks. Say a simple grace on behalf of them all and encourage them to join in. A few words such as, 'Thank you God for my food', are enough.

## EXERCISE

Which Christian activities would be most appropriate to introduce into your toddler group?

- Songs
- Musical instruments
- Story time
- Games
- Rhymes
- Prayers
- Art and craft
- Circle time
- Snack time

In twos or threes, plan an activity from the ideas given here, or one of your own. Present it to your team of leaders. Choose one new activity to try at your next toddler group.

### Toddler services

Toddler services can be part of an existing group or an entirely separate event. They need to be planned carefully and thoroughly. If it is separate from the main toddler group, make sure that posters or literature produced are very clear that this group is a midweek church activity and that it will include a short act of worship. For example: "During this group there will be a short Christian-based service for you and the children to join in with. This will include a little story or thought, craft and some fun songs with instruments and prayers."

How could you timetable a toddler service? What might work for you?

- Once a month, replacing your regular toddler group for that week?
- During or after one of your regular toddler groups?
- For occasional special occasions, such as Christmas or Harvest?
- Something else?



*"You missed a page", said Duncan, as his Mum read 'Thomas' for the third time that morning.*

**Practical tips**

Produce a typed service sheet, or use *PowerPoint* slides to present all the songs, prayers and any words for people to say aloud. Parents and carers will feel more comfortable when they know where and how to join in and when they know exactly what is happening.

A simple activity sheet to take home can also be produced to remind both children and adults of the story – for cutting out, colouring, join the dots (no more than 5) and so on. Include a short Bible verse or phrase in bold lower case letters, for the parents and carers to read to the children, such as: 'God loves me all the time.'

Always have a welcome table where families are registered and welcomed in a friendly, unhurried manner. Take the opportunity to catch up on anything significant in the lives of each one.

** EXERCISE**

Look at the sample toddler services in TRAINING EXTRAS. Identify the common threads in them. Why do you think they are there?

In twos or threes, plan a sample programme for a toddler service suitable for your group. Take the theme of 'Harvest' and incorporate creative ideas. Make the plan as detailed as possible. Present the plan to your team of leaders.

# WHAT NEXT?

Many toddler groups exist from week to week, with no plans for the future, and no idea of what they want to achieve. Yet, as we have identified, toddler groups provide tremendous opportunities for Christians to sow seeds and reach families with the good news of the gospel. Where else in today's world do we see so many families flocking through the doors of church? It truly is a harvest field. But harvests need hard work and active workers.

Now you have used the *Building Blocks* TRAINING COURSE:

- Are you clear about your vision as a team?
- Do you have an understanding of spirituality and faith – both in children and adults?
- Have you decided what steps you will take to engage with parents and carers?
- Have you discussed how your group seeks to reflect Christ?
- What else do you need to know or find out?

You are already showing your deep commitment to showing God's love, through your toddler group. Trust in him, keep praying, and believe that God really can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine!

## EXERCISE

Discuss the following questions and make a note of your answers.

What has impressed each of you most deeply, as you used *Building Blocks*?

If there is one thing you would resolve to change, what would it be?

Why not make a note now in your diaries for a year's time, to meet again and review your team's vision for the future?

Thank God for all that he has – and will – accomplish through toddler groups just like yours. It is not always easy, and there are some days when giving up feels like a good option. But be encouraged! Keep going – what you are doing is making an eternal difference.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Philippians 1:3–6 (*Today's New International Version*)

"Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you're in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labour of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God our Father. It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special." 1 Thessalonians 1:2–4 (*The Message*)



The vicar was starting to rethink his plans for a quiet reflective service.