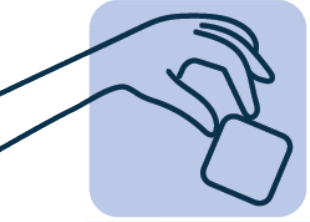


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GET SET!

Laying the Foundations



1.1 Why Start a Parent and Toddler Group?

Parent and toddler groups are the second most attended activity across the United Kingdom and Ireland Territory of The Salvation Army (after Sunday worship services) with around half of all corps offering one.

It's understandable, then, to wonder whether a corps without such a group is missing a mission opportunity. Yet faith-filled mission is not about copying what works elsewhere, but about prayerfully discerning where God is already at work in your own community. **See Section 1.2**

What matters most is choosing ministries that:

- Reflects your corps' unique calling, gifts and capacity.
- Genuinely responds to the needs of the people you are called to serve.

So here are some things to think about if you are considering starting this ministry.

1.1.1 Where has this idea come from?

Reflect on your motivation to start a parent and toddler group.

Has the idea come from what is happening around you?

- Was it suggested by someone in the corps?
- Do you have families connected with your church who need a place to meet?
- Is the whole corps family excited by the prospect?
- What inspired the idea?



Or is the motivation more internal?

- Have parent and toddler groups always been something you are passionate about?
- Has your experience from being a part of a group changed you?
- Has it come to you in answer to prayer?
- Have you always been searching for the 'right time' to start a group?

1.1.2 Where does it fit with what you already do?

A parent and toddler group is not a stand-alone activity; it needs to be connected to the whole mission of your corps. **See Section 1.3**

What are the mission priorities for your corps and community, and which established activities support them? It is important that the mission priorities are explored, perhaps through the *Corps Mission Journal*.

Consider:

- Are families and children a mission priority already?
- What else could they link to, to keep connected to your church once the children go to school?

Your corps leader will be able to help you explore the idea of setting up a group in the *Corps Mission Journal*.

A parent and toddler group might be seen as a possible way to increase the Sunday congregation or to attract more children to your church. However, it is more important that families see Jesus through the care and compassion offered - whether they attend worship or not.

1.1.3 Is there a need for a new group?

See Section 2.1

In some areas the closure of local family centres has left a big gap in early years provision. This includes affordable spaces for families to meet and learn from each other in their parenting journey. New parents can feel isolated from existing friendships, as life with a new little one brings new routines.

Before you go any further:

- Research other local parent and toddler groups.
- Explore if another group is needed.



- Consider how will your group be different from others.
- Assess the needs of local families, eg research online, consult local healthcare professionals and talk to families you know.

This will help you determine what you hope to achieve in your group.

Supporting every need

Think about the need to build relationships and community - how will your group foster inclusiveness and friendships so that parents don't go away feeling the group was not very friendly.

If you discover lots of families in your area who are struggling with the rising cost of living, how will your group signpost to food support and specialised provision?

How will your group support families who speak other languages or who have additional needs? Or families that are navigating adoption, fostering or have moved to a new location?

What other organisations or signposting will you need to be aware of to support families who are in trauma, eg experiencing grief, domestic abuse, modern slavery or have been trafficked.

1.1.4 Who will be your team and supporters?

Who is going to run the parent and toddler group? Guidelines in **Section 2.3** will help you consider how to create and train an effective team, but initial questions need to be asked to find out if there are enough people to run a new group.

Having people to cover the practical tasks is important, but there is a significant role for those who will talk to and build relationships with those who attend.

Who will be your supporters and prayer warriors? Are there people who are passionate about family ministry but cannot physically help? Can they pray with you and for you; can they take an interest and mentor your team? **See Section 1.2**



1.1.5 What do we really want to achieve for the Kingdom of God?

Ministry with families is not simply about running an activity, but about journeying alongside people and sharing life together.

Rather than offering a functional weekly activity with little ongoing connection, the purpose of a good parent and toddler group is to **build a supportive community where relationships can grow.**

This means creating spaces where families feel they belong, can connect with leaders and one another, and know how to reach out for support when needed. **See Sections 1.1.3, 2.1 and 4.1**

The Salvation Army's own research into parent and toddler groups currently being undertaken highlights that:

- pastoral care,
- a sense of belonging, and
- Christian values that are meaningful in everyday life,

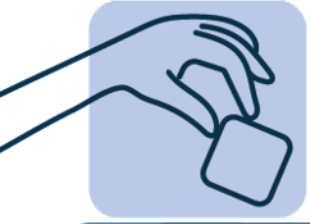
are among the most significant experiences reported by families who attend a parent and toddler group.



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Laying the Foundations



1.2 Pray and Plan

When preparing to start a new parent and toddler group, it is important to take time to think prayerfully about why you feel led to start this new ministry and how it reflects the purposes of God and the heart of your mission.

Here are a few ideas of ways to pray and plan together with your team as you begin this exciting journey.

1.2.1 Go on a prayer walk around your community

Even if you are very familiar with your community, it is good to take a prayerful walk and see what you notice; especially look out for families with young children out for walks or on the school/nursery run.

How could your provision of a safe and welcoming space for babies, toddlers and their carers be a source of hope and transformation and an expression of God's Kingdom?

1.2.2 Conversations with your corps council or leadership team

See Sections 1:3, 2:1 and 4:4

It is essential that the parent and toddler group is seen as an integral part of the church's mission. In line with your *Corps Mission Journal*, present the vision, ideas and plans to the corps leadership team and take time to pray about this together.

- Share statistics and stories about the impact of church parent and toddler groups.
- Explore Bible passages which speak of welcoming children, caring for our neighbours and being a light in our communities.



- Encourage others to share their experiences, ask questions and make suggestions of ways the group could connect with the wider life of the church and community.

Useful links

- **Talking toddlers research** (hopetogether.org.uk)
- **children everywhere.com**

It is also helpful, when starting a new group or reviewing an existing group, to do this in conversation with your divisional intergenerational officer/worker, territorial community engagement lead, divisional safeguarding officer and safe mission adviser, to ensure we are doing all we can to keep people safe.

1.2.3 Invite the whole corps to pray

When the whole corps prays, the ministry becomes part of the whole corps' mission - not just one team's responsibility. Here are some ways to get your corps family involved.

Pray through the challenges and opportunities

Make a list of potential opportunities and challenges to help you and your church to pray. For example, you might pray about:

- Creating a team of enthusiastic volunteers who work well together.
- Helping new families build friendship and support.
- Building confidence for new leaders.

These could be the focus of a prayer time within Sunday worship, added to a prayer newsletter or used in a specific prayer meeting about the potential new group.

Pray creatively

Seed planting is a great way to visualise the love and Kingdom values you want to share and grow within the families who come to your new group. Each seed planted could represent a family. The congregation could each take a seed pot home to remind them to pray for one of the families you hope to reach out to.

Alternatively, use different toddler toys to pray creatively for your new initiative. Each toy could represent something you want to pray for. Eg:



- Building blocks for building your team.
- Soft toys for providing a place of care.
- Toy trains for staying on track in your planning.

Create a prayer team or prayer partners

People who do not feel able to volunteer may be keen to support as part of a parent and toddler group prayer team. Perhaps new families joining your group could be offered a prayer partner within the church who pray regularly for them as a family - consult your corps leadership for guidelines on this.

National month of prayer for parent and toddler groups

June is designated as the National Month of Prayer for church-based parent and toddler groups. Churches are encouraged to make it a specific prayer focus during this month each year.

Further information about this is shared on Family Ministries Social Media pages throughout June.

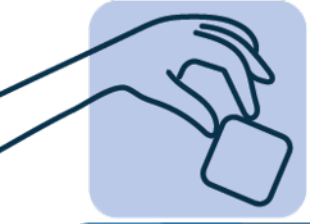
- Facebook: **@sarmyfm** and **SA P&T groups UKI**
- Instagram: **safamily_ministries**



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Laying the Foundations



1.3 Aligning with the Wider Corps Mission

Children naturally ask ‘Why?’ - and it is an equally important question for us too. Starting a parent and toddler group should always be rooted in purpose, not just activity.

Young children are constantly learning and forming their understanding of the world. A parent and toddler group provides a safe and welcoming space where they can experience kindness, friendship and acceptance, while being gently introduced to faith through stories, songs and relationships. For parents and carers, it offers vital connection and support.

Within The Salvation Army, each corps is on a mission journey - seeking where God is at work, recognising local needs, and responding with the love of Jesus. A parent and toddler group can play a vital role in this by helping to bring about the vision of **‘fullness of life for all with Jesus’**.

1.3.1 Missional impact

A parent and toddler group is more than a weekly gathering; it is a space for intentional mission and relationship-building.

Through consistent welcome and care, groups can:

- Demonstrate God’s love in practical ways.
- Reduce isolation for parents and carers.
- Provide emotional and relational support.
- Build friendships and community networks.
- Create a safe and inclusive environment.

Over time, trust grows. Families begin to share more of their lives, creating natural opportunities to talk about faith and invite them into wider expressions of church life.



1.3.2 Understanding local need

See Sections 1.1 and 2.1

Before starting a parent and toddler group, it is essential to explore what already exists in your area.

- What toddler groups are already running locally?
- When do they meet, and who do they reach?
- Is there an unmet need?

By visiting other groups, you can learn what works well and where gaps may exist. It may also open opportunities for partnership rather than competition.

If a gap in provision is identified, be clear about how your group will respond. This might involve:

- Serving a different age group.
- Running at an alternative time.
- Meeting a specific need within the community.

A clear purpose ensures the group is both needed and effective.

1.3.3 Connecting with the wider corps

Parent and toddler groups thrive when they exist as part of the wider life and mission of the corps; they should not exist in isolation.

What next steps might families take with your corps?

- What other opportunities are there for them? What else could they be invited to?
- Are any of the group's leaders or volunteers involved in other areas of ministry? Might families be able to participate and see a familiar face?
- How can relationships be built beyond the weekly session?

Accessible and informal opportunities - such as Messy Church, social events, or intergenerational gatherings - can provide natural pathways for deeper engagement.

For some, the parent and toddler group will be their main connection to church, and this is the right step for their family, so it is important to value and nurture this space fully.



1.3.4 Aligning with the corps mission strategy

The parent and toddler group needs to connect clearly with wider mission planning, including using and incorporating other tools available such as the *Corps Missional Journal*, UKI Mission Priorities and *Blueprint for better choices*.

A key question to reflect on is:

- How will everyone who attends encounter and have the opportunity to respond to God's love through this work?

Also consider:

- How does this support our corps mission priorities?
- What does 'fullness of life in Jesus' look like for the families we serve?
- Why is this the right time to begin?

Intentional alignment ensures the group contributes meaningfully to the corps' overall mission.

Further reading

- **Our vision and identity** (salvationist.org.uk)
- **Our identity** (OurHub)
- **Blueprint for better choices** (OurHub)

1.3.5 Measuring outcomes - what is the fruit of this ministry?

It is important to define what we hope to achieve by running a parent and toddler group and to identify what the fruit of this ministry looks like from the beginning.

- What outcomes are we hoping to see?
- How will we know the group is making an impact?
- When will we pause to review and reflect together?

Regular evaluation helps ensure the group remains effective, healthy, responsive and aligned with its purpose and within the purpose of the whole corps.



1.3.6 The opportunity

A parent and toddler group creates opportunities to experience connection, belonging and faith.

For many families, it becomes a place where they feel supported, valued and accepted without judgement. From these relationships, deeper engagement and spiritual exploration can grow.

Ultimately, whatever the motivation for starting a group, the impact can be significant - for children, for families, and for the wider community. **It is worth it.**



‘We love coming to your group every week as we feel relaxed, supported, and loved in a non-judgemental environment with hospitality and generosity at its heart.’

Parent, Hackney, Mare Street

