



GET SET!

Growing Together



6.1 Handling the Hiccups: Troubleshooting Common Challenges

See Sections 3.5.2 and 4.2.2

Inevitably, every parent and toddler group will experience moments that don't go according to plan. These 'hiccups' are a natural part of what happens when different people come together, and when handled well, they can become opportunities for learning and growth, both for the group team and for those attending.

Communicating expectations and boundaries clearly and in a timely way can help pre-empt challenges that might occur. It will be helpful to consider how you might work through the following:

6.1.1 Setting expectations that feel safe and supportive

See Section 3.3.2 and Appendix 6

Clear and respectful expectations, underpinned by The Salvation Army's values, help everyone understand:

- how the group operates,
- what behaviours are valued, and
- what the desired culture is.

Expectations should be communicated appropriately, shared regularly and modelled by all team members. Expectations are likely to include the following as a minimum:

- Parents are responsible for their children at all times.
- Everyone is treated with kindness and respect.
- Toys, resources and buildings are shared and cared for by everyone.
- Tidying up is an activity that everyone can be involved in.



Keep expectations simple and flexible enough to respond to real-life situations. Make these expectations visible, and when challenges arise, gently refer to these.

Useful link

- **Our values** (salvationist.org.uk)

6.1.2 Responding with love and respect

At the heart of every human interaction is the call for churches and Christians to treat people as Jesus does - with patience, dignity and compassion. This is especially important when addressing:

- Conflicts between children, eg grabbing or pushing
- Challenging child behaviour, eg biting or hitting
- Differences in parenting styles, creating tension
- Tired or overwhelmed parents

Practical responses to such situations should include:

- Speaking calmly and privately where possible
- Avoiding judgement or embarrassment
- Offering support rather than instruction, eg 'Would it help if ...?'
- Modelling positive behaviour to both adults and toddlers

6.1.3 Responding to challenging toddler behaviour

Always remember that toddlers are very young and are growing and learning how to express feelings. Here are some tips:

Acknowledge their emotions

Naming what a toddler may be feeling helps them feel seen and reassured. It supports early emotional development by giving children simple words for big feelings, helping them gradually learn to recognise, express and manage those feelings in safer ways.

Eg: 'I can see you may be feeling sad because you wanted that toy.' This does not mean giving in; it shows the child that their feelings are understood while the adult calmly holds the boundary.



Encourage parents/carers to handle the situation without stepping in too quickly

Where it is safe to do so, giving parents and carers a moment to respond allows them to support their own child in a way that feels familiar and appropriate for their family. It protects their dignity, avoids making them feel judged or undermined, and helps build confidence in handling everyday toddler challenges.

Provide distractions or alternative activities

Toddlers are still developing impulse control, patience and the ability to cope when something does not go their way. Offering a simple distraction or an alternative activity can help shift their attention before frustration escalates, while still guiding them towards a safer or more appropriate choice.

Eg: 'That toy is being used at the moment. Shall we try the blocks while we wait?' This helps the child move forward and gives parents and carers a gentle model they can use again. Knowing your families and having built relationships is helpful, to know when to do this and when to step back.

6.1.4 Responding to parents and carers feeling isolated

See Section 4.1.2 and 4.1.4

Some parents and carers may find it hard to engage within the group or may feel excluded for a number of different reasons. It will help to:

- Intentionally welcome and introduce people.
- Ask individuals if there is anything that helps them settle into new situations.
- Create simple and easy opportunities for conversation.
- Notice and include those who seem to be on the edge of the group.

6.1.5 Responding to disruptive situations

See Sections 3.5.3, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3

If any behaviour impacts the group:

- Address it early and gently.
- Focus on safety and shared respect.
- Work alongside the parent or carer rather than taking over, in order to support their dignity.



6.1.6 Offering pastoral care

See Section 4.1.4

Families don't arrive at the group empty-handed. They bring their joys, challenges and personal experiences. A parent and toddler group can be a place of quiet support and gentle encouragement.

Pastoral care may look like:

- Taking time to listen
- Remembering names and important details
- Checking in when someone hasn't attended for a while
- Offering prayer when appropriate and welcomed
- Signposting to further support where needed

Small, consistent acts of care build trust and can open the door for meaningful conversations to take place, and can provide opportunities to share God's love.

Useful link

- Family support - resource links and advice (salvationist.org.uk)

6.1.7 Keeping perspective

Remember, challenges are inevitable and will contribute to building authentic community within the group. When handled with grace and consistency, they strengthen relationships and demonstrate God's love in action.

TIP: Stay calm, stay kind, stay consistent. The responses from the team will set the culture for the whole group.





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6.2 Adapting and Expanding

As your parent and toddler group grows, it is important to review how the group can continue to provide a safe, welcoming and supportive environment for children and their parents and carers.

Healthy growth is about more than increasing attendance. The success of the group is best measured, for example, by:

- the quality of relationships,
- the support offered to families, and
- the opportunities created for community and belonging.

By regularly reviewing capacity, managing demand thoughtfully and remaining responsive to local needs, groups can continue to flourish while maintaining a safe, welcoming and caring environment.

Whether through additional sessions, targeted provision for babies or childminders, or entirely new initiatives, adapting wisely can enable the church to serve more families effectively and deepen its ministry within the community.

6.2.1 Group size and capacity

There is no ideal group size that suits every setting. Capacity should be determined by factors such as:

- The size of the venue
- The number of volunteers available
- The equipment and resources provided
- Safeguarding and fire safety requirements
- The overall experience of families attending

The size of the group is not linked with how successful or unsuccessful it is.



Smaller groups often foster stronger relationships, provide a more personal welcome for new families and allow volunteers to give greater individual attention. They can also create a calmer environment with lower noise levels and make it easier to identify families who may need additional support. However, smaller groups may sometimes struggle with lower energy levels, fewer opportunities for peer friendships and, in some cases, financial sustainability.

Larger groups can create a lively atmosphere, offer more friendship opportunities and provide greater resilience when attendance fluctuates. They may also be able to offer a wider range of activities. However, excessive numbers can present challenges. New families may feel overwhelmed, relationships can become more difficult to maintain, and safeguarding, registration and pastoral support become increasingly demanding. Facilities such as parking, toilets and refreshments can become stretched, and some families may stop attending if the environment feels crowded or unsafe.

As a simple guide, parents and carers should always be able to locate and supervise their children easily. If this becomes difficult due to attendance levels, it may be time to review the group's provision.

6.2.2 Reviewing places and attendance

Attendance often varies from week to week, so it is helpful to review attendance regularly, especially when demand is high. Groups should communicate clearly that places may be reviewed and that a place could be considered inactive if a family has not attended for several weeks and does not respond to contact attempts. This helps ensure that places remain available for families who wish to attend regularly.

6.2.3 Waiting lists

If demand consistently exceeds capacity, a waiting list may be necessary. Before introducing one, however, it is worth considering whether the issue is temporary or whether there are alternative solutions - such as reconfiguring the space, recruiting additional volunteers, creating a second session or developing a different type of provision that better meets local needs.

Where a waiting list is required, it should be simple, fair and transparent. Collect only essential information, such as parent or carer details, the child's name and age, contact information and the date of application.



Families should be informed about how the waiting list operates, how they will be contacted and, where practical, how often places become available. Places may be allocated on a first-come first-served basis, or according to agreed priorities such as local families, church-connected families or vulnerable families referred by professionals. Whatever approach is chosen, it should be clearly communicated and applied consistently.

Waiting lists should be viewed as a temporary measure wherever possible while leaders explore ways of meeting increased demand.

6.2.4 When is it time to start another group?

If demand continues to grow, it may be worth considering an additional session or a different form of provision.

Before doing so, ask:

- Is the need short-term or long-term?
- Do we have sufficient leadership and volunteer capacity?
- Will another session affect the quality of existing provision?
- Will smaller groups allow for better relationships and support?
- Are there particular groups of families whose needs are not currently being met?

Reviewing the needs of the local community may reveal opportunities to offer more targeted support rather than simply duplicating an existing group. **See section 2.1**

6.2.5 A baby group or first-time parent group

In many communities, provision for babies and first-time parents has reduced in recent years. A dedicated baby group for children aged 0-12 months, or a group specifically for first-time parents, may help meet an important local need.

Such groups are particularly valuable when new parents feel overwhelmed in a busy toddler environment or are looking for support, discussion and confidence-building opportunities. Partnerships with health visitors and family support services may also be possible.

Benefits include:

- A quieter and more relaxed atmosphere
- Strong peer support among parents at a similar stage of life
- Greater opportunities for discussion and friendship



- Early intervention and pastoral support where needed

Resources such as *Baby Song* may provide a useful framework for this type of provision. Thought should also be given to how families will transition into a wider parent and toddler group as their children grow.

Useful link

- **Baby Song** (salvationist.org.uk)

6.2.6 A childminders' group

If childminders attend in significant numbers, a dedicated childminders' group may be worth considering. Such groups can provide professional networking, peer support and opportunities to exchange ideas, resources and good practice.

A dedicated session can help address practical issues that sometimes arise when childminders bring several children to a general group, while also enabling activities to be tailored more appropriately to their needs. Childminders may develop a greater sense of ownership and commitment to a group specifically designed for them.

For the church, this can also be a valuable outreach opportunity. By recognising and supporting the important role childminders play in family and community life, the church can build meaningful relationships, offer pastoral support and create natural opportunities to invite childminders and the families they work with to wider church activities and events.

6.2.7 Other possibilities

As communities change, other forms of provision may become appropriate, such as:

- Stay-and-play sessions
- Outdoor groups
- Dads and children groups
- Saturday family sessions
- Additional groups in other neighbourhoods
- Groups for children with additional needs

If help is required when considering new possibilities, please contact familyministries@salvationarmy.org.uk

