



How to ...

Start a toddler group

I. Just imagine if...

Just imagine if your church discovered a way to effectively engage with over 50% of the local community. Just imagine if half of the young families in your area came along every week.

You'd notice, wouldn't you?

Well, I've got news for you - in many churches in the UK they already do!

Recent research has found that 52% of under-4s in England (and, of course their adult carers) attend a Church-led Toddler Group. [1]

As a young Baptist Minister, it took me some years to realise that every week some 50-60 parents with toddlers from the local area gathered in my church. Furthermore, they were not only willing but eager to do Bible Crafts, hear Bible stories, sing Christian songs and even say prayers!

Of course I knew that the Parent and Toddler Group existed. In fact I was glad it was there... but also very glad I never had to attend! For me it was a scary place. It had that potent cocktail that as a male church leader I tended to avoid - young women and small children.

To my shame, I saw it as unimportant, even trivial. I saw it as just a few mums gathered together to natter about kid's stuff. Somehow I had segregated the group from the rest of the life and mission of the church. That was until I visited as part of a Church Mission Audit. I popped in to ask how many of those present attended church. I sort of knew that 80% of them didn't. I also assumed that most of them weren't really interested. But when I asked the question, to my surprise, every single parent put their hand up.

I was shocked! In my confusion I asked 'Which church?' They looked at me as if I was mad and said in unison '*This one.*'

Suddenly and unexpectedly I was forced to change my view of the group. Despite the fact that they were not yet believers, they saw themselves as part of the church I led.

I began to realise that the Parent and Toddler Group was not some fringe activity but, in the economy of God, a valuable part of His mission to our community. More people from the surrounding area attended this group every week than any other in the life of the church.

As a church, we began to ask ourselves key questions:

- What is the Parent and Toddler Group for?**
- How can we deepen our relationships and draw those who attend further into the life of the church?**
- How can we show greater love and support?**
- How can we get to know the rest of their friends and families?**

Without a doubt, the most important question we asked was, how can we support, value, encourage and resource the Parent and Toddler Group Leaders to be more effective in their

ministry? The answers we came up with not only changed the church's attitude to the group and its leaders, but also the whole church strategy for mission.

It was this final question that made me want to do what I can, not just for the group in my church, but for all the other groups in the UK.

It is the chief reason why 1277 exists, www.1277.org.uk. 1277=the number of days a child has between birth and starting nursery education. It aims to bring together all who have a heart to see Toddler Groups make a difference in our society. 1277 seeks to represent the views, concerns and interests of Church-based Toddler Groups with those in authority both in Westminster and around the country.

By registering your group and receiving information from 1277 you can become part of a movement that together will make a difference to our society; by reaching one parent and one toddler at a time.

The 1277 Facebook group is a fantastic discussion forum and support group for leaders of groups and a good place to ask advice if you are considering starting a group.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1277makethemcount/>

Written by: Rev. Richard Hardy; Director of the Entheos Trust.

[1] - 52% of children under four years old access some form of parent & toddler group via Churches. Source: Children's Workforce Development Council, 'More than Sundays' report, 2009 available from the Family Matters Institute.

2. A fantastic, comprehensive guide by Scripture Union

Building Blocks: A training resource for those in church-based toddler groups. This can be downloaded from:

[http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk/Uploads/Documents/Building%20Blocks%20Training%20Resource\(2\).pdf](http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk/Uploads/Documents/Building%20Blocks%20Training%20Resource(2).pdf)

Written by: The Carer And Toddler Strategy (CATS) consultative group, which 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.

3. Some Questions to help you get started

The follow questions are designed to help you with planning and discussions when starting a toddler group. There are different questions to ask yourselves as leaders and those who will be involved, to help you think about all aspects of running a toddler group.

You do not have to answer all the questions in one go but keep coming back to them, Use them as a guide to help you think and discuss your group's needs.

Why?

Why do you want to open a group?

Is there a need?

Are there any other groups nearby?

Aims and Objectives

What is the aim of the group?

Who is it for?

Will there be a limit to the number of children?

What will the children/carers gain?

Do you have the support of the P.C.C and do they share your vision?

Finance

How will the group be funded?

P.C.C, a start up grant or donations?

Will you charge or ask for donations?

If charging is it per child, per family or group?

Administration

Who will be responsible for other administrative tasks?:

- Writing and maintaining a welcome sheet or leaflet
- Notices and distribution of information
- Initial registration of each attending child
- A record of any special or medical needs and communicate this to appropriate leaders
- Weekly registration on arrival at group
- Where will records be kept?

Advertising

Where and how will you advertise the new group?

Local shops, Library, Church newsletter, School newsletter, Doctors surgery, Health visitor, Preschool or nursery

How will you communicate church events and services to those who attend the group?

Health and Safety

Is there an existing Child Protection policy?

Do you have adequate insurance?

If there is an existing policy, check it covers your group and its activities?

Are any of the leaders a qualified first aider?

Will they always be present or do more leaders need training?

Do you have an 'in date' first aid kit?

Do you have an accident reporting book?

Do you have a complaints procedure?

What are the fire procedures and are there adequate safety measures?

Risk Assessments; who will complete them?

Suitability of Area

Where are you going to hold the group?

In a hall, in Church, rooms within it or somewhere else?

How many rooms are going to be used?

Are they safe and suitable?

How will they be set out to incorporate safe areas?

Are the toilets accessible?

Do you need potties, trainer seats or steps?

What facilities are there for changing nappies?

Are there suitable hand washing facilities?

How hot is the water?

Can children reach the taps?

Is there enough safe storage for all the toys and equipment?

Is there a designated area for the storage of prams?

If preparing refreshments, are there suitable facilities?

Are they clean, safe and hygienic?

Roles and Responsibilities

Volunteers:

How will you recruit people to help?

How will they be supported?

How will you thank them?

What skills do people already have? Do you need to arrange further training?

How will roles be delegated, weekly, termly or permanently?

Some tasks to think about-

Cleaning and maintenance of toys and equipment

Regular safety checks

Administration

Budgeting and finance

Health and Safety issues like first aid and fire safety

Session planning

Preparation

Refreshments

What responsibility will the parents or carers have? Will you encourage them to become involved?

Session Structure

Will it be more of a toddler service, a time to play and chat or a combination?

How will it be distinctly Christian and Faith based?

What will happen during the session?

Free play with a selection of toys, Activities, Craft, Songs, Story, Prayers, Refreshments

How long will the session last?

What time of day?

Consider local school and nursery starting and finishing times

What rules will you have and how will they be communicated?

What strategies will you use for dealing with difficult behaviour?

Do you have appropriate equipment, toys, books, craft materials and toileting aids? Are they clean, safe and meet safety standards?

Do you have enough cups, beakers and feeder cups for drinks so all abilities are catered for?

Toys

When thinking about toys, look to have some that have some connection to the church building or the Bible.

Include things that can inspire children's imagination and can take some inspiration from what they see and hear around them.

Does what you do and provide say "we value you"?

Are the toys clean and well maintained?

Are there any toys that enable children to encounter God or to nurture prayer and spirituality?

Include toys, books and material for dressing up. It is also important to include items from nature or made of natural materials not just plastic.

Choose a theme for a term with a variety of things for children to play with and explore.

- Baptism
- Major festivals like Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Harvest, All Saints Day, Remembrance Day, Advent Christmas
- Old Testament stories like Creation, Noah, Jonah, Moses
- Parables
- New Testament stories about Jesus

Include a variety of toys, jigsaws, material for dress up, figures, storybooks and bibles,

Connections

Will you be able to link with any other groups in the area, local services or professionals who could offer more to the group?

Church, Mothers' Union groups, Local schools, nurseries, or play groups, Library, Community centre, Health Visitors or Doctor's Surgery, Local support groups like National Childbirth Trust or La Leche, Programmes like Book Start or Sure Start

Back up and Support

What support do you have?

Has anyone in the congregation had similar experience?

Are you on any prayer lists as individuals and as a group, and for the children and their carers?

Have you spoken to your Children's Adviser or visited the Resource Centre?

How does the group fit into the bigger picture of Church Life?

The longer term...

How will you ensure the group's future?
Advertising, Volunteers, Finances, Support, Ideas, Equipment

It is best to do things as a team so things do not depend upon any one person.

Written by: Ellie Wilson: Adviser for Under 5s at the Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales

4. Case Study: Ideas from 'Seedlings'

Seedlings runs term time on Friday's from 9:45-11:15am.

The session opens with a welcomer on the door welcoming people

and introducing new people to the group. We have a space for parking buggies and 2 play rooms.

At registration parents pay £1 per child and the table contains welcome leaflets with information about the group in it, postcards that advertise the group and copies of the 'Playtime' Monthly Newsletter available.

In one room we have a craft table with a different weekly craft activity and the other room is full of toys of all kinds. We include a box of books, a special corner for babies to play and sometimes we get out our small bouncy castle.

Half way through the session we stop for snacks. We serve proper coffee and nice cakes for parents and a wide range of snacks for the children. Providing a good amount and wide range of snacks goes down well with those who attend and demonstrates generosity.

At the end everyone helps us pack the toys away and we end with songs and notices.

Sometimes we hold cakes sales, or are visited by the local Pre-School or visitors from the children's centre.

We have a small team of volunteers who setup and pack away the toys and talk to the parents.

We have a second pair of volunteers come and serve the refreshments.

For a time we also ran a dads group on Saturdays and would love to also hold special pamper evenings for mums. At Christmas we give everyone a book as a gift.

Written by: Seedlings Toddler Group Leaders.



5. Useful Websites

Useful websites...

www.faithinhomes.org.uk

www.going4growth.com

www.1277.org.uk

www.careforthefamily.org.uk

www.messychurch.org.uk

www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk

www.themothersunion.org

www.eden.co.uk

www.tts-group.co.uk

www.sbs-educational.co.uk

www.bakerross.co.uk