

How Child-Friendly is our Congregation?

Things have changed. We all know that. Today's parents and children expect to be fully included in the life and mission of our congregations. If we ignore this fact, we do it at our peril. Young families will simply come to visit and move on to another congregation where they can be more fully involved.

Sometimes I hear comments like this: "Young people today don't appreciate what they have. When we were young we walked two miles to school and never complained. We went to Sunday school in the morning, then stayed for worship. Then we went back to the church for evening service. It seems as if young people now-a-days have too much."

Well—there may be some truth in this. But, if we are to have growing vital churches, there are two important facts that compel us to consider if our congregations are child-friendly. **We simply cannot blame children, youth and young families for living the 'good life' which we helped to shape.** All of us worked hard to have more amenities and those of us over 50 enjoy them, too.

The second important fact is that, regardless of our different contexts, children, youth and young families **have a spiritual hunger** that can be met by our congregations. Having more material possessions than we had when we were younger does not necessarily make for happier living. Everyone needs God.

Structuring a Workshop Around the Questionnaire on Page Three

You may simply do the questionnaire OR you may use the following outline to develop a workshop on the theme "How Child-Friendly is our Congregation?"

1. Mix and connect

Photocopy the "Mix and Connect" sheet (p. 4). As people arrive, give each person a sheet and a pencil. Ask them to mingle and sign in each square the name of a person who matches this description.

2. Introduce purpose of gathering

Use some of the points in the preamble above to introduce the idea that the group has gathered to explore how child-friendly your congregation is, and also to begin to plan one or two new initiatives that will improve children's ministry.

1. Mix and connect	10 minutes
2. Introduce purpose of gathering	2 minutes
3. Do questionnaire	10 minutes
4. Debrief: What have we learned about ourselves?	15 minutes
5. Where do we go from here? (Three models)	15 minutes

3. Do the questionnaire

The questionnaire may be done individually, or in small groups.

4. Debrief: What have we learned about ourselves?

As people talk, list ideas and concerns on chart paper.

5. Where do we go from here?

Suggest there are at least three models which may be used for follow-up. Decide which one works best for your situation.

Model #1: *Congregation task group based around concerns from the questionnaire*

Form a congregational task group that will meet regularly. Choose one or two of the areas listed in the questionnaire and form an action plan to increase activity within the congregation. To whom will this task group report?

Model #2: *Congregation Task Group based around milestones in church life*

A task group designs a congregational plan based around baptism (ages 0-1), baptism birthday (ages 1-2), prayer (ages 2-3), church school (ages 3-4), worship (ages 4-5), friendship (ages 5-6), Bible (grades 2-4), communion (grades 5-6), profession of faith (grades 7-9), witness and service (grades 9-12). The resource *The Child in Our Hands: Milestones*, by Lee Hovel, Youth & Family Institute, Augsburg College, 1999, is an excellent resource for this.

Model #3: *Community Task Group*

Form a community task group with other denominations or congregations. Invite leaders who are like-minded about ministry with children and youth. Plan events or activities around specific areas of concern that might be offered together, such as:

- Keys to nurturing faith in family
- Building healthy self-worth in Christian families
- Listening skills
- How to make the most of family time
- Dealing with anger
- Family or intergenerational seasonal celebrations
- How communities and churches can work together to encourage reliant, mature, responsible youth and children.

Questionnaire

How Child Friendly is our Congregation?

Inclusion in Educational Programs

- We provide age-appropriate church school.
- We provide training for our church school leaders.
- We budget adequately for learning materials.
- We provide some all-ages (intergenerational) learning opportunities.
- We give children and youth opportunities to share their learning with adults.

Inclusion in Worship

- We provide areas in our sanctuary or worship area where small children can see.
- We provide a worship bulletin for children.
- We provide at least 4 intergenerational/family worship services per year.
- Children have the option of either staying in worship or attending age-appropriate classes.
- Children are given offering envelopes and expected to use them regularly.

Inclusion in Service Within the Congregation

- Children help regularly to usher and take up the offering.
- Children are trained and encouraged to read scripture and/or prayers in worship.
- Older children are trained & encouraged to lead games/programs for younger children.
- Children are expected to be part of clean-up days at the church. Children are expected to provide music leadership in worship and fellowship times.

Inclusion in Service Outside the Congregation

- Children are expected to join adults in visiting shut-ins and nursing homes.
- Children are expected to participate in outreach efforts (e.g. food banks).
- Children are encouraged to do some community volunteer work.
- Children participate in some activity or study to learn about world mission.
- Older children are invited to reflect on what they learn by serving.

Intergenerational Inclusion

- Most of the adults in the congregation know the names of nearly all or all the children.
- Adults are tolerant of children in worship.
- At all important meetings (e.g. Annual Meeting) children's needs are considered.
- Children are given pastoral care by elders or special pastoral care providers.
- At least once a year children, youth and adults work together on a service project.

Inclusion in Use of the Building

- Children are allowed in every room of the church.
- If areas are off-limit (e.g. the secretary's computer) this is clearly communicated.
- There are child-level coat racks and appropriately sized tables and chairs.
- Children are allowed, with supervision, to use the kitchen.
- Older children providing leadership are entrusted with keys to locked cupboards for necessary equipment.

Support for Parents

- Parents are given a baptism gift and information about beginning Christian nurture at home.
- Parents are given help to pray with their children.
- Parents are given help on how to prepare their children for worship or communion.
- Resources are suggested/made available for family devotional time.
- Parents are encouraged to do simple Christian rituals with their children.

Find someone who

...worries about kids	...first learned about God from their mother	...went to church camp as a child or teen	...can call at least one kid on the block by name
...remembers family devotional times	...played with a child within the last week	...helped at a Vacation Bible School recently	...believes that kids are more unruly now than 20 years ago
...plans to do something interesting in the next month	...had a conversation with a teen within the last week	...talked with a child under 10 today	...is helping someone through University or College