**Toddler Groups**

The Why and How

Date August 2022

**Introduction**

As a CYP Team we are really thrilled that you are considering starting a group for pre-school children and their carers. We have put together this document as you consider the why’s and how’s of such a group.

If this doesn’t answer all your questions, or you feel a conversation would help do please get in touch with us as we would love to support you through this process. It may seem daunting but think of starting small and when you have the hang of it allow it to develop as circumstance and God leads.

**Why have a Toddler Group?**

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

Source: Children’s Workforce Development Council, ‘More than Sundays’ report, 2009 available from the Family Matters Institute.

**These groups are a lifeline to many parents and carers as they provide a welcoming and supportive environment during the week. Because of this, groups can have a great impact on their lives, and the lives of the children who attend.**

Parent and toddler groups provide a great place for parents and carers to form new friends and seek support and advice. They also provide a safe place for children to make friends, learn and interact together. Many of these friendships often continue outside the group as families visit each other’s homes rather than sitting at home alone feeling isolated. These friendships can last a lifetime.

These groups not only offer vital friendship, but can also be a life-saving avenue for families in crisis. Those who attend toddler groups are shown unconditional love, help and support, which is ongoing and endless, not only for the children and parents, but also to their wider families and those they meet during their day-to-day lives.

They are also a great place for families to start to feel welcome in our churches. They meet people of faith who care and love them and their children. These groups vary but they can provide a place for Bible stories and songs on a regular or occasional basis.

They are a great opportunity for mission in our communities.

**How to start a group**

**First do some research:**

* **Is there a need for a toddler group?**

It may seem logical to set up a group but it makes sense to ask first. Find out what other groups exist in your local area. Make your group complimentary rather than in opposition to those which are already happening. Consider approaching local professionals such as child minders, health visitors and local schools, and circulate a questionnaire to seek opinions and determine if there is a need. If all your prayer and research returns a resounding ‘yes’, start thinking about which group (or groups) will work best for you? A regular toddler group, toddler praise, a group just for dads or an age restricted group (maybe under 1’s)? Hopefully you will have gained a feel for what is most needed from your research.

* **What support will you need?**

If this is going to be successful and sustainable you will need a team. Think who you can ask (make sure they are safely recruited). Maybe a larger team who help on a rota basis? Try to make sure some faces are consistent to help build good relationships. Try to make sure clergy can attend (it helps families feel connected to the church and shows the church family the importance of the ministry) with some regularity.

* **What are your aims?**

As your team is established, together you need to decide on the aims of the group. To use this as a missional group, think about how you can make your toddler group distinctively Christian, but in a sensitively appropriate way. You could choose to have a Bible story and songs each week or simply at major festivals. Whatever aims you settle on, ensure they are shared and understood by your team. This will help in your planning and preparation. You should also share your aims with the wider Church, after all this has the potential to be a significant part of your ministry. Review your aims annually to ensure they are still appropriate and relevant.

* **When will you meet?**

Once you have established the purpose of your group, think about the best and most appropriate time to meet. Ask those you will be inviting as well as your team. Consider those with other children so can help to time it around local school or nursery runs. Check out when other local activities for this age group are going on and try to avoid meeting at the same time. Also, it’s worth being aware that toddler groups tend to be a very fluid group. Due to the very nature of parents returning to work after maternity leave or pre-school hours kicking in, you may see a large number of children, parents, grandparents and carers passing through your doors, so it may be worth considering adapting your timings over time.

* **What will you do?**

Plan for a no longer than a two hour session, for example, 9.30 am to 11.30 am or 1 pm to 3 pm. Activities could include free play, craft, story, music, singing, prayer and refreshments. Some of what you choose to do will be driven by the space you have available. If space is an issue avoid bikes and slides as although these are very popular they take up a lot of space. Consider other ways of including physical activities in your group. Get creative in how you use your space and think about providing sensory activities. Pinterest is full of ideas you can use.

Remember, this is a church toddler group, so don’t be apologetic for sharing Bible stories or including a prayer activity, embrace those elements and do it creatively. There are lots of great examples of this working around our Diocese and we can put you in contact with other groups to see how it works in their setting.

You may choose to adopt a theme for the term or be guided by the church year. You can reflect the theme through play, craft, story, music, prayer and even the refreshments.

* **How will you resource your toddler group?**

The toys and resources we have should reflect the value you place on the children in your groups. They should be clean, good quality, complete and in working order (a spare pack of batteries is essential). Do consider the ages of the children you are planning on welcoming and ensure the toys reflect that as well as the diversity in our society. It is important to provide a variety of types of toys, which cover different ages and abilities. Ensure that there are tactile and sensory toys available. Think about babies who come make sure there is a soft, clean and protected space for them.

Consider toys to help with imaginative play, small world, home corner, dressing up. And please have a quiet corner with books – not all families have many age-appropriate books.

Toys are expensive so ask families whose children are moving beyond the toddler years for any they no longer use. Charity shops and social media pages are another good place to find bargains.

Another important resource is the toilets – do you have potties, children’s seats, stools? Are there changing facilities? A clean mat is a good starting point and maybe spare nappies and wipes.

Do ask the Diocesan CYP Team as you look for funding for your group.

* **Who does what?**

Now you have your team, you have your vision and know what you are setting out to do you need to start deciding on roles and responsibilities. On the next page is the list of what we have thought of, you may think of other things you need. Think of your team’s skills and abilities and allocate roles accordingly. There may also be people in your congregation who cannot commit to being part of the team but who may be able to support in other ways.

This is an extensive list – do not be daunted - the CYP team have drafts of many of these documents and are very happy to offer support as you work through the process.

1. Advertising – paper flyers, posters where they will be seen, a sign outside the door, social media.
2. Administration – registration forms (do consider GDPR), weekly registers, Welcome Leaflet explaining who you are and other information you want your families to know – like rules you think are needed, sharing information.
3. Finances – consider making your charge as low as possible to enable more families to access the group. Encourage your church to see this as mission and consider either actively funding or at least not charging rent etc.
4. Setting up and packing away.
5. Cleaning – the space needs to be clean if you are inviting families with children. Toys and carpets need cleaning regularly.
6. Health and safety – check with your insurance company before starting your group. You will need a Risk Assessment (approved by your PCC) that your whole team is aware of. A First Aider on the team is also desirable along with an in-date kit and accident book.
7. Safeguarding – You will need to follow your Child Protection policy so your team will all need to be safely recruited and your leaders will need to be DBS’d. Talk to your Incumbent and PSO regarding the team and they can advise on the appropriate training.
8. Playing and chatting with children and their carers
9. Refreshments – consider what will best suit your group toast, fruit, biscuits? This link is helpful for food preparation. <https://help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/get-help-to-improve-your-practice/food-safety->

Aim to have refreshments available throughout the session to accommodate those who cannot stay the whole time.

Food and Hygiene 2 is inexpensive and easily accessed online.

1. Craft – aim to offer something each week and consider that for some children this is the only place they will have this opportunity. Offer aprons to reassure carers.
2. Story - make sure the story has a visual element as the children will engage better.
3. Music – do not worry about your voice once everyone joins in no one will hear you. A bag or basket with toys or pictures to identify the song that children pick goes down well.

Review roles and responsibilities regularly especially as your team grows in confidence.

And remember to thank your team – they will serve more faithfully if they know they are appreciated.

There are some very good training/information resources we can send

**The Good Practice guide for Toddler Groups** – from Mothers’ Union, Salvation army, Care for the Family.

**Building Blocks Training Resource** – from SU, Fegans, Salvation Army, Baptist Union

**Useful information Websites:**

[www.faithinhomes.org.uk](http://www.faithinhomes.org.uk), [www.going4growth.com](http://www.going4growth.com), [www.1277.org.uk](http://www.1277.org.uk), [www.careforthefamily.org.uk](http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk), [www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk), [www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk](http://www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk), [www.themothersunion.org](http://www.themothersunion.org)

**Where to find resources**

[www.eden.co.uk](http://www.eden.co.uk), [www.KCS.co.uk](http://www.KCS.co.uk), [www.tts-group.co.uk](http://www.tts-group.co.uk), [www.sbs-educational.co.uk](http://www.sbs-educational.co.uk), [www.craftycrocodiles.co.uk](http://www.craftycrocodiles.co.uk), [www.bakerross.co.uk](http://www.bakerross.co.uk)

**Ideas for Faith Element**

[www.ministry-to-children.com/toddlers-knowing-god/](http://www.ministry-to-children.com/toddlers-knowing-god/)

[www.imaginor.co.uk/jack-in-the-box-for-churches/](http://www.imaginor.co.uk/jack-in-the-box-for-churches/)

[www.littleworshipcompany.com/](http://www.littleworshipcompany.com/) which can also be round on the RaiseUP Faith platform

[www.diddydisciples.org](http://www.diddydisciples.org), www.biblebuds.co.uk

We have resources from other groups who have a plan for their year – ask us to share it.

**Facebook**:

1277-make them count – a support group for leaders of church groups and a good place to ask advice.

Scramblers Network, London Network of Parent and Toddler Groups

**Pinterest** is another great place for craft ideas

**Family Support** The Smalltalk leaflets have some great ways to support families in a gentle way – maybe leave a selection out every few weeks and have a copy of each available for specific people that you hear about.

https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/support-for-you/faith-in-the-family/support-for-churches/playtime/smalltalk/?fbclid=IwAR0aXfDBT40PrbP4sr-zfoj9pwu-zyLVoBDuk\_RX2fVzU9lZRjI-bNg\_ZOs

Care For The Family have Top Tips leaflets which offer help to a variety of people and situations. There is a small charge but well worth it. https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/product-category/parenting-resources/

***Journeying Together*** from Care For the Family is a flexible, four session resource to help toddler group teams develop their vision, establish a healthy team culture and equip themselves to support families in their community.

The training sessions will equip toddler group teams to:

· Reflect on why you exist and define your vision

· Think about the impact you want to have on families’ lives

· Dream, discuss and plan what your unique group could be

This is a great opportunity to gather your teams together to evaluate what your group looks like and think about possible changes. https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/courses/courses-involving-faith/journeying-together/

We have draft application forms, role descriptions, welcome letter