

Sunday Groups:

Mixed ages and variable numbers

Jan 2025



The Sunday Group Role

We are helping the children in our groups meet God in a real and life-giving way as part of their journey of faith. We do this in conjunction with their families (usually) and sometimes with their schools.

As disciples we are on the journey together with them. Be prepared to you will receive as much from them as they get from you. They are not simply empty vessels waiting to learn from you; they often already have a faith; some for as long as they can remember. we share and we are all learning more about God together.

For more information about how a child or young persons faith develops look at Fowler and Westerhof. We have some books in the office we can lend you.

The variable numbers issue:

The positives of fewer children –

- good chance to build deeper relationships,
- be more responsive to the needs of individual children
- be more flexible in your activities
- shyer children may be more forthcoming.

The negatives:

- makes planning harder – need to plan for the maximum, just in case, and adapt down.
- Group can feel less dynamic
- Harder to meet the needs of both older and younger children.

The wide age-range issues:

There are benefits:

- The older children think of things in a different way and as they express their thoughts it helps to make a bridge for the younger ones to go from abstract concepts to real, life-changing learning.
- When you have older and younger children working together, they develop an appreciation for each other and build a sense of community.
- You can encourage the older ones to take some responsibility in the group such as welcoming, reading etc.

- Asking the older children to support the younger offers them a sense of self-esteem as they see themselves making a difference to another child. It gives the younger one role-models and gives the older ones a reason to act in a more responsible way.

Group make-up:

Have some boundaries for each group regarding age and suitability. With mixed ages or small groups it makes sense to consider each child rather than a blanket rule. The group is there to help a child's faith grow – so the decision as to where is most suitable should rest there. This is true for a child with additional needs as well. Have a theory but be prepared to adapt it to suit the child you are welcoming, being aware that parents may not always agree.

Rules:

Have a few clear rules that everyone agrees to and understands. E.g. each of us is important, we listen to each other. It is worth repeating and reviewing these regularly. Involve group members in setting the rules as much as possible.

Leaders:

Leading a group, or part of it can seem intimidating to start with. Encourage everyone that helps to take on a larger role. Be gentle but persevere. Many people do not realise how capable they are. We have a God who uses us. Even when we feel inadequate. Start out by leading a game or a discussion time.

Content:

- Consider Learning Styles when you are planning each session. They are read/write, auditory, visual, kinaesthetic/hands on. Ideally have each style every week but as long as you use a variety that will be fine.
- Plan to share one main idea in each session rather than overcomplicating it. Once clear on what God wants you to cover the children are more likely to leave having understood.

- Share it simply. Every child will benefit. With a room of mixed ages pitch it to the middle age group. The younger ones will catch enough for them and you can always add extra bits for the older ones you know will benefit from it.
- Share that simple idea in a variety of ways. Use visual aids, stories, sport, music, drama.
- Children who are under 7 years old can only think in concrete, literal ways, so avoid conceptual language; for example say, "Jesus is always with us" rather than "Jesus lives in our hearts."
- Keep it short. Children have a short attention span; in theory they can concentrate for the same number of minutes as their age in years. So, plan for the concentration span of the youngest in the room. Then have something different to move on to.
- Use your space. Can you move around to give each new section a fresh feel, to help concentration? Can one area be the story telling space? Can you use the corners for small groups? Use the different ways children learn to help you: If a story has a journey, then move the group around as you tell the story. Use the children's senses as the characters in the story use theirs.

Stories :

Use a variety of ways to tell the story – maybe more than one way?

- Videos are a great way to tell a story, Saddleback Kids are great. Watch first to check suitability. Make sure you either have Wi-Fi or download the clip. Make sure the volume works for the space.
- Either hand out summarised version or ICB version for children to read. Have a Bible there as well but it is easier for little ones to follow if printed out.
- Use Godly Play – very good for each child to engage with the story at their own level. Information on our website.
- Have pictures/props to help tell the story – essential to engage younger children and those with additional needs as well as being helpful to understand geography of the story. They could even have their own set to take home.
- Act out Bible stories together, give more difficult roles to older children who are happy to read and ask younger children to take the simpler roles. A stack of simple pieces of costume can really help.

- And do not shy away from covering non-story passages. The Bible has many of them and there is always an activity to help explain the concept.

Discussion Groups:

Split into smaller groups to explore and discuss the Bible story in a more age-appropriate way. With the younger children it is helpful to tell the story in more than one way as you help them connect with it. If you have enough team have 2 leaders with the younger group and 1 is sufficient with the older ones. Make sure there are always 2 adults in each room. Prepare the discussion group for the older children carefully, so that this time feels like their special time, when they are being engaged.

Use open questions that can be answered at a different level – I wonder what was your favourite part of the story? I wonder where you would be in the story?

Activities:

- Do activities with open-ended outcomes. E.g. provide a range of art/craft materials and ask the children to respond to the story in whichever way they choose.
- Use art/craft activities as an opportunity to talk with children one-to-one – tell me about your picture.
- Have a whole group activity that all children can contribute to at their own level.
- Have colouring and worksheets at different levels available if it adds to the session.

Games:

If you have very few children its best to avoid team or competitive games – size makes it so unfair! But you can still do individual challenges. If more kids but different ages, ask them to stand in size order and number them off for the number of teams you need. That way each team has a smaller member to help as well as an older one.

Prayer & Reflection:

This should not just happen at the end. We want to show that chatting to God is just 'what we do' as Christians. Some children are confident praying aloud, others pray in their head and others are simply observing. All of these are ok as long as God is given space and respect.

Offer different ways to pray- use all the senses; it will help the younger ones concentrate.

- Touch – a holding cross, using playdough to make shapes to enable prayer. Scrunching paper to represent our sins, pass a cuddly toy around to identify whose turn it is.
- Taste – offer food (be aware of allergies) or sweets to 'taste and see that the Lord is good.'
- Smell – have some essential oil in a burner to express how God's presence is everywhere, use frankincense at Christmas.
- Sight – light a candle to help concentration, have pictures of creation, or those that need prayer.
- Sound – play music to help them centre on God.

Try [Chat and Catch](#) as a way to help them listen to God's voice for themselves.

Encourage them to pray for each other as you pray for them.