

# Toddler Groups

The Why and How

Date August 2024



## Introduction

As a CYP Team we are convinced that a well-run toddler group is a real asset to any church. We are passionate about the support they offer to communities and the opportunities they offer to share faith both in both word and action. They are a great way to help families feel comfortable with church, build relationships with you and each other and understand the love of Jesus in a positive way.

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. It may seem daunting to think of starting a group 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?

The Talking Toddlers report released in May 2020, shows that 74% of all parents with children under the age of five have attended a church-run activity in the past year presenting a huge missional opportunity for the church.

[Talking Toddlers](#)

**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.

Research has shown that those who are attending church based groups are largely expecting some faith element to the group. Obviously this should be with an invitational approach but a Bible story, craft and Christian songs will largely be happily accepted by those attending. The Distinctively Christian webinar is very helpful as you decide your approach.

[Distinctively Christian](#)

You should also share your aims with the wider Church, after all this has the potential to be a significant part of your parish 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 (although most meet for 1 1/2hrs) 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 and a screwdriver are 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.

- **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 undertake the Basic and Foundation Safeguarding training and your leaders will need to be DBS'd and do the Leadership training.
8. Playing and chatting with children and their carers
9. Refreshments – consider what will best suit your group. Toast will work for those groups who meet in the morning or where there is food poverty. Families may not be able to afford fresh fruit so being able to offer that will be good for health and to help them try new things. And of course biscuits always go down well. If you can offer a nice piece of n=homemade cake – even better. You may have a baker in church – ask.  
This link is helpful for food preparation. [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.
10. 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.
11. Story - make sure the story is short and has a visual element as the children will engage better.
12. 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.

Here are some very good training/information resources

[Good Practice Guide](#) – from Mothers' Union, Salvation army, Care for the Family.

**Building Blocks** – a training resource from SU, Fegans, Salvation Army, Baptist Union

**Journeying Together** – a 4 session resource from Care For the Family is a flexible, 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.

### **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)

### **Ideas for Faith Element**

Worcester Diocese has a great resource called Little Seeds where they link a popular children's book with a Biblical theme, there are 45 sessions all with craft and free play ideas. [Little Seeds](#)

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

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

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

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

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

[www.flamecreativekids.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.flamecreativekids.blogspot.co.uk) has some excellent playdough mats amongst other ideas.

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

### **Facebook Pages:**

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**

An important part of a toddler group is the support it can offer to families. Some families have specific struggles but others will benefit from more generic support. Please make sure the advice you offer is gentle and current. There are leaflets available you can leave available or pass out where you know there is a need.

You do not need to have all the answers – a sympathetic ear and understanding is the most important element of a group. Being able to signpost or suggest other sources of help will be invaluable.

**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.

**Top Tips** leaflets from Care for the Family offer help to a variety of people and situations. There is a small charge for the pre-printed leaflets but can be downloaded and printed for free.

### **School Readiness**

An important part of the toddler group is preparing children to start school. Whilst many may attend preschools and nursery what we offer those children should also help them get ready for school.

There is a booklet and set of posters that have been put together for groups like ours so please have a read, print some off and see how you can support these children as they prepare for the next big milestone in their lives.

Not Just The Parent and Toddler Group

We have draft application forms, role descriptions, welcome letter we can share and know other groups you would be welcome to visit.