

Discipline is something almost everyone is concerned about—and yet this is the shortest chapter in the book! Why? Because the secret of effective discipline is to build it into every aspect of children's work.

- **Discipline is a planning issue:** It's common for children to become disruptive when bored, or when they are expected to sit quietly with nothing to do while the leaders sort out the next activity. Good planning will minimise these moments, and also mean there is an alternative activity available if something goes wrong.
- **Discipline is a team issue:** It is never just the responsibility of the person who is currently at the front of the group speaking or leading an activity. A team that works together can diffuse potential problems before they erupt, and calm them quickly if they do.
- **Discipline is a gospel issue:** Because children who are able to listen to the Bible story quietly, and engage well with the activities that have been designed to support the teaching, are in the best place to hear and respond to the good news about Jesus Christ.

So, instead of a separate chapter on discipline, throughout this book you will find boxes that look like this:

**Discipline tip**  
The "secret" of effective discipline is found in the other seven chapters of this book...

Each box will help show how some forward planning, and effective teamwork, will minimise discipline problems, and help you to handle them if they do occur.

*From:  
"Starting Out in  
Children's Ministry"  
- Alison Mitchell*

## WHY CHILDREN'S MINISTRY?

### IN THIS CHAPTER...



- Why we do children's ministry
- Why children's ministry is a fertile gospel opportunity
- We are in partnership with parents, but they are the primary partners

### THINK ABOUT IT

When the Kids' Club leaders asked parents what they wanted from the Sunday morning groups, this is what they were told:

"After an exhausting week, John and I need some peace and quiet on a Sunday. As long as the kids have fun, they'll be happy to go to the group, and we can sit quietly at the back of church."

"Kids' Club is where my children learn about God and stuff. They do maths and English at school; then come to Kids' Club to learn about religion."

"I want my son to love Jesus, but I don't know much about the Bible. At Kids' Club he learns things that I don't know yet—and then we both read the Bible story together when he comes home."

"Carl plays cricket in the summer. But there's nothing in winter, so we bring him to Kids' Club instead."

The children's team wanted to give the parents what they asked for if they could. But were these really the best reasons to keep running Kids' Club?

- Do you think these are good reasons for children's ministry?

I heard the gospel for the first time as a child. I will be forever grateful to those leaders who ran the Christian camp I went to, and who faithfully taught me the good news about Jesus. That's one reason I'm so enthusiastic about children's ministry.

But here's what a theology of children's ministry would look like if we just built it on my own personal experience:

- Alison became a Christian at camp—therefore all children must go on a yearly camp or houseparty.
- Alison chose a sailing camp because she wanted to learn to sail—so we must first nurture a child's nautical gifts if we want them to respond to the gospel message.
- Alison became a Christian in the week she first heard the gospel—therefore we can expect all children to do the same.
- Alison used an evangelistic booklet to help her pray a prayer of commitment—therefore we must give all children evangelistic booklets, and tell them that the way to be saved is to pray the prayer in the booklet.
- Alison ended up serving the Lord full time as a children's worker and writer—we can expect that every child who becomes a Christian in our group is destined for full-time Christian work.

Clearly this is nonsense! But it's remarkably easy to base our assumptions about children's ministry on what we ourselves experienced when we were younger, rather than on Scripture. To avoid that trap, we need to look carefully at what the Bible says.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT CHILDREN'S MINISTRY?

Nothing! Or at least it says nothing about children meeting together with others of their same age group and learning about Christianity together. You won't find the typical Sunday School or after-school club anywhere in the Bible. So, if we want to be sure that our children's ministry is Bible-centred and pleasing to God, we need to look at the wider principles and then apply them to our own situation.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT CHILDREN?

A lot! There are clear commands in both the Old and New Testaments about the importance of teaching children the truth about our wonderful God. Here's an example from Psalm 78:

<sup>1</sup>My people, hear my teaching;

*listen to the words of my mouth.*

<sup>2</sup>I will open my mouth with a parable;

*I will utter hidden things, things from of old—*

<sup>3</sup>things we have heard and known,

*things our ancestors have told us.*

<sup>4</sup>We will not hide them from their descendants;

*we will tell the next generation*

*the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,*

*his power, and the wonders he has done.*

<sup>5</sup>He decreed statutes for Jacob

*and established the law in Israel,*

*which he commanded our ancestors*

*to teach their children,*

<sup>6</sup>so that the next generation would know them,

*even the children yet to be born,*

*and they in turn would tell their children.*

<sup>7</sup>Then they would put their trust in God

*and would not forget his deeds*

*but would keep his commands.*

<sup>8</sup>They would not be like their ancestors—

*a stubborn and rebellious generation,*

*whose hearts were not loyal to God,*

*whose spirits were not faithful to him. (Psalm 78 v 1-8)*

- **Circle** any words and phrases that refer to children (e.g. "descendants").
- **Draw a rectangle** around the words that tell us **what we are to do** for the children.
- **Underline** the things we are to **tell** children.

## LEARNING ABOUT GOD IN FAMILIES

In this psalm, we see the wonderful truths about God passed down through the generations. Adult believers are to "tell" and "teach" children; who in turn will tell their own children, and so on.

And this isn't just dry information that's being passed on. We are to tell "*the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done*" (v 4)—with the result that "*they would put their trust in God*" (v 7).

But who are the adults who do this "telling" and "teaching"? The language of Psalm 78 is the language of family—"ancestors", "descendants", "next generation", "their children".

This teaching and telling is happening within **families**—something that is even clearer in another Old Testament passage about children...

## LEARNING ABOUT GOD EVERY DAY

In Deuteronomy, Moses is preaching to the Israelites just before they enter the land God has promised to give them. Moses reminds them of the laws and commands God has given them to show them how to live as his chosen people. Moses then tells them how to pass these commands on to their children.

<sup>6</sup>*These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup>Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup>Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup>Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6 v 6-9)*

It is clear that this teaching and telling is meant to happen during normal, everyday life...

- when you **sit at home**
  - when you **walk along the road**
  - when you **lie down**
  - when you **get up**
- ... and in people's homes...
- on the **door-frames** of your houses
  - on your **gates**

So in the Old Testament we see that adults, especially parents, have the responsibility to teach and tell children "*the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD*". And this teaching and telling is to happen as part of everyday life.

## LEARNING ABOUT GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

This pattern continues in the New Testament—it is still the responsibility of parents to be teaching and telling their children about God. For example:

<sup>1</sup>*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. <sup>2</sup>"Honour your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—<sup>3</sup>so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."*

<sup>4</sup>*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6 v 1-4)*

And we see the huge impact of a godly home in 2 Timothy, where it is actually Timothy's mother and grandmother who have been teaching and telling the young Timothy about God:

<sup>1</sup>*I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. (2 Timothy 1 v 5)*

<sup>14</sup>*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3 v 14-15)*

## BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING CHILDREN

So, what principles can we take from the Bible to help us shape our ministry with children?

- **Adults are to teach and tell children about God.** This teaching is to be continually passed down from one generation to the next.
- Ideally, this is to happen as **part of everyday life.**
- **The primary responsibility for teaching and telling children lies with parents.**

But a typical children's group meets once a week for an hour or so, usually without the parents there, so how does that fit in? Before we answer that, let's have a prayer pause.

## PRAYER PAUSE

Think of three children from your group—I suggest choosing a range of children, e.g. a mix of ages, or of Christian background, or of character. If you're not yet involved in a children's group, just choose three children from church that you know. Write their names here:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Throughout this book we will pause every now and then to pray for these same children. As a starting point:

- Thank God that each child comes to the group/church. Don't take this for granted. Thank God for bringing them somewhere where they will learn "*the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD*".
- Think of one specific thing each child needs to learn or to grow in their understanding of (e.g. how much God loves them, why they can trust God when they are worried or scared, who Jesus is and why he came). Ask God to help each child learn the thing you have thought of this week.

## BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

Having prayed for some of the children in your group, let's think how the biblical principles we have found can be applied to how we teach these children.

- The pattern in the Bible is that **adults are to teach and tell children about God**. The things we teach are to include "*the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done*" (Psalm 78 v 4)—and also his *law* (v 5) and *commands* (v 7). So we will tell children about the exciting, wonderful things that God has done, which show what an amazing, wonderful, glorious Lord he is. And we will also teach them the way God wants us to live as his people.
- This teaching is to be **passed down from one generation to the next**. This implies that the adults who do the teaching are themselves already believers (more about that in the next chapter).

- The children's group you are involved with may only meet once a week, but we will also take what opportunities we can to be involved in the **everyday lives** of the children in that group. At the simplest level this means asking them about their lives, being interested in what they do, and praying for them day to day. It may also involve spending time with them during a camp or weekend away; or simply spotting them when you are out shopping and taking the time to stop for a chat.

- We are in partnership with the parents of the children in our groups. But since the **primary responsibility for teaching and telling children lies with their parents**, we are the *lesser* partner. So we will do whatever we can to support parents and help them in the spiritual upbringing of their children. Which makes this a good moment for another prayer pause...

### Discipline tip

If you have a child who finds it particularly difficult to behave well, ask his or her parents for ideas. They will already know which strategies do or don't help their child to stay focused.

## PRAYER PAUSE

Do you know the parents of the three children you listed opposite? Whether you do or not, pray the following for them. (But if you don't know the parents, have a think about how you can begin to get to know them some time soon.)

**If one or both of a child's parents are Christians**, ask God to help them to be teaching and telling their child about him, and to be finding ways to build that into everyday life.

**If one or both of the child's parents are not Christians**, ask God to use their link with your church to open their eyes to the wonderful truths of the gospel message about Jesus. Ask him to bring these parents to know him for themselves, so they can then be teaching and telling their children about him.

## WHY IS CHILDREN'S MINISTRY A FERTILE GOSPEL MINISTRY?

If you know any under-11s well, you'll know how great they are. This is an age of discovery, when they are learning new things all the time. So here are four reasons why children's ministry is fertile ground for the gospel:

- **The good news is just right for everyone.** Think of the range of children in your group, or the wider church family: they will vary according to age, sex, cultural background, academic achievement, and ability at sport or languages or being able to sing in tune or... But for every single child on that list the gospel is *exactly the perfect message* they need to hear. The good news about Jesus is exactly right for every single one of them.
- **Children soak in new things all the time.** They haven't yet become bored with learning. They don't assume they know everything. They haven't closed their minds or put up barriers in the way older teens and adults can do. They are open to new things, ready to listen, and often have a streak of enthusiasm running through them that is eager to find something to be excited about.
- **Children already know that they are sinners** (though this is becoming less true as modern children are increasingly told how wonderful they are!). One huge difference between children and adults is that children have far more experience of being in the wrong! Many of them get told off every day at home or school for doing what they shouldn't or not doing what they should. They're used to making a mess of things. Even the well-behaved ones know how easy it is to mess up, or have the experience of being caught up in a larger group of children who all get punished together. Compare that with what John says in **1 John 1 v 8-9**: *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* I've met many adults who "claim to be without sin" (or, at least, without enough sin to need saving from it!)—but children find it much easier to recognise their own sinfulness, and therefore see what wonderfully good news it is to be offered forgiveness through Christ.
- **In children's ministry we can build the teaching up over time.** This is in contrast to many adult evangelistic events, which tend to be one-off opportunities that we try and encourage our non-Christians friends to come to. But much of children's ministry is regular (often weekly) and so gives us the time to build and develop a child's understanding of the good news about Jesus.

**Discipline tip**

Some of your children will have moved up from a younger group. Ask their previous leaders to let you know about any children who need particular strategies to help them settle, and which children to keep them with (or apart from!).

**Discipline tip**

Children often know they are sinful—and so do we! How does that help us with discipline? It means we won't be surprised when a child behaves badly. Instead, it's a reminder that we all fall short of God's standards—us as well as the children. Why not use **Romans 3 v 23-24** as a basis for praying for the children (and perhaps especially for any who seem to be particularly prone to bad behaviour)?

- *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (v 23)—ask God to help these children recognise that this is true of them.
- *"All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus"* (v 24)—thank God that the grace he shows us in Jesus is enough to "justify freely" anyone—adult or child—who puts their trust in Jesus.

Praying for the children in this way will help change how you feel about them, and strengthen your desire to see them understand and respond to the good news of forgiveness that is offered freely because of Christ.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- *Adults are to "teach and tell children about God". This teaching is to be continually passed down from one generation to the next. Who first taught and told you about God (even if you were an adult yourself by then)?*
- *The primary responsibility for the spiritual education of children lies with parents (not with the children's ministry or wider church). What impact does that have on how you see your own role?*
- *We are in partnership with parents. How can you show interest in parents and their families, and be an encouragement to them?*