



# It's ABOUT Relationships

A guide to effective children's ministry



By Karl Bastian



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## About this Book

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There is no shortage of programs, resources, or ideas in children’s ministry today—but at the end of the day, what is most effective in reaching kids for the Gospel hasn’t changed in a hundred years—it’s building relationships and personally introducing children to the Savior. This ebook is loaded with practical ideas on how to have a more relational ministry. You’ll be surprised by the results!

### **About the Author**

Karl has been championing a relational approach to children’s ministry for over twenty years. And this approach can be ministry-changing: more kids, more volunteers, and greater Kingdom impact. After all, it’s how Jesus did ministry.

### **About Disciplr**

Disciplr is a digital platform created for teachers in the local church. The Disciplr team noticed that while teachers often get into ministry to make disciples, they’re bogged down by the process of finding, managing, assigning, and presenting materials. Disciplr simplifies this process by giving leaders a single, digital place to find their material, manage volunteers, and present to the class.

Want to know more? Check out [Disciplr.com](https://disciplr.com).

## Introduction

### Introduction

*Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever.*

*(Psalm 119:152)*

The most incredible aspect of Creation was that God walked in the garden with the crown of His creation. They had a relationship with God that sin severed, ending a fellowship we can only imagine. For centuries, that relationship became one of distance and of fearful respect until Jesus came to walk, talk and relate with man. He came to live in relationship with mankind.

He didn't just die on the cross to offer salvation. He invites His beloved creation back into an intimate relationship with Himself and to genuine fellowship with each other. That is why the secret to effective ministry that has long term results can be summed up in one word: relationships.

All that has changed in recent years is our means of relating to each other. At one time, we walked to each others' homes, rode horses, drove cars, and used rotary phones. Now, we text and use electronic social networks on devices that can span the globe in seconds. Who knows what might be next! What matters most, though, will never change! It is relationships.

God created us for relationship and it is through relationships that the most genuine and effective ministry is done. Are you ready to increase the relational impact of your children's ministry?

If so, read on!

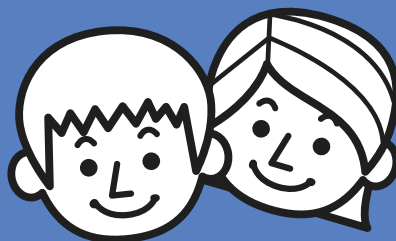
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IT'S  
— ABOUT —  
RELATIONSHIPS



## It's about Relationships

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Most children's ministries give great attention to "quality programming," and they should! Quality programming is important, but it is RELATIONSHIPS that keep people coming. No matter how "quality" a program is, if there is little or no relational outreach, the program will suffer! Therefore, a Kidologist will not only get to know kids and their world, but they will spend time getting to know kids by connecting with them and spending time with them.

While Jesus did spend much time teaching, his ministry was built on a foundation of RELATIONAL OUTREACH. Read the Gospels and note how much time Jesus spends with people, walking with them, going to see them, and ministering to their needs. He did not just stand on the hillside and talk! Neither should we be content just to stand in our classrooms and teach!

There is a story that has survived for over 100 years about a little boy who was walking through the snow on a cold Chicago Sunday morning in the late 1800s. A Sunday school teacher on his way to church saw the boy and invited him to join him and come to his church. The boy replied by explaining that he was already on his way to the Sunday school that D.L. Moody had started. The man was surprised and pointed out that Mr. Moody's Sunday school was across town and that his Sunday school was just a few blocks away. The boy politely thanked the man but said he'd still rather go to Mr. Moody's Sunday school.

The teacher who told the story said the boy's answer made a long time impression on him. He asked him why he would walk so far in the cold to Mr. Moody's Sunday school when there was another one so close by. The boy replied, "Because at Mr. Moody's Sunday school, they really know how to love a kid."

This wonderful story begs the question, would a child walk across town to attend your class? Would kids describe your class as a place where kids are loved?

## It's about Relationships

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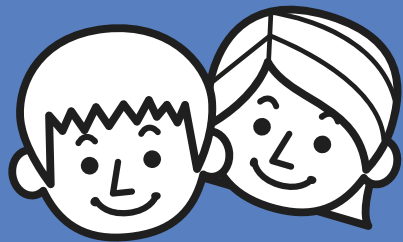
In our times, most kids don't walk across town to church alone, and adults today might hesitate to invite a child on the street to come with them for fear of being arrested! But the principle still applies. I've had kids turn down a championship game or a trip to Disney World to avoid missing a Sunday at church—even when I thought they should go! I've had parents tell me stories of their kids waking them up on Sunday morning at 6am all dressed for church and eager to leave. Do not think for a second it was because of a puppet, a magic trick, video clip, or funny skit. Those are part of creatively reaching kids— but it is loving relationships that make kids beg to come to church.

It's like the little boy who once said to his teacher, "I love you because you are like Jesus with skin on." That's why my signature has been for years, "Because Jesus Loves Children." It is the only answer I need to explain nearly every crazy, zany, nutty, messy, goofy, funny thing I do for kids. It's what Jesus would do.

So go be Jesus with skin on, and you will change the world of a child.



SHEPHERD  
— OR —  
SHEEP  
HERDER?



### **Remember?**

Remember when you first got in to children's ministry? Remember the calling God gave you? The burden you had for children? The awesome responsibility you accepted? The urgency you felt? Back when it was about reaching lost kids and discipling those who had accepted Christ? Remember when the stories were about changed lives and your conversations were mostly about the kids rather than the problems? Remember when you spent a ridiculous amount of time on some minor, but fun aspect of the ministry just so you could see the faces of the kids light up when they arrived? Remember when you didn't even notice how exhausted you were?

### **What changed?**

You went into children's ministry because you wanted to be a shepherd of children—and all too soon you became more sheep herder than shepherd. Just getting the kids where they need to be and hoping to have a reasonable adult-to-child ratio became a weekly battle. Managing volunteers, appeasing parents, buying supplies, keeping the senior pastor as well as the janitor happy, answering voice mail, e-mail and snail mail and countless meetings gradually took over.

Before you knew it, being a minister gave way to being an administrator. And somewhere the kids got lost in the shuffle. Oh, the kids are fine. But you feel your heart for ministry fading and you secretly miss when you were just a volunteer and not in charge of the whole operation.

### **It doesn't have to be that way!**

Children's ministry has gone nuts. Seriously. It's less than a hundred years old and yet we've made it into an empire more daunting and menacing than

## Shepherd or Sheep Herder?

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the Galactic Empire! How did the Church survive for so many generations and produce such godly saints without all the trappings of our modern ministry?

Perhaps all our advances are a part of the problem. Could it be that all we have created to help has in part become a hindrance? An entire industry of resources and programs (and websites!) has exploded and what do we have to show for it? Just statistics that seem to suggest that kids are worse off spiritually than ever before. How can this be?! Where have we gone wrong?

**We forgot our calling to be shepherds.**

*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)*

I have always loved the title, “Children’s Pastor” because it means that you are a shepherd of children. In my first ministry, I was offered the job as “Coordinator of Children’s Ministry.” Fresh out of Bible College, I didn’t want to be too presumptuous, but I gently asked if, since they had a “pastor” for every other people group in the church from youth to singles to adults to seniors to missions and even for the music, they would consider allowing me to be a pastor for the children instead of a “coordinator.” I had no interest in coordinating, but pastoring kids? I was all over that! Granted, there was a lot of coordinating to do, but it’s the difference between the end and the means. If you are coordinating in order to shepherd, that’s fine. But when you find yourself primarily administrating, the joy gradually but steadily evaporates.

### **Choose to be a shepherd first and foremost!**

Whether your official title is children's pastor or not, that is what you are. I know that some churches or denominations do not use that term, or perhaps you are a woman denied that title because while you do the same job as a man in your position, you aren't allowed the title. Theological debate over whether a woman can be a "pastor" is beside the point. (Please, no e-mails picking a fight on either side of that issue.) The point is if you are in a leadership role over children, God has called you to be a shepherd.

*Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be ... eager to serve. I (Peter 5:2)*

But how do you get SHEPHERDING back to front and center in your ministry when you are responsible for so much administratively? As with any key change in life or ministry, it starts by asking the right questions. Let me challenge you with some questions that could change your ministry and your impact in the lives of the children, parents and volunteers with whom you work. I'm not going to give you "answers," as the answers will vary from person to person and church to church. But I will offer some suggestions that are well worth considering and that can help move your ministry back toward being more focused on shepherding and less on administrating.

What do you think it means to be a shepherd? Don't bother trying to come up with a perfect definition, just describe it—use specific examples or ideas of what you think it looks like to be a shepherd or to experience shepherding from the recipients perspective.

## Shepherd or Sheep Herder?

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What aspects of your ministry can be described as shepherding? This is just between you and God, so you can be brutally honest. When do your children, volunteers or families feel shepherded in your ministry? (Or do they?)

What are your programs actually successful at? List all your programs or activities, then state what the purpose of each is, and describe how well each is fulfilling that purpose. What does success look like and do you measure success? How do you measure success?

What consumes your time? How effective is it? What are the tangible results that you can point to that merit the time invested? (Example: if you spend 10 hours a week on a family newsletter, is that more effective than say, spending 10 hours visiting families in their homes to talk and pray with them? Perhaps the newsletter, as great as it is, needs to go!)

What, if you stopped it, would no one notice? What do you do “just because?” If you listed everything you do in order of priority, what would be on the bottom half of the list? What if you discontinued that bottom half?

What, if you started, would surprise and delight people? Pretend you had someone to do ALL the administrative stuff for you, but you still had to work—what would you do to fill your time? Could those things actually be more effective in the long run?

My guess is that when you get to this line, you’ve only read the questions above—not taken the time to answer them. That’s OK, but don’t neglect to take the time to thoughtfully reflect on them, and WRITE your answers. There is power in what you commit to paper rather than just allowing your reactions to be passing thoughts. Lee Iacocca said, “The discipline of writing something down is the first step toward making it happen.”

After you have taken some time to gather your thoughts on the questions above, and whatever other ideas are stimulated, you are ready to start

taking some serious and strategic steps toward becoming more of a shepherd and less of a sheep herder. Let me suggest five steps you need to walk yourself through. (No one else will do this for you!)

### **1. IDENTIFY WHAT YOU'D LIKE TO BE DOING**

You have more control over your life than you'd like to believe. It is time to stop making excuses and start doing what you determine is most important. The most important things in life never happen by chance—they must be scheduled.

### **2. EVALUATE WHAT YOU ARE DOING**

Take a hard honest look at how you spend your time. How do you waste time? What is optional? What pays the least dividends while costing the most time? Be ruthless at eliminating the time-killers in your life.

### **3. MAKE A LIST OF PRIORITIES**

It can be the most powerful thing you do! Make a list of what is most important to you, and then put them in your schedule, and as early in the day as possible. If that day comes and you can't do it, it's OK, but at least you will see what didn't get done and just reschedule it. But good intentions that are not calendared will never happen. You will never get everything done, but you can choose what gets left undone, and make sure it isn't what is at the top of what you claim is most important!

### **4. CHOOSE THE BEST**

There is no end to all the good opportunities that confront you every day. Learn to say "no" to the good for the sake of the great. Look at your priorities every week at the least, but every day is ideal, and determine "TODAY I will get this done at all costs." Discard all your past excuses for

why you don't get to what matters. There is never anyone to blame but yourself. Own it and live it.

### 5. **DELEGATE THE REST**

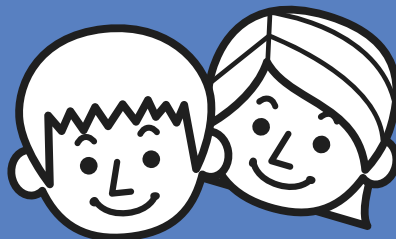
Believe it or not, God has wired other people to love doing what you hate doing. I used to feel bad asking others to do what I didn't enjoy—I thought I was being cruel—until I finally learned there are people who enjoy what I hate, and are better at it! A principle I try to live by in my ministry is “only do what only I can do” and have others do the rest.

*The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. (John 10:12)*

I Peter 5:8 urges us to be “self-controlled and alert” because our enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he can devour. Our children are his primary targets. You are not a “hired hand”; you are a shepherd! Determine to be both alert to what our kids truly need and then self-controlled in order to take back your ministry and make it one that shepherds, not just herds.

With God's help and some hard determined work YOU CAN do it. What are you waiting for?

# FIRST — THINGS — FIRST





## First Things First

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If you have friends (or strangers) who forward you every e-mail they find even remotely interesting, then you've probably heard this story, but I think it's worth repeating. And, if you don't forward to 10 of your friends, don't worry, nothing will happen to you!

But the story is of some college professor somewhere who displayed a large clear container to his class along with a pile of large rocks. He asks a student to fill the container with as many of the large stones as possible. After the last rock is in, the student declares it full, and the class agrees, until the teacher reveals a pile of smaller rocks and has another student fill in the gaps with those until he and the class agree that it is again full. To which the wise teacher responds by displaying a pile of yet smaller rocks. This process is painfully repeated in detail through the small rocks, then gravel, then sand and finally water. Only then does the sage agree that the container is indeed full.

He then asks the class, "If the container represents your life, what is the lesson here?" The story then goes on that some well-meaning schmuck (who, if this story is true, must be grateful his name was dropped!) stands up and declares, "It means that there is always room in your life for more!" The cries of despair and distain echo in front of computers around the world as the teacher kindly corrects the poor sap, saying, "No. The point is that if we hadn't put the big rocks in first, they would never have fit later."

Except to the one over-eager but misguided student in this story, the point is clear: we must make sure the most important things in our life are included first before we allow the rest of life to fill in all the cracks.

How does that apply to your life and ministry? Are the gravel, sand, and water of ministry choking out the big rocks? Or you laughing and saying, "Big rocks? Did you say BIG ROCKS! I can't even get the medium sized ones in!"

If so, I've been there! I share this with you, not as the mountaintop guru who has it all figured out and mastered, but as a fellow struggler in ministry who often wonders if the big rocks haven't been lost in the quicksand of ministry!

Does ministry ever seem like the Fire Swamp as featured in the family movie classic, *The Princess Bride*? I mean, what are the three terrors of the Fire Swamp? One, the Flame Spurt: little ministry fires that pop up unexpectedly and threaten to burn you! No problem. There's a popping sound preceding each, right? Yeah, right! Two, the Lightning Sand: problems that suddenly pull the ground out from under you and suck you in no matter what you had planned to work on that day. And, of course, the R.O.U.S's: problems or people who suddenly attack you when you least expect it!

(Hey! I heard that. No assigning names to the R.O.U.S's in your ministry ... though we know who they are!)

Are you in the Lightning Sand right now? Well, consider this ebook a branch you grab to stop the sinking and climb out! Singed by a flame spurt perhaps? Follow these steps and the sting will cool off.

### **Don't just read this—do it!**

Let me challenge you to take a break this week, even just a lunch date with yourself and God. (He is always available for that, believe it or not, as important and busy as He is!) Take a blank piece of paper with you. No calendar. No contact list. No to-do list. No agendas or minutes or outlines or scope-and-sequences. Consider even leaving the smart phone behind (my own hands are now trembling).

And just like in grade school, number your piece of blank paper from one to ten. When you pray over your food, pray as well that God would show you over your lunch meeting with Him, TEN BIG ROCKS for your life and ministry. Don't worry about that order. Unfortunately, they won't come out in order, but get them on paper. Later you can rearrange the order of importance, but

## First Things First

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get the TEN BIG ROCKS written in ink on paper. There is power in writing something down. It brings it suddenly out of the realm of idea into the real world. When you see in your own handwriting, things you need to be doing, you are more likely to actually do them.

Things like “I need to pray for my students weekly,” “I need to visit the kids in my church in their homes,” “I should send out birthday cards to my students,” “I need to plan a date with my wife,” “I need to give an evening to my kids,” “I should read that book,” “I haven’t written to some of my friends in a while,” etc. God will give you the ideas! Think about the things you WANT to do, SHOULD do, COULD do, WOULD do, if only you had the time. The fact is you have the time! You just have to put the big rocks in first!

After you have your list, the second step is to plan these items into your life. First, schedule them! If you get sick, you suddenly have time in your busy life to sit in a doctor’s waiting room. I have a secret to getting stuff done I call the “Staff Meeting Principle.” My pastoral staff meeting is Tuesdays, 2:00–4:00 p.m. No matter what is going on in my life—no matter how busy I am, no matter how stressed I am, no matter what deadlines I am struggling with, no matter what, unless I am out of town or deathly ill, I will be in Room 200 at 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday for staff meeting.

Believe me, there are days I do not want to be there. (Hope my boss isn’t reading this!) But I’m sure you’ve never had that experience. However, it always turns out to be a good thing I was there and helpful to my ministry. I call it the “Staff Meeting Principle” that no matter what, those two hours are committed to staff meeting, whether I like it or not. Why? Well, because I am required to be there by my boss. Think about this: Why is it we can be there ‘no matter what’ when it’s our boss making us, but we can’t be our own boss and schedule other things that we won’t miss no matter what? You must schedule some of your high priorities and give them the same priority and ‘no matter what’ status as your staff meeting.

## It's about Relationships

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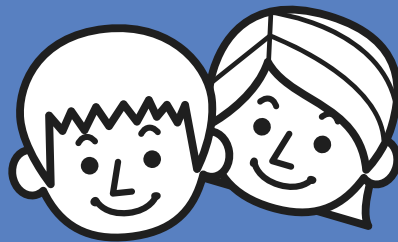
What are your big rocks? Lesson prep? Discipleship? Prayer? Visitation? Note writing? Phone calling? Whatever it is, schedule it! And treat it like staff meeting, even running if you are late! Why? Because if you don't get the big rocks in first, they won't fit later. Block off time slots for your most important ministry duties. Here is a fact of ministry that if you haven't figured this out yet, it may be a relief to learn now: Every week in ministry, things will be left undone. Things WILL get left undone—but guess what? **You can determine which.**

If you honestly CAN'T get the big rocks first, then you simply are doing more than God is asking you to, and you need to take a hard look at your life and ministry and do some heart-searching prayer about what God is asking you to do. And let some things go. “No” may be a word you need to practice, translated often as, “Wow, that's a great idea, but I'm sorry, I just can't do that right now, I've got some big rocks I need to deal with first.”

I think a lot of ministries are covered in some very nice looking gravel, but it's still gravel, and some big rocks are missing. Determine your big rocks, and get those planned and scheduled first. The gravel can wait. There may, no, there will be a lot of “nice” things you won't get to, but in the end, few will notice or miss those little things, and you will feel so much better about what you are accomplishing overall. You'll feel better and you will be more satisfied with your life and ministry.

So grab your pen and a piece of paper, and take God to lunch. You'll both be glad you did.

YOU DON'T  
— HAVE A —  
RECRUITING  
PROBLEM,  
— YOU HAVE A —  
RELATIONSHIP  
PROBLEM



You don't have a recruiting problem.

You have a relationship problem.

So you would like more volunteers?

I have some hard news for leaders. This may come as a shock to some. You may need to sit down. Get a coffee or tea or soda ... whatever you enjoy. But you need to hear me on this. There is a Grand Canyon of perception between why you serve in children's ministry and why most volunteers volunteer.

You? You love kids! You knew long before Barna that there is a 32% greater chance of kids coming to Christ if they are reached before the age of 12. You know Jesus said we ought to come as a child, we are not to hinder the children, and that he blessed the children. You feel called to children's ministry. You read Roger Fields *The Calling*, and it gives you goose bumps and you nearly cry because THAT'S YOU. You would serve if no one asked, no one noticed, and no one said thank you. Sure, you'd have your little pity party when no one was looking, and you'd whine to your spouse a little ... but you'd never quit. Because, like Roger Fields also said so well, you are a Special Ops KidMin. The Few. The Proud. The kids need you. And lets be honest, you need them too.

But this creates a little problem for you.

You see, you assume others are this way. In fact, you are looking for and hoping to find others like this. I've got news for you. You may be the only one in your church. Actually, you may be the only one for a hundred miles!

Now, before you despair and cry "Woe is me!"—or get prideful—it's OK. I'm not so sure your church could handle two of you anyway—or even the hundred mile radius around your church. God spaced us out for a reason.

What does this have to do with recruiting?

EVERYTHING.

It has so much to do with it—you've GOT to get this! So many children's pastors/directors/leaders don't get it, and it is precisely why they have recruiting problems.

Their problem isn't recruiting—they recruit just fine. But they don't keep volunteers, so they have to constantly be recruiting, and that gets harder and harder as the pool of potential recruits runs dry. Their problem is misunderstanding what their real job is and why those volunteers volunteered in the first place.

There is a huge, and I mean MASSIVE, disconnect between why you think you recruited them and why they actually volunteered.

I know this, because I was a full time professional pastor for 15 years, and now I've been a full time unprofessional volunteer for five years. So I've now lived on the "other side" and discovered the disconnect. And it's startling.

People (let's call volunteers what they really are) come to church longing for two things that are really the same thing: a connection with God and friendships. They are both relationships.

They complain that the church "isn't friendly." Right? So what do the pastors tell them? VOLUNTEER! "If you want friendships, don't just sit in the worship service," they tell these folks, "you must get involved."

So they do!

Why do they volunteer? Because like you, they want to fulfill the Great Commission and bring little children to Jesus?

Nope. Sorry. 'Fraid not.

They want friends.

Period.

And they will give you three months, max.

If they haven't made friendships, they are done. They will volunteer somewhere else, and somewhere else, and then somewhere else, or visit another church, until they make friends.

People are starving for friendship. You are looking for volunteers.

See the disconnect yet?

The secret? Stop looking for volunteers. Start making friends, and you'll have all the volunteers you need. I look back over my ministry and now realize why I never lacked for volunteers. I had friends. Tons of them! I took 'em out to lunch. I used to fill Culvers almost every Sunday. The owner finally printed a box of 20%-off-on-Sunday coupon business cards just to make sure I kept coming there. I partied with them. I visited them. I went camping. I played mini-golf. I had movie nights at my house. I forgot they were volunteers. They were my friends.

I hardly recruited. Of course, I had to at times, but I just made friends at every turn, and had all the volunteers I needed.

Now, I go to church looking for friends. I volunteer to find friends. If I serve and no one talks to me, no one greets me, no one asks me my name, or shakes my hand, or treats me like a person—if I'm just a volunteer, I lose interest. Even though I'm one of those Special Ops with all this passion and the biggest KidMin website on the Internet. Without a friend, I'm outta there. Sorry, but that's just reality. People need friends like a plant needs water.

If a lack of friendship can make ME lose interest—imagine someone who doesn't have any passion for kids ministry? Someone who is just a normal everyday non-KidMin wacko like me?



## You Don't Have a Recruiting Problem . . .

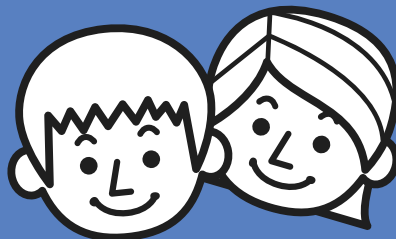
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What's to keep them around? They'd rather be an usher or fold up chairs after service if it means laughter and friendship and an invitation out to lunch after church.

Don't miss this: The ministry with the most volunteers will be the ministry where people connect and make friendships. If you don't connect volunteers to yourself and each other, you will always be recruiting, over and over and over, because you won't be meeting the real need.

The need isn't to staff your rooms. It is to help the people who come to your church to connect with God and each other. Do that, and your classrooms will all be staffed by friends. I dare you to try it.

FOUR TIPS  
— FOR —  
CONNECTION  
WITH KIDS



## Four Tips for Connection with Kids

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No child has ever thanked me for that great vacation Bible school we did three years ago or for the awesome Water War event. Instead, children remember our trips to restaurants, the times I came to watch them play soccer in the rain, the birthday parties I attended, or the miniature golf outings we had.

It's the little things that matter to kids. And if we're really going to make a lasting impact on children, we need to do more than just teach them or program for them. There are too many young people with heads full of Bible facts who aren't living for the Lord. Somehow, we need to make a connection with them that transcends, is deeper than, and makes relevant the things that we teach them.

What does it mean to connect with kids? What does that connection look like? What must you do to become a genuine kid connector? Follow these four steps.

### **1. DEVELOP A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE**

The first step toward a highly relational ministry style that'll make real connections with kids takes place without any children. It starts in your head and heart. If you're to make connections with kids, you must learn to see and understand the world as they do. You must carry with you an invisible pair of "kid glasses" that you can put on at any time to help you see the world as kids see it. You may even find you like the view and decide to keep it permanently! No one will notice except the children around you.

Rediscover the wonder of everything around you. Unleash your imagination. Play. Be curious. Reach out and touch stuff. Be silly sometimes. Kids will recognize that you're one of them and fail to notice that you're three feet taller. My favorite compliment from kids is that I'm a kid in a grown-up's body. I know, and they know, that we understand a world that most adults have forgotten.

### **2. FIND THINGS IN COMMON**

Think about who your friends are. Why are they your friends? What is it that connects you? Most likely you have something in common such as work, hobbies, sports, or your family situations. If having things in common is how and why you connect with adults, why wouldn't the same be true for connecting with children? It's not enough to use kid stuff as props in your teaching; you must own things that you enjoy and kids can relate to. Show kids your Happy Meal toy collection. Or play soccer with kids before church. Find ways to get on their level by being part of their world.

### **3. ENGAGE KIDS IN THEIR WORLD**

Listen to what children talk about. Notice the subject matter and type of conversation. They'll usually discuss things from their world, engage in imaginative storytelling, or create wild "what if" scenarios. To enter into the conversation and connect, you need a key—something that proves you belong there. It may simply be your attitude. It may be a toy. Or it may be a demonstrated knowledge of the world of kids—things you can respond to when most adults wouldn't have a clue.

People often ask what to do or say to connect with kids. It's more about what you need to be. We're each different, and therefore our connections look different. Some of my portals to the world of kids, and indirectly to their hearts, are yo-yos, LEGO blocks, paper airplanes, and magic tricks. What will yours be? What'll you have in common with children? Perhaps you need to visit a toy store to buy yourself something or devote a Saturday morning to watching kids TV shows.

### **4. TOUCH THEIR LIVES OUTSIDE OF CLASS**

No matter how good a teacher you are, your mere presence in a room has limited connecting power. Children live in a world where there's always an adult in front guiding their activities. To make real connections with kids, you must impact them outside the classroom.

Even as you connect, though, never forget that it's unwise and unsafe to spend one-on-one time with children outside of church. Remember that your two-adult rule for classrooms need to apply to outreach settings as well. Children's ministry consultant for New Re-sors-es Sharyn Spradlin agrees. She says, "I will forever be an advocate of connecting with our kids, for it's through relationship that the message will be made authentic. Our efforts, however, must be filled with wisdom beyond reproach." If you don't have two adults, then spend time with a group of children who have their parents' permission.

Do things that are unexpected. Break out of your grown-up mold. Drop by for a visit. Attend school and sporting events as an all-out fan. Take children to a McDonald's restaurant and order a Happy Meal dinner for yourself too—and play with the toy! Visit schools, eat the cafeteria food with kids, and climb the playground equipment with them. Drop them birthday cards and notes in the mail.

Be in touch with families so you know when kids are going through tough times. These are the best times to be there for them. When kids are sick, visit them with a lab coat with your name on it and a doctor bag filled with toy doctor equipment and candy. Leave a balloon animal or small toy. Prescribe for children to pray twice before bed and call you in the morning.

Be creative! Find out that you can do to surprise and delight your kids with the ways you reach out to them. You'll make connections that'll make your teaching take on new relevance and effectiveness. You'll not only be their

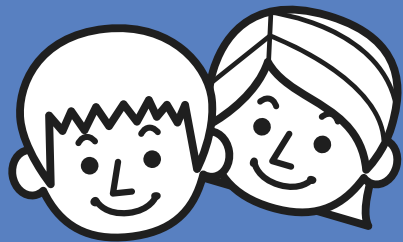
## It's about Relationships

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teacher, you'll also be their friend.

If you do these things, you'll cease to be just another adult figure; you'll connect with kids. And aside from the results and the benefits to your ministry, it's simply a fun way to live. After all, who ever said you had to grow up?

HOW  
— TO MAKE —  
KIDS FEEL  
SPECIAL AND  
LOVED



### **1. LEARN THEIR NAMES**

The best way to make someone feel unimportant is to be continually asking them their name. Your name was easy to them: there is only one of you. But kids don't always realize that there are many kids for you to learn. And if they DO realize, then your remembering only means that much more. If you have a lot of kids in your ministry, use name tags! I use a separate color for visitors so that I can call them by name during our program. You can even make flash cards to work on learning names either by having kids fill out a prayer card on themselves (complete with picture!) or take pictures and make yourself flash cards to work on learning kids name while in your car or when you pray for them!

### **2. DROP THEM FUN STUFF IN THE MAIL**

We adults are inundated with mail ... bills, flyers, coupon packets, pre-approved credit card applications, form letters, notices that we have won millions and an occasional personal note from a friend. Mail is an everyday event for us, in fact, we are shocked if don't we get any mail! Which is why many can overlook the impact of mail to kids.

Children almost NEVER get mail, so when they do get something, especially with their name on it, it is exciting! Learn to use mail to touch the kids in your ministry ... and I don't mean just sending out those boring post cards that were printed in the 70's and are still sold at Christian bookstores!

Here are some tips that will help 'deliver' a personal touch to your ministry to kids!

- Have your own stationary made—by hand. Mine says “Hello” really big and has cool stick figure dudes all over it doing different things, with humorous bubble captions. Then there is a box for a personal hand written message. You can photo-copy the stationary on bright colored



## How to Make Kids Feel Special and Loved

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paper and then add a personal note. If you write with Crayola markers or colored pens, you need not write an epistle, but just a short note. It is not the length of the note that counts so much as the fact that you took the time to write a personal note!

- Collect stickers and put some on the envelope. Cute ones for girls, cool ones for boys!
- Get into rubber stamping and decorate your paper and envelopes with those. Add your own colors and bubble captions for an added personal touch.
- Enclose a small prize! A sticker, novelty prize, baseball card, etc. Perhaps even a coupon for a prize the next time they come to church!
- Enclose an activity page for them to do. I have a “Draw Pastor Karl” page I send little kids that has everything drawn already but the face. They add my face and then add details to the page. Some even return it to me to show me! (I never looked so good!)
- Enclose a child’s Gospel tract if you are not sure they are saved yet!
- Send a letter to visitors, absent kids, birthday kids—and remember other special occasions.

You can write to several kids every week! It only takes a little time on Monday morning to look over Sunday and see who was a visitor, who was “missing,” who was out sick, etc. You can even enclose a copy of your Sunday kid’s bulletin for the kids who were absent. No, you do not have to write to every kid who is gone every week; be selective. I have a system where I monitor my contact with every kid in my ministry: phone calls, mail contacts, personal visits, etc. I target the kids that have not been ‘hit’ in a few weeks. And keep an eye out for those kids who are always there—they can be so good they get overlooked! So I send out a note once in awhile

to the kids who have perfect attendance. I even have a 'cool kid' letter that goes out to a few kids every now and then just to let them know I think they are a cool kid! So, get organized! Get your big envelopes, your colored paper, your stickers, your rubber stamps, stamp pads, markers, prizes and get writing! You will hear the good reports not only from kids, but parents too!

### **3. CALL THEM ON THE PHONE**

As much as kids like mail, they like phone calls too. Why do you think kids are the ones who usually answer the phone when you call families? They LOVE the phone! But usually the call is for someone else and they have to pass the call along to Mom or Dad or an older sibling. What delight when they hear you say, "I called for you."

A few tips to make your phone calls successful:

- Be sure the parents know you before you just talk to kids, for the parents' comfort.
- Ask open-ended questions, otherwise you'll just get "yes" and "no" answers or the dreaded, "uh huh." It sometimes helps to have an excuse to call, such as: "Missed you Sunday..." or "Just wanted to remind you of an up-coming event..." or "I'm conducting a kid survey... what did you like the best about kid's church Sunday?"
- Then ask questions about what they were doing when you called. What do they like to do after school? Do they have a video game system? What is their favorite game?
- Ask for some prayer requests. TAKE NOTES, and on future calls be sure to ask about those prayer requests. That demonstrates that you really prayed!

### **4. REMEMBER THEIR BIRTHDAYS**

Birthdays are very important to kids! (They seem to be important to most grown ups I know too!) When you remember a kid's birthday, they know they are special to you! Here are two great ways to remember kids' birthdays:

#### **BIRTHDAY PHONE CALL!**

Keep track of your kids' birthdays!

*Here are some ideas:*

- If you get an answering machine, have a puppet sing Happy Birthday, and then do your voice at distance coming into the room and “catching” the puppet on your phone, talk back and forth a little, with your puppet explaining whose birthday it is, and then you get on the phone and say happy birthday, too.
- If you get the child on the phone, say that you called to wish them a happy birthday!
- Ask if they are having a party, if so, when or where.
- Ask what they hope to get (or got) for their birthday.
- Ask how old they are, share a memory from when you were that age.

#### **BIRTHDAY PACKET IN THE MAIL!**

Send your kids a birthday packet that they will remember! Postcards or boring cards sometimes communicate ‘you had to send something.’ Send something that shows time and effort. Use some of the ideas from the “Drop Them Fun Stuff in the Mail” section above.

*Here's what I enclose in my birthday packets:*

- A birthday card I designed myself. I design one boy and one girl card each year. Next year they will get a new one.
- A Birthday Prize Coupon for them to bring to Kid's Church for a prize!
- A small toy or prize!
- A Gospel tract I wrote based on how they can have a second birthday.
- The USS Pastor Karl paper airplane I designed.
- SEAL THE ENVELOPE with a "Don't Open 'til Your Birthday" Sticker.

### **ANOTHER OPTION FOR SOME**

I do birthday parties for the kids as much as possible. I only actually do about 2–3 a month, so I don't hit every kid. Since I can't do them all, I don't advertise that I'll do this, but whenever a kid invites me to his/her party I let the parent know that I would be happy to do a little magic show, bring some puppets, and do balloon animals for the kids. I used to do this professionally, but now it is a treat reserved only for the kids of my church. It has a great evangelistic benefit. While I rarely actually share the Gospel at a party (though occasionally a parent asks me to) the kids who come get to know me and my puppets, and that makes it that much easier for the church kid to invite them to future church events! The friends' parents also meet me when they drop off and pick up their kids and the host parents introduce me as the kid's pastor at their church. Everybody wins—especially the kid whose birthday it is!

### **5. GIVE THEM LITTLE GIFTS**

You don't want to "buy" a kid's love, but little gifts are a way to the heart. I emphasize little gifts. Big gifts can create a feeling of obligation, but little

gifts say, “I care.”

Here are a few ideas of little gifts that have a BIG impact.

- Save those Happy Meal prizes and keep them handy to give away when you see a kid!
- Stickers bring smiles to all young kids, and girls of all ages.
- Candy is OK if you know the parents. You should be reinforcing the teaching of not taking candy from strangers by not giving candy to strangers! (And only give away wrapped candy.)
- Little kids like pennies. Say, “A penny for your thoughts, what are you thinking about right now?” And after chatting awhile, give them the penny for their thoughts!
- As you get to know kids’ hobbies, collections, etc. keep them in mind. I recently gave a mini Coca-Cola can from overseas to a boy who likes Coke stuff.

### **6. KNOW THEIR WORLD**

One of the most effective, but most subtle, ways to make a kid feel special is to show them that you know and understand their world. This means you know what cereal they eat, what television shows they watch, what toys they play with, what popular actors/athletes they admire or whatever else is important to children. I can tell story after story of times when children were amazed at what I knew about their world—and as a result my relationship with them deepened.

*Here are some ideas that can help you learn more about the world of kids:*

- Never pass a toy store without going in!

- BUY SOMETHING in that toy store.
- Carry small toys/gadgets in your pockets.
- Display toys in your office, car, home, or anywhere else!
- Order a kid's meal and keep the prize for yourself.
- Go to kids' movies and read kids' books/comics.
- Men: wear some goofy ties kids will like!
- Women: wear some kid-friendly jewelry or scarves.
- Read kids' joke books and memorize a few.
- Play with the kids on your block, not just your own kids.
- Watch some Saturday morning cartoons
- Go down the cereal aisle and pick one that looks yummy.
- Check out the latest candy and buy some to give away.
- Check out the kid's section at your Christian book store.

### **7. SPEND TIME WITH THEM**

OK. You are determined to get to know kids, to get involved in their world, and are even considering buying yourself a toy. But how does an adult relate to a child? No amount of "stuff" or understanding changes the fact that a kid is a kid and a "grown up" is not.

How do you bridge that gap? How does an adult cross the chasm of differences so that children will see them not as just another "grown up" authority figure, but as a friend? Turning into a clown is not the answer, for you must still maintain your authority and respect, or you simply cannot

## How to Make Kids Feel Special and Loved

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lead. How do you learn to minister across the gap? You do this primarily by spending time with kids!

And I do not mean in front of them teaching! You must spend time with them being RELATIONAL, not merely INFORMATIONAL! Relationship must come first. If you like someone you will learn from them. Whether you realize it or not! That is why “bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor. 15:33). Strive to be a kid’s friend before you are his teacher! This will transform your relationships with children, your classroom, your approach to discipline, and your overall ministry effectiveness with kids! As you learn to understand children and their world, and become a genuine friend of the kids you minister to, you will influence more children than you can even imagine!

Look at the ministry of Jesus! While He did spend much time teaching, his ministry was built on a foundation of relational outreach. Read the Gospels and note how much time Jesus spends with people, walking with them, going to see them, and ministering to their needs. He did not just stand on the hillside and talk! Neither should we be content just to stand in our classrooms and teach! Here are just a few of the many ways you can spend time with kids outside of the “program”:

- **IN-HOME VISITS.** Check out kids’ bedrooms and toys to see what interests them! Especially visit when they are home sick.
- **OUT-OF-HOME VISITS.** Take them out for lunch or dinner. An after-school snack is a hit with kids and moms. Plan special outings to places popular with kids. (Always have the parents’ knowledge and permission, of course!)
- **CHURCH CONTACTS!** (Besides your class!) Sit with them in “big church” or evening service. Talk with them in the hallways, never just walk past a kid!

### **8. PRAY FOR THEM**

As mentioned under phone calls, ask kids for things you can pray for them about. And then (besides actually praying for them), be sure to follow up on the prayer request to see how things are going. You may be able to rejoice with them over answered prayer, continue to pray with them, or work together through the disappointment of no answer from God. As the saying goes, the family that prays together stays together. There is a principle there: Praying together and for each other creates a powerful bond of unity. A child who knows you pray for them will feel special!

*A few ideas for ways you can pray for the children in your ministry...*

- Ask for prayer requests when you talk on the phone.
- Keep a prayer journal of kids' prayer requests and answers.
- Have a prayer wall where kids can write out prayer requests and post them. One church told me that they had a "Request Wall" and an "Answer Wall" where the answered prayers were moved to after they had been answered!
- Have kids make prayer cards for themselves, much like missionaries have.
- Have an e-mail address where kids can send their prayer requests.
- During the week, when the church is empty, go through your children's ministry rooms and pray for the staff that work in them and the children who study in them. Pictures on the wall will help. Set a time when others can come pray with you for the children of your church.

### **9. REMEMBER THEM**

When kids move away, don't forget them! Be sure to still write to them or



call them and see how they are going. Arrange for classes they left to make “We miss you” cards. After a year, they should be re-adjusted to their new home, but in the transition time you remembering them can be a real boost! Contacting them after it is no longer “your job” proves they are special to you.

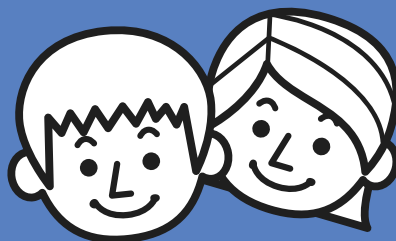
### **10. CREATE GREAT MEMORIES FOR THEM**

Don't underestimate the impact of that extra effort you put into your ministry every week. Children know the difference between child care and when you pull out the stops because they are important to you! Those great events that aren't on Sunday let them know they are special. This winter I am having a Saturday Morning with Pastor Karl once a month that is basically just a fun relational time with the kids that has a little spiritual emphasis, but a lot of I-love-kids-because-Jesus-loves-kids emphasis! (YO-YO Mania, The Paper Airplane Fair, Leggo-My-Lego, etc.)

When you go on those retreats, when you stay all night at the lock-in, when you sit around eating pretzels and drinking pop at 2 in the morning, those kids know they are special.

Why? Because YOU are special and you love kids! Keep up the great work!

— MY —  
RELATIONAL  
HEROES!



## My Relational Heroes

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Relational ministry has been my passion since kids were my peers and God called me to children's ministry. I know that I personally have been most impacted by those who took the time to get to know me, spend time with me, and do ministry with me. I think it is insightful that Jesus didn't found any ministries or launch any programs when He was here on earth. All He did was invest in people. People, who in turn, would change the world. I am so thankful for those who invested in me, many early on, and hope that I will continue to produce fruit as a result of their relationships with me!

In 2010 I was honored to be selected by *Children's Ministry Magazine* as one of the [Top 20 Influencers](#) in Children's Ministry in the past twenty years. I was humbled to be featured in their magazine and I was sent a beautiful award and letter by that will be treasured by his family for years to come. It was truly an honor and tribute to the hard work of the entire Kidology Team to have their leader recognized in this way.

As a result, I am often asked, **“Who have been *your* top influencers in *your* children's ministry thinking?”**

So in answer to that question, here are my top influencers, and there is much to learn from each of them. While I certainly can't list everyone who impacted me, and I am thankful for each and every one of them, these are who I prayerfully determined were my “top influencers.”

1. He's been dead a long time, but he's my #1 influencer in children's ministry because he lead both of my parents to Christ one hundred years before they were born. His name is **Dwight Lymon Moody**. He also founded the Bible College where I got my Bible education and where I first served as a children's pastor. They are [Moody Church](#) and [Moody Bible Institute](#). It was also in reading



about his passion for children that inspired me as a young man. When the church would not allow “street urchins” into the church, he left the church and went to where the children were and started his own program, a program that became known as “Mr. Moody’s Sunday School.” It grew so big President Lincoln visited it, and it is now the Moody Church where I got my first job as a children’s pastor. Asked to be the “Coordinator of Children’s Ministry” I thought I invented the term “children’s pastor” so new was the term back then! I decided early on I wanted to have that same passion and zeal as Mr. Moody did and do whatever it took to reach kids. I hoped to create something that would out last me one hundred years after I was gone.

2. My mother, **Patti Bastian**. While she was never famous, anyone who has heard of me has been influenced and impacted by her. When I told her at age 10 I wanted to be a children’s evangelist when I grew up, her answer was, “What’s growing up got to do with anything? You start next Wednesday night!” She coached me through my first Gospel illusion and the next week I taught the Awana Counsel Time in front of all my peers. Within two years I was traveling to neighboring churches as a traveling evangelist with my Gospel show on the road! She taught me how to teach and perform while encouraging my creativity. She helped channel my boyish energy toward the Kingdom of God instead of the mischievous endeavors I naturally was drawn to. When others were frustrated with my endless energy, she saw only creativity and potential. When others gave me a “time out” to get me out of the way, she sat with me and talked to me about how I was going to make a huge difference in the world and how God had wired me to impact others. She laughed with me over and



## My Relational Heroes

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over again, even through hard times and said, “Watch out world.” If only she could have seen what God was going to do. She went to be with the Lord in the early years of Kidology.

3. **Roger Fields** of [Kidz Blitz](#) was the first workshop speaker I heard at my first [Children’s Pastors Conference](#) and he said the opposite of what so many others were saying, and I loved it. He swam upstream and against the tide. When he said, “No volunteers are accepted in our children’s ministry, it’s by invitation only,” I knew someone finally saw kids’ ministry the way I did: not with the desperation and hopelessness, but with value and honor and esteem. I sat and took notes furiously and decided I might be younger than everyone who worked under me at my church, but I was going to inspire them all and call them to a new level of excellence in ministry. I was going to go home and talk about kids’ ministry in a brand new way. I still hang on every word he writes and I am still tempted to shave my head in an act of devotion.



4. **Larry Fowler**, from [Awana](#), the author of [Rock Solid Kids](#), came along later in my life, but his gentle heart and understanding of what it means to reach kids and partner with families was a fresh voice I was looking for and I have deeply appreciated his approach. I believe more people need to listen to what he is saying. He has also been an accessible friend on a personal level on my own pilgrimage with Christ and that has meant the world to me. Larry’s a guy “awana” get to know better.



5. Finally, but not least of all, **Mark Steiner** is a man who is not often known by name, but is known more by the product he has created: [DiscipleLand Bible Curriculum](#). What is less grasped by many, even those who use it, is the comprehensive children's discipleship system that lies underneath it, that when studied and fully understood, is incredibly fascinating.



Mark knows Scripture and its application to children's ministry unlike anyone I have ever met. Its impact on me and how I approach every aspect of ministry has been profound and caused me to be deeply biblical and thoughtful in how I strategize the overall goals and desired outcomes of ministry. A truly biblical scholar of children's ministry, he showed me that children's ministry is a pursuit worthy of the most intentional strategy.

As you can see, none of my influencers are those who seek to be known—in fact, I am drawn to those who don't seek the spotlight. I don't know most of my other big influencers' names. They don't have ministries that bear their names, or websites or blogs, because they are regular folks who are just busy serving Jesus and reaching kids.

They are members of [Kidology.org](#) and they are attendees of children's ministry conferences. They are the folks I sit with at conferences and chat with in the hallways and sit with after workshops. They are the ones I love to ask questions of and learn more about what God is doing in their ministry. Often folks are usually surprised when I have a list of questions for them, because, you see, I'm still learning. I don't consider myself an expert yet.

Being considered a "Top Influencer" is kinda crazy to me, because I consider myself a "Top Learner" still. I'm just sharing what I'm learning along the way from those I am constantly talking to—and most of them are just unknown folks in the trenches. *They are my biggest influencers*, because they are

## My Relational Heroes

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the most real. Of course, there are great folks with ministries and blogs, and such, but my favorites are those with no time for that, because they are too busy just ministering to kids. They are the ones living out that “it’s all about relationships.”

Karl Bastian, the Kidologist

*aka a never-ending student of kids’ ministry*

# THANKS — FOR — READING

You can read more of Karl's ministry advice at [Kidology.org](https://www.kidology.org).

You can also get discipleship tips from the [Disciplr](#) blog.

*If you enjoyed this guide, we suggest you share it with your friends. Everyone loves to hear about free resources!*

