

Building Community in Children's Ministry

Small groups are an essential part of children's ministry. During a recent toy repair project at home, I shared the recipe of two-part epoxy glue with my eight-year-old son. "When both clear gels are mixed together, they become super strong." At the time, though, I didn't realize that I had accidentally glued a screwdriver to the table.

Children's ministry also has two key ingredients that, when mixed together, make it "super strong": 1) creative, relevant Bible teaching and 2) community. Teaching tools, techniques, and creative curriculum seem to receive more than their measure of attention. So for now, let's stick with the other key ingredient—community.

Community for Kids

"Miss Jamie lets me say stuff without interrupting me. I wish my brother was like that," is why 4-year-old Erin loves the Yellow Team, her Sunday morning small group.

What is community for kids? The simplest formula is to divide your children by age into groups of six or eight, assign a leader, and call it a small group. That's a starting point. But the recipe for real community involves much more.

The world today is a tough place to grow up. The obvious emotional pain of divorce or parental absence, the quiet dilemma of watching hurricanes destroy lives and livelihoods, and persistent peer pressures all mix and stick to kids more than ever. For many kids, safety in life seems non-existent. That is our opportunity.

On Sunday morning, it is possible to offer a place to know and be known, love and be loved, serve and be served. It is possible to be a place where every child is individually treasured and valued—an emotionally safe place. A place where, every week, kids can build healthy bonds and trust with the same kids and same leader. This place is rarely found in other parts of a kid's life.

"I know we have real community when no one is seen as fat or thin, rich or poor, cool or outcast; everyone is accepted the way they are," describes Joy, a fifth-grade small-group leader. "They don't get that level of full acceptance in school or their neighbourhood."

Girls in Joy's group enjoy relationships with each other, as well as the benefit of seeing an adult Christ-follower up close. To that end, kids in small slices of community can see that Christianity does work in real people. And in this safe setting, they have the freedom to figure out how to really apply Bible truth to their lives, ask questions, and process life's ragged edges. Without being interrupted.

Building Community for Kids

Regardless of size, any children's ministry that strives to build thriving community should begin with four essentials. First, your ministry must be completely clear on the importance of kids to God. That must serve as the primary motivation to building community. The disciples received extreme clarity on this in Matthew 19. God loves people and knows they should not face life alone. This includes little people.

Next, elevate community as a high value in your ministry and state it boldly. Adopt a strong statement such as, "We value intentional shepherding of children through small groups."

The level of commitment your ministry has to building community will be proportional to the clarity and conviction of the vision you cast.

Third, make it a mission to find small-group leaders who love kids and want to be used by God to change lives. Gifted shepherds will not only implement a vision for community in your ministry, they will make it spring to life. Bob, a second-grade small-group leader, illustrates the healthy heart needed when he says, "I want each of the guys in my group to know I care about them. If a boy has a dad doing that already, then he'll like it. If a boy doesn't have a father doing this in his life, he'll crave it. Either way, it's great to give them something I know they need."

Fourth, make sure your ministry delivers community consistently; it must be a nonnegotiable every week. Kids must be able to rely on the "safe place" of community to be there for them because no one knows when their life is going to go out of control, making the need for "someone" critical. The Bible repeatedly tells us to expect troubles in life, but nowhere does it say to deal with them alone.

Reliability leads to trust, and life's troubles tend to break the trust of kids a lot. Remember, reliability and trust can only be built over time, so be patient. And never forget that reliability and trust will be re-earned every week, so be consistent.

Advice from the Pros

"My small group rocks because of my leader, Mr. Phil!" says Jake, a fifth-grader.

If an environment has been set for community to thrive, the adhesive that holds community together is the small-group leader. Given clear vision and room for creativity, leaders act as the catalyst for life-change in kids. If your leaders see the value they bring, the inventory of great ideas will swell. Here are a few to share with your ministry:

- Joy maintains connection with the girls from her group by calling or sending a postcard once a month. This extra contact lets each girl on her team know that Joy cares for her, which flows from Joy's commitment to prayer. "I am constantly praying for each of them, for specific issues in their lives, and for them to put into practice what we talk about each Sunday morning," Joy says.
- Bob makes it a practice to call each boy on his team by name as often as he can during small-group time. "It's a little thing to do, but sure makes them feel affirmed when they hear their name; kind of a man-to-man thing," Bob says. "An adult who is willing to look them in the eye while they talk also helps them feel that what they are saying is important."
- Roxanne, a fourth-grade leader, describes two ideas that help form strong community. First, she learned that pictures are great tools to help everyone in the small group relate. So, she asks her girls to bring in pictures from all corners of their lives, and then puts them on the walls in the area where they meet. She explains that photographs help the girls say to each other, "I know more about who you are now!" Her second idea is to use activities outside of church to make small-group memories. On a recent small-group afternoon trip, a new girl named Sandy showed up in Roxanne's group for the first time. "It was a fun afternoon, and the girls just accepted Sandy immediately. I'm thankful our community is so strong that we can share it freely with anyone," Roxanne says. "Because of that experience, Sandy and her family decided to begin attending church more regularly."

This taste of community was likely not the sole reason Sandy and her family are now in church each week, but it may have provided a very strong reason—especially as an

ingredient of a thriving children's ministry. The desire of a child to go to church is a strong motivation to even the most unchurched parents. Willow Creek Community Church Senior Pastor Bill Hybels says, "Your ability to reach seekers is directly related to how well you care for their kids."

When God says it is not good for man to be alone in Genesis 2:18, he indicates that he has made us to be relational people. This need to bond with others is abundantly present in kids, too. If a children's ministry can establish a well-worn path toward community for kids, they are certain to better navigate the challenges of life they face now, as well as those that lie ahead. But they can't do it on their own; your ministry must have a clear vision of community for them.

Just imagine how a strong small-group experience sticks in the hearts of kids. Imagine the "super strength" of children's ministry that mixes community kids love with creative, relevant Bible teaching.

How to be an AMAZING Small Group Leader

Many churches today use a Large Group / Small Group format. That simply means all the kids first gather together for a large group teaching that may utilize videos, skits, object lessons, puppets or games, and a gifted teacher who is able to engage a large group of children effectively. Then, the kids break into small groups for discussion, a simple game perhaps, and other activities to help dig a little deeper into the lesson topic.

If you are a small group leader, here are FIVE TIPS to make your time as effective as possible:

1. Understand how important you are! Often small group leaders sell themselves short. They may not have the "up front" skills of the Large Group teacher and so they may mistakenly think that they aren't as important. Nothing could be farther from the truth! Your role is critical. No matter how amazing your large group teacher may be, they are teaching to a LARGE group. They can't have the relational impact that you can. Notice, Jesus amazed large crowds, but he poured his life into a small group called the disciples. The crowds ran when Jesus was dying, but it was those disciples who carried on his work. Your students are your disciples! The greatest impact on children is what they learn in a small group setting. There are things you can do that a large group leader simply can't. You can ask questions to see where each child is in their understanding. You can pray for each one specifically because you can learn what each of their needs are. You can challenge them to live out what is being taught, then follow up to see how they are doing. Large group casts the net, but small group is where the fish are reeled in! You have the opportunity to make a huge difference in the lives of children! #
2. Take your role seriously. If you think you are merely providing a fun time for the kids while their parents are being ministered to, you are completely missing the boat. As much ministry happens in a children's small group as does in "Big Church" – perhaps even more! I Peter 5:2 tell us, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing... eager to serve." You are a shepherd to the kids in your small group! Wow. Think about what

that means! It's an important role that must be taken seriously. The Bible also says we will give an account for how well we shepherd those in our care! (Heb. 13:7) #

3. Be relational! Your job is not just to help children participate and "be good." It is to "be Jesus" for them. It's ok to ask yourself, "What would Jesus do?" Jesus wouldn't be on time; no, He'd come early! He wouldn't be getting ready for his class while there were kids around; He'd be ready before they arrive. Then, He wouldn't stand at the edge of the room; He'd be in the midst of it talking to the kids. He wouldn't be on His cell phone; it would be turned off and He'd be engaged with the kids. He wouldn't be sitting off to the side of the kids; He'd be sitting with the kids, maybe even on the floor with them. He would be asking them meaningful questions and listening intently to their answers. He would be offering gentle but Godly advice. He might even stop and pray for them in the middle of a conversation – because something came up that needed to be prayed for right then and there, regardless of what is going on around them. He would get down on their eye level. He would play with them. He would laugh with them. The children wouldn't even realize he was a "leader" or "authority figure" because they would see Him as a friend. Yes, this describes your role. From the moment you enter the room, your role is to relate to kids. #
4. Be intentional. You are on a mission – and you choose your words, actions and activities to accomplish your mission. If you get a small group guide, you know ahead of time what the ONE THING is that you are trying to drive home through everything you say and do during your short time with the kids. Whether it is a game with a point, looking up Bible verses, facilitating discussion questions, or doing an activity, you are constantly repeating the main point and illustrating it as many ways as you can. When parents ask their kids, "What did you learn today?" your students are quick with their answer because you repeated it so many times, it is on the tip of their tongue! #
5. Be fun. Of course we want kids to have a great time. At my church, our goal is to make Sunday the best day of a kid's week. Kids should be laughing and smiling and having a great time – but fun isn't the goal. It is a means to a much more important goal: that they come to know Jesus, and grow in their relationship with Him. I like to say, "I'm serious about fun!" That means that I never lose sight of the grave seriousness of what we are doing – saving kids from the dire consequences of a life lived outside of God's design. We are saving kids from unimaginable pain and suffering... that's serious business. But the good news is we can have FUN leading kids toward a life that will be everything God has prepared for them. (Jeremiah 29:11)

In summary, here are some BONUS practical ideas that will make you the most awesome small group leader ever!

- Learn your kids' names.
- Ask them questions that get them talking about what interests them.
- Let them hear you pray for them – passionately!
- Use small gifts as a tangible expression of your love.
- Speak words of encouragement to them constantly.
- Use your Bible – make it central to your time.
- Be funny, but be sincere.

- Send post cards in the mail.
- Bring cool show-and-tell items that relate to your lesson. (Be visual.)
- Learn pocket magic tricks, riddles, jokes and other things kids think are cool.
- Show them you care by the way you talk, pray and ask questions.
- Surprise them with unexpected treats.
- Master a skill that will impress only kids (an amazing paper airplane, yo-yo, etc.).
- Have your own funny things you do that no one else does.
- Provide challenges they can step up and accomplish.
- ADD YOUR OWN IDEAS!

As a small group leader – you have an incredible opportunity to make a huge difference in the life of a child. Embrace this opportunity and own it. Someday when your kids are asked about their spiritual journey, YOU will be a part of their story as they share the impact that YOU made on them! They won't be talking about a cool video or funny skit in the large group time, they will be talking about what you did in small group that helped steer them in the right direction.

Go be an AMAZING small group leader!