

Connecting with Community through Under Fives' Groups

Claire and Gaynor spoke at the 2007 Children's Ministry Conference in Eastbourne. Here is the basis of their presentation.

You can buy the CD recording of the presentation from Children's Ministry website www.childrensministry.co.uk (see Conference pages)

'Parenting courses, Preparing your Child for School, Childhood Ailments, Baby First Aid, Dads & Toddlers, Candlelit Suppers and even Belly Dancing! What will these groups think of next?! An informative and exciting seminar to help you reach out to your local community'.

A Parent and Toddler group, a Creche and similar groups, these are the Church's greatest bridge building opportunity to reach the community around them for Jesus. To serve them and to offer to meet them at their points of need.

Before you decide on any course of action for reaching into the community a couple of things need to happen;

Talk to your Pastor, Vicar or elders and ask them what is their vision for reaching those around your Church.

Do they have a strategy, what plans are already in place.
Share your plans with them.

Know something about the demographics of your community, eg.

For some areas, single parenting courses may be a great thing to offer, or basic cookery courses.

While in a middle class village community a Friendship Dinner, a women's breakfast or wine tasting evening may be a better option!!

Apart from your common sense and your local knowledge, one of the best people to talk to is a **health visitor**. She knows what is going on in the lives of young families.

You could also contact your local authority to find out if there are any gaps in local provisions.

How many people live in the Parish or surrounding areas?

If you are in contact with other Toddler groups, ask them what they are doing. Because Mums tend to do the rounds of groups, it may not be wise to run a parenting course if there is already something up and running at another group.

You could put out a questionnaire within your group asking what they would like you to organise.

How many 'events' will you plan a year?

What is Church? For your Mums/Dads/Carers it may be the time they spend with you on a Monday....Thursday..

MODELS OF UNDER5s WORK.

Only about 1% of groups are overtly Christian and yet I think it's safe to say that most Parent and Toddler groups are run by Churches. I must say that in our area I believe this statistic is changing.

Most groups follow a bridge building model, a safe place.

In fact this is probably the most significant bridge building group in the Church and should be recognised and supported as such. (Your budget should reflect this too!)

There are levels of evangelism and friendship making. The following ideas may help you move into both areas.

Let's get practical. Just a few ideas to get you thinking:

- **Parenting Courses.** Have run these? What did you use? Were you pleased? If not, there are others to explore.
- **Debt Counselling**
- **Single Parent courses or Get Togethers**, while Church folk offer to baby sit (remember they need to be CRB checked)
- **Cookery Classes.** May be basic with reasonably priced ingredients if that suits the folk you serve, or something more exotic if that suits.
- **Family Fun Day.** This may be a whole Church event and it is very easy to invite friends to come along, see if you hire school grounds if the church isn't suitable and hire a bouncy castle, face painting, football, rounders, races etc. have a barbecue, a picnic. The possibilities are endless.
- **Table for Two!** Give a weary Mum and Dad a romantic evening, a good meal and a baby sitting service.
- **Sustaining good Relationships** eg. 'Marriage Masala' a marriage course to 'spice up a marriage!' (Published by Scripture Union)
- **What's happening in a Child's world.** Invite a speaker who is well acquainted with what is going on in the world of the child/and youngsters.
- **Belly Dancing!!!!** Such fun, try the internet to find a teacher.
- **Pamper Evenings.** Bring in a beautician/manicurist to pamper your Mums. We ruined ours by taking in a chocolate fountain and strawberries!! We also had someone to give a follow up talk on what is real inner beauty.
- **Colour me beautiful or beauty or pampering sessions nail painting and manicure!**
- **Literacy and numeracy** sessions with crèche
- **Daddy and Me.** Run on the same lines as a Toddler group but for Dads and Grandads. Don't forget the bacon butties! **A must.**
- **Preparing your Child for School.** Invite a reception school teacher to advise the new nervous parents! eg. Doing up buttons, turning a jumper when it's inside out, etc.
- **Breast Feeding** drop in sessions with health visitor
- **My child won't sleep/eat/ has terrible tantrums**
- **Childhood ailments.** Find a sympathetic Doctor. Maybe you have someone in your Church.
- **First aid for Babies.** St John's runs a good course, organise one for your workers and parents.
- **A holiday.** Particularly appreciated by single or poor Parents.
- **Celebrate our Christian festivals.**
- Treats and traditions.
- Subscribe to **Activate** magazine

- Involve your self in a local school. Go in to listen to the children read etc. **Ask the Head teacher** how you can be of service. If you are a parent consider serving on **the PTA** or **School Governing Body**.
- Encouraging under 5s involvement in local events
- **Just 'be' I your local community** Dog walking/ Flower Festivals/ be an ambassador for under 5s work
- **Raising the profile of under 5s in Third World countries** and closer to home. Raise funds to be able to bless Mums and toddlers elsewhere.
- *Share any ideas you have found to be successful with other groups. We are not in competition with each other.
- **Contact Centre**. You may be able to facilitate the meetings of a child/ren with a parent, which has to be carried out in a supervised setting. Contact Centres are set up through the Family Courts system and require specific training of volunteers and specific operation of contact centres providing contact time for parents with supervised access arrangements..

Become a member of **Activate** See their website www.activatecv.org.uk

Pastoral Needs

This is another big topic we could cover another time but for now, lets just ask you how prepared you are regarding the pastoral needs of your group. Would you know how to support a family going through bereavement having lost a child to sudden infant death syndrome, miscarriage, stillbirth? Don't wait for a crisis to get prepared. Speak to local health visitors, midwives and SANDS for information... there may be an annual memorial service.

God Bless your endeavours.