



Article by Ruth Mitchell

I remember the first time I saw her. A tiny bundle wrapped in a white blanket with a head of dark hair and her eyes, when she eventually opened them, were like big puddles of black ink. She was less than 24 hours old. The last time I saw her was last week. She is now a bouncing, giggling, three-year-old with straggly hair and the same dark eyes. She has a love of princess dresses, Peppa Pig, of having books read to her and to be with the people who she loves the most. She is a typical pre-schooler and she is my niece.

Pre-schoolers are often seen as the easy group to deal with in church. They look cute, play with toys and are often kept out of the way while children's and youth ministry is provided for those who go to school and adults can be in the main church without being disturbed. There are two difficulties I have with that concept. Firstly, I believe that ministry with pre-schoolers can be really tough and definitely not the easiest ministry in church. Secondly, I believe that pre-schoolers should not be simply put in a glorified babysitting service, but should be seen as tiny images of God to whom we want to introduce the things of faith and see develop in a love and knowledge of God.

A couple of years ago, I visited a pre-school ministry in a church in Belfast and what I saw in that place challenged my view of what a pre-schooler's ministry should look like. I saw babies in their mothers' arms and very small toddlers learning about creation in a way that was very age-appropriate and interactive. They sang songs, used puppets and were reminded that Jesus died for them. I also saw three- and four-year-olds not just learning that God answers prayer but actively believing it by praying for each other. And yes you did read that correctly. It was not the leaders who prayed, but instead the three- and four-year-olds prayed for each other in answer to pray requests.

In 1969, Sesame Street first hit American television screens. At the time, it was a one-of-a-kind type of show. Its aim was simple: to help

prepare children, particularly poor inner-city children, for school. They planned an hour-long programme of educational television for pre-schoolers and within a year, the programme had become synonymous with outstanding television programming. They researched and piloted their material with real children before it ever went on screen and they succeeded. And it was targeted at pre-schoolers, something never done before. And Sesame Street is still on our screens today, children still watch it although it is no longer the only programme out there for pre-schoolers to watch. It is, however, the one that all the others have developed from. There are many things that we can learn from Sesame Street and can use within our church ministry to reach pre-schoolers. It is important that we look outside the box and see where else we can learn about how to reach and teach pre-schoolers apart from simply our Sunday school curriculum teacher's guides. Sesame Street aimed to reach pre-schoolers for an hour and not just hold their attention but educate them. We want to do the same, except that what we want to teach is infinitely more important in terms of their spiritual development.

So what are those lessons? What can we learn from their research and findings?

• ONE THING AT A TIME

In terms of development, pre-schoolers cannot take in a lot of information at one time. In fact they not only do not take in lots of information,

but cannot process it. Sesame Street learnt this early on and focused on teaching one thing at a time. More recent programmes like Lazytown also follow this idea. They spend each episode concentrating on one teaching point and understand that is all that children of this age can handle in one go. When we are teaching children in pre-school, babies, toddlers, three- and four-year-olds, we should simply teach one point. For example, when we are teaching "Do not lie", simply teach do not lie. Don't worry about the fact that it is one of the commandments and that there are nine others. Pre-schoolers do not need to know that and in fact it will more likely fill their heads with too much and they will not truly learn anything. Trust that they will learn about the commandments and the number of them later on throughout the children's ministry in your church. It is enough for them to know that God does not want them to lie and that He is sad if we do. In children's ministry, there is often a "more is more" concept – we want kids to know more about God's love so we spray them with information – if we say it then they'll get it. Truth is that the more we pack in to a lesson, the less the kids get out of it.

• IT'S ALL ABOUT A FORMULA

Dora the Explorer and Blue's Clues have discovered an amazing recipe for success. But it's not due to amazing special effects, groundbreaking animation or unheard of educational principles. What is it I hear you ask? It's all in the formula.

What does Sesame Street have to teach our pre-school ministry?

Every episode is the same – annoyingly so! Beyond minor content changes, every single episode follows the same formula. So why is that important? Young kids need to be in the know but rarely are!! We often think we have to keep things changing, keep them guessing. And with school age kids, that's really important – variety is the name of the game. But when teaching a room or class of two and up little ones, formula creates uncanny interest and attention. They know what's coming next and they are waiting for it to happen! Same set, same order of elements, same characters, same layout, same, same, same... You may be asking "Won't kids get tired of that?" We might, but think: "Does your pre-school child ever get tired of watching Dora?"

• USE MEMORY AIDS BOTH PHYSICAL AND OTHERWISE

Pre-schoolers don't just need one thing at a time, repetition and formula, but also memorable triggers help them hold on to concepts, both in your programme and the teaching. For example, when you teach one clear concept, make sure that it is the little nugget that kids chant repeatedly in the car, driving their parents insane! Make it something that is easily repeatable and easily memorable. Have the children say it over and over through the lesson or sing it to a familiar song,

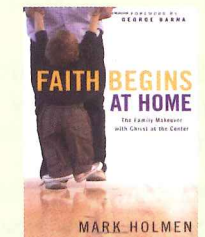
and have it as the trigger that reminds them about something they have learned about God. And do not keep this simply for learning tools but also to help pre-schoolers know what is happening next in the programme. One pre-school ministry has a pile of mouse mats in the corner and when the children are told to go and collect one, they know it means it is story time and they have to sit "as quiet as little mice."

Pre-school ministry is a much neglected and rarely developed ministry within the church today. Pre-schoolers are mainly put in a crèche with toys and left with some leaders babysitting them and allowing parents to do the real business of church. But this is short-changing our children. All we have to do is look in the world and we will see that there is programming out there for pre-schoolers which holds their attention and teaches them. Television programmes have been made for years that capture children's imaginations and have them staring goggle-eyed at the screen, for hours if they were allowed. We need to take the lessons and principles from the programmers and see that we have something so much more valuable to teach and engage these tiny images of God, who He sees as so important, and to take the time and effort to do that. There should be ministry happening in our crèches all through the

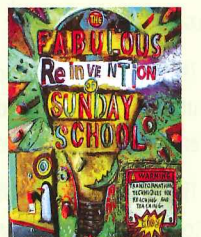
denomination. We should be taking seriously our role to teach and model faith to these little children. We need to see the place that they hold within the children's ministry of our churches.

And we need to view our crèche leaders, not as babysitters or nappy changers, but as they really are: changers of lives!

Resources



Faith at Home
Mark Holmen



The Fabulous Reinvention of Sunday School
Aaron Reynolds

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