



# TODDLE INTO CHURCH

## Parent and toddler group expert **Fiona Burt** shows you how to turn your toddler group into a missional opportunity

Have you ever been to a parent and toddler group? The chances are that you have, even if you were too young to remember being there. More than half of all children under four have been found to go to a church-based toddler group, according to the Family Matters Institute's 'More than Sundays' report. The report also identified that over half of the UK's churches are running such groups.

These open-access play sessions for pre-schoolers and their carers provide a fantastic mission opportunity but one which, for various reasons, the Church often overlooks. This may be because sessions take place during the week when most of the congregation are at work, because the team running them is small and are unable to devote more time or energy to develop their ministry or because they just don't know how to share their faith effectively in this setting.

Some churches, however, do regularly see families joining their congregation from their toddler groups. Studying what makes these groups so effective could give us an insight as to how to make the most of our toddler groups as a mission opportunity.

### TODDLING TOWARDS FAITH

Research by Sue Stout (available from the Heaton Moor Evangelical Church website, → [hmec.org/activities/family-work/toddler-group-survey](http://hmec.org/activities/family-work/toddler-group-survey)) has found that there are five distinctive features of toddler groups that regularly see people coming to faith. These are:

- Clarity of aims and objectives
- Support from the church leadership
- Small groups
- Enquirers' courses
- Regular prayer

Interestingly, similar points feature in John Clarke's *Evangelism that Really Works*, (SPCK, 1995).

### CLARITY OF AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

It is hard to see what difference a written mission statement actually makes to a toddler group but for many of the groups who saw people come to

faith the evangelistic aim was the most important and had been incorporated into a mission statement specifically created by the toddler group team.

Many excellent church activities are run for the benefit of the community. However, if your vision is missional, then it is helpful for this to be clearly stated in your aims and objectives and effectively communicated to both the team members and the wider church.

That is not to say that outreach must consist of a clear gospel presentation between singing 'the wheels on the bus' and snack time! As the famous misquote of Saint Francis of Assisi says, 'Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.' So, if your vision involves running your group in such a way that it brings glory to God and implicitly demonstrates his love, then write this down and seek ways to bring it about.

### SUPPORT FROM THE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

In speaking to toddler group leaders across the nation I have discovered that there is a massive variation in the support that they receive from their churches. However, in those groups that saw conversions there was often a real appreciation of the group by the wider church and in particular, the church leaders.

Although some toddler groups are run by the vicar or pastor, many are not, so it is especially important that those involved communicate what they are doing effectively and persistently with the rest of the congregation. Of course, the best way to understand what goes on at any group is to drop in and see for yourself, and regular visits from the church leaders should definitely be encouraged. Such visits have the additional benefit that the toddler families become familiar with the leaders, making the eventual transition into the Sunday congregation easier.

Of course, once families from the group start to join the congregation, then interest in the group naturally increases and a virtuous circle is established.

### SMALL GROUPS

Toddler groups can be a victim of their own success. A hugely popular group will end up with an extremely high ratio of families to leaders so that building real relationships becomes difficult. Running additional small group events creates opportunities for parents and carers to really get to know and trust the leaders – a key part of leading people to faith.

Possible small group events can include mums' social evenings, parenting courses, Bible studies or toddler services. Interestingly, Colin Cartwright in his paper on 'Appreciating

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the Art of Toddling' (available from the CBA website, → [centralba.org.uk/toddlers.shtml](http://centralba.org.uk/toddlers.shtml)) found that parenting courses were even more effective than the more spiritually focused toddler services. One reason for this could be that they encourage interaction rather than simple participation, and therefore foster relationships more deeply.

### ENQUIRERS' COURSES

Enquirers' courses such as Alpha or Christianity Explored have become part of the outreach programme at many churches, so it is perhaps unsurprising that most of the churches where families had come to faith through the toddler group were found to run one. What is perhaps more surprising, is that actually attending the course was not found to be the key factor – so don't get discouraged if take-up is low! Perhaps the mere existence of the course raises the profile of evangelism within the church and the mere invitation to the course is sufficient to encourage people to seek answers to their spiritual questions from the church.

Of course, in order for toddler group adults to attend a course, they have to be run at a parent-friendly time. This may necessitate the provision of a crèche. Sue Stout also found that parents were far more likely to attend if they knew the course leader and more particularly if the toddler group leaders were involved in running the courses.

### REGULAR PRAYER

The final characteristic of groups seeing families coming to faith was the priority given to prayer. As Christians we accept that prayer is vital in any ministry but it is fascinating to see it confirmed by scientific research!

For me this is a real encouragement to get down on my knees and start praying for my toddler group, the leaders and the families who attend it. Toddler groups really can be a fantastic mission opportunity; let's make the most of them.

Fiona Burt has run toddler groups for 15 years, and previously coordinated Care

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for the Family's 'Playtime' project. She is currently working with 1277 to develop a national strategy for church-based toddler groups and speaks regularly at the Toddler Rocks conferences run by the Entheos Trust, which are designed to inspire, encourage and support parent and toddler group leaders. → [theentheostrust.org](http://theentheostrust.org)

## THE NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN TODDLER GROUPS

This will take place on 2 June 2013, and is part of National Family Week (27 May – 2 June). It was initiated by 1277 → [1277.org.uk](http://1277.org.uk), an alliance of churches and agencies that support the work of church-based toddler groups. On average a UK child has 1,277 days between birth and starting nursery education; the vision of 1277 is to make those days count for the children, their families and for the toddler groups that they attend. The 1277 website also has links to many useful resources and events for church-based toddler group leaders.

## TOP TIPS TO MAKE YOUR TODDLER GROUP MORE MISSIONAL

1. Incorporate prayer before and/or after the toddler group session, or pray as you gather to prepare crafts or clean the toys. Build up an email list of people who will pray for your group and send them regular updates.
2. Use Section 1 of *Building Blocks* from Scripture Union to help you think through your group's vision and

formulate a mission statement. → [scriptureunion.org.uk/Tiddlywinks/ParentandToddlerGroups/69463.id](http://scriptureunion.org.uk/Tiddlywinks/ParentandToddlerGroups/69463.id)

3. Get the rest of the church involved. Share your stories regularly; ask them to bake cakes, clean toys or collect junk for the crafts; hold an 'open day' for them to visit the group.
4. Ask your church leader to help out every so often. Give them a specific role suited to their talents. They may be able to tell good stories or enjoy serving tea.
5. If you don't have the time or resources for a parenting group then why not arrange a cinema trip or a pamper evening for the mums.
6. Give parents and children a reason for attending church. Practise songs that the group can perform at the front or plan a service to celebrate the work of the toddler group and other pre-school ministries.
7. Invite people to courses and events while they're watching their children play. Take a leaflet with you so that they have all the details needed in order to book. This approach is quite personal, but takes the pressure off individuals to respond. It also gives friends an opportunity to discuss the invitation after you've left and decide to come together.
8. Expect God to change lives.

## CASE STUDY:

**Danielle James, 'Little Gators', Gateway Church, Poole, Dorset**

'After the birth of my first child I attended an NHS postnatal class. It was there that I found out about Gateway Church Toddler Group and my friend Sue and I decided to go along.

I'd assumed it would be in a cold smelly hall with broken, dirty toys, but the building was bright and things were clean. The tea and coffee was nice too. And the session was free so I didn't have to worry about finding change before I came.

Sue was a Christian but I'd never known church. I expected the people running the group to think they were better than everybody else, but I found lovely, genuine people. They were all mums, but their children were at school so they understood the pressures of caring for a baby but could spend time getting to know everyone properly.

I wasn't getting much rest and was

suffering from postnatal depression. These women invited me to their houses and came round to mine. I remember one of them made a particularly lovely meal, including homemade purée for my son. Another one popped in and took a pile of dirty nappies away to their bin!

Sue, who I'd come with, was a psychiatric nurse and I could talk to her about my depression. She also talked about how great Jesus was. She and I made friends with some mums from the church who had babies of a similar age. We all got on really well. They too invited us for coffee, meals and walks.

After four months I was curious about Christianity and attended the church's Alpha course. It was easy to understand that God loved me unconditionally now that I was a parent because that's how I felt about my child, even though he wouldn't stop crying. I became a Christian in the second week of the course, and was overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit.

I might have made a commitment and left it at that, but Claire, one of the toddler team, met weekly to pray with me and encouraged me to join a lifegroup. I was baptised a few months later. Going to church for the first time was a bit daunting, but I already had friends there.

When I was pregnant with our second child, my husband agreed to go on an Alpha course. He could see the change in me, and how my faith had helped my depression. He went on another two courses before he made a decision to follow Jesus himself.

We have been members of Gateway Church ever since. Until recently I led the toddlers group. We're about to move so I've had to give it up, but I'm still passionate about helping other young mums find the Gospel like I did.'

## RESOURCES

A good practice guide for parent and toddler groups is available as a free download from Care for the Family's Playtime Project → [engagetoday.org.uk](http://engagetoday.org.uk)

The Baptist Union have produced a *Toddler Group Mission File* and have a list of ideas for Praying for Toddler Groups. Both are available as free downloads from their website → [baptist.org.uk/age-specific-mission/toddlers.html](http://baptist.org.uk/age-specific-mission/toddlers.html)