

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Developing Children's Ministry



SESSION 1
Introducing Children's Ministry

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Introducing Children's Ministry

SESSION OVERVIEW

The Importance of Children: A Biblical Perspective

Understanding Childhood: A Developmental Look at Life

Windows of Opportunity/Points of Commitment

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- develop an understanding of the importance and necessity of children's ministry.
- develop a beginning image of children's ministry and the children's pastor.
- clarify how children fit into the life of the Church.

INTRODUCTION

As we begin to investigate what is meant by "children's ministry," we need to clarify why ministry to children remains absolutely vital to the life of the Church. Our approach must include both a growing understanding of the biblical mandate and the developmental power to grow evident in even the youngest children. A glimpse into the needs and abilities of children based both on God's revelation in Scripture and through creation remind us of the key perspectives that guide our ministry to, with, and for children in our world.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

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At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." —Matthew 18:1-6

It seems appropriate to start off a module about children's ministry focusing on the biblical mandates and principles for making teaching and modeling a priority for our children. We will explore this theme more thoroughly in later lessons; however, the biblical focus on children provides a beginning point of our study. As Christians, the biblical perspective serves as the foundation on which we must build. Dean G. Blevins and Mark A. Maddix, in *Discovering Discipleship: The Dynamics of Christian Education* (2010), note:

Children often find themselves at the center of God's covenant relationship with God's people, whether in the person of Isaac (Genesis 15-22) in establishing Abraham's hope and faith before God or in the simple act of Jesus placing a child in the midst of the disciples and announcing the kingdom of God below to children like these (Matt 18: 2-5, Lk 9:47-48, Mk 10: 13-16). Children, by their presence within the Biblical narrative, signal the presence of God's covenant love and the power of Kingdom based not on the inherent goodness of a child but upon their marginality and people desperately in need of grace. (252)

Note that, for Blevins and Maddix, children provide one unique perspective because of their ability to model our need for grace. There may be other gifts beyond this need, but children at least remind us of God's desire to love and protect those who are least able to protect themselves. Jesus' own words remind us of an older teaching in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, where our love for God is mirrored in our commitment to teach the love of God to others, including our children (v. 7). God's grace in our spiritual lives mirrors the physical needs of children as they grow and learn, the support required in social settings of family and community to provide for children, and the relational encouragement to allow children to express their gifts and abilities for the sake of others.

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Our scriptural responsibility to guide and teach children revolves around the teachings of our Savior. Indeed, Jesus' warning about our unfaithfulness in leading children to sin rather than salvation provides a sober reminder that our lives are deeply intertwined with children. As we move forward in this study, we will explore the implications of children's ministry for the life of the Church but we also understand the need for children's ministry to exist within a caring congregation where the care of children remains everyone's responsibility, not just assigned leaders of children. Much more will be said in later lessons. However, the biblical mandate reminds us that all Christians bear a responsibility to care for children and to recognize their place in God's redemptive plan.

UNDERSTANDING CHILDHOOD: A DEVELOPMENTAL LOOK AT LIFE



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In addition to a biblical perspective, we need to also consider the very nature of children as God's creation, particularly at the earliest point of their development. We are created in God's own image, different from any other created being. Based on that biblical foundation, we must learn what makes people so special and why early experiences in our lives are so critical. A good place to begin follows the developmental factors God built into each human being. We call these different areas of development "developmental domains." This developmental understanding will help us minister to children effectively as whole human beings who have physical, emotional, social, and spiritual characteristics.

As we better understand the opportunities children face, we will come to understand that each of these opportunities influences individuals over the course of their lifetimes. It is important to understand there are windows of opportunity during developmental periods in the human life cycle, where people seem particularly open to a particular kind of learning. If a person does not have the opportunity to learn what he or she is ready for at the peak time, it may be almost impossible to go back and totally reverse the negative consequences. Yet there is always hope! We serve the God of the second chance, and through God's intervention, miracles can happen in human lives.

As we begin to see patterns and consistencies in how humans grow and change, we may begin to wonder if moral and spiritual development follows a similar pattern and similar time frames. It certainly does make sense that if childhood is the greatest time for learning and establishing concepts and ideas and ways of interacting with people, then these patterns will prove relatively permanent throughout their lives. So, children also learn patterns of interacting with God and the world God created in these early years. There may be no one set pattern that cannot change (for good or for ill) since our lives interact with creation much like we do with God, always open to responding or rejecting grace. However, God constantly provides for our general growth—as well as our spiritual growth—opportunities to engage and change positively when the right actions are taken.

Let's start with infancy and how babies come to recognize that they exist. The problem of existence is one that philosophers have discussed throughout history. How do we know that we "are"? How do you know that you exist? While philosophers talk and debate this issue, each child solves this riddle for him or herself. Some may have assumed that this takes place at birth, but evidence suggests this may not take place until later, when children begin to realize they are separate from their mothers and others who nurture them.


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Self-Identity

How do babies come to know themselves? We've all watched babies play with their feet in much the same way they play with rattles or other toys, examining them with their mouths, dropping them and picking them back up. Developmental researchers Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl, in their book, *The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains, and How Children Learn*, tell us even newborn babies can be observed imitating an adult sticking out his or her tongue. This observation shows an ability to actually feel and control their power to change their own bodies to look like someone else. This implies an inborn self-awareness, at least in relating to others.

A three-month-old child listens to the adult cooing at him or her and begins to make sounds that mimic the pitch and tone of the adult, even though they do not yet speak. In fact, all babies start out making the same sounds (like Ma Ma and Da Da) as they "play" with their voices. They begin weeding out sounds that aren't part of the language of their caretakers very early. All these point to the infant's ability to distinguish between himself or herself and others, but it is not until roughly 18 months that babies begin to visually recognize themselves as unique individuals. This insight has been demonstrated by a procedure called the "rouge test" in which a researcher holds a child in front of a mirror and places a dab of rouge on the child's nose. At about 18 months of age, children will touch their noses to wipe the rouge off. Children under 18 months will not reach to wipe the red off of their noses. Why? Some researchers believe that before 18 months of age, the child does not fully recognize him or herself in the mirror.

Around this age, if a child is talking, he or she will begin to say words like, "I," "me," and "mine." Deaf children's sign language reflects the same change in language structure, indicating that children are beginning to recognize themselves not only as imitators, but as actors in life, who can effect change on their own.

Moral Development

Studies on infants in newborn nurseries demonstrate that infants respond to the crying of other infants by crying themselves. For whatever reason, the discomfort of others affects our own sense of well-being from the day we are born. Some theorists claim it is this characteristic of humans that forms the root of moral development. We are emotionally touched by others, and we experience a sympathetic response.

Developmental theorists, such as Lawrence Kohlberg, remind us that children have no ability to see things from any perspective other than their own. Often labeled egocentrism, this perspective remains a natural part of human development. The way adults can help children grow out of egocentrism is

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to teach the child trust by willingly giving appropriate loving care. In fact, some research indicates stressed babies who are held and whose needs are promptly met are less likely to use violence and anger to get their needs met throughout life. Kohlberg says this egocentric stage comes before any kind of moral reasoning ability develops. It is not “bad” or “immoral.” It is “pre-moral”—a step before early moral reasoning. Some Christians believe this egocentricity is a sign of the sinful nature, while others recognize that children are not capable of choosing not to be egocentric. Either way, young children need to have loving care modeled to them so they can imitate loving care toward others. This principle of loving care is one of the bases of moral and ethical behavior throughout our lives. Some researchers have linked moral sense to the child's ability to recognize that something is wrong with an object. For example, a child may become upset by a broken toy or a doll that is missing an arm. This happens about the same time that a child visually recognizes something wrong with him or herself, as in the rouge test described above. A child who is talking will begin to say the words “bad” or “good.” This may indicate the child has some understanding of right and wrong. However, the use of these words is also strongly influenced by the words used by caretakers.

Labeling a child good or bad does not contribute to moral development. Instead it may cause a child to feel shame in a way that interferes with his or her ability to make personal judgments about right and wrong. Actions and decisions can be labeled as right or wrong or good or bad. However, children should not be labeled, because these early labels influence how a child perceives him or herself morally. As children develop in other areas, their ability to think and act in genuinely caring and moral ways, follow rules for the good of the community, understand the consequences of their actions, and respond obediently will grow, especially when these traits are recognized and affirmed by those people who matter to them.

Brain Development

In recent years, we have acquired much knowledge about brain functioning and brain development. New technology, such as computer-assisted tomography (CAT) scans and functional magnetic resonance imaging (f-MRI), actually shows researchers what happens in the brain under different circumstances. This research leads to a number of valuable insights about brain development. The brain regulates every single activity of our lives, from breathing to decision-making. At about two years, the electrical connections in the brain that stimulate learning (synapses) form at a faster rate than at any other time in life (Do you see any connection to what some people call the “terrible twos”?). By three years, these synapses number about 1000 trillion—about twice the number of an adult brain! The brain continues to develop at a rapid pace until about the age of 10, with

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different parts of the brain developing at “hyper-speed” at different times. The brain “sheds” those connections it doesn’t need. If a connection is used over and over through repetition of words, experiences, or actions, it becomes part of the permanent structure of the brain. If the connections are not used, they disappear. A single brain cell can form connections to as many as 10,000 other cells.

While we once thought new brain cells could not be generated in the body, we now know that some can. Our brains keep a “plasticity” throughout our lives that allows us to continue to form new electrical pathways as we learn and repeat new activities or information. Our brains are constantly taking in information from the environment. At any second, you may have as many as 50,000 bits of information coming into your brain through sight, smell, taste, touch, or hearing. You learn to screen out the stimuli that you don’t need at the moment. Children have less experience screening, so they are often more distractible (or sensorily stressed) than adults.

Brain-based research reveals a number of key factors about children. Emotional engagement creates chemicals in the brain that promote learning. Challenge and emotional security promote learning. Threat and fear inhibit learning. Children need a language-rich environment to stimulate brain development. Movement actually promotes learning, although sitting may also require attention that is not available for learning. Good nutrition, hydration (plenty of water), exercise, and sleep are all necessary for the learning brain to function at its best.

Of all of the developmental aspects presented so far, plasticity is most critical to long term outcomes. Plasticity suggests that children’s ministers can lay some of the foundations for how children’s brains will be organized as they move into the adolescent years when they begin to formulate a stronger image of who they are and will be as adults. In other words, what a child sees, hears, and feels over and over through a children’s minister may become a relatively permanent part of his or her brain structure. A child’s thinking processes throughout adolescence and young adulthood and even for the rest of his or her life may be affected by what happens at church. Wow! What an opportunity and what a responsibility! But do not forget that negative experiences will stick with kids as well—and maybe more so because of the emotional response they generate. If a children’s minister or Sunday School teacher communicates to a child over and over that he or she is a troublemaker or a problem, this may shape the child’s thinking for years to come.

It should be evident that there are incredible developments that take place very early in life, many around the age of 18 months, including a sense of self, a moral sense, incredible brain expansion, and more. While we’ve mentioned “windows of opportunity,” let’s examine some of them a little more closely to understand better how early childhood is one of the most critical times of learning and development.

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY/POINTS OF COMMITMENT



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In general, windows of opportunity are consistent with the most rapid rate of development in a particular part of the brain. The windows of time that are listed are broad-based and vary from individual to individual. From birth to 24 months is a time of visual, motor, and emotional development.

Visual Development

Babies are visually stimulated by exposure to high contrasts, such as black and white and bright (primary) colors. They are also stimulated by human faces. In fact, some research states the human face is the most interesting thing babies can look at. We know that different understandings of objects are stored in different parts of the brain. When a two-month-old child looks at a toy, he or she may be identifying something like color. At six months, the same baby will begin to notice something like depth or texture patterns. By the time a child is two years old, he or she has mastered most of the basic visual abilities. However, discrimination skills will continue to develop for several more years. This is why a two-year-old child may be able to recognize letters, but he or she may not know which letter it is.

Motor Development

Between the ages of 0 and 2, a child learns how to hold up parts of the body, sit erect, kick on demand, stand, walk, run, and fall and pick him or herself back up again. The child also learns how to hold large and small objects, pick up items, slide items, and drop items. The child learns to do those things at will, not as some kind of random reflex reaction. Basically, all movement skills are established early. Throughout the life cycle, these actions are refined to allow us to skip, run, dance, write, and do needlework.

A particularly important part of this development is a sense of balance, which is developed by stimulation of the inner ear. This happens as babies are rocked, swayed, swung, and sometimes tossed into the air by their parents in play.

As children get older, there are times in their development when they are very sensitive to their bodies' need for movement. Sitting for too long can actually seem to a child to cause physical pain at the pressure points. An understanding of this aspect of development can help children's workers understand why some children actually can't sit still.

NOTES*Emotional Intelligence*

A developmental researcher, Erik Erikson (who we'll talk more about later), helps us understand emotional development as based on the first task of life: learning trust. Separation anxiety, becoming emotionally overwhelmed when a caretaker leaves a child, is a normal and appropriate reaction for a child until he or she discovers the caregiver (mother or father) can be trusted to come back. The foundation of trust built by the caregiver helps to form a child's view of God as trustworthy.

Children first experience very basic emotions. As they develop, their emotional range becomes more extensive. The three basic emotions—mad, sad, and glad—become expressed in various degrees of intensity, from irritation to rage, from “the blues” to deep mournfulness, from mildly pleased to ecstatic. Other aspects of emotional intelligence rooted in the first two years of development make an enormous difference in how a child becomes able to relate to others. This emotional development is inseparably tied to how children see life and how they envision God.

One very important skill is the ability to self-soothe. This allows children to calm themselves, gain self-control, and go to sleep instead of exploding or lying awake staring at the ceiling. Another skill is the ability to relate reciprocally to others. This includes smiling when smiled at, calming down when someone else calms down, and responding to invitations to play. This ability is based on learning to interpret subtle social cues and change one's behavior in response to the cues. It is a complicated process but one which even babies can observe. Children need to see approval and encouragement (such as smiling) when they act appropriately. They need gentle disapproval (non-emotional reactions) when they behave inappropriately. Disapproval should include redirection to help children make better choices.

You have seen children explore many ways of getting their needs or desires met, from being cute to throwing a fit. The best way to help a child learn appropriate ways to relate to others is to respect their needs, encourage the use of words, and respond appropriately to what a child tells you. A child who is yelled at learns to yell to be heard. A child who is disciplined through use of physical force will often try to use physical force with others. Children who are touched appropriately and lovingly will grow emotionally. These patterns of relating are established early in life, and they help children develop an internal working model of how the world operates. An infant who has caregivers who respond promptly and accurately to their signals (crying, screaming, cooing) will develop an internal working model that says, “People are dependable” and “I have what it takes to get what I need from others.” A child who does not have caregivers who give


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prompt and accurate responses to their signals will develop an internal working model that says, "People are not dependable," and "I do not have what it takes to get what I need from others." The development of an internal working model begins to stabilize as early as 18 months.

Children need loving responses as infants, and they need limits as they grow. Children who grow up with inconsistent boundaries are likely to be emotionally unstable. Kids need to know limits in order to function safely within them. But limits must be reinforced through repetition. Limits must be enforced with love and consistency, in an unemotional way, in order for children to feel safe. Children learn better by responding to positive encouragement than by trying to avoid punishment. Children who feel secure in the presence of God's people are ready to feel secure in the presence of God.

Sound and Language Development: Ages 4 months to 8 months/8 months to 4 years

By age one, an individual loses the ability to hear consonant sounds that are not in their native language. That is why some language groups have a difficult time saying certain words in different languages. For example, when attempting to say an "r" sound, it comes out as an "l" sound. They say "blight" instead of "bright." This is because the "r" sound was not in their original language (mother tongue), and they hear it as an "l" sound, which is part of the original language.

Children also learn to hear beginning, middle, and end sounds, how words rhyme, the cadence and rhythm of language, how tones of voice signal emotion, how to regulate the volume of the sounds they make and lots of other small parts of language that work together to allow effective communication. These sounds are the precursors of both spoken language and reading. Playing with language during this stage is *fun* for children. This is why nursery rhymes and rhyming songs are universal.

A child's vocabulary also expands at an astounding rate, from about 15 words at age one to more than 2,000 words at age five. They learn to tell stories, tell about what happened to them, and interact with others in give-and-take dialog. It is important to realize children have a greater listening vocabulary than speaking vocabulary, and they will not use a greater vocabulary than they hear. While we shouldn't overwhelm children with words they don't understand, we should help them understand the words we use! We have been called "people of the Word." Our heritage is preserved in a word-based book, the Bible. We have an interest in helping children learn the words of faith and use words as a tool of faith.

NOTES*Musical Development: Birth to 30 months*

Musical expression includes singing, listening to music, tapping rhythms, listening for similarities and differences in instruments, and learning to work with others to make pleasing sounds. Music works hand-in-hand with memory and brain development. Music gives kids a tool for creating and expressing what is important to them. It may help them learn to identify patterns, a skill useful in mathematics and science, as well as art and design. Children also learn to coordinate movements to music, to feel the music in their bodies. Music is a kind of language without words, and it helps us to express thoughts and ideas that are beyond words. Appreciation for music develops as we expose children to the range of styles through listening, singing to children, singing with children, and allowing them to experiment with sounds and rhythms of both everyday objects and musical instruments.

God's people have used music to express praise, encourage one another, carry messages and stories from generation to generation, and express heartfelt feelings in beautiful melodies. Some people have even noted the ability of music to bring people together in harmony, something no one can do alone. The Church has an interest in helping children to appreciate the tool of music.

Thinking Skills: Birth to 48 months

Who hasn't been brought nearly to tears by the constant questions of a child: Why don't dogs have wings? If a dog did have wings, could it fly? Why are some flowers orange and some purple? Why aren't there black flowers? These questions help children form operating rules for the world. How we respond to children as they ask these questions and how we encourage their minds to wonder establishes how they will seek answers in the future. If children learn there are many answers to their questions instead of one right or wrong answer, they learn to explore many possibilities.

Sometimes the best answer to a question is a question—one that causes a child to expand his or her own understandings. Children who learn to question will not accept that what's bad in the world cannot be changed. They will learn to seek better ways to do jobs that could be lost in the mediocre.

While there are some facts we want children to learn, we want them to use their imaginations to apply biblical truths to their lives and visualize themselves as part of God's ongoing story. God has gifted children with inquisitive minds. Our job is to nurture their curiosity so they will become lifelong thinkers who can bring the gospel to life.

NOTES*Patterns of Childhood Christian Commitment*

Demographer George Barna has surveyed a number of people and families in the United States. While most of his information may seem conditioned by North American culture, he reported the following through his work. A person's moral foundations are generally in place by the age of nine. A person's response to the meaning and personal value of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection is usually determined before a person reaches 18 years of age. Those who are adult church leaders usually had serious involvement in church life and training when they were young. Barna, while relying on surveys, mirrors similar work by sociologist Christian Smith, whose study with youth reveals that the patterns of belief in youth remain closely tied to the families and communities who raise them.

Ministering to children requires a great deal of understanding about how children grow. Children's workers should begin to see how misunderstandings of children's development can interfere with their relationship to God and the church. Ministers should understand the urgency of helping children respond to the gospel, because children's patterns of relation to the world are set so early in life. People who respond to God's invitation to relationship early have more solid, stable, lifelong, spiritual growth into Christlikeness.

Some Thoughts Concerning Children's Spiritual Formation

Some researchers have proposed developmental stage theories for children's spiritual formation. Rather than learning what these stages are at this point, it may be best to think of a child's spiritual formation as inseparable from all the rest of his or her development.

One prominent educational psychologist, Howard Gardner, has explored whether some children have a "spiritual intelligence." His conclusion remains that this category is unlikely. Unlike other kinds of intelligence, spirituality cannot be identified in one specific part of the brain in the same way language, visual skills, or even higher-level thinking can. Instead, we can say spirituality involves the whole brain, or the whole person, in a unique and mysterious way that can't be fully measured by scientific means. Is this surprising for people who have been told to love the Lord our God with all our heart (emotions), soul (will), mind (cognitive), and strength (physical), and our neighbors as ourselves (social)? We will talk about spiritual formation throughout the class, but not as something separated from the rest of the person. Our spirituality is about the whole of who we are, rather than a part of our nature, as God's unique creations.

APPLICATION

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1. Discuss with other children's leaders their personal motivation for serving in children's ministry. Do you see intersections based on the biblical mandate?
2. Observe a young child (newborn to three years old). Where do you see examples of development like those described in the literature?
3. Talk with parents about their understanding of their child's growth and development. Where do you see points of intersection with the reading in this lesson? Do parents name a particular critical turning point as important?

EXAM



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1. Biblically, our ministry with children proves important:
 - A. Because of their marginality.
 - B. Because they are cute and often, parents require it.
 - C. Because they model God's grace to us.
 - D. A and C.
 - E. All of the above.

2. Our lives, even aspects of our salvation, are tied to our ministry with children.
 - A. True
 - B. False

3. Being created in God's image means:
 - A. We are unique.
 - B. God has a special plan that cannot change each of us.
 - C. We can see the entire life cycle as part of God's creation.
 - D. A and C.
 - E. All of the above.

4. Development psychologists believe children are aware of who they are at birth.
 - A. True
 - B. False

5. Adults should not label younger children "good" or "bad" for their behavior.
 - A. True
 - B. False

6. _____ provides the primary basis for early childhood learning that stretches throughout life.
 - A. Discipline
 - B. Plasticity
 - C. Family
 - D. A and C
 - E. All of the above

7. Separation anxiety is not normal and often can be overcome only if the parent returns.
 - A. True
 - B. False

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8. The best way to help a child relate to others is to:
 - A. Respect his needs.
 - B. Challenge outbursts immediately with discipline.
 - C. Tell the child how he needs to act.
 - D. A and C
 - E. All of the above.
9. Children need to know there is one right answer to each of their questions.
 - A. True
 - B. False
10. Howard Gardner does not believe there is a special "spiritual" intelligence since it cannot be limited to just one aspect of the brain.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



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Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Does the biblical mandate to teach and care for children surprise you at any point? Why?
2. How does understanding these concepts of human development establish the need or urgency for children's ministry?
3. What do facts about a child's self-identity or early moral development mean for children's ministry?
4. How do insights in brain development confirm or change what you know about children?
5. Which of the critical turning points seem most important to you and why?

Review your answers with your mentor, then respond to the following:

How many responses focus on supporting children (particularly in areas where they are not yet fully self-reliant), and how many answers focus on empowering children?

Which of these answers support the goal of living Christlike relationships? Why?

What do we need to add to our list to make our approach more comprehensive, more faithful? Which do we need to incorporate into the role of the children's leader as one who both supports and empowers Christlike relationships with children?