

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Developing Children's Ministry



**SESSION 19**  
Children in Ministry

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# Children in Ministry

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**Children in the Kingdom of God**

**Children as Ministers**

**Ministry for and with Children**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand the role children play in ministry.
- envision strategies for ministry by children.
- understand the role of advocacy for children in the congregation.

# Children in Ministry

## INTRODUCTION



While the majority of Children's Ministry focuses on children as the recipients of ministry, such an approach will never be enough for a truly dedicated Children's Ministry leader. Ultimately, children have to be a part of the ministry both to the larger congregation and the community. Children's leaders must serve as planners and advocates for children as they also serve as members of the Body of Christ.

## CHILDREN IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD



### NOTES

In several lessons, we have focused on our responsibility toward children, through education, evangelism, worship, even pastoral care. However, do children have a role within the life of the church? Can we discover biblical and theological resources that help children's leaders serve as advocates for their ministry to the congregation?

We can begin by returning to one very familiar Bible passage in Matthew 18:2-5.

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."

Commenting on this passage, Dean G. Blevins and Mark A Maddix, in *Discovering Discipleship*, offer the following insights. They write,

Jesus' admonition, replicated through three of the gospels, reveals a startling fact that the role of children (often through the advocacy of children's ministry) includes revealing the nature of the Kingdom of God. Judy Gundry Volf (2001) advocates that welcoming children "is to welcome Jesus himself in the sense that he humbled himself like a little child and endured the worst lot of the little child in carrying out his God-given mission" (45). Children provide a range of realities that resemble the nature of the Kingdom of God: 1) they represent the Kingdom's investment in those without power or prestige (45), 2) children model an understanding and appreciation of Jesus (46-48), and 3) they serve as recipients and expressions of the power of holiness (1 Cor. 7:14) in and through the lives of their parents when consecrated to God (52). In short, children reveal the power of the Kingdom by both receiving and expressing Christlikeness among families and within the Family of God, the church.

Blevins and Maddix note that this view changed in the early church, where a preoccupation with the doctrine of original sin pushed children to the margins of ministry, often restricting their role due to a heavy emphasis on child depravity. However, within the Wesleyan tradition, the role of infant baptism (or dedication) coupled with the doctrine of prevenient grace, provide a theological framework for seeing children as both needing discipleship but also expressing ministry. Blevins and Maddix write,

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(M)inisters can appreciate Wesley's spiritual admonitions to both inculcate children into Christian practices and also advocate that children's spiritual lives served as a "means of grace" to others through testimonies and written accounts. Wesley's employ of the means of grace, as well as his appreciation for the spiritual presence of children in the ecology of Methodism, provide a stronger framework for the spiritual nurture and expression of children.

In a sense, the role of children raises a key question of whether God intended every aspect of the life course (from infant to older adult) to serve a broader role in creation and the church. Does the very presence of children, merely as children, represent something important to our understanding of the world and the congregation? Can we imagine a world where there are no children? Can we imagine a church bereft of children? Can there be a kingdom of God without children? Do children, by their mere presence, signal to adults something about the nature of God's love, God's creativity, and God's provision? Does recognizing the moral agency of children (sometimes good, sometimes bad) remind adults of their own tendencies to behave and misbehave, and of their continued need for grace?

Before considering the active role that children might undertake in ministry, children's leaders might emphasize the mere presence of children. Children, whether infants, toddlers, or elementary-age, offer ministry just by being who they are in relationship to God. Perhaps the first step children's leaders must take entails helping a congregation "notice" the important place of children among youth and adults. Becoming an advocate for children may be quite similar to being Jesus once again, placing children in the center of the congregation and helping other church members recognize the key place these children have in the kingdom of God.

## CHILDREN AS MINISTERS



### NOTES

As much as children may have a ministry of presence in the local church, they also serve unique roles of service and outreach. The range of ministry-oriented programs often varies based on the global setting, a socio-economic location, or a congregational perspective. Perhaps the best approach to describing children's ministry begins with different biblical perspectives or approaches to ministry such as acts of hospitality, compassion, and witness.

#### *Hospitality*

Children often display the gift of hospitality. Children possess a unique ability to connect with other children, inviting kids into their world and making space for each other. Often, children serve as natural evangelists. Depending on age-level sensitivity, children can provide direct and engaging methods of inviting other children as well as adults to situations and settings. Adults may need to facilitate these moments, particularly in introducing children to adults. However, leaders may also need to encourage children and respond when they bring additional children to the ministry.

One danger in ministry rests with converting hospitality into competition. Ministries often include membership "drives" where adults reward children for bringing friends to local events or Sunday school. We need to be careful of the implicit messages communicated in this type of activity. Hospitality reflects the ability to receive children on their own terms, not manipulating them for personal goals.

#### *Compassion*

Children possess a great capacity for compassion. Children respond to the physical and emotional needs of other children or older adults. Children utilize their compassionate hearts when they engage in raising money or resources for needy causes. The range of fund-raising possibilities depends on the level of need. Children need to know more about ministries they are not directly connected with (like global mission). Providing key stories, particularly of other children, provide an important "bridge" between a local children's ministry and a global setting. A child may be able to participate directly in compassionate ministries when guided by adults. Kids need to know explicit guidelines; they need very direct training on appropriate behavior, for instance, when in a home for the elderly or a compassionate ministry setting.



Acts of compassionate service can occur both within and beyond the local congregation. May, et al., in *Children Matter* (2005), offer several practices both to church and neighborhood:

#### Service to the Church Family (302)

- Wash nursery toys
- Empty trash containers
- Weed flowerbeds
- Hold doors open as people enter
- Pick up trash in the church yard
- Make simple gifts for sick church members
- Adopt an elderly person to provide assistance to and play games with
- Serve during worship services

#### Community Service (303-304)

- Pick up trash in the neighborhood
- Ask area merchants if pairs of children may help with simple tasks
- Wash windows—for free, of course (taller children)
- Ask to help clean up construction sites
- Ask to help moms at parks with toddlers
- Spend time regularly visiting residents of a nursing home (not just during the holidays)
- At Christmas, sing carols door-to-door
- Participate in Earth Day (April 22) activities, such as planting trees or a garden at church or in the neighborhood, or clean up a nearby park

Of course, each idea requires adult supervision and participation. However, children should be empowered to engage in each activity as part of their own compassionate outreach. Even simple ministries provide profound experiences both for children and the people they touch through their service.




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Leaders need to be cautious when it comes to fund-raising for compassionate ministries locally and globally. Fund-raisers may unintentionally focus on the very source of resources that aid the children and parents. Leaders have to be careful not to place an undue burden on parents, expecting them to support the ministry in general and specific events as well. Instead, fund-raisers should focus on third-party members either in the church or the community at large. Special instructions may need to be given to children on whom they should ask to support a compassionate ministry effort. Leaders may want to take children to particular community settings, where adults may be willing to support a food drive if children approach them for donations. In every case, children need to be able to see the results of their efforts, if only in a small way. When leaders receive thank-you cards or other expressions of gratitude, they can help children appreciate the work they undertook for a ministry fund-raiser.

### *Witness as Vocation*

Witness defines a large category that includes any time a child lives out the gospel before others. Witness can include merely modeling a Christian walk before others. A number of theologians and ministers have reflected on the basic role or “vocation” of each child before God (Patrick Brennan, editor, *The Vocation of the Child*, 2008). While there may be multiple interpretations, children need to be prepared to understand that their daily lives reflect something of their belief and trust in Jesus. Living out vocation may include useful contributions to family life such as doing chores and tasks that are both consistent with the child’s ability and necessary for the sake of the home (Brennan, 295–323). Beyond basic service within the family, children have a number of other interests and abilities. A child can express Christian commitment as they seek to be a strong student, a dedicated athlete, musician, member of a student club, or member of a family. Children’s leaders need to help children realize that every aspect of a child’s life provides living out a vocation or calling that represents their dedication toward God and others. Learning this principle early helps children to seek connections in adult lives. Parents should be encouraged to speak with their children about how God remains active in adult work, family life, even recreation. Children can then model appropriate behavior consistent with Christian virtues like faith, hope, and love.

Of course, children’s leaders may have to work to distinguish vocation (doing something out of love for God) from performance (doing something to the best of one’s ability to gain public attention). Children in some settings struggle with the need to perform, to demonstrate success, often for the sake of adults, especially parents. Children need to see that giving their best means doing what they can

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consistent with their Christian convictions, not always finishing first in an event. Children's leaders may have to remind children that they live by grace so that each child may participate but not necessarily succeed in every venture. Learning to "lose graciously" may be one of the toughest vocational goals for a child, but this knowledge will serve them later in life.


*Witness as Proclamation*

Witness can include the act of proclamation as well as personal evangelism. These public acts include specific opportunities for ministry before other people through art, drama, music, and other modes of public performance. Children may work in advance on public presentations and dramatic events. Sometimes music, such as with a children's choir, may be used in public settings. Children may well be able to express basic Christian convictions through popular songs or public presentations where adults might not have the same freedom. In every instance, children need to participate based as much on desire as talent.

Proclamation can also entail the straightforward role of preaching. Older children often have the ability to place the gospel in simple and direct terms that appeal to children and adults alike. Leaders need to work with children to help them understand that proclamation does not mean performance, that the child's personal worth does not depend on people's response to his or her proclamation. Too often children absorb a personal responsibility that combines personal worth with public perception (adults can fall into this trap as well). Children need to know that their responsibility begins and ends with obedience to God and not the response of adults in this setting.

*Ministry and Families*

Children's leaders need to recognize that ministry-oriented activities serve as prime opportunities for the whole family. Families often bond and grow through mutual ministry toward others, either in the church or community. A young child's act of hospitality often involves other family members, either in bringing the children to church or opening a home to a newfound friend. In many communities, children provide the connecting point between families; adults need to be prepared to engage the parents of their child's new friend. Compassion entails the actions of whole families in engaging the poor or raising funds for people who desperately need help. As noted, families serve as the first "donors" in a ministry fund-raising project, so children's leaders need to be sensitive about their ability to participate.

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Still, families who work together in a concrete compassionate ministry setting learn a great deal from each other. Preparing families to engage as a unit entails special attention to both the dynamics within the family as well as the dynamics between the family, as a unit, and the ministry. Parents may have to learn to let their children lead, but adults sometimes, know intuitively that children make a great difference through their natural gifts and graces. Families may also live out their Christian lives in such a powerful way that their vocation as a loving, caring, family provides a unique witness to other children, adults, and families. Much like children in a congregation, families have the ability to model the life of the church simply through their presence as a godly family. In those circumstances, leaders may be as busy pointing out the natural strengths within a family as specifying new ministry assignments.

Finally, families can live out their witness in celebration and proclamation. Churches can employ families in public testimony, through different times of the Christian calendar (Christmas or Easter) or during moments of personal triumph or grief. Leaders may be able to help families, much like children, provide poignant and meaningful testimony. The central point remains that children may often serve in ministry not only alone but also through their families.

## MINISTRY FOR AND WITH CHILDREN



### NOTES

Returning to the beginning, we can argue that ministry requires two different approaches. Leaders can provide ministry “for” children by providing key moments of direct discipleship, and also minister “with” children by focusing as advocates on these children’s contribution to the church. Blevins and Maddix summarize these approaches this way:

Often Christian educators take on the role of guarantor, advocating the role of children as participants in the church. Developmental concerns remain, however adults now condition their teaching to balance cognition with imagination so that worship, even children’s church, serves as an entrance into God’s mystery as much as behavioral training or entertainment. Formative practices seek to create a particular experience via learning a particular language and story (often through Christian calendar festivals and scriptural storytelling), engaging in redemptive community relationships, and participating in formative practices such as prayer and service. Discernment includes intake of knowledge to stretch the mind and shape character, allowing for opportunity to critically test limits, constructively expand horizons, and imaginatively intuit new possibilities. Ultimately learning results in a transformed spirituality to be lived out for students’ sake and for sake of others. Children engage in service within the church as well as compassionate action beyond, “acting out” faith and responding reflecting the ministry of the church.

Advocacy may entail a number of strategies that combine both “for” and “with.” For instance, children’s leaders may need to insure that children can be successful in their ministry to others through every phase of the ministry. Children’s leaders can guide children through the preparation, engagement, and reflection over their ministry. By working hard to prepare the children in advance of the ministry event, leading them in ministry, and inviting them to reflect after, leaders serve as both educators and advocates.

#### *Preparing for Ministry*

Depending on age level, children may need to know in advance “why” such ministry is important for the church. Kids may need explicit instruction in preparation for ministry: given direct guidelines, taught the limits of their activities, provided with safety information, and even taught basic social skills. If

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dealing with people like senior adults, children need to know how these adults may respond to them, particularly kids whose daily lives include little social contact. Advance preparation may help a child respond with compassion rather than recoil in fear.

Older children may also participate in the planning stage of a ministry. Children's leaders might begin with the problem a church faces, or a troubled area that needs ministry. Kids can research the needs and explore the range of options of addressing a need either in the church or in the community. Children have creative imaginations that can generate interesting or incredibly difficult ideas. Leaders can help children through a decision-making process to determine the best idea based on resources and ability. If older children have the opportunity, with guidance, to plan a ministry from its beginning, they learn a number of beneficial skills, while also gaining confidence in their ministry ability.

#### *Engaging in Ministry*

When engaging in ministry, children often need direct assistance and direction. Such efforts as gathering goods may require an adult being present when a child approaches a home or apartment. Children may demonstrate an enthusiastic attitude early in a ministry event but quickly lose interest if adults do not help moderate their activity alongside their enthusiasm.

Leaders may need to assess the ministry as it occurs. Children often need time in the midst of the ministry to pause and reorient themselves to the task at hand. Young children need to be guided from one caring senior adult to another. Children might become discouraged if they do not see early results. Leaders can point out small successes, encourage patience, and explore alternatives that children might not see in the middle of a ministry event. When a young child brings a friend to church as a result of outreach, leaders need to be both welcoming to the new child as well as encouraging of the other child's efforts. Even a private word of greeting (to the new child) or appreciation (to the member) may make all the difference for follow-up.

Often, children may prove exceptional in starting a ministry event but lack the social awareness to know how to end the effort. Leaders may want to set specific time limits on an event and serve as the "time keeper" so that children will not have to determine how to disengage. Even as children end an event, there may be a moment to celebrate and "bless" what has occurred during that time.

 **NOTES***Reflection*

Too often children do not have an opportunity to look back and reflect on their efforts. Reflection can include celebration but also provides an opportunity for children to find meaning and purpose in their efforts. To begin, children's leaders may want to present the outcomes of the ministry to a larger group, either families or the whole congregation. These celebrations may include pictures of the ministry, testimonies, even a demonstration (a role-play or display of goods collected). As in preparing for the ministry, children need direction and guidance so that celebrations prove to be occasions of joy and appreciation, not embarrassment. Leaders may want a period of time between the actual ministry and the celebration. They may need to work with ministers to insure that children and families know in advance when they might be recognized, so that children are not singled out inappropriately in a spontaneous moment.

Reflection may take place either before or after a time of celebration. Reflection allows leaders to check the children's perceptions of their ministry and also of the conditions they encountered. For instance, in some affluent settings, children might get the wrong impression of poverty. Rather than realizing the need to help people in poverty, a high-performance child may feel the need to work even harder so he or she will not end up like "those" people in poverty. Rather than encouraging compassion, the leader inadvertently fosters anxiety in the child. Without proper opportunity to reflect, the child may not articulate this concern and leaders may not know the need for pastoral care.

Reflection with children can occur both on an individual and group basis. Children may need time to process both internally and verbally, but not always verbally with a larger group of people. Leaders may design the reflection so children begin with a leader or caring adult, and then move to a circle to share their thoughts and experiences. Older children may appear more ready to handle a group reflection, but understand not all children possess an outgoing personality, so do not require everyone to participate in the reflection. Reflections may also involve some other activity, like drawing the ministry experience, writing a personal letter to God or Jesus about the experience, even creating large displays that include explanation of each child's contribution.

Regardless of method, reflection provides an opportunity to deepen a meaningful ministry effort as well as reveal misgivings and misunderstandings. Remember that reflection implies assessment but that children need not use the language of a successful or unsuccessful event. Instead, ask children first what they enjoyed

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about the ministry; second, what they might change in their own attitude or approach to the ministry to make it more enjoyable; and finally, what kind of changes they would make if the ministry is repeated. By starting with a positive assessment, and moving to awareness of personal motivation, the final reflection will serve as a balanced assessment of the ministry activity.

Children demonstrate ministry first by their very place within the kingdom of God, and through active engagement either in the church or the community. Children serve through a variety of methods. Ministry for and with children entails our coming alongside children as advocates and guides in the midst of their ministry. We need to help children prepare for their ministry, serve alongside them as they engage in ministry, and offer opportunities to celebrate, reflect, and explore the meaning of their ministry following the event. In doing so, we follow Jesus' command that places children in the center of God's kingdom as both dependent and powerful agents of grace for the sake of the whole church community.

## APPLICATION

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**NOTES**

1. Talk with parents about a time when children made a difference in their lives just by their presence.
2. Discuss with children's leaders three or four ministries where children have made a difference. Can you classify them as ministries of hospitality, compassion, vocation, or proclamation?
3. Design a ministry event for and with children. Be sure to include elements that help children (and their families if possible) prepare, engage, and reflect.



## EXAM



### NOTES

1. Children represent the kingdom of God through:
  - A. Receiving and expressing holiness.
  - B. Modeling power.
  - C. Witnessing that Jesus loves them even if they do not understand or appreciate Jesus.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.
  
2. God intends that every aspect of the life course (newborn to senior adult) serve a broad role in creation and the church.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
3. Ministry with children begins just by noticing children in the church.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
4. The danger to hospitality is:
  - A. Abuse.
  - B. Avarice.
  - C. Competition.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.
  
5. Children do not need to know about the ministries they are supporting; they just need encouragement to be compassionate.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
6. Children can make a difference merely through their “vocation” as a child.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
7. \_\_\_\_\_ can be dangerous to children who proclaim the gospel.
  - A. Lack of preparation.
  - B. Simple sermons.
  - C. Performance mindset.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.



8. Parents may have to let their children lead in family service projects.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
9. Ministry for and with children requires:
  - A. Planning.
  - B. Staying out of the way so children can do ministry.
  - C. Finding meaning and purpose to what children have done in service.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. How might the church lift up the idea that everyone, regardless of age, is a minister in his or her own right? How can we encourage the church to see children as a “means of grace?”
2. Do children serve others through our congregation? If so, how do they serve? Where might they serve in the future?
3. Do we encourage children, even young children, to see their lives as a vocation (a calling before God) in every area of their life? Why or why not?
4. In ministries of outreach and service, do we include families and even young children? Do we do a good job helping them in preparation, engagement, and reflection, or are there weak spots in our approach to ministry?

*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?*