

Small Groups and Children: What Do We Do?

6 ideas on including children in small groups

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What do we do with the kids? This is one of the perennial struggles for many small groups. It was rarely a problem for previous generations who attended Sunday school classes while their kids were cared for by a team of dedicated volunteers. But as more churches have traded classes for groups, one demographic is often left out: parents with small children. There are, however, several solutions to this challenge that engage rather than exclude families.

Why does this matter?

Before we explore solutions, we should answer a simple question. Why does this matter? After all, parents are already stretched by careers and hustling kids from daycare to school to sports. Some might suggest it's enough if parents make it to a weekend service and have a few spiritual conversations at the dinner table. Why not allow families at this stage of life to take a breather from groups?

Along with needing an intimate community, parents set the tone and teach life lessons to their children as much by what they do as by what they say. "More is caught than taught," as the old adage says. When parents participate in a Christian community through small groups, they express a value to their children through actions, not merely words. Christian parents are eager to see their kids forge healthy relationships with other kids who will encourage their faith. This becomes more pronounced as children move through adolescence. If parents want this for their kids, it's wise to model this value when their kids are small.

The most common metaphor for the church in the New Testament is *family*. While broad participation in the church as a whole can show children the extended family, a small group shows what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ. Family-oriented groups provide spiritual aunts and uncles and cousins for those who participate.

Here are the most common ways groups include (or choose not to include) children in the group:

1. Children NOT in the group

Most small groups are adults only. While children are wonderful gifts, they often distract from meaningful discussion. Nursing babies may be welcome, but once children are mobile it's time for parents to find someone to watch them elsewhere.

The family and the group are two separate entities that rarely intersect. The group knows about each other's children through stories, the occasional prayer for the kids, or interactions before and after weekend church services. The kids may know about the group and the group may know about the kids, but the two worlds rarely collide.

This approach requires that parents turn to family, friends, or a hired sitter to watch the kids. Some innovative churches have encouraged forming relationship networks where parents from a Sunday night group take the kids of parents who meet on Wednesday night and vice versa. It's economical but pretty complicated to arrange. More affluent churches may even reimburse childcare costs of group participants.

The obvious benefit is that kids are taken care of and parents can focus on the group experience. For parents who don't have family or trusted caretakers nearby, this presents a challenge. Others find the cost prohibitive, or feel they are already away from their kids enough because of career demands and don't want to further remove themselves with another commitment. That's where the next solution may fit the need.

2. Children OCCASIONALLY in the group

I'm a Michigan native and my wife is from Wisconsin. Throughout the years, we have served churches in Kentucky, California, and Oklahoma. As a result, our kids have grown up far away from extended family. Families like ours often crave surrogate relatives for their children. They want aunts, uncles, and cousins for their kids, but the small group just described doesn't offer quite enough interaction between adults and children.

These small groups may prefer a solution that lets them enjoy time with other adults and also creates special times and events that include children. In doing so, group members get to know one another more deeply as they get to know each other's children. Kids also have the opportunity to meet adults who are important in the lives of their parents.

These groups often enjoy a quarterly gathering of families as they celebrate holidays or take on a service project together. Consider a special Christmas party that includes children. Maybe incorporate some fun activities like Christmas crafts or decorating cookies. During the summer, gather all the families and have a special picnic, play backyard games, or go to a lake together. There is no shortage of fun, family activities that can be easily planned throughout the year. These are relatively easy ways to include children in this type of group structure.

3. Children NEAR the group

This solution ratchets up the connection between the family and the group. The kids are on the premises, but they're quickly whisked away to a playroom so the adults can get down to business. Other than the very beginning and the conclusion, children are not part of the group.

Groups that choose this option require a space for both the group and for the kids. It doesn't work so well if parents are distracted by kids in an adjoining room. Once space is solved, childcare during group time must be considered. Some churches recruit middle or high school students as sitters if the group has trouble recruiting someone to help with the kids. While not ideal, some groups save money by having adults from the group take turns watching the kids. This approach is fine, but it does mean at least two parents aren't present for the entire group time.

Family groups without babies and who have elementary children can sometimes put the kids in a room with a video or with some toys. This either works well or turns into the Lord of the Flies. Parents who take this approach need to be aware that things could go downhill quickly if the social dynamics aren't right.

4. Children AROUND the group

Some groups enjoy what many would consider disorder (or downright chaos). Kids wander in and out. Babies might be passed from person to person. Children are not participants, but they are not necessarily a distraction either. The small group discussion carries on even though the children might disrupt.

Viewing quiet and orderliness as rather dull and undesirable, these groups thrive on unpredictability, variety, and interruption. Groups like this will find the constant action of kids to be a healthy dynamic of their community. Think of this as a family party where all generations converge. Sure, kids may interrupt the conversation or need attention, but that's normal in a family gathering.

This type of group might seem too distracting and it's certainly not right approach for every group. Even so, it's probably pretty close to the first-century Christian experience.

5. Children IN the group

Some groups go beyond allowing the kids to wander in and out of the group time and actually include them in the meeting. While not tailoring topics and questions specifically to the kids, they welcome participation from everybody. Adults benefit by hearing youthful perspectives and children benefit by hearing mature voices share their insights.

When a group decides children should be in the group, they begin to think of kids as a significant and vibrant part of the experience. Rather than a necessary interruption, children become welcome members of the group. By being around the discussion and Bible reading the children pick up on different aspects of the lesson. Perhaps a question or two from the discussion is specifically worded for the children and they are asked to participate in the discussion or share prayer requests.

6. Children as ESSENTIAL in the group

For a select few, a "family group" is a welcome alternative. Topics, questions, and small group experiences are designed with all ages in mind. Adults want *and expect* to hear from kids. The group wants everybody to participate.

C.S. Lewis said that the proof that you understand a concept is how well you can explain it to a child. Far from dumbing down the group to accommodate children, a group that focuses on all age groups has the potential to go deeper and have a lasting impact on participants because of the creativity required to engage all generations. Groups who pursue this approach may benefit from seeking resources and curriculum suggestions from the children's ministry at their church.

When groups purposely decide to engage the whole family, everything is arranged to reflect this—from the curriculum to the environment to the time and day the group meets. It's not always easy, but it's worth the effort. Having children in your group can be a wonderful opportunity to spur on growth for all who participate.

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