

## Play Group

Play Groups for under school aged children remain the most successful way to invite non-church families into the church grounds for a church-run activity, and break down any negative perceptions held about churches and their members through friendship.

**Aim** – The first step in beginning or running a playgroup is to step back for a moment and try to put into words the aim of the group, as this will guide the running of the group. It is much more than just providing a weekly place for children to play. To be successful as a ministry activity of the church, the group needs to be intentional. The aim is likely to include goals such as connecting the church with the local community; and showing love and support to community families as they love and raise their children. The most important thing is building friendships with the community families who join the group, with both the children and their carers. From this base there is the opportunity to run extra social events such as dinners or weekend family activities, to reach out to the whole family and build these friendships further. As these friendships are built, opportunities will arise to invite the group members to wider church activities, events and services. However, these invitations are unlikely to be fruitful unless they are based in friendship or a sense of connection with the church.

**Christian Content** – depending on the aim of the group and the community in which it is based (and the format chosen), you may choose to have no Christian content, a couple of Christian songs or a bible story each week, or a planned program of bible content to intentionally run the group in a similar way to a Sunday School program. Given the young ages of the children, the scope of this program should be fairly basic – a more important outcome is building positive associations in the children's minds with the church property and the people they met there.

**Format** – There are many different styles of playgroup, and the one you choose will depend on the availability and abilities / interests of the church members who will be running it. If there are only a couple of Christian mums / volunteers available to commit to the group each week, a less structured format will probably work best, so that these people are free to use their time talking with the community families as their children play together, rather than being tied up running activities. Some ideas for formats are:

- **Free play only** – if you have access to a church hall and / or outdoor play area with a range of toys available for use, and only a couple of Christian parents / volunteers available to be responsible for running the group, this format can work well. All that is involved is opening up the play area and putting out some toys, and packing up / locking up again at the end. It is also a low cost format, unless you wish the people attending to make a small contribution each week towards toy wear and tear, or craft costs if you choose to use any craft / painting supplies. It is a relatively easy way to fill a morning, with minimal organising required. It is an easy format for Christian parents (typically mums) to invite their Mother's Group friends to, and the toys put out each week can be chosen to suit the ages / stages of the children attending. However, without committed Christian members intentionally reaching out each week to the community families who come along, these groups can either lose their focus (not fulfil the stated aim of the activity), or lose momentum and become 'cliquey'. They are harder for a new family to feel comfortable to just turn up to. Another challenge with this playgroup format is connecting with families from the wider community, as new members join most successfully through personal invitation. A sign at the front of the church can help, as can providing the details of the group to the early childhood health centre. Also, there is no commitment required from families attending, and casual attendance can make it harder to build friendships.
- **Special activity group** (eg music, dance, art) – if one of the Christian parents / volunteers has training or interest in one of these areas, a more specific weekly activity group can be run. These are usually very popular, and a sign out the front may be all that is needed to attract interest from community families. If the group is well run, membership will grow by word-of-mouth as members bring their friends. This type of format takes more planning and preparation, and potentially resources, depending on the activity chosen. If starting a new group in a new church, a music group can be run with limited toys / resources, and simple percussion instruments can be easily and cheaply made. It is not necessary to have training in the chosen activity, just enthusiasm and commitment to running the group. The internet is a very valuable resource in terms of ideas. It is common for this type of group to attract a weekly fee (dependent on the demographics of your area), and this money could be used to pay a trained person to run the activity each week if none of the church members feels able to do it, or in order to free them up to spend their time talking to the

community families. In terms of intentionally connecting with community families, it is important to build in time within this format for social interaction, in order to build these relationships. This might involve morning tea at the end, or a time of free play with some church toys once the structured activity is finished.

- Structured format – this involves a regular structure of activities over the course of the play group time, including activities like indoor play, outdoor play, morning tea, craft, music time or story time, depending on the resources available. Children like predictable structure and repetition, and unless the children are already very comfortable with the venue and the people, it can be easier to engage them with a regular pattern of changing activities. However, the structure needs to be simple and flexible enough to allow social interaction along the way! This kind of format provides a natural way to include Christian songs / verses / stories, if desired. It is an easy format for new families to feel comfortable turning up to if they don't already know anyone. Depending on the activities chosen, there is more organisation required for this kind of format, and more Christian parents / volunteers are needed to help the group run smoothly, and still allow intentional interaction with community families. However, the regular structure can help maintain the momentum of the group, particularly if a theme is chosen to base the activities around each week / month / school term. A theme can make life easier in planning the program, and choosing songs, stories or crafts, or even related games and activities. Once again, the internet is a very valuable resource in terms of ideas.

Some ideas of themes that work well include:

- ❖ At The Beach
- ❖ Under The Sea
- ❖ Things That Go (Vehicles etc)
- ❖ On The Farm
- ❖ In The Garden
- ❖ Colours
- ❖ Numbers / Counting
- ❖ Australiana
- ❖ Let's Go On Safari (Jungle / African Animals)
- ❖ Marvellous Me (Senses, parts of the body etc)
- ❖ Weather / Seasons
- ❖ At The Circus
- ❖ People Who Help Us