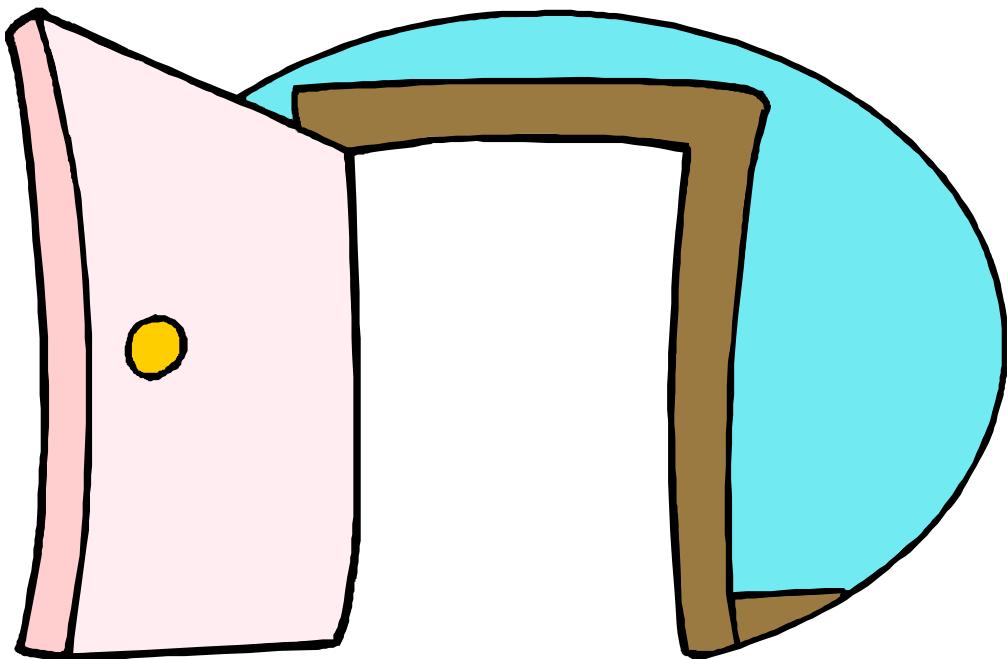


O.P.E.N.

A Local Church Strategy to Intentionally
Introduce Children to Christ



"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."
Revelation 3:20

Skip Arnhart
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O.P.E.N.

A Local Church Strategy to Intentionally Introduce Children to Christ

The O.P.E.N. Strategy is designed with the local church in mind. It is a four-part strategy that is more of a process than a program. Each part of this strategy is easily integrated into all aspects of any children's ministry. For maximum effect the local church should follow each step in the order they are presented. (That is, it is difficult to focus on the Parents of children unless the ministry is Organized to do so. Or, equipping people in Evangelism is much easier when the Parents and teachers are all on your side and agree with the direction of the ministry.) The four parts of the O.P.E.N. Strategy are:

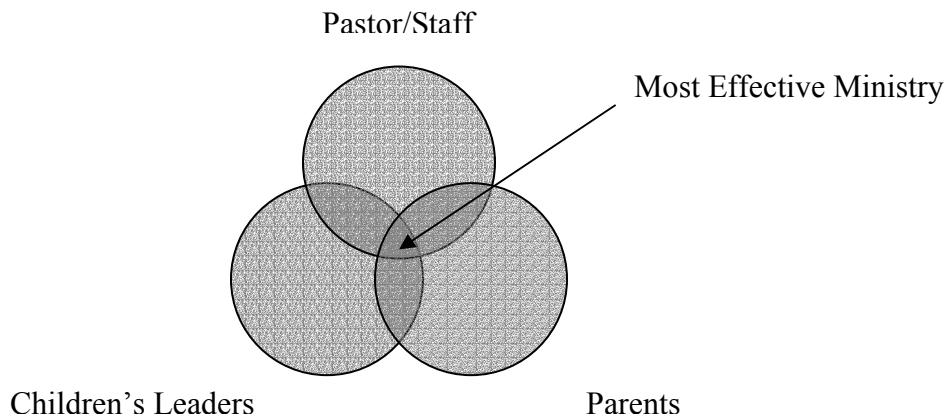
1. **O**rganize - Organize the children's ministry and home to create an environment of intentional evangelism
2. **P**arents - Equip the parents to be the spiritual mentors God expects
3. **E**vangelism - Equip those who have contact with the children to communicate the gospel in terms a child can understand
4. **N**ew Believers - Assimilate new believers into the church and begin a life-long process of spiritual growth

This document presents the O.P.E.N Strategy in four parts. These parts correspond to the outline above. At the end of each section there is an article that will provide additional help to incorporate the O.P.E.N Strategy into your current children's ministry.

Three major groups within the local church will contribute significantly to each part of this strategy. These groups are:

1. **Pastor/Staff** - Can be one person (pastor or children's minister), a part of the ministerial staff, or the entire ministerial staff of a local church
2. **Children's Leaders** - Those who work with the children (volunteer or paid) in various programs/activities
3. **Parents** - The primary caregivers of the children

It is important to recognize that each group listed above has an important part in the spiritual development of the children in the church. Not only do these groups have their own unique responsibilities in this development, their work in some aspects must overlap. The ideal relationship of these three groups can be illustrated as follows:



The intersecting groups illustrate the need for them to work together to be the most effective in the spiritual development of the children. Also, the point at which all three intersect represents the ideal situation in working with children. In other words, a ministry to children is most effective when all three groups work together with a common purpose for the children. Each part of the O.P.E.N. Strategy will list the responsibilities of these groups.

One other item is worth noting before discussing the O.P.E.N. Strategy and that is the Three R's of children's ministry. These are: **Relevant**, **Relationship**, and **Repetition**. Everything done in the children's ministry must be **Relevant**. That is, we must communicate biblical truths in a fashion that is **Relevant** to the lives of children. Children cannot relate well with life in biblical times, so we must intentionally attempt to contextualize the message for today. The ministry must also be intentional in building **Relationships**. People respect and follow individuals they trust. Building trust means that you must spend time with those to whom you minister. Finally, everything in children's ministry must be built upon **Repetition**. People need to hear the same message over and over for understanding and application. The key with children is to present the same message over and over but in different formats. Keep these Three R's in mind when working through and

implementing this strategy. With each step in this strategy ask, "How can I make this **Relevant?**", "How can I use this to build **Relationships?**", and "How can I **Repeat** this truth in a different format?"

And now, the O.P.E.N strategy for the local church.

Step 1

Organize

"The bridgers (today's children) must hear the clear and convictional teachings of God's Word. They must hear God's plan for the family, for marriages, and for parental responsibility. They must know the consequences of living against God's plan, even if they were raised in an environment that taught otherwise. Our churches must indeed become safe havens for hurting bridgers, but those havens must have clear and convictional boundaries." (The Bridger Generation, Thom S. Rainer, Broadman & Holman, 1997, page 65)

Organize

Organize the church, children's ministry, and home to create an environment of intentional evangelism.

Why Organize?

Jesus taught that children could believe in Him (Matthew 18:6). God desires children to be saved (Matthew 18:14). Paul commended Timothy's heritage of being taught the Holy Scripture from infancy because that is what makes a person wise for salvation (2 Timothy 3:15). True faith comes from hearing God's Word rather than by accident (Romans 10:17).

How to Organize Your Children's Ministry

1. Pastor/Staff (Job: Do the planning)

The pastor and staff should initiate the process. They should begin praying, asking God to help them build a ministry to children that is effective and relevant. The pastor/staff should hand select one leader from each activity/program within the children's ministry (i.e. Sunday School, missions programs, music programs, VBS, TeamKid, etc.) to serve on a planning team. This team is to regularly meet, pray, and plan the ministry. Each activity/program involving children must be represented at these meetings! These meetings can be held anywhere that is convenient, but need to be in a relaxed atmosphere. The purpose of these meetings is to fine-tune the current ministry to children, not to recreate it. This group is not to be the watchdog for the ministry, but to assist in developing the current ministry into all God wants it to be. Also, this team must determine to meet as long as possible. Refining the children's ministry is an ongoing process, so each individual in this team must be committed to the purpose. The pastor/staff will lead this hand selected team to pray, establish a purpose for the ministry, set age appropriate goals, plan the activities/programs, recruit and train volunteers, enact and evaluate the activities/programs. The pastor/staff and this team will be responsible for communicating to the children's leaders, parents, and congregation why there is a need for organizing the children's

ministry. Without the support from children's leaders, parents, and workers initiating changes will be difficult.

The pastor/staff (or his designates) must assume the responsibility of equipping, supporting, and resourcing the parents in establishing godly homes. The pastor/staff (or whoever he designates) should teach parents how to establish a regular family devotion time. The pastor/staff (or those he designates) should help parents form accountability groups to motivate and encourage them. The pastor/staff (or those he designates) should teach parents how to prioritize the family and structure time together.

Summary of Pastor/Staff Responsibilities:

- Begin praying for the ministry to children
- Hand select a leader from each program/activity that the church sponsors for children (it is important that every program/activity is represented) to serve on an organizing team
- Plan a regular meeting time for this team of leaders
- Guide this team in praying, evaluating the current ministry, establishing a purpose for the ministry, setting goals for each age group, initiating the plan, informing the church of the plan, evaluating and fine-tuning the process
- Assume the responsibility of equipping, supporting, and resourcing parents in establishing godly homes.

2. Children's Leaders (Job: Implement the plans)

This is the group that will have the most contact with the children in the church. They are the teachers in the ministry. This group will be responsible for implementing the process and striving for the goals established by the pastor/staff and team mentioned above. Not only should the children's leaders be committed to the children, they should also be committed to supporting the organizing process. Each leader must understand that a better-organized ministry will make their work much easier (not more difficult as some will perceive). This group should be open to

change and flexible to the point of being able to change quickly. They must be people of prayer. They must be creative. These leaders should be able to express biblical truths in a relevant and interesting fashion. To be effective leaders must be open with one another. There must be open communication between the leaders, parents and pastor/staff.

Summary of Children's Leader's Responsibilities:

- Implement the plans of the leadership team
- Must be committed to the plan
- Should be open to change and flexible
- Must be committed to prayer
- Must be able to creatively teach biblical truths
- Must be open and honest to other two groups
(Pastor/staff and parents)
- Must be more interested in overall spiritual development
of children than just teaching a lesson

3. Parents (Job: Organize their home to intentionally train their children)

Not only should the church be organized, but homes should be organized also to reach children. That is, parents must be intentional in teaching biblical truths in the home for the purpose of leading their children to an active and growing relationship with Jesus. Parents need to establish a regular devotion time. This time needs to be appropriate for the ages of their children. Parents need to briefly plan in advance what they will discuss during this devotion time and how they will discuss it (i.e. Will everyone participate?, Is there an object lesson?, What needs to be prepared?, What supplies do I need?, How long will this time last?, What is the one truth I want the children to learn?, etc). The pastor/staff will assume the responsibility of equipping, supporting, and resourcing parents in establishing godly homes.

Summary of Parent's Responsibilities:

- Establish a regular devotion time for family
- Gather the appropriate materials for the devotion time
- Adequately plan this devotion time

- Be able to rely on the church for accountability, support, encouragement, advice, and resources

Key Resource

Sandcastles to Building Block: How to Build an Evangelistic Children's Ministry (ISBN 0840085397) - This is a workbook designed to guide those who work with children in the process of strengthening their current children's ministry.

Additional Resources

Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., ed., Children's Ministry that Works! The Basics and Beyond, Group Books, Loveland CO, 1991.

Choun, Robert J. and Michael S. Lawson, The Christian Educators Handbook on Children's Ministry, Baker Books, Grand Rapids MI, 1998.

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Fleming, Kendra and Mindy Hall, The Priority Level 1: Empower to Lead (Notebook), Priority Publishing, Inc., Virginia Beach VA, 2000

Rose, Ty, Adventure Land Children's Ministry, Saddleback Community Church, 1994.

Acts 1:8 Kids, North American Mission Board, Alpharetta GA, 2001.

Trent, John, and Rick Osborne and Kurt Bruner, Spiritual Growth of Children, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton IL, 2000

Boucher, Pamela K., and Darrell Vandergriff, Children and Worship: An Administrative Guide, LifeWay Press, Nashville TN, 1999

Article for Additional Help

Developing a Children's Ministry that is Intentional in Introducing Children to Christ

Adapted from the Resource *Sandcastles to Building Blocks: How to Build an Evangelistic Children's Ministry*

Scripture reveals that children are special to Jesus. In one instance, parents were taking their children to Jesus for Him to pray for their little ones. Jesus welcomed this act of trust and dedication. However, the disciples thought that Jesus was much too busy to consider any of these children and they tried to stop the flow of parents and children to the Lord. Jesus responded to the disciples actions by saying, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14). There was never a time when Jesus turned children away. He always welcomed and included them in His ministry, just as He did with adults.

As Jesus was concerned with children, so should the local church. The church is to be a place where children are welcomed and trained in the truths of the Bible. Sadly, many churches do not see children as Jesus did and, as a result, put little effort into developing a ministry to children that is well planned and intentional in training. Of course training within a children's ministry should begin with building biblical foundations in infants and preschoolers and should culminate in guiding older children to Christ. The process should then continue by developing these children into faithful disciples. Many churches may not have a well-defined children's ministry simply because they do not know how to organize and plan a comprehensive children's ministry. Others may lack an intentional ministry to children because they just do not want to invest the time. Whatever the case, it must be stressed that Jesus viewed children as a valuable part of the kingdom of God. Therefore, the church must strive for and fulfill this vision of Jesus.

The following steps are designed to help the leadership of a local church to plan and develop a comprehensive ministry to children that is biblical and intentional in introducing children Christ.

1. Develop a purpose for the children's ministry

The leadership of the church should meet and pray asking God, "What do You want to accomplish through this children's ministry?" Begin to write down items that God reveals to you about the structure and direction of the children's ministry. From these God given ideas, develop a purpose statement for the entire children's ministry of your church.

The purpose statement should be general, brief, and biblical. Be sure to support your statement with Scripture. This statement will provide a boundary for the entire ministry. Every activity and program should fit within the boundaries of the purpose statement. In writing the purpose statement consider these three fundamental truths.

- a. God has a concern for children (learning and discipleship)
- b. Children can have a relationship with God (evangelism)
- c. Children have a responsibility to others (missions)

Write a purpose statement for your children's ministry that encompasses the truths just stated. The purpose statement can read something like this:

The Children's Ministry of _____ church exists to train children in the following areas:

- 1. (fill in as God leads the group)
- 2.
- 3.

2. Evaluate your current ministry to children

Assess each age group separately to determine if the current programs and activities fit within the purpose statement developed. If not, then those activities or programs must be eliminated or altered to fit the standards set. Evaluate the spiritual progress each age group is currently making by asking, "Are these children growing

the way God intends?' When answering this question, consider the following categories.

- a. Developmental effectiveness-Is there an intentional effort to reach out to children at their level of understanding?
- b. Complementing activities-Do the activities and programs currently in place work together to effectively enhance the spiritual learning of the children?
- c. Evangelistic emphasis-Are there intentional efforts to present the truths of the gospel on the children's level of understanding?

Evaluating the spiritual condition of a specific age group is very subjective, that is, it is your opinion. Only God knows their true spiritual condition. However, answering this question should reveal to the planning group the strengths and weaknesses of the current ministry. This is the information needed for the next step.

3. Set goals for each age group within your children's ministry

The previous exercises have revealed the spiritual condition of the children within your ministry. This is a starting point. You must know where the children are spiritually before you can set a direction for them to grow. In setting the goals, consider the following tips.

- a. Each age group should have its own set of goals. The reason for this is because children have different learning capabilities at different ages. A first grader does not learn as a sixth grader does. Neither can a first grader learn the material age appropriate for a sixth grader.
- b. Goals are specific and measurable. They should be skills and knowledge that God desires for the children to learn. When setting goals consider the age and learning capabilities of the children.
- c. Goals should fit well within the purpose statement. Use the fundamental truths mentioned in step number one as a guide for setting goals.
- d. Goals should be achievable. Do not set goals that are impossible for an age group to achieve.

e. Goals should be biblical. Support each goal with Scripture.

4. Develop a strategy to achieve the goals set

Now that the goals are set, determine how best to achieve them. Each activity or program within an age group will have its own strategy to accomplish the goals set. Here are some tips to achieve the goals you have set.

- a. Each activity or program within an age group should have a part in striving toward the goals set. Here is something to keep in mind. Each activity and program will not achieve ALL of the goals individually. However, the activities and programs TOGETHER will achieve ALL the goals set. For example, you may have eight goals set for one age group and the music program of that group is designed to only achieve two of those goals. This is acceptable as long as the other activities in the age group achieve the other six.
- b. The style of teaching must be age appropriate. Teachers must understand how their age groups learn and be equipped to teach accordingly.
- c. Plan to achieve the goals set in a twelve-month time frame. Write a timetable of steps to achieve goals. Section this timetable by months and quarters. Be sure to share this timetable with all teachers to make them aware of your expectations.
- d. Build intentional evangelism into the strategy where appropriate. Determine which programs and activities will intentionally present the gospel to children. Train the leader of this program to present the gospel to children (consider using the *Sharing God's Special Plan with Children* materials). Determine how and where the one-on-one counseling will occur. Determine who will do the follow-up with the children and their parents.
- e. Incorporate teacher training in your strategies. Train the teachers in the children's ministry to work with their specific age groups. Consider requiring teacher training for all who work with the children.

- f. Be accountable for all of the time the children are in your care. Plan for NO wasted time when the children are at church.
- g. Teach not only for head knowledge, but also for a heart change. The ultimate goal of any ministry is to guide individuals to a personal and active relationship with Christ. As you are planning be sure you include activities to allow God to work in the hearts of the children.
- h. Use a balanced approach. Not all activities can be 100% evangelism. Neither can all activities be 100% outreach to the community. Consider the goals you have set and equally distribute the responsibility for achieving those goals among the activities you have planned.

5. Measure the progress toward achieving the goals set.

Measuring the progress toward achieving the goals will allow you to see if the ministry is heading in the right direction. Measure regularly and reward the teachers and children for making progress toward the goals set. Each activity must be flexible enough to adjust if you realize one is not helping to achieve the goals. Also, if one or more activities are not accomplishing what you want, evaluate the teachers' methods. The teachers may lack the proper training to teach the age group they are with.

6. Spend some time working on the small details of an effective children's ministry.

Consider these items:

- a. Budget-Is there enough money to do all we want to accomplish this year? If not, how can we raise more money (or cut our plans)?
- b. Calendar-Be sure that events for the children are scheduled at appropriate times. For example, do not plan events on holidays or peak vacation times. Consider the parents' schedules and financial situations when planning special events.
- c. Recruit and Train Teachers-Look for teachers who have a desire and are gifted at working with children. Pray for God to direct you to workers. Enlist others to help you pray and

search for workers. Once you have them, give them proper training. Do not throw new teachers into a room of children without adequate training and preparation.

- d. Plan an agenda for each activity. Know who is doing what and for how long. If the teachers are not prepared to train the children, the children will control the class and the teachers.
- e. Keep the church informed. Present to the church the progress of the children's ministry; even the small steps. Inform them of new and upcoming events. Share your vision and strategy with the adults of the church. When they are informed, they are better equipped to support and pray for the ministry.

7. Evaluate the ministry as you put your planning to work.

As the ministry is progressing ask yourself these questions:

- a. Did this activity achieve (or make a step toward) the goals set?
- b. What worked well in this activity?
- c. What needs to be improved upon in this activity?
- d. Did we have enough workers in this activity?
- e. Were the workers prepared?
- f. How could I have better prepared the workers?
- g. Were the workers properly trained in working with this age group?
- h. What head knowledge did the children gain as a result of this activity?
- i. Was the gospel presented in this activity? Was it presented with integrity?
- j. How well was the one-on-one counseling done with the children?
- k. How well was the follow-up with the children and their families done?

No ministry is perfect. But if we take the time to develop a comprehensive plan for intentional teaching, our ministry becomes much more efficient and effective. God desires for everything in His church to be done in an orderly fashion. "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Corinthians 14:40). Planning and structure enhances order and allows the activity to better focus on God and His plan for our lives.

Step 2

Parents

"Your home is the single most powerful arena on earth to change a life for God." (Wilkinson, Bruce. The Prayer of Jabez. Multnomah Publishers, Inc. 2000. p. 32

In a recent interview, SBC LIfe asked Josh McDowell what he thought were the main challenges or issues for our society and for Christianity in America. He responded, "First, I would say parenting. Research shows that kids learn spiritually not in church, not in the youth group, not from the youth pastor or the pastor, but from mom and dad. I am convinced the number one responsibility of the youth worker is to help parents to relate to his or her own kids in their home." (Revell, John, "Fathers are Called to Disciple", an article in Living with Teenagers, June 2002)

Parents

Equip the parents to be the spiritual mentors God expects

Why equip parents?

Parents are ultimately responsible for the spiritual development of their children (Deuteronomy 6:4-6). The purpose of parenting is to train children to love Jesus more than they love their parents (Matthew 10:37). Effective training is done by words as well as actions (Matthew 18:6). It is the parents who train children what and how to love (Titus 2:4). It is the parent's responsibility to see that the needs of their children are met (1 Timothy 5:8).

How to Equip Parents

1. **Pastor/Staff** (Job: Help parents to create a Christ-like atmosphere in their home.)

The pastor/staff should view this step as three-fold: prayer, care, and share.

- a. Prayer - The pastor/staff should first guide parents in developing and prioritizing their own personal quiet time. Parents cannot effectively lead their children to a growing relationship with Christ if they are not actively growing themselves. This would involve teaching parents how to systematically read the Bible and pray. Provide accountability partners for them. Provide parents with other resources and training that will help them grow spiritually. Next the pastor/staff should guide parents in praying with each other. Most couples are uncomfortable praying with each other, as well as, unwilling to take the time to pray with each other. This step involves overcoming these obstacles that keep couples from praying with one another. The pastor/staff should guide parents in setting aside a time each day to pray with one another. The pastor/staff should provide resources for parents to use in this time together. A beginning point would be to guide parents to begin praying for their marriage and family. Accountability groups (or the partners mentioned above) is

another useful way to encourage prayer with spouses. A final aspect of prayer would be guiding parents to lead a prayer time with their family. Prayer in this phase must be age appropriate. Teach families how to pray with their families in creative and interesting ways. Teach them to use a journal or prayer sheet. Use a calendar to record prayer request. The pastor/staff should help parents learn ways to teach their children about prayer.

- b. Care - Parents don't want to be bad parents, but many do not know how to be godly parents. The pastor/staff should help them become the parents that God desires by guiding them to care for their children biblically. To do this, you must address relevant issues that parents deal with daily such as relationships, finances, media influences, etc. This "equipping to care" process should not be a time for condemning the society but rather helping parents raise their children in the current culture. Use the accountability partner/groups to aid in this process. The pastor/staff must help parents recognize their responsibility to oversee the spiritual development of their children. The church is there to only supplement what is happening in the home. This is contrary to most thinking and will take much prayer and detailed planning to help parents assume that responsibility.
- c. Share - Parents should be equipped to share the love of Christ with others. Children learn, not only by what they hear, but also by what they see. Children need to see their parents involved in helping others enter into a growing relationship with Christ. The pastor/staff should offer opportunities for families to encounter the unbelieving and/or unchurched for the purpose of introducing them to God and His Son, Jesus. Also, parents need to be equipped to share Christ with their own children. The pastor/staff should see that adequate evangelism training is available to all parents.

Summary of Pastor/Staff Responsibilities

- Help parents establish and continue a personal quiet time
- Help parents establish and continue a prayer time with each other
- Help parents establish a prayer time with spouse and children
- Equip parents in the process of biblical parenting
- Establish accountability groups for families and help them schedule times and places to meet
- Provide adequate evangelism training for parents
- Provide adequate evangelism and ministry opportunities for parents and families.
- Have an open door to all parents

2. Children's Leaders (Job: Lead a children's activity and build relationships with children and their parents)

Since this is the group that will have the most contact with the children, it follows that this is the group that will have the most contact with parents. Many times the parent will form their opinions about the church and its children's ministry based on their impression of the children's leaders. For this reason, these workers need to be the best leaders in the church. Children's leaders should be prepared in their task, professional in their work, and personal in their relationships. They should be very open and honest with parents, yet not with a critical spirit. Their program/activity should always be open to parental participation and involvement, and in fact encourage it. The children's leaders must be committed to building relationships with the children and parents, which require contact with them inside and outside the church facility. The children's leaders must be available to the parents. The children's leaders must be committed to the spiritual growth of the children, which means they must be committed to working with the parents and pastor/staff to accomplish this. The children's leader must be reliable enough to fulfill the parental tasks assigned by the pastor/staff.

Summary of Children's Leader's Responsibilities

- Always prepared for program/activity
- Relate to everyone in a professional and godly manner
- Committed to building relationships with children AND parents
- Open and honest with parents
- Encourage parental participation and involvement in program/activity
- Always available to parents
- Reliable and dependable to fulfill the parental tasks assigned by pastor/staff
- Willing to act as a liaison between parent and pastor/staff
- Willing to act as a liaison between the child and parent

3. Parents (Job: Oversee the spiritual development of their children)

Parents must recognize that it is their responsibility to oversee the spiritual development of their children, not the church's. The church should only supplement the training the parents are conducting in the home. To oversee this development, parents should be involved in the activities their children are participating in at church. Parents need to see, and even have input into, what is happening in the children's ministry of their own church. Parents should also know and trust their children's teachers. This requires the parent to have a relationship with each teacher. However, the parent needs to realize that the greatest amount of spiritual teaching that happens in the lives of their children happens in their homes, not in the church. For this reason, parents should make every effort to establish their home as a model for the church. In other words, every action (and reaction), decision, conversation, and activity should be done recognizing that Christ is the Lord of the family. This is more than just saying the words; it is believing it and living it out as a family. The family, therefore, should rely not only on God's Word, but also on the church for assistance in creating this type of environment in the home.

Summary of Parent's Responsibility

- Recognize responsibility to oversee the spiritual development of your children
- Know and develop a relationship with your children's teachers at church
- Become involved with the programs/activities your children are involved in at church
- Recognize the tremendous influence you personally have on the spiritual development of their children
- Create a godly atmosphere in the home where Christ is the center of everything
- Relies on God's Word and the local church for support, resources, and accountability pertaining to creating a godly atmosphere in the home

Key Resources

Family to Family (ISBN 0840085370)

His Heart, Our Hands: A Ministry Evangelism Tool Kit (ISBN 0633034614)

www.namb.net/children

www.namb.net/family

Additional Resources

Skinner, Kerry, The Heart of the Problem

Blackaby, Henry and Claude V. King, Experiencing God, Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville TN 1994

Barrier, Roger, Listening to the Voice of God, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis MN, 1998

Campbell, Ross, Relational Parenting, Moody Press, Chicago IL, 2000

Kopp, David and Heather Kopp, Praying the Bible for Your Children, WaterBrook Press, Colorado Springs CO, 1997

Kopp David, and Heather Kopp, Praying the Bible for Your Marriage, WaterBrook Press, Colorado Springs CO, 1997

Article for Additional Help

Parenting with Influence Raising Children with a Heart for God

The greatest privilege we have as parents is leading our own children to Christ. This is best accomplished through building the biblical foundations early in life. As our children grow and mature we need to be able to recognize when they are ready to make a decision for Christ. The Bible says in 2 Timothy 3:15, "And how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." There are two definite truths we can learn from Paul's statement to Timothy. First, is the need to begin early. The earlier that biblical training begins, the more ingrained these truths become in the life of a child. Is it ever too late to start? No, it is just better if training begins in infancy. Second we see the importance of using Scripture, not only in language, but in living. Through the use of God's Word, the Holy Spirit is free to move in the lives of individuals to bring conviction and point them toward Christ. Therefore, a parent who wants to influence their children toward a relationship with Christ should begin the process as early as possible and structure their children's lives to conform to Scripture as closely as possible. These two items are to be the boundaries in which we parent. Let me restate them again as simply as possible; *it is never too late and keep it biblical.* This should be our parenting guide. Using this model, the Bible gives us six directives concerning our parenting.

The Bible says that we are to _____ our children.

1. Love - We are to love our children. Our love should be sincere and unconditional. It is not enough to simply say, "I love you." Our children must *know* that we love them. In spite of *their* faults and immaturity, our children should know without a doubt that we love them deeply. In spite of *our* faults and immaturity our children must know that we love them unconditionally. Unconditional love means that we will love them no matter our circumstances. Do not confuse love with appeasement. Love is not bought, bribed, or

bargained; it is earned. Love is intentional and the result of time, understanding, and concern.

Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children.
Titus 2:4

2. Encourage - Parents are to encourage their children. Encouraging your children means to support and endorse their achievements toward positive goals. Children's efforts should always be first recognized and acknowledged by their parents. Our children may never be the best at baseball, school, or Scripture memory, but they should be able to look to their parents for encouragement. Criticizing our children as they attempt new goals destroys their self-esteem and makes them hesitant about attempting further goals. Criticism is unhealthy and hinders the maturing process. It causes children not to trust their decision making process. The Bible tells us to encourage our children. Never once does it say to criticize.

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. 1 Thessalonians 2:11

3. Provide for - God expects us, as parents, to meet the needs of our children. Our lifestyles should never result in our children being without. Material needs include food, clothing, and shelter, but there are spiritual necessities also. For example, God expects that our home be one where He alone is worshipped. The home is not to be spiritually neutral or a spiritual buffet. There is one God and He is to be the object of worship in our homes. This is a necessity that we are to provide for our children.

If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

1 Timothy 5:8

4. Comfort - The Hebrew word translated *comfort* literally means *breathe deeply*. The picture is of one who is relating to another emotionally and showing compassion for their circumstances. We, as parents, are to have an emotional link with our children that

allows us to show compassion and bring comfort when they experience disappointment or hurt. Their hurts may seem trivial to us; yet, they are very real to the children and demand our attention. An emotional link with our children does not mean that we shelter them from disappointments and hurts. These are a natural and necessary part of maturing. However, this link does mean that we should be able to sympathize with our children's hurts and be able to help them, gently, to deal with it.

As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.

Isaiah 66:13

5. Discipline - From its use in the Old Testament, the word means to correct for the purpose of education. The purpose of discipline is not solely for punishment, but to guide behavior toward biblical expectations. In discipline, correction and instruction merge for the purpose of guiding children toward a life of obedience to God. Discipline, when administered properly, should not only hurt, it should help. Positive discipline is never done in anger, but done with the child's well being in mind.

Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.

Proverbs 19:18

6. Train - Training is more than just verbal instruction; it is guiding children by our lifestyles. It is impossible to properly train children biblically if we are not living out this lifestyle ourselves. This can only be accomplished as the result of an active and growing relationship with Christ. Before training children in the way they should go, we as parents must check to see if we are going in the correct direction. "Not in what we say and teach, but in what we are and do, lies the power of training."¹

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

Proverbs 22:6

¹ Andrew Murray, How to Raise Your Children for Christ, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis MN, 1975, p. 12.

Training should be intentional.

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7

The word *impress* means *to sharpen like a knife*. A knife is not sharpened by accident. Nor does one intentionally try to dull the blade of a knife during the sharpening process. A knife is sharpened intentionally to increase its effectiveness. So it is with a child. Parents are to train their children intentionally to increase their spiritual effectiveness in a lost world.

Training should be modeled.

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 18:6

Matthew records a stern warning to all who attempt to train children. We must train children, but be sure we are doing it according to Scripture.

Training should be with a purpose.

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Matthew 10:37

In Matthew 10:37, Jesus states the purpose of parenting. We are to train our children to be worthy of Jesus. We do that by training them to love and depend on Jesus more than they love and depend on us.

Here are seven practical steps we can take as parents to help fulfill these biblical directives.

1. Know your children. Talk to them. Be open with them. Be honest with them. Give them only what they are able to handle spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Know their friends. Know their likes

and dislikes. Know their school. Know their personalities and what makes them tick. Be sure you are meeting their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

2. Accept your children. There are no perfect children. Compliment them. Correct, but don't condemn them. Discipline them when necessary. Do not force your children to be what you wish you were.
3. Make time for your children. Your children are more important than your job, TV, computer, paper, magazines, books, videos, sports, and vacations. If you don't make the time, you will never spend the time with them. Spending time with your children lets them know that they are important to you.
4. Parent your children. Be a positive role model. If there are certain habits you do not want your children to form, then don't possess them. Model prayer, spiritual disciplines, repentance, sensitivity, values, and dependency on Christ to your children. Be very transparent with your children. They will learn how to deal with sin by watching how you deal with it. Children are very perceptive. Consider seeking out the advice and prayers of older Christian parents. Many times their experience and godly wisdom will help you through extremely difficult times. Be a parent, not just a friend!
5. Make your home Christ centered. Pray with and for your children. Have a family devotion time. Read the Bible together. The faith of your children will rarely rise above the level of your faith. Your children will not be serious about their faith if you are not.
6. Take your children to church. They need exposure to the Christian community.
7. Lead your children to Christ. Do all with the intention of helping them develop a personal relationship with Christ. Be able to recognize when they are ready to receive Christ and be equipped to lead them through the appropriate Scriptures and commitment.
8. Don't quit. Even if it seems that your parenting efforts are not paying off, don't stop guiding them toward God. One day you will be surprised just how much your persistence at godly parenting is reaching your children. When you least expect it, your children will say or do something that confirms your struggles are not in vain.

Step 3

Evangelism

" . . . the most important evangelistic work we can do remains introducing our own children to the faith. Other evangelistic efforts are important. But for moms and dads, the first priority must be reaching the little ones playing around our feet and eating around our tables." (Focus on the Family, Family News From Dr. James Dobson, August 2000)

Evangelism

Equip those who have contact with the children to communicate the gospel in terms a child can understand

Why evangelize children?

The gospel is for everyone (Romans 10:13, Luke 210). Jesus never turned children away (Matthew 19:14, John 6:8). God can and does deal with the hearts of children (1 Samuel 3, 2 Kings 22, Jeremiah 1:5, 2 Timothy 3:15). Jesus taught that children could believe in Him (Matthew 18:6). God's desire is for children to be saved (Matthew 18:14).

How to Equip People to Evangelize Children

1. **Pastor/Staff** (Job: Oversee the entire training process)

The pastor/staff should determine when and where the training will occur. Consider prime times to equip individuals for evangelism to children such as late Spring prior to Summer activities (VBS, Summer camps and activities, backyard Bible clubs, etc.). Another good time to equip individuals is late Summer prior to school starting. Schools are a great mission field. The pastor/staff should plan to equip parents, children's leaders, and older children in evangelism. The pastor/staff can choose to teach these sessions or recruit others to do so. The training process should address areas such as: communicating the gospel in terms that a child can understand, how to tell if the Holy Spirit is dealing with a child, creative ways to present the gospel to children, how children process information, appropriate Bible verses to use in a gospel presentation, the correct questions to ask children to determine their accountability (i.e. questions that have more than a "yes" or "no" answer), etc. The pastor/staff should also consider how to conduct this training process. For adults, an intensive one-day study (i.e. all day Saturday) or a multi-week study (i.e. one-hour sessions that meet one day a week for four to six weeks) usually works well. For older children, consider a multi-week study as with adults. Allow at least two sessions for training and the others for accountability, encouragement, and prayer. The pastor/staff

should also provide opportunities for those who have been trained to encounter children in witnessing situations. These would be in addition to those that are regularly scheduled, like VBS, Sunday school, etc. These opportunities could include block parties, Fall festivals, special events for children that are open to the community, backyard Bible clubs, etc. One other critical responsibility of the pastor/staff is see to it that everyone working with the children in a church activity or program have a clear personal testimony of when they accepted Christ and are in an active growing relationship with Him. In other words, those working with children need to be saved and growing in Christ, which is evident by their words, actions, and lifestyle.

Summary of Pastor/Staff Responsibilities:

- Determine where and when the training sessions should occur
- Consider prime times to equip individuals to share Christ
- Require children's leaders to attend the training sessions
- Highly encourage parents to attend the training sessions
- Determine the content of the training sessions. Be sure to include: communicating the gospel in terms that child can understand, how to tell if the Holy Spirit is dealing with a child, creative ways to present the gospel to children, appropriate Bible verses to use in a gospel presentation, the correct questions to ask to determine a child's accountability, how children process information
- Determine the time and length of the training sessions
- Be sure that all who are working with the children are Christians

2. **Children's Leaders** (Job: Work with parents and pastor/staff to clearly communicate the gospel to children and offer them a chance to accept Christ)

The children's leaders must first be certain of their own relationship with Christ. How can one explain to children and encourage them in an active growing relationship with Christ if he is unsure of his own experience? Children's leaders must be willing to be equipped to share Christ with children. Children's leaders should regularly plan a creative gospel presentation in their lessons. They should work closely with parents in seeking to win children to Christ. Whenever possible, children's leaders should allow the parents to lead their own children to Christ. Do not be so overly zealous that you prevent parents from experiencing the tremendous blessing of helping their own child commit his life to Christ. Children's leaders should never tire of seeing children being saved. Children's leaders should actively seek for unsaved and/or unchurched children to participate in the children's activities/programs at church.

Summary of Children's Leader's Responsibilities:

- Be sure of your own salvation
- Be in a active and growing relationship with Christ
- Be equipped to share Christ with children by attending the training sessions offered by the pastor/staff
- Regularly plan to creatively present the plan of salvation to children in your lessons.
- Work closely with parents in presenting the gospel to children
- Whenever possible, allow parents to lead their children to Christ
- Actively seek unsaved and/or unchurch and encourage them to participate in the children's activities/programs at church
- Never tire of seeing children come to Christ

3. Parents (Job: Intentionally seek to win their children to Christ)

Parents should be sure of their own salvation. They should be in an active growing relationship with Christ. Parents should view themselves as a living testimony of a true Christian to their children. Their actions and lifestyle should match the words they are communicating to their children. Parents must be willing to participate in the evangelism training sessions offered by the pastor/staff. Parents should work closely with the children's leaders in explaining the gospel to their children and talking with them about committing their lives to Jesus. Parents should have the honor of leading their own children to Christ. Parent should encourage their children to invite their unchurched and/or unsaved friends to participate in the children's activities/programs at church. Parents should encourage their older children to learn how to share the gospel with their friends. Parents should volunteer to assist pastor/staff in equipping others to share the gospel.

Parents should volunteer to help the children's leaders teach and train their children.

Summary of Parent's Responsibilities:

- Be sure of your own salvation
- Be in a active and growing relationship with Christ
- Understand your tremendous influence on your children. As a result, realize your actions have as much of an influence as your words
- Participate in the evangelism training sessions at church
- Work closely with children's leaders in presenting the gospel to your children
- Lead your children to Christ
- Encourage your children to invite their friend to attend the children's activities/programs at church
- Encourage your children to attend evangelism training sessions for older children. Your older children should learn to share Christ with their friends.
- Volunteer to help pastor/staff equip others to share Christ

- Volunteer to help children's leaders teach and train your children

Key Resources

Sharing God's Special Plan with Children Leader's Kit (ISBN 0840087209)

Sharing God's Special Plan with Children Training Manual (ISBN 0840087373) - Call (770) 410-6330 for free Spanish version

God's Special Plan for Children Witnessing Booklet (ISBN 0840087225) - free Spanish version available at www.namb.net/children

An Important Question for An Important Person Witnessing Tract (English version ISBN 0840088256 - Spanish version 0840087543)

Show & Tell: Training Children to Tell Others About Jesus Leader's Packet (ISBN 0840096534)

Show & Tell Book Covers (ISBN 0840096445)

Show & Tell Bookmarks (ISBN 0840096448)

Show & Tell Sticker Booklet (ISBN 0840096453)

Show & Tell Leader's Manual (ISBN 0840085389)

Additional Resources

Eager, George B., How to Succeed in Winning Children to Christ, The Mail Box Club, Valdosta GA, 1979

Murphy, Art, The Faith of a Child, Moody Press, Chicago IL, 2000

Kid's Evangelism Explosion, Evangelism Explosion International, Ft. Lauderdale FL, 2001

The World's Greatest Adventure: A Commitment Guide for Older Children, North American Mission Board, Alpharetta GA

An Important Question for An Important Person Witnessing Tract, North American Mission Board, Alpharetta GA

Sanders, Thomas, When Can I?, Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville TN 2001

Day Camping Anytime: 10 Complete Weeks of All-Day Bible Centered Curriculum (ISBN 0767393864)

TeamKid materials from LifeWay

Down the Street and Around the World Bible Club material from LifeWay

Article for Additional Help

Introducing Children to Christ

Adapted from *Sharing God's Special Plan with Children Training Manual*
And

God's Special Plan for Children Witnessing Booklet

(Both available through LifeWay Christian Resources)

George Barna reported that "the greatest evangelistic window currently available is among young children." According to the data gathered, children, ages 5 through 13 have a 32 % probability of coming to Christ while teenagers and adults have just a 4% and 6% probability respectively of doing so. Barna continued in the report to state "that if a person does not accept Christ as savior before the age of 14 the likelihood of ever doing so is slim."¹ Other research tends to agree with Barna's results. Thom Rainer expressed in his book, The Bridger Generation, that "the most receptive group in America may very well be an age-related group . . . More than any other factor-race, class, culture, etc.-age seems to be the key to receptivity."² Rainer's research demonstrated that over half of Christians today accepted Christ before the age of 13.³ History and experience both reveal that children are a fertile mission field for the gospel.

But how do we appropriately introduce children to Christ? After all, children are not small adults. Their minds are just as unformed as their bodies. We must understand that presenting the plan of salvation to a child is much different than presenting it to an adult. Introducing children to Christ must be done, not only biblically, but also with integrity, taking into consideration the child's level of understanding and maturity. Therefore, the key to any witnessing encounter with a child is having a properly trained adult discussing the life-changing gospel message with that child. An adult is properly trained when he is able to recognize if a child is truly ready to accept Christ. A child's understanding can be determined by simply asking questions and presenting appropriate Bible passages dealing with salvation.

¹ Barna Research Online, www.barna.org, "Teens and Adults Have Little Chance of Accepting Christ as Their Savior," November 15, 1999.

² Thom Rainer, The Bridger Generation, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville TN, 1997, p. 168.

³ Ibid, p.169.

Doing these two things allows the Holy Spirit to move in the life of a child, as well as, in our own lives to give us discernment in the understanding of the child.

Below are five biblical concepts to help one know if a child is ready to receive Christ. Along with these concepts are questions (answers are in parentheses) and Scripture verses that are helpful in determining a child's understanding of the gospel.

1. A child must understand the concept of sin.

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness 1 John 3:4

Generally speaking, a child will understand this concept in terms of right and wrong. For this reason, sin is bad things that people do that God does not like. Sin can be an action or a thought. Briefly, sin is disobeying God.

One can determine if a child understands this concept by simply asking him, "What is sin?" Try not to feed the answer to the child, but allow him to answer from his understanding. If he has difficulty in answering this question, tell him the answer. A child not answering this question does not necessarily mean that he is not ready to receive Christ, it could be that he has never before heard the word. Explain the concept of sin to him in childlike terms. Next ask, "What are some things that people do that God does not like?" Have the child list for you several items that would be considered sin. Allow the child to once again express his understanding of sin. If the child answers correctly, acknowledge his understanding by saying, "That's right, God does not like _____. God says that _____ is sin." This will help to reinforce his concept of sin.

2. A child must understand that he has sinned.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God Romans 3:23

Repentance is a major aspect of becoming a Christian. However, before one can repent, he must understand his sinfulness before God.

To test a child's understanding of this ask, "Have you ever done anything that God does not like?" If the child answers, "Yes," allow him the opportunity to explain what he has done. If the child answers, "No," do not assume that he is not ready to receive Christ. Simply, probe his understanding further by asking questions such as, "Have you ever told a lie?" or "Have you ever disobeyed your parents?" If the child acknowledges these questions explain to him that these, too, are sins that God does not like. Therefore, he, like everyone else, is a sinner. If once again the child answers, "No," to these probing questions, gently stop the presentation and in a positive manner explain to the child that he is not yet ready to make this important decision. Encourage him to continue in his spiritual activities and as he has more questions to come to you to discuss them. The most important aspect of stopping the presentation at this point is to be positive. Gently turn the child away by stating that God wants a relationship with him, but he needs to grow and mature more before making that decision.

3. A child must understand that sin is rebellion against God.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight
Psalm 51:4

For the Lord our God is holy Psalm 99:9

Sin hurts people. If one steals from a person, then the stealer has hurt that person. If someone lies to a friend, then the liar has hurt his friend. Even though sin hurts individuals, all sin is ultimately against God. God is the One who has expressed his requirement of people in the Bible. If one does not obey the Bible, then his lack of obedience (sin) is rebellion against God. Sin is very serious. In today's society many make fun of or excuse away man's sinful behavior. Sin is portrayed as being "not that bad." However, to God sin is very serious. It is sin that cost God His Son. To express the seriousness of sin to a child ask questions like, "Where does God live?" (He lives in heaven.) "What is heaven like?" (It is perfect. There are no bad things in heaven.) "Is our world

perfect?" (No) "Why isn't our world perfect like God's heaven?" (Our world is not perfect because of sin.) Sin has polluted our world. God is holy, that means He is perfect, and His desire is for us to be perfect. But, our sin keeps us from being perfect. God views our sin as rebellion against His command for perfection.

4. A child must understand that sin separates him from God.

Our sin is not only rebellion against God, it causes us to be separated from Him. What we deserve for our sin is to be forever separated from God. Explain to the child that our sin (rebellion) keeps us from getting into heaven and being with God. Because of sin we cannot be with God and He cannot be with us. Our sin has pushed us away from God. God cannot allow sinful man into a perfect heaven, because we would ruin it. Ask the child, "Even though sin keeps us away from God, does He still love us?" (Yes). Yes, He loves us very much. The Bible says *For God so loved the world* (John 3:16). We are a part of the world that God created. Our sin separates us from God, but He loves us so much that He still wants us to be with Him. God desires to be with us so much that He provided a way for our sins to be forgiven.

5. A child must understand that Jesus died to take the punishment for our sin.

For God so love the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life John 3:16

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord

Romans 6:23

God loves us so much that He sent His one and only Son to earth to come and die for the sins of the world. Jesus left heaven, came to earth, and died on the cross to take the punishment for our sins and God raised Him back to life on the third day. Jesus died so that we could be with God and God could be with us. God made only one provision for our sins to be forgiven, the death of His Son Jesus. Now ask the child, "Just because Jesus died for the sins of the world, does that mean that everyone is automatically going to heaven?" (No). Ask the child to explain his answer. (God's gift to us is eternal life, but knowing about the gift is not enough. We must each accept this gift. Part of God's special plan for your life is that you receive His gift of eternal life through His Son, Jesus.)

If the child has understood the presentation this far and has shown a desire to become a Christian, then continue with the following biblical information.

To accept God's gift of eternal life, you must:

1. **Repent**-Understand that you sin (disobey God) and you must turn from your sin. To repent, tell God that you have sinned, ask Him to forgive you and help you obey and please Him the rest of your life. The Bible says, *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out* (Acts 3:19).

2. **Believe**-You must believe that Jesus died for you and is alive today. You must also believe that Jesus is the only way for you to get to heaven.
The Bible says, *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God* (John 1:12).

3. **Receive**-You must invite Jesus to come into your life to be your Lord and Savior. By inviting Him, you are promising to obey Him in all areas of your life.

Now ask the child, "Do you understand all that I have explained to you about becoming a Christian?" If the answer is "Yes" ask the child to explain to you the three things he must do to become a Christian. If he answers "No" ask him to explain which part was unclear. Be prepared to review the three items again. If you sense that he is truly ready to make a commitment to Christ, then read to him Romans 10:13. *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.* Ask the child if he truly would like to turn from his sin and accept Jesus into his life as Lord and Savior. If you sense that he understands the message, that the Holy Spirit is dealing with him, and that he really wants to do this with all his heart then lead him in a prayer highlighting the three items listed above.

Step 4

New Believers

"Discipleship is not a program. It is not a ministry. It is a lifelong commitment to a lifestyle." (Barna, George, Growing True Disciples, Issachar Resources, Ventura, CA, 2000, p. 21)

"Discipleship, in other words, is about being and reproducing spiritually mature zealots for Christ." ." (Barna, George, Growing True Disciples, Issachar Resources, Ventura, CA, 2000, p. 20)

New Believers

Assimilate new believers into the church and begin a life-long process of discipleship and spiritual growth

Why disciple new believers?

Believers are expected to grow in their knowledge and relationship with Christ (2 Peter 3:18). God has chosen us to be holy before Him, therefore spiritual growth must be a priority (Ephesians 1:4, 5:25-27). Believers are to be filled with the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19).

How to Begin the Process of Discipleship and Spiritual Growth

1. **Pastor/Staff** (Job: Plan and oversee an effective discipleship and spiritual growth program in the church)

The pastor/staff must lay out an effective discipleship plan to grow children in their relationship with Christ. The discipleship process should begin immediately after salvation. Immediate follow-up should present some basics about the Christian faith (assurance of salvation, baptism, church membership, steps to growing in Christ, etc.) and information on the church. The pastor/staff can either do this or enlist someone (i.e. children's leader or parent) to conduct immediate follow-up. Immediate follow-up should occur within the week after a child accepts Christ and ideally should occur in the child's home in the presence of his parents. Another option would be to offer this immediate follow-up material in the form of a new member's class that could be offered several times a year. Instead of presenting the material to one family at a time, you would gather a group of children (and parents) together and make this presentation at the church (or other location) in one or two meetings. In this case select a time that is most convenient to a majority of the parents. The new member's class may be more appealing to the pastor/staff, especially if many children make a decision at one time, but it lacks the one-on-one interaction. If this is the route that is preferred, within one week of a child's decision, the parent should be informed of the date, time, and location of the next new member's class and a formal invitation should be extended from the pastor/staff. As

mentioned previously, the pastor/staff can lead this new member's class or appoint a children's leader or parent to do so.

A full discipleship plan can be accomplished by following the procedure listed in ***Step 1: Organize*** of this O.P.E.N. Strategy. The pastor/staff should oversee the development and process of this discipleship and spiritual growth program.

Summary of Pastor/Staff Responsibilities:

- Take responsibility for the development and process of a comprehensive discipleship and spiritual growth program for children (refer to ***Step 1: Organize*** of this strategy)
- Conduct immediate follow-up (or appoint a children's leader or parent to do so) with any child accepting Christ within one week of that decision
- Immediate follow-up should ideally occur in the child's home in the presence of his parents
- Immediate follow-up should include basic information concerning Christianity (i.e. assurance of salvation, baptism, church membership, steps to growing in Christ, etc.) and information about the church and its ministry to children
- Another option would be to offer this material in the form of a new member's class and invite several families to participate at one time

2. Children's Leader (Job: Implement the church's discipleship plan)

The children's leaders are responsible for implementing the discipleship plan established. The activity/program they are now involved in is a part of the overall discipleship program. If it were not a part of the plan, it should have been eliminated by now. Therefore, they should continue teaching and leading the children as they have been doing.

The children's leader should be open and available to conduct immediate follow-up (or lead a new member's class) if asked to do so by the pastor/staff. The children's leader should be

knowledgeable of the church's discipleship plan for children and be open to discuss this plan with the parents. The children's leaders should be able to encourage a child in his decision for Christ and assist him in matters pertaining to that decision and growth. The children's leaders should be able to advise the parents on ways reinforce their teaching in the home.

Summary of Children's Leader's Responsibilities:

- Continue teaching, you are now a part of the discipleship program for children
- Be available to pastor/staff to conduct an immediate follow-up visit to children making decisions
- Be available to pastor/staff to lead a new member's class if needed
- Be knowledgeable of the overall discipleship plan for children in your church
- Be open to discuss this plan with parents
- Encourage children making decisions for Christ and assist them in matters of spiritual growth
- Be able to assist parents in ways to reinforce your teaching in their homes

3. Parents (Description: Oversee the discipleship of their children)

Parents should realize that the spiritual development of their children is, ultimately, their responsibility. For this reason, parents should understand the basic tenants of Christianity and be able to help their children understand them. After their child makes a decision for Christ, parents should be open to a visit from someone at the church to discuss that decision and provide information about the church. Parents should be available to the pastor/staff to lead a new member's class for children if necessary. Parents should cooperate with the pastor/staff in planning a discipleship program at church. Parents should be involved in all activities/program at the church that include their children. Parents should seek ways to reinforce what their children learn at church in their home. Parents should give input to the pastor/staff to guide them in planning activities/programs

that will reinforce the spiritual teaching they are doing in the home.

Summary of Parent's Responsibilities

- Realize that the overall spiritual development of your children is your responsibility
- Understand the basic tenants of Christianity to be able to explain them to your children
- Be open to a visit from someone at church after your child has accepted Christ
- Be available to pastor/staff to lead a new member's class for children
- Cooperate with pastor/staff in planning a discipleship program for children
- Be involved in all activities/programs sponsored by the church that include your children
- Seek ways to reinforce what your children learn at church in the home
- Give input to the pastor/staff to guide them in planning activities/programs that will reinforce the spiritual teaching you are doing in the home

Key Resource

The World's Greatest Adventure: A Commitment Guide for Older Children (ISBN 0840087128)

Additional Resources

Now that I'm a Christian (Child's Workbook ISBN 0767320409,
Leader's Guide ISBN 0767322290)

www.namb.net/cffes

www.namb.net/family

www.namb.net/children

www.kidzplace.org

Blackaby, Henry T. and Micky Thomas Oldam, Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God, Preteen Edition.

Sanderfer, Suzette C., Choices: Setting Sail Director's Notebook
(ISBN 0767393953)

FUNDamentals materials available from LifeWay

Everything You Need to Know to Be a Teenager material from
LifeWay, 13 week study for preteens.

TeamKid materials from LifeWay

Neighbour, Ralph W., Survival Kit for New Christians, Children's
Edition (ISBN 0805496017)

Bible Buddies materials from LifeWay

Bible Drill materials from LifeWay

PraiseKid materials from LifeWay, designed as a Children's Church
curriculum

McDowell, Josh, Truth Works (ISBN 0805498273)

Article for Additional Help

The “Big 3” of Children’s Ministry

The goal of children’s ministry, of course, is to impact the lives of children toward a personal, vital, and growing relationship with Christ. Activity oriented ministry is certainly one way to accomplish this, however a comprehensive ministry to children must look beyond the activities to new and creative ways to accomplish the ultimate goal of impacting the lives of children.

An effective ministry to children will be threefold. These can be referred to as the “Big 3” of children’s ministry.

1. Parents

*These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.
(Deuteronomy 6:6-7)*

Any effective ministry to children will address the needs of parents or whoever is the primary caregiver of the children. Addressing their needs means equipping them to be better, godly parents. “Parents have more influence than anyone else on the their children’s faith.”¹ A study by George Barna² reveals that a majority of parents say that they are struggling to create the type of spiritual family relationship that they desire. These parents admit that the church is trying to provide them with useful information on parenting, but something is still lacking. To be effective in children’s ministry, the church must discover what is lacking in parenting today and seek to develop strong and godly families. Whether parents intend this or not, the home is “the single most powerful arena on earth to change a life for God.”³ A child gains his understanding of God and establishes a belief system based on the actions and attitudes of his parents. So a parent can be a positive influence as well as a negative influence. The church must be prepared to equip parents to train their children as God intended.

What is it that parents are looking for from the church? According to research from the Barna Group, parents want seven items from their church⁴:

¹ Roehlkepartain, Jolene, L., ed. Children’s Ministry That Works: The Basics and Beyond. Group Publishing, Inc., Colorado Springs, CO. 1993. p. 46.

² Barna, George. Ministering to the Family: The Foundation of a Spiritual Revolution. A video seminar.

³ Wilkinson, Bruce. The Prayer of Jabez. Multnomah Publishers, Inc. Sisters, OR. 2000. p. 32.

⁴ Barna, George. Ibid.

1. A Safety Net-Parents want support in a family crisis.
2. A Process for Building Foundations in Their Children's Lives-Parents want to build self-esteem, moral values, and emotional stability into the lives of their children and they need guidance in doing so.
3. Specific Parenting Skills-Parents want guidance in becoming effective, godly parents.
4. Lifestyle Changes-Parents want help in determining what is vital to their family and then assistance in prioritizing those elements.
5. Emotional Support for Day-to-Day Issues-Parents want a support system to rely and lean on.
6. Reliable Advisor-Parents desire non-critical mentors that can be honest and objective about their parenting skills.
7. A True Partnership in Marriage-Parents want help in defining each persons role in raising a family.

Churches must take the initiative and help equip parents to be the godly spiritual leaders that they desire to be. Parents want to be a positive influence on their children, but many times do not know how to do it biblically. What better platform for equipping parents than through the children's ministry.

2. Teachers

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. (2 Timothy 2:2)

A second area of concern in children's ministry is the motivation and equipping of teachers. Qualifications of a great teacher of children include godliness, dependability, the ability to communicate to children, loyalty, persistence, flexibility, and the ability to love. Although these qualities exist in many people, a true leader in children's ministry will guide teachers to use and better develop them. When developing teachers for children's ministry, three areas should be addressed:

1. Spiritual Development-“Those who commit their time and energy to developing spiritual maturity in others should not have to do so at the expense of their own growth.”⁵ Leaders should provide opportunities for teachers to grow spiritually. These opportunities could be through devotional materials, sermon tapes, occasional sabbaticals, regular Bible studies, or opportunities to attend an adult Sunday school or worship service at regular intervals. A teacher who fails to continue growing spiritually will be ineffective and becomes more of a hindrance than an asset.

⁵ Choun, Robert, J. and Michael S. Lawson. The Christian Educator's Handbook on Children's Ministry. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI. 1998, p. 275.

2. Teacher Training-Teachers need to be equipped to work with children. Keep in mind that at different ages children learn differently, so training should be age specific. Teacher training should be viewed as a three phase process⁶:
 - a. Phase 1-Identifying people who have a heart for reaching and teaching children.
 - b. Phase 2-Screening teachers to place them where they are most gifted.
 - c. Phase 3-Train teachers in proper teaching techniques, curriculum, evangelism, etc.

Teachers are the backbone of an effective children's ministry. Keep in mind that it is the teachers that will ultimately make the difference between a good ministry and a great ministry to children. Prepare teachers to develop a great ministry by adequately training them to work with children.

3. Teacher Encouragement-Even though the work the teachers do is eternally important, many churches view the children's ministry as non-essential.
“Even parents are inclined to view children’s programs as mere baby-sitting.”⁷ Because of the lack of encouragement within a local congregation, teaching children can be one of the loneliest places to serve God. Therefore, an effective leader will do everything possible to appreciate and encourage teachers. A few ways to encourage teachers are, regular recognitions from the pulpit, appreciation banquets, teaching certificates and awards, assigning new teachers to a mentor, and regular notes and gifts of appreciation. One creative way to encourage teachers is to ask them to commit to teach for only one year. Many times teachers are recruited and feel locked into a position for eternity. Giving them a way out if they are unhappy with the work relieves a lot of stress and creates a happier teaching force. Appreciating and encouraging the teachers increase the probability that they will stay committed to the task of teaching and reaching the children.

Many times the importance of teacher growth and development is overlooked within a children's ministry. However, a ministry that will devote time to the teachers will reap the benefits of being stronger, unified, and more effective.

3. Children

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14)

A third and final aspect of a children's ministry is, of course, the children. Driving factors for a children's ministry include the following:

1. Children are created in the image of God. (Genesis 1:27)
2. Children can have a part in the Kingdom of God. (Matthew 18:4)

⁶ “You Wanna Volunteer? Take a Number!” Children’s Ministry Magazine. September/October 2000. p. 42.

⁷ Choun, Robert J. and Michael S. Lawson. Ibid. p. 272.

3. Children are entrusted to us by God. (Proverbs 22:6)
4. Children are highly impressionable. (Matthew 18:6)

As one can see, working with children is a high calling from God and must be taken seriously. Children, like adults, are human beings, and all humans respond best in relational settings. Therefore, great effort must be given to developing relationships with the children. Learning basic facts about the children, such as, the children's names, their home situations, and their parents can accomplish this. Each of these facts are important elements of a child's life. When teachers and leaders know these things, children sense that they are truly cared for by the church. A child becomes more teachable when he or she knows they are cared for and loved. Children are spiritual beings as well as human beings. God desires to be in a personal relationship with every child in your ministry. For that reason, every activity planned for children through the platform of the church must be intentional in pointing children toward that relationship. Activities that are enticing because they are fun may draw crowds, but have no place in the church if no spiritual impact is intended. This does not mean that church activities for children should not be fun. They can be, but the ultimate focus must be spiritual. The objective of the ministry must be to do everything possible at all times to point the children toward Jesus Christ. This is the only way to have a true relationship with God. This takes time, planning, and much work, but is necessary to effectively communicate God's love to children.

God expects a lot from the leaders of a children ministry. The leader's job is to develop and plan a ministry that is effective in reaching and teaching children. To accomplish this, three essential areas must be addressed: the parents, the teachers, and the children themselves. A ministry that is well balanced in these areas will have a great impact on a community for Christ. As a result, lives will be changed and the Kingdom will be enlarged.

“When a boy or girl thrusts his small hand into yours, it may be smeared with chocolate ice cream, or grimy from petting a dog. There may be a wart under the right thumb and a bandage around the little finger. But the important thing about his hand is that it is the hand that some day may hold a Bible or a Colt revolver; play a piano or spin a gambling wheel; gently dress a leper’s wound or tremble wretchedly, uncontrolled by an alcoholic mind. Right now, that hand is yours . . . it asks for help and guidance.”⁸

⁸ Author Unknown. Quoted by George B. Eager. How to Succeed in Winning Children to Christ. The Mailbox Club, Valdosta, GA. 1979. p.1.