

# Make a Difference in the Next Generation!

by Greg Baird / Pastor's Coach guest writer

"What do you want to do when you get out of college?" is the question I was often asked. "I want to be in full-time ministry" was my standard response. Of course, that always led to the next question, "What area of ministry?" And my usual response? "I'm not sure, I just know it won't be with kids!" God has a sense of humor.



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I grew up immersed in ministry. My parents led Junior High groups and disciplined college students in Japan (Dad was in the Navy). Then, after he retired and graduated with Bible and Counseling degrees, they moved our family to the mission field to plant a church. I saw many aspects of ministry, and decided early on it was for me - I just wasn't sure in what area. But I knew I wanted to be a leader who made a difference. Just knew I wasn't interested in working with kids. As a 16 year old I taught a first and second-grade Sunday School class on the field in Australia. Nope, didn't want anything to do with kids after that!

After college, things changed. A friend invited me to work at a kids' camp. That's where I found my calling. I didn't hear an audible voice, but over the few months I was there God's voice was clear: "I want you to reach my children, and I want you to do it by equipping others." That was it. That was how I was going to make a difference in people's lives.

What God impressed on me during my time at that kids' camp is the value of children in His eyes. Jesus tangibly modeled this with the familiar story found in Mark 10:13-16. He rebuked the disciples for their lack of value of children and then tells them that the faith of a child is exactly the kind of faith we need to have! With that, Jesus does more than He was asked to do – He not only touches them to bless them, but He takes them up in His arms and fervently prays over them. They were of great value to Him, and He greatly loved them.

Children are no different today. Innocent and vulnerable, yet fully capable of a very real faith, they represent the single greatest mission field in the world. Children are, by far, the most responsive to evangelistic efforts. Some studies indicate that as many as 85% of those who accept Christ as their Savior will do so between the ages of 4 and 14.

Since that time at the kids' camp, as I have pursued my calling and sought to equip others to reach kids, I have discovered much more about the world of children in the church. Children's Ministry is a complex and challenging ministry, encompassing the greatest developmental range of any ministry age group. It represents the area of highest risk – be it for physical injury or unlawful conduct by adults. It presents the greatest communication challenges -- as adults try to communicate the love of Jesus and Biblical truth in age appropriate and engaging ways. And children's ministry represents the rewarding but never-ending challenge of recruiting, training, and retaining large numbers of volunteers!

Yet as I work with churches across the country, I too often find that Children's Ministry is viewed as childcare. The prevailing, yet often unspoken, sentiment is "keep the children busy while the real ministry (to adults) is happening." The unrecognized attitude is nothing less than that of the disciples. I often wonder what Jesus would think of how churches approach ministry to children.

Recently I was consulting with a Senior Pastor and we engaged in a very candid discussion about the value of Children's Ministry. He was wrestling with how his church ought to approach it, and shared how very few churches within their denomination, and even within their region, gave children the kind of value that I was urging him to consider. I told him that perhaps he ought to be the one to set the example for not only his own church, but other churches within the denomination and region. With some hesitancy in his eyes, he asked me what that might look like. I think he thought I was suggesting he take his turn teaching in the three year old class!

I assured this Pastor that I was not suggesting he teach the three year old class, nor was I suggesting that Children's Ministry take over the church. Instead, I recommended three ways that he and the church could give appropriate value to children:

## 1. Cast vision to match the incredible potential of spiritual formation within Children's Ministry.

The potential that resides in children as the most spiritually receptive members of the body, mandates reaching them for Christ as early as possible and equipping parents to disciple them at home.

- Talk about the vision of reaching children for Christ at every opportunity
- Train parents and volunteers to lead children to Christ

- Offer training for parents on how to effectively disciple their children (on-going, in-house training, or seminars open to the whole community)
- Provide materials for parents to use in discipling their children (take-home "talksheets" provided with curriculum, family devotionals, etc.)

## 2. Invest appropriate time and attention to match the vision.

Ensure the Children's Ministry staff and volunteer leaders are adequately equipped and trained.

- Assist core Children's Ministry leaders (paid or unpaid) in creating and following a leadership development plan and facilitate their participation in leadership training (conferences, coaching, etc.)
- Design a Children's Ministry training schedule for volunteers

Provide time in adult venues to cast vision and share ministry opportunities.

- Have an annual "Kid's Day" in the main service to cast vision and recruit leaders
- Create opportunities for kids to serve in the main service, or participate on a regular basis

Encourage volunteers, knowing that encouragement from senior leadership of the church is priceless to the heart of those serving.

- Put a note of thanks in the bulletin, say something from the pulpit, or write 3 cards to volunteers each week
- Walk through the children's area once a month to say thanks to volunteers

## 3. Resource your Children's Ministry for success.

By its very nature, Children's Ministry requires greater resources than most other ministries.

- A minimum annual budget of \$75 per child (avg. weekly attendance) is an acceptable guideline

Understand staffing needs and hire/recruit appropriately.

- One full-time (or equivalent part-time) paid staff per 150-175 children is a minimum acceptable guideline
- Maximum adult/child ratios should be: infants = 1 to 3; preschool = 1 to 7; elementary = 1 to 12)

In short, resource Children's Ministry with equal value to other ministries within the church.

Children did not dominate the ministry of Jesus – most of His time was spent with adults - yet He recognized their value and gave appropriate time and energy to them. How would you evaluate your children's ministry in light of the thoughts in this article?

As church leaders we balance many priorities. Like Jesus, we have many demands for our time and attention. It's easy to overlook areas that are not our strength or passion, and too often that area is Children's Ministry. But like Jesus, a little interest can speak volumes.

I encourage you to value your Children's Ministry for the spiritually ripe field that it is. Articulate vision, invest appropriate time and attention, and provide resources they need. A little interest will go a long way, and the impact on the lives of children, families, leaders and the church as a whole will be felt for generations to come.



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