

CHILD CARE IN SMALL GROUPS

When parents participate in healthy community through small groups, they express a value to their children through actions, not merely words. Parents are eager to see their kids forge relationships with other kids who will encourage their faith. If parents want this for their kids, it's wise to model this value when their kids are small. The most common metaphor for the church in the New Testament is family. Family-oriented groups provide spiritual aunts, uncles, and cousins for those who participate. Here are ways groups include children in the group:

1. Children NOT in the group.

Nursing babies may be welcome, but once children are mobile it's time for parents to find someone to watch them elsewhere. The kids may know about the group and the group may know about the kids, but the two worlds rarely collide.

This approach requires that parents find child care to watch the kids (see options at the end). The obvious benefit is that kids are cared for and parents can focus on the group. For parents who don't have trusted child care nearby, this can present a challenge. Others feel they are already away from their kids enough because of career demands and don't want to further remove themselves with another commitment. That's where the next solution may fit the need.

2. Children OCCASIONALLY in the group.

These groups let parents enjoy time with other adults and also create special times including children. Members get to know one another more deeply as they get to know each other's children. Kids also have the opportunity to meet adults who are important in the lives of their parents. One way to do this is to affirm their place by involving them at the beginning of the group. You could open with an icebreaker question geared toward children, play a short game, or sing a familiar worship song. The more you can make them feel a part of the group, the more they will value it too.

These groups may also have a quarterly family gathering to celebrate holidays or serve their community together (i.e. a Christmas party that includes children, have a picnic together). Fun, family activities can be easily planned throughout the year and are ways to include kids in this type of group structure.

3. Children NEAR the group.

This solution ratchets up the connection between the family and the group. The kids are brought to a playroom so the adults can get down to business. Other than the very beginning and the conclusion, children are not part of the group. Groups that choose this option require a space for both the group and for the kids. It doesn't work well if parents are distracted by kids in an adjoining room.

4. Children AROUND the group.

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

Groups like this will find the constant action of kids to be a healthy dynamic of their community. Think of this as a family party where all generations converge. Kids may interrupt the conversation or need attention, but that's normal in a family gathering. This type of group is certainly not the right approach for every group. **Even so, it's probably pretty close to the first-century Christian experience.**

5. Children IN the group.

Some groups go beyond allowing the kids to wander in and out of the group time and include them in the meeting. They welcome participation from everybody. Adults benefit by hearing their perspectives and children benefit by hearing mature voices share their insights.

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

6. Children as ESSENTIAL in the group.

For a select few, a “family group” is a welcome alternative. Adults want and expect to hear from kids. A group that focuses on all age groups has the potential to go deeper and have a lasting impact on participants because of the creativity required to engage all generations.

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

Child Care Considerations

→ Find Your Own Sitter

Each family is responsible for turning their kids over to someone they trust.

→ Alternating Weeks

The small group alternates guys one week and women another. This format allows one parent to stay at home with the kids, while couples can discuss the content of the study together at home. Every once in a while, everyone comes together, children included. This allows relationships to grow among families.

Another version is to encourage everyone to attend/watch the First Wednesday service on week 1, everyone gathers on week 2, and then men and women gather separately on weeks 3 and 4.

→ The “Rotation”

Rotate two members out of the group on a weekly basis to provide childcare in another room. This is best done in pairs to provide company for the adults and add accountability for the kids. Never rotate out a married couple, but instead send two men or two women so that relationships are built.

→ Child Care Nearby

The children are cared for in a home within a 5-10 minute drive of where the adults are meeting. During the meeting, one phone is the designated phone in case there’s an emergency. If that phone rings, the group stops until they are certain everything is okay with the children.

→ Student Ministry

Many groups use teens from the church to take care of the children during the meeting. This is often very settling for the parents of the children as the parents can utilize the teens that are already being hired to babysit their children on date nights.