



Dear Church Leader,

A new resource to help you connect with your parent and toddler group

Which ministry in your church would you say has the most contact with your community on a regular basis? And which has the potential to make the greatest difference? My guess is that you wouldn't say your Sunday preaching ministry, or even your evangelistic programme, but I wonder whether you'd put your parent and toddler group in the top three?

The church where I served as pastor had a parent and toddler group, yet for too long I had bought into the notion that the group was solely for the children. I was glad we had one but I didn't really see the need to be involved. It wasn't until I realised that the parent and toddler group is a great place to start developing stronger ties to the community that I invested any time in it.

I began to see that parent and toddler groups are as much for the benefit of the parents as they are for the children. So I always tried to go down and stand behind the counter at coffee time. Why? Because every parent would come to the hatch to get a drink and I could say, 'Hi'. Over time they got to know me and began to regard me as their pastor. And as a church, we began to develop new ways to engage with this group of people.

We started:

- Pamper Nights: We would hire a professional to do make-overs, and we'd do a brief talk about beauty being more than skin-deep.
- Dinners: We would invite both parents to a 3-course sit down meal and an after dinner speaker who would talk with humour, yet understanding, about some aspect of parenting.
- Outings: Picnics in the Park.
- An annual 'Fun Day' for the whole community: We'd have food, ice cream, games for the kids, and everything was free.
- Parenting courses.
- Mini services 3 times a year at Christmas, Easter and Harvest.

As my interest grew we gave the group a budget so they could buy big items, and offer their ministry free to those who came. All of this was aimed at building bridges between the rest of church life and this 'alternative congregation' called Parent and Toddler Group. And most of the time I would make an appearance, to chat or help serve, or clear up, or lead.

I realise that church leadership has many demands and that not all leaders feel comfortable with small children, let alone a roomful of mostly mums! But I'm absolutely convinced that your time, support, interest and appearance will make a big difference to the group leaders who often feel overworked and isolated. And your encouragement can really help the effectiveness of the group.

To help you get started in interacting with your group, we have put together a ready-made **Easter event**. (Visit www.careforthefamily.org.uk/playtime and click on the 'Run an Easter event' button to view the details). Just take it to your toddler group leader and offer to help with the organisation.

We've written a little story for young children that explains the meaning behind Easter. It only needs to be quick – no more than five minutes – under 3s have a very short attention span! It's designed to hold the interest of the children, whilst also allowing you to speak to the adults about your faith. Although this involvement alone will surely be appreciated, I would encourage you to see it as one part of a greater plan. One small step amongst others.

I really would urge you to take a greater interest in your group. After all, where else in your church programme do you have so many who don't attend on a Sunday gathered on your premises?

I wish you well in your continuing endeavours in God's service.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Hardy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end of the name.

Richard Hardy
Care for the Family Church and Community Development Manager