

“What should our Small Group do with our kids?”

For decades, church and small group leaders have been asking questions about children and Small Groups. And there’s a reason: there are no easy answers. This document exists to provide suggestions (each with its own strengths and weaknesses) for how your group might find answers. Each of these have been tried with varying levels of success.

Informing Values:

- Children are valuable in the Kingdom of God. We will choose what is best for everyone.
- Parents are ultimately responsible for the spiritual formation of their children. Our church family and its Small Groups will serve important roles, but our classes, activities, and groups are not able to carry full responsibility for a child’s spiritual development.
- **A Small Groups’ unique role for children is to provide a core of relationships which provide Biblical community and expect spiritual growth.**
 - Children need to see adults living out the way of Christ.
 - Children need to develop Spiritual Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, and Grandparents. Here’s the truth: as our children become young adults, they will seek to develop more of their own identity and independence apart from their parents. As a result, there will be seasons when an adolescent will have questions which they simply will not ask their parents. We want them to seek counsel from their extended spiritual family, and these relationships must be formed in the years *before* adolescence begins.

Keep in Mind: Our groups should already be practicing a variety of activities each semester (fellowship, worship, study, service, prayer, etc.). Many of these activities already lend themselves to children fully participating. Therefore, separate children’s activities only apply to gatherings requiring more privacy and discussion such as study and prayer. Ideally, each group only needs to address these separate children’s activities for a few weeks each semester.

A Suggested Approach: Varying Children’s Activities According to Seasons & Semesters

- By intentionally varying our activities for children with each season and semester, we are able to capitalize on the strengths of many approaches.
- “Think Big”—Seasons: For the most part, our Small Groups will have children between the ages of birth and 6th grade. (Beyond 6th grade, most will be participating in Student Ministry activities.) We categorize the younger children into three seasons: Toddlers, Preschool, and Elementary. On the back, you will find a list of suggested activities and practices for each of these seasons.
- “Think Small”—Semesters: We suggest choosing a different children’s activity for each semester. For example: let’s say your adults will engage in a 6-week DVD study in the Fall and an 8-week Bible Study in the Spring. Can we do a brief devotional at the beginning with the kids before we start our conversation, and then ask them to go play? Or, should we have someone prepare children’s lessons for these weeks? Either is fine. Do one in the Fall and the other in the Spring. Allow the group to make these decisions together.



**SOUTHWEST
SMALL GROUPS**

Suggestions for Each Season

Birth—Toddlers

(approx. 0-2 years old)

- Infants will likely remain with his/her parents. Parents will need to practice discretion and excuse themselves with their child if the child becomes too disruptive to the conversation.
- Otherwise, for this season we suggest childcare. Such young children require constant supervision, making other conversations more difficult. Furthermore, parents of young children are in desperate need of uninterrupted conversation with other adults! Here are some childcare suggestions:
 - Pool your resources to hire two childcare providers. Some reimbursement for childcare expenses is possible, so please contact Ryan (rporche@southwest.org) for more information.
 - Have pairs of adults rotate to watch the children so the remaining adults can have an uninterrupted discussion. While this is cheaper than hiring a childcare provider, it is less ideal because all of the adults do not get to be together at the same time. Avoid rotating a married couple out together—rotate out two women or two men for the sake of building friendships.
 - If an older and responsible child is already in the group, explore if he/she is able to provide childcare. Consider providing an occasional gift as an expression of gratitude.
- Consider using videos as well: Right Now Media has numerous options (VeggieTales & Theo are good options).

Preschool

(approx. 3-6 years old)

- Free play time. Everyone gets stir crazy sometimes—especially around holidays and the end of school! Do not allow yourself to feel guilty for allowing children to simply play together rather than completing an elaborate Bible lesson. This is why we rotate activities! And free play with peers is helpful for a child's overall development anyway.
- Joining the adults for a brief devotional at the beginning of the gathering. Most groups will have someone who facilitates children well. Invite this person to lead a short conversation with the kids about God. Allow a child to suggest a worship song for the entire group to sing, and then finish with a simple prayer. (Consider praying in very short phrases and allowing the children to repeat the phrases aloud.) After this time of devotion, kids can be dismissed for free play time. Consider these resources to frame devotional thoughts with the children:
 - Preschool & Elementary: *Jesus Calling*, by Sarah Young; 2010: Tommy Nelson Publishing
 - Preschool—3rd Grade: *Growing with Jesus*, by Andy Holmes; 2000 & 2014: Tommy Nelson Publishing
 - 2nd Grade—6th Grade: *Family Devotional*, by Sheila Walsh; 2015: B&H Publishing Group
 - 3rd Grade—6th Grade: *Devotions Off the Map*, by Abbey Land; 2015: B&H Publishing Group
- Have an adult and/or older child prepare a lesson and activity for the children. Check with our Children's Ministry about curriculum options which may already be available. Explore kidsofintegrity.com for free lessons available for download. Or simply develop your own lesson and activity. As always, check with Ryan for additional suggestions.
- Consider using videos as well: Right Now Media has numerous options (VeggieTales & Theo are good options).
- Share/Prayer. Each semester, adults should take time to share about life and pray for one another without the children present. At the same time, consider having a share/prayer time for the children too. It means the world to a child when adults take time to listen to their hearts and pray for them. Don't force a child to share if he/she doesn't want to or becomes shy. This activity allows us to model the importance of praying for each other's concerns. It also helps us develop Spiritual Aunts & Uncles.

Elementary

(approx. 7-11 years old)

- At this age, try to include children as much as possible while still leaving occasional opportunities for adults only.
- Additionally, find ways to allow the older kids to serve and play a role. Perhaps a 5th grader can prepare a lesson and activity for the preschoolers. Or allow an older child to work with an adult to prepare a kids' lesson and activity. Or allow them to coordinate pieces of a service project, a game night, or a worship experience.
- These are the most important years for forming Spiritual Aunts & Uncles. Consider dividing the group into even smaller groups for times of share/prayer and have different kids pray with different parents. Also consider having parents "trade kids" when having a game night or a service project. Create intentional time for these connections to form.
- Free play time. Elementary age children can coordinate activities for the younger children or simply provide childcare.
- Consider using videos as well: Right Now Media has numerous options.
- Rites of Passage: When growing up, my parent's Small Group had special blessing events when one of the children graduated from high school. They would take turns complimenting and encouraging the graduate aloud, providing a gift (one gift from the entire group), and sharing a time of prayer. Consider having more moments like these for other occasions like finishing Kindergarten, beginning Middle School, beginning High School, and finishing High School.