

Children and Youth Ministry in Church Plants/Small Churches

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Introduction

Hey, what's up, y'all? My name is Tim Levert. I'm pastor at Mustard Seed Church in Denham Springs, Louisiana. I've been part of the Ecclesia Network for a while, and I'm excited to share some things with you today.

I've been in ministry since the early '90s. I have a PhD in adolescent spiritual formation, focusing on the role of the family in adolescent faith development.

I definitely do not presume to have all this figured out. But we've tried to be thoughtful, and everything I'm sharing today is rooted in Scripture, research, and our own lived experience. My hope is that this encourages you, gives you something to chew on, and maybe challenges you a little bit too.

I don't think any of us have it all figured out, so it's always good to hear new ideas and let others challenge and sharpen us.

Why This Workshop?

In many church plants and smaller churches, I think we often ignore kids and students longer than we should.

I don't think we do it intentionally. Usually it's because we're wearing all the hats and trying to keep everything going. So we think:

“We'll get to it later.”

Or we think about children's ministry mainly as childcare:

“We need something for the kids so adults can focus.”

But if you look at Scripture, God has included children in the life of His people from the very beginning.

Deuteronomy 6 and Spiritual Formation

In Deuteronomy 6 — the Shema — God says:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength...”

Then He tells them to teach these things diligently to their children:

- when sitting at home,
- walking along the road,
- lying down,
- getting up.

This is one of the earliest pictures of spiritual formation.

And notice:

- It’s not a program.
- Not a class.
- Not a colorful room.
- Not curriculum.

It’s a way of life.

Spiritual formation was never meant to be outsourced. It was meant to be lived relationally within the people of God.

Reflection Question

Where does this kind of formation happen in your church right now?

How could it happen more often?

Children’s Ministry Reveals Theology

Children’s ministry is not a side ministry.

It reveals what we actually believe about the Kingdom of God.

Kids ministry is theology in miniature.

If your model contradicts your theology, your theology loses.

What we're talking about today is not:
"Here's the perfect plug-and-play model."

Instead, I hope we recover something older and better:

- clarified convictions,
- healthy posture,
- faithful first steps.

Before children's ministry was ever a program, it was a rhythm of life.

Biblical Foundations

1. Children Are the Church of Today

Children are not merely the church of tomorrow.

They are the church today.

Throughout the Old Testament, children were participants in community life.

Deuteronomy 31 says:

"Assemble the men, women, and children."

There's distinction between stages of development, yes — but not separation from the body.

2. Jesus Welcomed Children

Jesus consistently centered children.

From Matthew 18 and Mark 10 we see:

- Jesus welcomed children.
- He used them as examples.
- He blessed them.
- He identified with them.
- He warned people not to hinder them.

Jesus did not treat children as future disciples only.

He treated them as present participants in the Kingdom.

3. Belonging Comes Before Understanding

Kids do not need full understanding before participation.

Participation forms understanding.

Belonging comes before understanding.

We must create environments where:

- kids know they belong,
 - students know they belong,
 - families know they belong.
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4. Ministry With Kids Forms Us Too

We need children in our own spiritual formation.

Kids:

- challenge us,
- expose our need for control,
- disrupt efficiency,
- invite us into relational life.

Children are not merely people we disciple.

God disciples us through them too.

What Are We Aiming For?

We want to challenge default ministry models.

Often:

- kids ministry becomes babysitting,
- youth ministry becomes entertainment,
- churches compete to become “the best show in town.”

But disciple-making is the goal.

Three Core Ministry Convictions

1. Disciple-Making

Not behavior management.
Not information transfer.

Heart formation.

2. Relationships Over Programming

Programming can support relationships, but it must never replace them.

One healthy adult matters more than one giant program.

3. Family Matters

Family is the primary environment for formation.

And the church itself functions as a spiritual family.

Development and Formation

Kids are not miniature adults.

Development matters.

The message stays the same.
Methods adapt.

Scope and Sequence

Ask:

What are we hoping is formed over time?

Keep it simple.

Early Childhood Goals

By preschool:

- God loves me.
 - God made me.
 - God is with me.
-

Elementary / Pre-Puberty

Add:

- God loves everyone.
 - I can trust God.
 - Following Jesus shapes my life.
 - Kingdom imagination:
 - justice,
 - kindness,
 - belonging.
-

Adolescence

Add:

- Identity in Christ.
- Ownership of faith.
- Abiding in Jesus.
- Calling and Kingdom participation.

Leadership Development

Don't wait until adulthood to invite people into leadership.

Kids can:

- pray,
- read Scripture,
- serve,
- lead in meaningful ways.

Trust helps form people.

Creating Experiences With God

We're not just teaching kids about God.

We're creating opportunities for them to experience Him.

Examples:

- listening prayer,
- kids praying for each other,
- inviting kids to discern what the Spirit is saying,
- letting kids respond to Scripture.

If we only give information, we create spectators.

If we create encounters, we form participants.

Practical Ministry Advice

Start Simple

Don't out-program your maturity.

Start with what fits your community.

Use the “Thirds” Principle

Divide energy roughly into thirds:

- kids,
- parents/families,
- leaders.

Don’t Chase “Cool”

Kids don’t need cooler buddies.

They need healthy adults pursuing Jesus.

Parents Are Not Problems

Behind many parent complaints is really one question:

“Will you love my kid?”

Expect Messiness

Healthy ministry with kids is loud sometimes.

Adults often struggle with this more than kids do.

We’re forming people, not dazzling audiences.

Tim’s Failure Story

A couple once visited our church and commented on how noisy things were.

At the time, I responded defensively:

“Well, this is just how we do things.”

They never came back.

The failure wasn't our model.

The failure was my inability to communicate the vision behind it.

Now we explain:

- kids are welcomed, not managed,
- we want children to love church,
- we want church memories filled with joy and belonging.

Final Charge

Seek God's Spirit and get started.

Don't merely copy another church's model.

Discern:

What is the Spirit doing in your community?

Start:

- small,
- relational,
- incarnational,
- Spirit-led.

You'll know it's working when:

- kids are known,
- families are supported,
- the church feels more like family.

Do something.

But do it in step with the Spirit.

Session Notes & Interactive Workbook

(Fill-in / Discussion Version)

Session Title

Children and Youth Ministry in the Ecclesia Network
Facilitator: Tim Levert

Part 1 — Core Convictions

Why This Matters

Reflection

What assumptions have shaped your view of children's or youth ministry?

Key Quote

“Children's ministry is theology in miniature.”

What does your current ministry model communicate about the Kingdom of God?

Part 2 — Biblical Foundations

Deuteronomy 6

Observations

What stands out to you about spiritual formation in the Shema?

- relational
- everyday life
- family-centered
- communal
- integrated

Other observations:

Jesus and Children

Read:

- Matthew 18:1–6
- Mark 10:13–16

What do you notice about Jesus’ posture toward children?

Reflection

How does your church currently:

- welcome children?
- include them?
- learn from them?

Part 3 — Ministry Philosophy

Discuss

“Belonging comes before understanding.”

Do you agree? Why or why not?

Ministry Goals

What are you REALLY trying to accomplish?

- childcare
- entertainment
- behavior management
- disciple-making
- family formation
- spiritual participation

Part 4 — Scope & Sequence

Developmental Vision

Preschool / Early Childhood

What do you want children to know by kindergarten?

Elementary / Pre-Puberty

What truths should deepen during this stage?

Adolescence

What does mature faith look like by high school graduation?

Part 5 — Leadership & Participation

Reflection

Where could children or students participate meaningfully right now?

- prayer
- Scripture reading
- hospitality
- worship
- serving
- mentoring younger kids

Other ideas:

Part 6 — Practical Ministry Design

Discussion Questions

What kind of ministry model fits your church culture?

What are you intentionally NOT going to do?

Common Misfires Checklist

- chasing “cool”
- prioritizing performance
- siloing kids
- treating parents as problems
- ignoring safety
- valuing quiet over formation

Which of these are temptations for your context?

Part 7 — Spirit-Led Discernment

Reflection

What might the Spirit want to do in your church that looks different from other churches?

Final Questions

What is one practical next step?

Who needs to be involved in the conversation?

What would success look like in 12 months?

Transcript source: