

Workshop 1 – Faith with Under Fives in Mixed Age Groups

Mixed Age Groups: A blessing, not a curse

Mixed Age Groups

- Are the norm today, with smaller numbers of children in our churches, fewer volunteers etc.
2016 church attendance figures show that on average, there were only nine children per Church of England church.
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/2016StatisticsForMission.pdf>
- Age banding was a relatively modern adoption into Sunday Schools from statutory education and not best suited to spiritual encounter.
- Can be a place of mutual service, shared learning, passing on stories, encountering God together.

Warnings

- Groups can feel too ‘babyish’ for older children.
- Under fives can be lost or left to their own devices.

Key principles to underpin Mixed Age Groups

We need to let children grow

There are deep truths which can be simply articulated which our under fives need:

- God made me
- God knows me
- God loves me
- I can know and love God

(A Theology that grows, Yvonne Morris, Children’s and Families Ministry Advisor for the Diocese of Oxford)

We are not defined by our age

- A four year-old may have more in common with a seven year-old, than two seven year-olds.
- We all have different preferences, this extends to how we connect to God.
- David Csinos has termed this ‘spiritual styles,’ identified as:
 - Word
 - Emotion
 - Symbol
 - Action

(David M. Csinos in Children’s Ministry That Fits: Beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to nurturing children’s spirituality, Wipf & Stock, 2011)

How do we put this into practice?

Some questions to consider to help decide the best way forward for your group:

- What is already working well?
- Which parts no longer work?
- What is the make up of your group? Number of children, ages, interests, strengths etc.
- What are your own preferences and strengths in running the group?

Planning for Mixed Age Groups

Some things to consider:

When will you gather all children together?

- Refreshments
- Storytime
- Prayer
- Singing

How will you structure the session?

- Offer activities simultaneously
Children have some control and choice over what they engage with, space for different preferences, room to talk one to one.
- Run the session sequentially
Offer play materials or story basket throughout the session for under fives to engage with at any time.

What resources will you use?

- Take a pick and mix approach, choosing the best suited elements for your group.
- Use something written for under-fives, but extend questioning, discussion or story telling for older children.
- Take account of children’s interests and preferences in planning.

Becky May, Workshop leader