



A missional toddler group

Juz Paice, head of kids mission and ministry at St Peter's Anglican Church in Harrow, shares ways of making your toddler group distinctively Christian... without scaring everyone off!

Why should churches prioritise baby & toddler groups?

If there is one thing I have gleaned over the 40 years of working with under 5s, it's that having young children is tough. It can be lonely. Extended family may be far away. Toddler groups are a lifeline for families: a warm, dry place for the little ones to play and for parents and carers to find friendship and support. Offering a toddler group is a simple way to show that the Church cares. We know that most people don't go to church, but they *will* come into a church for a toddler group. Research shows that 74 per cent of parents of under 5s have been to a church toddler group.¹ I didn't have to look for young families – they came looking for the toddler group. And perhaps surprisingly, they appreciated that it's distinctively Christian. Many are looking for spiritual input for their families but may not seek this out on a Sunday.

How can a toddler group be missional?

I have run toddler groups in two different churches. The first was smaller with 15-20 parents who came regularly. I wanted a safe space for parents to come and talk openly. I focused on building relationships, making sure I knew everyone's name and spoke to everyone every week. From there, I could say, 'I'm sorry to hear you put your back out lifting your toddler. Can I pray for you?' The next week, I'd say, 'I've been praying. How are you doing?' And that really worked in that group.

Where I am now is quite different. We have 60 people on our books. I'm never quite sure who's going to be there. While I'm still trying to make connections with them, it's slightly more transient. I felt God challenging me, saying:

'You're the Church. You're a Christian. You've got all these people coming. This is an opportunity we shouldn't miss.'

I had to be able to talk to them about Jesus.

If I said I was confident about the change, I'd be lying. I was very nervous. What if I scare them off? What if they go down the road to another group where they're not preaching at us? We always did a story and song, so I decided to make the story a Bible story and to introduce Christian songs alongside our usual 'Wheels on the bus'. I thought, it's at the end. If people are offended, they can just leave, and it won't be too awkward. What I found is that nobody left. Everyone was happy with it. Quite a few people had some sort of childhood church experience, and they wanted their children to have some moral or Christian input. Others said, 'I think it's a good thing for my children to know the Bible even if we don't read it at home.' People of other faiths didn't mind either, wanting to teach their children to respect other religions. So, actually, there was no problem. I didn't need to be scared.

I found it helpful to pre-plan what to say – every week before the story, I say, 'Here at St Peter's church, we're Christians. That means we believe Jesus is the son of God and the Saviour of the world.' It's great because young children love repetition and, for me, I'm not having to think about what to say. It makes it easier for others on the team to lead too, as we all say the same thing. We keep it simple, with a Bible story and a related craft. And we sing the same Christian songs each week, so the children learn the words.



Opportunities for prayer

You will have a team who help set up or serve the tea and coffee. They may not be Christians or part of your church, but you can involve them in a short team prayer time before you start. This can be a gentle way for people to find faith and deeper relationships. You can also offer an opportunity for parents to request prayer, either through a prayer box with cards as they're signing in, or by creating an interactive prayer station where children and adults can pray if they want.

Invite your church leaders along to build relationships or for a particular task (perhaps to share the Bible story one week, or to invite people to your Christmas or Easter events). If your church leader is involved in the toddler group, it really increases how much people associate your toddler group with the Church.

Extend the invitation

Does your church run a food bank, parenting or marriage courses, Alpha, or Messy Church? Invite parents to Church events that will meet their needs. Don't forget the obvious: regularly invite your families to Sunday worship with clear communication about how they can engage with their children.

Roots **Under 5s** material is a great way to introduce Bible stories and Christian songs to your toddler groups. Use it in the lectionary order, or search by Bible reference, to create your own plan.

Listen to the full interview with Juz:
<https://rootsforchurches.podbean.com/>

¹ <https://www.eauk.org/great-commission/resources/talking-toddlers>

² <https://d3hgrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/61f2fd86f0ee5/content/pages/documents/20210827-doc-mission-ministry-children-young-people-families-9dot-toddler-group-research-report-191016-v01.pdf>