

How to set up an intergenerational small group



Dr Sam Richards is head of children's, youth and intergenerational discipleship for the United Reformed Church. She discovered the joy of intergenerational small groups in a fresh expression church (called mayBe) that rashly decided never to do anything just for the children!

A child proudly shares homemade biscuits, a teenager teaches everyone a new song, a retired person shyly offers photos of their garden project, a dad shares his frustration about the lack of progress in tackling an issue he cares about, mums discuss the difficulties of balancing care of aging relatives with parenting, and everyone takes turns holding the baby in between trying to master origami.

Welcome to the merry chaos of an intergenerational small group!

Intergenerational small groups provide the opportunity to open up the home group format to all ages. This doesn't always mean you have someone from every generation, but you might. The benefit of meeting in a more intimate and informal way is that people come to understand each other's preferences, needs, gifts and challenges. The fruit of this is fellowship beyond the normal peer-group boundaries, stretching across ages and stages, where people discover shared interests, humour, a desire to learn from and with one another, and a shared love of God expressed in different ways. Fostering intergenerational relationships matters – research shows they are a key factor in enabling people to stick with faith through life transitions and events.¹

So, how do you go about setting up an intergenerational small group?

Be clear about the aims. It might be to bring together the generations because faith develops best for everyone in that environment, or that you are working together on a project, planning a service or event, or exploring a particular theme. If everyone understands the purpose, it's easier to bring things back to this focus.

Find a time that works for people. One benefit of intergenerational groups is that no one needs to arrange babysitters because all ages are included. However, not everyone can stay out until 10pm! Gathering at a time that includes a meal often works well – a Saturday brunch, weekday tea or bank holiday lunch. Hosting means providing the space to gather, not taking responsibility for refreshments and content. Everyone is invited to contribute; this might mean everyone brings something towards the meal. Even having enough suitable crockery and cutlery can be a shared responsibility – and washing up definitely is!

Everyone contributes to your time together. Agree on a range of activities and find ways for different people to lead. Buddy people up across generations for any larger roles or activities that need more preparation. People can try things in a flexible context and receive supportive feedback.

Sometimes people want to go further or deeper than the group can accommodate, either due to attention spans or the nature of the topic. A good facilitator will notice this and find ways to enable the group to divide into those moving onto the next thing and those staying with the current (the division won't always be age-based). Talking out loud isn't the only way to go deeper – space to reflect using art materials, writing things down or encouraging people to respond to each other's contributions can also be helpful.

For some, an intergenerational space feels too chaotic, noisy or overstimulating. Hosting might mean offering a quiet space for people to retreat to or providing sensory items (noise-cancelling headphones, a weighted blanket or cuddly toys). Ensure everyone knows they can bring whatever is helpful for them and explain to others how this helps foster understanding and builds relationships in the group.



Typical activities in your small group could be:

Welcoming – perhaps with an icebreaker to help get to know each other. For example, 'What is, or was, your favourite toy?' **Opening prayer or grace** before eating together. **Bible engagement** – a way of helping everyone read, hear, sing, watch or unpack a Bible passage together, engaging more than one sense if possible. **An activity to make or do something** – to create space for more conversation about the Bible passage or theme. This can be differentiated so people choose the right level for themselves and give and receive support in doing this together. **An opportunity to share a little of people's lives** – things to celebrate, give thanks for and ask for God's help with. **A time of prayer** – for one another, the group and the needs of the world. **A time of worship** – focusing on God. **A blessing** to share as you finish. **An agreement** about who is going to do what next time.

A small group doesn't need to do all of these, or the same selection, every time. You also don't need everyone to do the same thing at the same time. The joy of a small group is its ability to be responsive and flexible in ways a Sunday service cannot. If someone forgets their contribution or is unable to come, activities can be changed. The most important thing is facilitating listening to one another, which deepens understanding across the generations and grows love for one another and God.

Resources

Roots **Explore & respond** and **holiday club** materials **WEB** can be easily adapted for this setting.

See URC resources: <https://bit.ly/URCFamilyFilmNight> and <https://bit.ly/URC-holidayclub>.

 Listen to Sam discussing intergenerational small groups with Melanie on the Roots for Churches podcast: rootsforchurches.podbean.com

¹ Dr. Kara E. Powell and Dr. Chap Clark, *Stickyfaith: Everyday ideas to build lasting faith in your kids* (Zondervan, 2011).