

TODDLER GROUPS

A guide to starting
a Church Toddler Group



 THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND **Loving.**
Living.
Diocese of Leeds **Learning.**

WHAT'S IN THE GUIDE?



- Prayer, vision and values for your group
- Example vision statement
- Good practice guidelines and a checklist
- How to structure a session
- Play activity ideas
- Suggestions for how to be a distinctively Christian Toddler Group
- Nurturing faith and supporting family life
- Encouraging and developing your toddler group team



GOD LOVES BABIES, TODDLERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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Welcome to the guide to setting up a Church Toddler Group.

God loves babies, toddlers and their families. Churches have a unique opportunity to reach out to the local community, to support and nurture little ones and their families whilst gently sharing the love of Jesus. As we do this, we are encouraging families to begin a lifelong journey of faith in God.

This guide aims to help you think through what you need to start a toddler group, to build vision and commit the work fully to God and ask for his blessing. There is an opportunity to consider best practice and make sure everything is in order before you begin. There are suggestions of activities and ways in which your group can demonstrate Jesus' love to all who attend.



PRAYER, VISION AND VALUES

Preparing well to start a Toddler Group requires time and space to think through and pray about what God is calling you to.

- Why you want to set up a group?
- Who your group is going to serve?
- What will your group be like
- How are you going to set up?
- Where do you see this group going?
- What next - what are your plans for the future?



Prayer

"Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain." Psalm 127v1
Start by seeking God's heart for the children and families around you. Where is God at work in your context? Is a toddler group the right fit?

Vision

Dream with God and work out a vision; what are your aims and objectives for the group? What do you want to achieve and where can you see it going in the future?

Values

What are the words you would use to describe your group? What are the essential characteristics of the group? How will these values impact the sessions you run?

Support

Write a proposal for the clergy and the PCC that includes your vision and values for them to discuss and approve. Ask them and the church congregation for prayer support as you move forward. Keep communicating your vision with everyone.

EXAMPLE VISION STATEMENT

Church Toddler group:

Our Purpose:

To be a safe, welcoming supportive group for children and parents to play and learn together and encounter Jesus.

Our aims:

- To provide top quality play provision every week in term-time.
- To support parents and carers as they raise little ones.
- To demonstrate God's love in all we say and do at toddler group.
- To encourage children and adults to know Jesus and to develop a lifelong relationship of faith.

Our ethos:

- Every member of Toddler group endeavours to love God and love one another well.
- We treat one another with respect.
- We share our toys.
- We speak kindly to one another.
- We don't shout.
- We support one another.



Good Practice

Important policies and procedures to consider before you start

01.



Build your Team

It is extremely important to have the right people leading and volunteering with toddler groups. As the team will be working with children, it is essential that you work with the clergy and parish safeguarding officer to appoint leaders and volunteers through the safer recruitment process. Write clear role descriptions for leaders and volunteers so everyone involved knows what they are doing and ensure all team members complete the necessary safeguarding training. Contact the [Diocesan Safeguarding Team](#) for information, advice and training. Make sure you identify team members gifts and skills and help them work out where they fit and the roles they could do.

02.



Health & Safety and the environment

The location you use for your toddler group needs to be clean, safe and warm. Take a walk around the venue with the church's Health and Safety representative to look for potential hazards and complete a comprehensive risk assessment for the building and your sessions. How many people can your venue hold to be safe? Is the venue secure so children can't get out and put themselves in danger?

Make sure your activity is covered by the Church's insurance.

Where are you going to store your equipment in between sessions? Are your volunteers trained in manual lifting? Are all the toys safe for children to play with?

If you are serving food, your volunteers require training on what to serve to children and food hygiene standards, being especially aware of allergies.

You will also need a qualified first aider on site for every session, a first aid kit and an accident/incident log book.

03.



Administration

It is important to keep good records. On arrival every attendee to the group should complete a registration/permission form for their child and themselves with their contact details, emergency contact details, any food allergies. Also include a consent form if you are taking photos/videos in to use in church publicity. It may also be worth having a section for them to select whether they would like to be added to the church mailing list to find out more about church life and events. All this information, under GDPR legislation, must be stored securely. For fire safety, always take a register of who is in the building in case you need to evacuate in an emergency.



04.



Finances

Consider how you are going to finance the group. Is there funding available through the church? Are you going to charge a fee or ask for donations? What will you do if a family can't afford to pay? Many people no longer carry cash - what are your options for contactless payment? What resources/materials might you need to buy to run the group? Appoint a treasurer or work with your church treasurer to manage the group finances.

05.

Managing behaviour and expectations

During toddler group sessions, you are likely to come across issues around behaviour and different expectations. Every parent/carer has a different parenting style and each child is unique. However there are certain standards of behaviour that keep everyone safe and we should be clear about what we expect. It is worth having some ground rules and writing a welcome leaflet to give to all families attending your group to outline your expectations. Having a visual poster or board with pictures to reinforce your ground rules may help children understand as well. You could include examples like:



- Parents and carers have the responsibility to to supervise their children playing. Please intervene if other children might get hurt.
- If parents/carers are taking photos on their phones, they must only photograph their child and keep it for their own personal use. Do not put photos from the group on social media to protect other people's identities.

It is important to be aware of the families with children with additional needs - their child's behaviour may be perceived as disruptive when it is part of their processing and coping. Speak to the parents/carers and work out together some strategies to help all of them get the most out of toddler group. Make sure your group ethos speaks of the welcome of God to everyone.

06.

Publicity and making connections

How are you going to publicise the group? Who do you have local connections with i.e. the school, the nurseries, children's centres, GP surgeries, Community midwives/health visitors, local businesses? Are you going to use social media? Can you print leaflets?



CHECKLIST

- All team members safely recruited, signed confidential declaration, DBS checked and Safeguarding trained.
- Venue and activities risk assessment complete. Risk Assessment Template Make sure your activity is covered by church insurance.
- Food safety and hygiene standards communicated to team.
- Qualified first aiders recruited, First Aid kit visible in venue with an accident/incident book for logging any issues.
- Safe storage for equipment and regular checks on toy safety.
- Baby changing facilities - have spare nappies, wipes and nappy bags available. Ask for soiled nappies to be taken away for safe disposal.
- Finances - treasurer appointed and funding obtained. Entrance fee discussed.
- Administration - registration/permission forms, GDPR policies adhered to, session register for fire safety and control of who is in the building.
- Managing behaviour and expectations - make sure the team and all those who attend know what is expected of them to help keep everyone safe while the session runs.
- Publicity - Social Media accounts/leaflets/connections made.



STRUCTURING YOUR TODDLER GROUP SESSION

Young children thrive in routine as they often feel safer when they know what will happen next. Having a session structure that is the same every week is really helpful for children to settle.

How are you going to plan your toddler group session?

What day is best for your group?

What time will your group start?

How long will the session run for?

Are you going to offer refreshments?

How about a story time or singing time?

Think about the opportunities for free play or craft activities? What will you offer?



You might like to use a curriculum to help you structure your session. There are lots to choose from, here are a few:

[Care for the Family Playtime Resources](#)

[Scripture Union Bubbles](#)

[Bible Buds](#)

[Diddy Disciples](#)



Here is an example morning session structure:

10am Open doors, welcome and registration

10-10:45am Free play & craft activities

10:45am Bible story and singing time

11am Snack time – coffees and teas followed by more free play

11:30-11:45am Tidy up time

11:45am Home time



PLAY ACTIVITIES AND IDEAS

Here are some suggestions of activities you might offer:



Baby corner

Soft furnishings and baby toys that have the Lion Mark or EC standard, play mats and blankets, baby seats/bouncers, rattles and musical instruments. It is worth having comfortable seating for breastfeeding mothers if that is an option.



Heuristic play

Treasure baskets with tactile, natural everyday materials – wooden spoons, metal egg cups, set of keys, large corks, large shells (nothing small that a child might put in their mouth and choke on), fabric swatches with different textures.



Books & Jigsaws

Have a calm, quiet corner with books and jigsaws to encourage imagination, interaction and language skills. Carers can sit with children and connect as they work or read together.



Construction toys

Building toys such as wooden blocks, Duplo, Megablox help children to develop fine motor skills and focus. Working together with other children to build encourages cooperation and building a structure that stands boosts confidence.



Active/physical toys

Slides, climbing frames, ride on toys or rockers, baby walkers, ball skill games; these enable children to burn off energy, build stamina and strength and help to develop co-ordination. It is good to offer these toys towards the end of a session.



Small world play

Playing with cars and a garage, a wooden train track set or farm animals, Happyland play, dinosaurs - the opportunities are endless. Small world play encourages children to use imagination, to develop social and language and problem solving skills.



Sensory activities

Playing with playdough, bubbles, water, sand, gloop (cornflour mixed with water), slime, shaving foam, rice or dried pasta, light boxes, baking activities. Sensory play aids brain development, body awareness and fine and gross motor skills.



Role play

Playing with dressing up clothes, pretending to be parents, playing home, kitchen, shopping, doctors, vets. When children act out real life, they use their imaginations, they learn to express emotions and resolve conflict.



Arts and crafts

Painting, gluing and sticking, papercraft, air drying clay, pipe cleaners, stringing beads, nature crafts, decorating biscuits or cakes, stickers. Arts and crafts help develop creativity, fine motor skills and resilience.



Storytelling baskets

Baskets or bags filled with storytelling items for children to play an explore for themselves, especially if there is a bible story or theme for the session. This helps children process the story for themselves.

BEING DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN

There are lots of ways church toddler groups can be distinctively Christian. Here are a few to consider:

The environment and space used

Children and families attending toddler group enter into a space that should be holy, cared for and inspiring so it speaks of God's presence and love for them. Is your group going to be held in church or in an adjacent church building? Is the space clean and safe? What is hanging on the walls for families to see?

Toddler group team

The team who serve families at Toddler group are really important because they show God's love through the way they act and serve. Do the team pray before Toddler Group starts? Do they offer to pray with people if required? Do the clergy attend Toddler Group? As well as the team serving, are there opportunities to allow the grown ups attending to contribute so they have ownership and a sense of belonging?

Ethos of the group

Is the ethos of the group obvious? Are all are made welcome? Does your group treat one another with respect and kindness? Do you have some gentle ground rules? Do you communicate our vision to families well? Does your team create a sense of community and belonging? Do you look out for people who are lonely or struggling?

Meeting practical needs

What are the needs of your local community and context? Can you offer additional support such as a Foodbank or Money management courses, mental health and wellbeing support in particular for those suffering with post-natal depression.



Seasonal celebrations throughout the church year

What activities, crafts and reflections can be offered based on the seasons such as Christmas or Easter or special occasions? How about a Christmas party with a re-telling of the Nativity story or an Easter egg hunt, reflective red poppy prayers for Remembrance or Mothers Day cards?

Bible storytelling and singing

Does the group have a bible story/singing time? This is a special opportunity to share faith to children and grown ups alike in a non threatening manner. Godly Play is an excellent tool to encourage children to wonder about God and we offer training in delivering Godly Play sessions. There are also lots of amazing Bible story books to use and ideas for props for interactive storytelling - do contact us for inspiration. Music and singing songs are another way to share faith. If you have a team member who is musical, they can lead this or you can use recorded music such as Playtime Bible/Action songs or Spotify playlists or Youtube videos.

Thought for the day

Could the group provide a 'thought for the day' for adults and children to consider? How about using children's film clips, recent news articles or art images to provoke thought and prompt discussion?

Take home resources

What resources could you provide for children and adults to explore faith at home? Could we have worksheet or a craft kit or a prayer card to give families each week? Do you have an online community that parents and carers can link up with during the rest of the week?

Invitations to church events and services

Don't forget to invite toddler group attendees to regular church events; Sunday services, small groups and church celebrations.

The Diocese of Leeds Children, Young People and Families team regularly update the social media pages with helpful resources and ideas so do check our pages for more inspiration and training.



Nurturing faith and supporting family life

What can your group do to encourage and grow faith amongst children and their parents and carers?

- Support for parents/grandparents/carers – If appropriate, could you offer prayer ministry and pastoral care to the grown ups or provide access to resources to help them with specific issues?
- Invitations to church services and special events run by the church to encourage families to come along.
- Take home activities – at the end of each toddler group session, have a take home activity for grown ups to do with the children to encourage faith at home – there are resources here...[faith at home link](#)
- Baptism/christening preparation – if families are interested in having their babies and children baptized, invite them to a baptism preparation session.
- Parenting for Faith have a series of [bite-size videos](#) for nurturing faith in babies and toddlers that you might like to use with your group to help them consider how they and their children might grow to know Jesus better.



When children leave Toddler group to attend nursery or start primary school, what can we do to keep in contact with families and continue walking with them on their faith journey?

We have a [Toddler Group Transitions training session](#) that will help your group plan ahead; do contact us for more information.



Encouraging and developing your team



Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.'

Matthew 22 v37-39

For Church Toddler groups to run well and be effective, it is vital that the Toddler group team works together and shares the vision for the group. We want to be groups that love God and one another. Water cannot be drawn from an empty well and nurturing faith and caring for others is difficult to do from a spiritually dry place. It is really important to invest in the team, to pray for each other and for leaders to make sure the team are spiritually nourished as well.

Here are some ideas to encourage the team:

- Pray together as a team regularly for the work you are doing and the people you encounter.
- Inspire team members to prioritise time spent with Jesus in prayer and worship and share ideas of how to do this.
- Use a team building resource such as Journeying Together from Care for the Family.
- Gather together socially to build relationships and bond as a team.
- Share encouraging stories of where you have seen God at work in your life and especially at Toddler Group.
- Attend conferences together such as Care for the Family's Playtime Conference.
- Regularly assess what is working and what is not so you can implement effective change. Keep communicating with the team so everyone knows what is going on.
- Plan a time of retreat together to seek God's heart for the group and for yourselves.



The Children, Youth and families team are here to support and encourage you as you seek to serve your community by running a church toddler group. We have further resources and training available on our [diocesan webpages](#) and if you need any specific advice, guidance or assistance, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us:

childrenyouth@leeds.anglican.org
<https://www.leeds.anglican.org/children-youth/home>

