

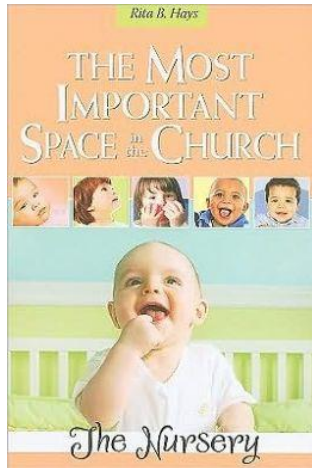
The Church Nursery and Toddlers

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The church nursery



The Most Important Space in the Church has a thought-provoking title. The author contends the most important space in the church is the nursery. Whether you agree with that or not, offering ministry for the youngest members of the body of Christ is important. It's not just babysitting but is actually the foundation for the future vitality of any church. In the nursery is where evangelism and spiritual formation can take place; it's also where many visitors first meet and interact with other church members and can experience warmth and acceptance. Congregations that have a rich and spiritually rooted ministry with newborns and toddlers are establishing a faith formation pattern that continues through all age levels.

Why have a birth to three ministry?

Scriptural basis

In Deuteronomy 6:5-7 we read these words:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds. Recite them to your children. Talk about them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up.

I'm sure you're all familiar with the scene in the gospels where Jesus blesses the children. In Luke 18:15-16 we hear that:

People were bringing babies to Jesus so that he would bless them. When the disciples saw this, they scolded them. Then Jesus called them to him and said, "Allow the children to come to me. Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children."

Note that people were bringing *babies* to Jesus as well as other children.

Evangelism/hospitality

Ministry to babies and toddlers also provides an opportunity for evangelism and hospitality. Many parents who don't regularly attend church services or belong to a congregation will still want to have their child baptized. Connecting with and supporting the families of baptized children leads to many of them joining a congregation when they see that they and their child are welcomed and valued.

Research findings

Research on brain development during the first three years of life shows that this is a time of critical importance in many areas and is a prime time for churches to make their first impressions on children. The church nursery can provide a place where God's love is felt by children through warm physical contact, soothing surroundings and music, and a reverent and spiritual atmosphere.

Cradle roll ministry

Ministry to infants and toddlers should involve outreach to families through what is commonly called a Cradle Roll Ministry. This outreach can begin even before a child is born with churches offering support and training for expectant couples.

Once a baby is born or baptized their name is added to the cradle roll, which may be an actual physical display in the church such as a banner or plaque. Sometimes photos of the babies are posted as well. Gifts are often given to families of baptized babies, such as a Bible storybook or CD of children's Christian music.

Regular mailings help the church to stay in touch with the family and there are even products sold by religious publishers with prepackaged materials to be mailed out when the child turns a certain age. One of these is [Splash](#) which is sold by Augsburg Fortress. There are three age levels with monthly Parent Pages which offer "ideas for faith-filled play, worship, meals, and prayer together." There is also a music CD as part of the program.

As part of the cradle roll ministry, the family is invited to attend worship services and information is given about the church nursery. When the child turns three (or whatever age that classes start) an invitation is issued to attend Sunday school.

Here's a [link](#) to an article about a church that does a great job with their cradle roll ministry.



Church nursery policy

Safe church policy

We want to create a safe environment for our babies and toddlers, so it's important to have a written Church Nursery Policy. If you have a Safe Church or Safe Sanctuaries Policy already in place, make sure that your nursery policy adheres to that policy to ensure that workers are screened and that there are two adults at all times in the nursery. It's also important to have the proper adult to child ratio in place and a sign-in/sign-out policy.

Safety and sanitation

A sanitary environment requires a regular schedule to clean and disinfect toys and other objects in the nursery. Make sure that parents know that children who show signs of illness won't be able to be cared for in the nursery.

Training

All nursery workers should be properly trained and receive an orientation.

Forms

Forms that are part of your policy include applications and job descriptions for workers as well as registration forms for parents to fill out. Make sure the registration form asks for information such as allergies, how to contact the parents if necessary, who has permission to pick up the child, and other important information.

Communicate with parents

Have information about the church nursery as well as your nursery policy available for parents.

Supplies/furniture

Have a list of necessary supplies and make sure items are replaced when used. Make sure all cribs, changing tables, etc. are safe and there have been no recalls on them. Parents are reluctant to leave their child in a room that looks outdated or dirty. An excellent article about establishing guidelines for your church nursery can be found on the [Building Faith website](#).

One-year-old milestones

Gross motor skills

Usually by a child's first birthday, he is able to stand alone and has taken his first few tentative steps. Within a few months he'll be walking with confidence and by the time he's two is running all over the place. Many try and succeed to pull themselves onto furniture and, unfortunately, can learn the hard way when getting down on their own.



Fine motor skills

One-year-olds are pretty good at doing a few things for themselves, such as eating with their fingers, helping their parents dress them, and turning the pages of a story book. They also start to use a few everyday items correctly, including a spoon, a telephone, and a hairbrush. They may be able to stack two or three blocks and are very interested in putting objects in and out of containers and are old "pros" at waving "bye-bye."

Language skills

At this age they are mimicking many of the words they hear and can name certain familiar objects. They enjoy music and can sing bits of simple songs (for example: E-i-e-i-o).

Cognitive

At one, toddlers start recognizing the names of the people in their family. They begin to understand and respond to simple directions, such as "Bring mommy the book" or "Wave bye-bye to Nana." They also recognize and can point to familiar objects and body parts either in their environment or in a picture book.

Social/emotional

Socially, one-year-olds become more aware of themselves and their surroundings. They will enjoy being around other children, but seldom "play with" another child. It's usually a form of parallel play where they play beside another child, doing their own thing. Sharing is a difficult concept and is rare among one-year-olds. Separation anxiety is usually in full force by 18 months, but tapers off as they near two years.

Two-year-old milestones

Gross Motor Skills

A two-year-old walks alone and can pull toys while walking. She also can carry one or more toys while walking. She is beginning to run and can stand on tiptoe; she also climbs up and down from furniture.

Fine Motor Skills

At two, a child scribbles and may favor one hand over the other. He can put objects in and out of containers and stack objects such as blocks and books. It's amazing how a toddler can find the tiniest speck of something on the floor, pick it up, and stick it in his mouth!

Language Skills

Two-year-olds recognize names of people, objects, and body parts. They use simple phrases and simple sentences. They can follow simple instructions and repeat words heard in conversation. During a toddler's second year, their vocabulary comes to a point where it just about explodes! Within a few months, little ones who could barely speak are able to put together full sentences.

Cognitive

Two-year-olds can find objects when hidden in a simple spot and can sort by shape or color. Make-believe play begins.

Social/Emotional

At this stage, toddlers imitate the behavior of older children and adults. Toddlers imitate everything: how mommy checks their forehead for a fever, playing house, a doctor's checkup, even when mom or dad gets mad and might say angry words. It's important to set a good example so that those two-year-olds see Jesus in you and imitate that behavior.



Spiritual life of a toddler

For toddlers, faith is a feeling; they can't verbalize what they've learned. Feeling cared for and safe are the basics for an emerging faith and trust is the most important factor. This first stage of faith is called undifferentiated faith.

Teaching toddlers

Toddlers are sensory learners. They have a very short attention span, anywhere from one minute to three-four minutes. Toddlers become distracted very easily, so anything you're going to teach them has to be done in that time frame. Keep concepts very simple such as love, helping, forgiving, sharing, etc.

Environment

One of the most important things you can do to promote a young child's faith is to make church (or in this case, the nursery) a place of love and warmth, where both they and the parents can trust they will be cared for.

Toddlers love big, colorful graphics. Decorate with hanging mobiles, happy colors, and things that will grab their attention.

Allow enough space for them to move around and to be noisy. Toddlers ARE noisy...whether laughing or, sometimes, crying.

Toddler-proof your room so the children are free to touch and explore with their senses. Make sure your space is also secure. Many a toddler/preschooler has the fine motor skills to turn a doorknob and make a quick getaway.



Bible stories

Keep Bible stories relevant to a toddler's life. In his ministry, Jesus used parables or stories to help people understand the lessons he was trying to get across. They were relevant to their lives. Keep Bible stories you tell relevant to a toddler's life.

The Good Samaritan: helping, compassion

Every toddler has had a bump or a boo-boo in their lifetime. Many even show compassion when one of their friends gets hurt. Telling this parable as a story about someone getting hurt and being helped by another is one every toddler can relate to.

The Prodigal Son: forgiveness, unconditional love

Another thing toddlers have in common is that they learn through trial and error...and sometimes the things they try get them in trouble. In telling this story, the idea of getting hurt or sad because you did not listen to a parent is something most two-year-olds can commiserate with. Being forgiven and loved unconditionally is something they understand.

The Lost Sheep: Jesus loves you

Most toddlers enjoy exploring the world around them. Some stay close to a parent or a caregiver and some are more adventurous and tend to stray and seek to find out what's around the next corner. On these occasions when suddenly they realize a parent is not in sight, they get worried and feel lost. The idea of Jesus searching for the one sheep who got lost gives them reassurance that someone will always come looking for them and they will be found.

Prayer

It's never too early to introduce prayer. In many homes, the parents have already done this, so children are familiar with thanking God for a meal, asking God to heal a person or pet who's sick, or saying bedtime prayers.

Toddlers need routine and repetitions in some areas just as they need freedom and creative expression in others. Singing the Doxology ("Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow") every week while collecting an offering is a beautiful way to have them offer thanks while introducing them to part of their future worship experience.



Games

Toddlers learn through play and are delighted when an adult gets down on the floor to play with them. There are dozens of books with ideas for games; however, some of the best are still the classics.

Roll-y Ball

Sit on the floor in a circle and roll the ball to each child, saying "Jesus loves... (name of child). While promoting name recognition, the repetition of the thought that Jesus loves them will also stand out.

Hide and Seek

The excitement of hiding and being found can elicit shrieks of excitement from little ones. Even if they all hide together (which often happens) or hide in the same place over and over again, this game has always been a favorite. It keeps toddlers active physically and promotes the cognitive thinking skill of figuring out where to hide. (This game is a wonderful activity for the Parable of the Lost Sheep.)

Peek-a-Boo

This well-known game never seems to grow old with very young children and can distract a crying baby as mom is trying to exit the nursery and go to church. As the children grow, you can add an emotional facial response each time you uncover your face (happy, sad, silly, angry) and either repeat the name of the feeling or have them guess what feeling it is.

I See a Cat

You play this game by saying "I see a cat and it says....(meow)." Continue with other animals. This works great with the creation or Noah's ark story.

Pretty Petunia

Starting with a flower, you can pass it around, letting each child see, touch, and smell it. Ask what it is and say "God created flowers. What else did God create in the world around us?" (You can have a basket filled with different objects to prompt sharing.)

Hop like a Frog

To play this game start by saying: "God made all the different animals in the world. He made frogs. Let's hop like a frog." Continue with different animals.

Music

Music enhances your environment. Having a bright, cheerful environment is a must for a church nursery. Filling it with music can only enhance it.

Toddlers learn through repetition and, amazingly, tend to learn the words to a song more quickly than an adult.

Toddlers learn through songs, fingerplays, and hymns about God and Jesus and different Bible stories. Music helps them learn in a different way and remember the stories.

Music can also set the mood. A happy, lively song is perfect for play time or circle time. A soft song soothes and prepares little one for grace and snack. And, there's always the good old "clean-up song" to promote "team spirit".

Christian bookstores and websites have many, many options available on CD. Many sites even let you preview snippets of the music before purchasing them.

Art activities

Since toddlers learn through their sensory experiences, it's important to give them opportunities to use different types of media with various textures...although not all at the same time.

Art comes from the imagination, which the toddler is starting to form. It's born of emotion and expressed through the hands.



Crafts create a definite "something." Crafts use more aptitude and dexterity, creating a "something" that has a definite shape and appearance.

The goal is to create something unique. You can put out a sample and materials with which they can express themselves and feel satisfaction.

It's wonderful to play different types of music while the activity is going on. Children may even paint to the music, swishing the brush around to the rhythm.

Sensory fun

When teaching toddlers, try to incorporate all the senses if possible. Toddlers love color; especially rainbows. A fun activity is to make a rainbow with fruit loops; half the supplies are eaten, but it's an activity that involves sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound (crunching as you're chewing). This activity can be used when doing the story of Noah's ark.

Fingerpainting, besides being a tactile and visual experience, has been known to be a form of meditation or prayer, much like doodling. Put it together with music and you a spiritual experience.

Using clay or Play-Doh creates a fun, tactile experience. Children can act out their feelings with clay and create something using their imagination. Water play is great to use with toddlers; even washing messy hands with soapy water can be an adventure in a bucket. Toddlers enjoy baking cookies and this activity uses their sense of smell, sight, taste, and touch.

Other supplies for sensory fun include feathers, crayons, washable markers, ribbon, lace, tissue paper, craft sticks, cotton balls, pipe cleaners, and crepe paper.

Stages of creative activity

- Stage one: Scribblings
- Stage two: Diagrams or shapes - the child can also remember the names of some simple shapes.
- Stage three: Complex diagrams - a shape within a shape or crossing lines
- Stage four: Representative aggregates - combining three or more diagrams

Toddlers usually fall within the first two stages.

Parents

Parents are an integral part of a toddler's faith formation. Most of the time, their first experience of a relationship with God is through their parents. Mealtime rituals, such as grace or Bible readings, promote the importance of taking a moment to talk or listen to God. Going to church and Sunday school can become the norm in a toddler's life as they learn that it is important to take time for God. A toddler's faith is mostly based on impressions they get at home. If parents view going to church as a positive experience, the child will emulate that feeling. If it is felt more like a chore or an obligation, the child will pick up on that feeling as well.

Resources

Many teachers create their own curriculum for toddlers based on the church year or what the children are studying in Sunday school or even with a monthly theme; the repetition of hearing the same story over a few times allows them to remember it.

Some well-known publishing companies have their own infant and toddler versions of Sunday school curriculum. Augsburg Fortress produces *Splash*, a resource which can be used for cradle roll ministry. There are also separate curriculums exclusively for infants and/or toddlers, such as *Play-n-Worship* by Group Publishing and *Nursery Time* by Next:Gen, which has monthly themes and activities for your nursery school.

Nursery Smart Pages is a book published by Gospel Light which is packed with teacher training ideas, forms and policies, clip art, parent letters, and monthly-themed activities. The accompanying DVD includes a training video along with the contents of the book.

Age Right Play by Susan Lingo is a collection of over 80 games to play with infants, toddlers and preschoolers, each having the flexibility to be downsized or expanded upon.



Visit our [website](#), [Facebook page](#), and [Pinterest boards](#) for more free resources and to sign up for our monthly free children's ministry webinars.

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