

## Children's Ministry White Paper | Why we do CM the way that we do

Ultimately, we want the same things for our kids that we want for ourselves: We want them to be disciples of Jesus. To help us know what we are aiming for (both for ourselves and for our kids), we offer these definitions of a "disciple" to help us wrap our minds around the goal:

- 1) A disciple is someone whose life looks very much like the life and ministry of Jesus
- 2) A disciple is someone who does the things that Jesus did for the same reasons that Jesus did them.
- 3) A disciple is someone who *learns* (the Greek work *mathetes* means *learner*) to do all of the things that Jesus taught his disciples in the Gospels

A disciple is someone who knows WHO they are (God's kid, loved, and nothing can ever change that) and then WHAT to do (representing their Father, the King, by acting on his behalf and putting the world back together). It starts with the interior reality of Identity overflowing to the external reality of acting on behalf of the King (their dad).

As parents, we have the privilege of teaching our kids to ground their Identities in their loving, heavenly Father (who urges us to call him daddy) and to live out of that Identity by what we do.

It's about BEING and DOING. It's about RELATIONSHIP and RESPONSIBILITY. It's about the INTERIOR world and EXTERIOR overflow.

**Everything that we do in Children's Ministry is geared around shaping our kids to be disciples of Jesus and living into the unbelievable adventure of taking part in their dad's work.**

### Research

We spent 6 months researching the best way to disciple kids and form a Children's Ministry based on that research, following what scripture teaches us and what we believe is just common sense. Some of the research is based on sociologists' findings on how we learn (since a disciple=learner), but there have really been two key texts for us:

- 1) *Effects of Family Recreation Interaction* by Tim Levert. This is a dissertation written by one of the only PhDs in Children's Ministry in the world, examining how to best disciple and form kids from childhood into adolescence so they embrace a vibrant faith.
- 2) *Hints on Child Training* by H. Clay Trumbull. Though written in 1890, this is widely considered the best book ever written on parenting kids in a way that causes them to embrace a relationship with Jesus and His work in our world.

## **Parents' as Primary Disciplers**

In the past 30 years of church work we've seen the rise of Consumer Christianity where people come to church to consume religious goods and services. Children's Ministry has played heavily into this mentality. While rarely articulated, it is subtly implied that parents expect their local church's CM to spiritually form their children. The pervading view is that it is the church's job to disciple them, provide events for them, spiritually form them, teach them the Bible, etc. By and large, most parents have abdicated the responsibility of discipling their own kids and passed this responsibility on to the church. The church, trapped by the desire to keep these families attending their services and giving financially, has by and large acquiesced and assumed the role. While many churches do provide resources to parents for "at home" use, these have very little impact as the parents consider them supplementary to what is taught at church, rather than the primary source of spiritual formation for their kids. It should also be noted that parents need to be true disciples as well if they are to be the primary disciplers of their kids, so that faith is simply "normal" in the family environment. Given the weak state of discipleship in most American churches, we have found that in the majority of cases neither the parents nor the children are being adequately disciplined.

In our research, we discovered the following facts:

- 1) Children were more likely to have vibrant faith if the parents *weren't even Christians* than if the parents went to church and didn't act as primary disciplers.
- 2) Children were more likely to have vibrant faith if the parents were Christians and didn't go to church than if the parents went to church and didn't act as primary disciplers.

In other words, your kids have a better chance of having a vibrant faith if YOU aren't a Christian or if you never go to church than if you regularly go to church and pass off the responsibility of discipleship to the church. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that more than 89% of evangelical teenagers leave the church upon graduation from high school.

To put it simply: The old way of Children's Ministry rarely works.

Based on this, there are two important things to note:

- 1) If parents want kids to have a vibrant faith, they must accept full responsibility for discipling their kids. Parents won't "accidentally" disciple their kids. It is a very intentional pursuit.
- 2) If churches want to see kids have a vibrant faith, they need to shape Children's Ministry around equipping parents to be the primary disciplers, fully integrating what they are equipping parents to do with what they are doing in the church context.

## **How People Learn**

Sociologists say that there are three basic ways that we learn.

- 1) Classroom style teaching: Passing on facts, data and information from a teacher/lecturer to a student. This is very familiar to us as our Western educational system is built around this

method of learning. Whether it is elementary school or college, we are lectured to and expected to learn what we are taught. Similarly, much of the Bible and the basics of faith are taught to kids in the same kind of way.

- 2) Apprenticeship: You learn to do something by learning from someone who does it well. So if you want to be a surgeon, you apprentice yourself to a surgeon after med school and enter into a residency. You learn by having them *show you* how to do something. So for instance, rather than telling a child how to pray, we should be *showing* them how to pray and doing it with them.
- 3) Immersion: You learn to do things by being immersed in the culture. Children don't learn to talk by taking lessons. They learn by being around people who speak the same language. They are immersed in a *consistent* culture and eventually they pick up the language and nuances of the culture. So, if your kids were immersed in a vibrant, consistent church community, they would pick up the behavior, language, nuances and depths of that community.

The best learning happens when there is a dynamic interplay between all three at one time, so that what is being "taught" is being reinforced and given depth and meaning in all areas. Perhaps we can put it this way: We want faith to be both *taught* and *caught*.

So as we re-imagine Children's Ministry, we want them to be taught stories, ideas and information from the Bible and basic Christian orthodoxy (Classroom teaching). But we also want them to see how those things are fleshed out in real life by engaging with parents who actively teach them to do the things Jesus did (Apprenticeship). However, the research also showed that there was a significant role that adults outside of parents play in Apprenticing kids. Kids who had adults in their lives outside of just their parents living in the way of Jesus had a much higher chance of having a vibrant faith. Furthermore, it is crucial to be a part of an active **community** who believes (and thus does) the same things as the parents and other key adults (Immersion).

One of the most important things is understanding that faith isn't a collection of facts that people "say they believe." Faith is a concrete thing that shows what we believe based on WHO we think we are (God's kids) and then WHAT we do out of that Identity. Its teaching kids what we believe reality is and what it means to live in that reality.

## **Role of the Church**

Our research found that there are 8 factors that churches can do to help parents shape children's faith development:

1. A hospitable climate
2. Inspirational worship
3. A caring environment
4. A thinking climate
5. Families who help families
6. An emphasis on prayer
7. Intergenerational service efforts
8. A sense of mission

As you can see, there is an active shaping to the Interior world that helps shape Identity (worship, prayer, thinking) and the External world that shapes how we act out of that Identity (caring, prayer, service, mission).

We would also add that it is essential that churches see themselves as equippers of parents *first* and facilitate that relationship and faith development. The better they can teach parents to disciple their kids and create environments for this to happen naturally, the better.

### **What we want our kids to know**

\*As we think about our kids being disciples, when kids finish 5<sup>th</sup> grade, we would like them to know and be able to live into the following:

- 1) Know they are God's kid and he loves them no matter what. (Covenant triangle and baptism)
- 2) Know that they represent their dad and are part of his grand adventure to put the world back together. (Kingdom triangle)
- 3) Be able to pray confidently and see things happen as a result.
- 4) Have balance in their relationships (God, God's family, those who don't know him yet) (Triangle)
- 5) Natural rhythm of rest and work (Semi-Circle)
- 6) Love of scripture and the story of Jesus
- 7) Hearing God's voice and seeing him at work in their lives (Circle)
- 8) Feel comfortable and even encouraged to ask questions about their faith

### **Here's how we will do it**

Based on what we've covered (and other findings not covered in this short paper), the following should actively shape how we do Children's Ministry:

- 1) Parents must act as the primary disciplers of their kids, taking responsibility for their spiritual development.
- 2) The church much structure Children's Ministry around this central idea.
- 3) The church must aim their resources at equipping parents to be successful in discipling their kids.
- 4) The church should help create natural and organic environments for parents and other adults to interact with kids in a meaningful way so that Classroom teaching, Apprenticeship and Immersion can happen easily and naturally.
- 5) These environments should be balanced between prayer, worship and teaching (relationship with God), caring, encouraging and having fun with each other (relationship with the church community), being on mission together (relationship with people who don't know Jesus yet).
- 6) We will use a shared and agreed on discipling language that both adults and kids can use and understand. For our purposes, it will be LifeShapes and when kids leave 5<sup>th</sup> grade, they will be fluent in *living out* the Circle, Triangle, Semi Circle and Covenant + Kingdom triangles.

## **The Church equips**

We see these happening most naturally by creating structured, spiritual environments within the church with:

- 1) **The worship service.** Elementary schoolers will be in the “adult” service for about half of the time. They will be able to sing with their parents, take communion with their parents from time to time and regularly hear stories about how God is moving (and have an opportunity to share stories of their own!). We can’t overestimate the importance of kids regularly hearing stories from adults where God is moving and working. They will then have a time that is specific to their age where more of the classroom teaching happens. The curriculum for this age-specific time is tailored to what is being learned at home and with the same language so it is reinforcing how the parents are discipling their kids.
- 2) **Missional Communities.** Kids will have a chance to be on mission with their parents, friends their own age and other adults. They will have the opportunity to contribute to the success of the vision and contribute to the spiritual well being of the MC. They will be integrated into this community which meets 3-4 times a month, treated as equals in mission with adults, and be immersed into a spiritual community and have the opportunity to regularly interact with other adults and learn from them.

## **Parents Disciple their Kids**

Based on our research, we recommend the following family, spiritual rhythms for parents. Parents can certainly do more, but we believe this is a baseline to help actively shape their kids. It is an intentional process that will shape the lives of their kids. You will notice that most of these are not that time consuming and they don’t need to be. They just need to be consistent and real. As you read these, you will see how Classroom, Apprenticeship and Immersion are playing out.

### **Daily Practices: Two intentional spiritual touch points**

- 1) **Scripture reading and prayer together as a family** at either breakfast or dinner (use an age appropriate Bible. We highly recommend *The Jesus Storybook Bible* by Sally Lloyd-Jones). Shaping the family prayer time:
  - a. Everyone shares something they are thankful to God for
  - b. Is anyone sick/not feeling well? Pray for them.
  - c. Is anyone worried or anxious? Pray for them.
  - d. Pray for our families Persons of Peace. (People who are spiritually open)
  - e. Pray for your Missional Community.
- 2) **Goodnight word and prayer.**
  - a. Tell your kids who they are each night so they go to sleep knowing this. An example: “Do you know who loves you? Mommy loves you. Daddy loves you and Jesus loves you most of all. Do know what you were created for? Love. Joy. Relationships and Adventure. We will always love you and always believe in you and nothing will ever change that.”

- b. Prayer: Pray over them each night while they are young out loud, and as they are able to, have them pray.

### **Weekly Practices**

- 1) **Sabbath**. Have one day a week where everyone in the family is off work and the day is spent playing together. No yard work. No email. No chores. Maybe put their best toys aside and on that one day they play with their best toys. Make their favorite foods on that one day. Find out what they enjoy the most, what gives them the most joy and do those things on days of Sabbath. Sabbath is a day of re-creation, of having fun and enjoying the relationships that God has given us.
- 2) **Missional Community**. Be on mission together as a family, existing for a purpose outside of ourselves. This language might be helpful in explaining MCs to kids: “Why do we have a MC? It’s because we want to bring heaven to earth and want our friends to experience it too!”

**Bi-Weekly Practice**: Once your kids are in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, begin Huddling them every-other week so you are actively teaching them the basics of following Jesus and engaging with the two central questions of Christian spirituality: 1) What is God saying to me? 2) What am I going to do about it? Answer those questions with them for yourself in your Huddle with them. These Huddles can be led by the parents of the kids or by another adult in the Missional Community (again, research showed a very high importance on adult relationships outside of just parents). Both are very effective in discipling kids. The crucial element is in it being a person they interact with outside of the context of just Huddle. They need to be able to observe their life outside of “God time.”

**Organic Practice**: Regularly talk about what God is doing in your life *with your spouse* in front of your kids. Don’t do it so that you’re doing it “at them,” but so that they are overhearing a conversation and are almost getting to eavesdrop and listen in. This allows them to see that this is simply “normal” for their parents to talk like this (and hopefully it is normal).

### **What if the Parents Aren’t Christians?**

The strength of having a space like Missional Communities is they allow people to enter more freely into each other’s lives without the pretext of “church” and all that can sometimes come with it. For kids who have parents that aren’t Christians, this is particularly important. It allows a family to invite that child into their rhythms (assuming the family isn’t hostile to their kid hanging out with them, which usually they aren’t). Missional Communities work because they can integrate many types of people and there is the opportunity for kids to have spiritual parents who aren’t their own. This is particularly helpful for MCs with children because they are often neighborhood based and parents don’t have to worry about dropping their kids off at a place (church) they don’t attend (with people they don’t know).