

If Only We Had More Families with Children!

Have you looked at your nursery lately?

By Ryan D. Hazen

Many times, in the midst of a consultation about building matters, someone will say in exasperation, “If only we had more families with children!” There is no one fix-all for attracting families with children. It has to do with programs, the attitude and skill of caregivers, and the welcome of the congregation. But the building, specifically the design and care of the nursery and other childcare areas, can speak volumes as a first impression to parents and children.

Even though I was responsible for children’s ministries areas (including the nursery) as an associate minister, it wasn’t until I had children of my own and began taking them to church nurseries that I realized the importance of church childcare areas. Of course, my two children, now two and one-half and almost one, deserve the best care that is possible. I knew this in my head as an associate minister but did not have a passion for it in my heart. Now, I expect nothing less than the best and neither do the parents coming through the doors of every church. There are steps that a congregation can take to make their childcare areas places of welcome for children and parents alike. Some steps will take much planning and possibly an outlay of capital funds while others

could be implemented this coming Sunday.

Location: The location of the nursery is key to the statement that is made by a church about the importance of their children. A location that is accessible to the sanctuary allows parents immediate access from worship. A place that is easy to find from the

main entrance will comfort parents who are carrying diaper bags and an infant and shepherding a toddler. Many parents of young children find that arriving at church on time involves a major coordination effort of supplies and morning routine, no major spit-ups, and a lot of luck. When the nursery is in the back corner of the basement, it can emotionally be the last straw in an already hectic morning. In addition, directional signs and signs identifying age groupings will ease the room search for first-time visitors and windows (possibly one-way) to the corridors will allow parents to watch

A reading area at Cascade Christian Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, invites children to group story time and individual reading



children without disruption. Such windows also address some liability issues that the church assumes when a child is placed in its care.

Appearance: It takes the parent of an infant about five seconds to size up a nursery. Is it inviting or has it taken a backseat to other areas of the church? If the carpet is avocado green and the countertops are harvest gold, it may be time to consider investing a few hundred dollars in their replacement. Church childcare areas should give more the appearance of children's areas at home than the appearance of a classroom. Colors, wallpaper, borders, and artwork all contribute to the feeling of warmth and care.

Age Groupings: Infants should be physically separated from toddlers. This can be done in separate rooms or adjoining spaces separated by a half door or a gate. Adjoining spaces can allow caregivers to move between the spaces to respond to the area of greatest need. Toddlers are just becoming mobile and are unsure of their steps and are more aggressive than they realize. If infants and toddlers are together, parents can be

uneasy as they wonder if the two-year-old has fallen on the infant; or, worse yet, fed them a small toy for breakfast while the caregiver is tending to another child.

Staff: The debate continues whether it is better to have a paid childcare person or to use volunteers to staff the nursery and toddler areas. Whether paid or volunteer, the important issue in staffing is consistency. Children and parents deserve to see the same face week after week—someone who can come to know, love, and care for the children. A consistent person knows the quirks of a child, including how they eat and sleep, which diapers they wear, and how to mix the formula. Having a new person each week is many times not worth the hassle for a new parent who must “retrain” a caregiver week in and week out. For an infant nursery, one adult for every two children is ideal. In the care of toddlers, one adult can adequately care for four to five children. Teenagers, while great help as assistants, should not be the primary caregivers. All staff should be adequately trained, including updated training in infant and

child CPR. A caregiver should never be alone with even one child due to safety and liability concerns.

Supplies: The ideal nursery will have a safe and sanitary changing area with a sink nearby for handwashing. While parents usually bring enough supplies for their child, a small supply of various sizes of diapers and some nonallergenic wipes can help avert an unpleasant situation. Toddlers should be located adjacent to their own appropriately sized toilet facilities. Such an arrangement alleviates the need for caregivers to leave the immediate area to care for the toilet needs of one child.

Toys: It is hard for the church to say “no thank you” to the well-meaning member who brings in toys for which they no longer have a use. If there is one consistent fault with church nurseries, it is that they have been mistaken for the rummage sale closet. Invest in a few new, age-appropriate, educational, or developmental toys. A church nursery or toddler area does not need hundreds of toys. If there is an abundance of quality toys, try rotating them to give children new opportunities every month or so.

Pagers: Shortrange, vibrating pagers are an inexpensive way to put a parent's mind at ease when they leave their child in the church nursery. Most electronics stores sell a small transmitting unit and pagers that can be kept in the childcare areas. The parent signs out a pager that they can carry into worship. If and when the parent is needed, the caregiver can key in the number of the pager and send a silent signal to come to the nursery.

Organization: Another way to instill confidence in the church nursery is to be organized about a child's belongings. Name tags or another system of identifying diaper bags, coats, etc., should be employed. One church even provided laminated

A note from the editor

It is interesting how suddenly being placed in a certain role in life changes one's perspectives. Parenting has been one of those changes for me. Will and Matt, along with their mother and my own fatherly instincts, have taught me much about quality childcare. It is hard to say what puts a parent at ease in a church nursery and what runs the red flags up the emotional pole, but every parent knows their feelings almost instantly. What I've brought to light here does not guarantee those calm feelings in the parents who come in the door but they can make a vast difference. Perhaps the one variable that cannot be built, remodeled, or purchased is attitude. Parents and children alike will know whether they have entered a place where children are valued, and affirmed by the welcome they receive.

I continue to welcome your comments about the content of “Cutting Edge,” and would solicit your suggestions for future issues. Do you have a building issue that you would like to know more about or do you know a church that has done creative things related to their facilities? Call me at 1-800-274-1883 or e-mail me: rhazen@churchextension.org.

—Ryan D. Hazen

“luggage” tags with the child’s name for diaper bags as a welcome gift. Compartmentalized shelves provide organization for bags, cups, pertinent instructions, and take-home projects.

Sanitize: Germs delight at the thought of church nurseries. Week after week, toys go in and out of little mouths and are rarely cleaned or sanitized. Sanitizing is a must. Toys that have been played with should be wiped down weekly, crib sheets laundered, and carpet vacuumed.

Safety: If nothing else, the church nursery should be the safest place in the building. Steps should be taken to prevent injury and to protect the church from liability concerns:

Cribs—In general, cribs manufactured before 1990 should be replaced. Slat width should not be more than two and three-eighths inches apart. (Test this with a soda can; if the can fits through the slats, they are too far apart.) Stay away from cribs that have been hand-painted due to lead paint possibilities. Finally, mattresses should fit snugly so that a baby cannot get caught between the mattress and the side of the crib.

Cords—All kinds of cords should be removed or tied far out of reach. Extension cords, electrical appliances, and miniblind cords are a few of the examples that can be hazards.

Drop-Off/Pick-Up—Unless other permission is granted, the only person to pick up children should be the person who dropped them off. Some churches choose to create a reception area away from larger play areas so that the caregiver receives the



Raymond Gaylord, former pastor of Cascade Christian Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, talks with Darlene Scharfschwerdt, longtime staff person about the childcare programs at the church.

child when they are dropped off and retrieves the child when they are picked up. Another idea is to use an instant camera to take pictures of the child with their parent or guardian for a classroom bulletin board. Toddlers love to look at their pictures and it is a way for caregivers to identify those who will be getting the child.

Child Protection Policy—Every church involved in caring for children should have a written Child Protection Policy. The staff should fully understand the policy and comply with it rigidly. These policies deal with a wide range of protection issues. Child Protection Policy information is available from Homeland Ministries at 1-888-346-2631.

More information on nursery safety can be obtained from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission at 1-800-638-2772 or on their Web site at www.cpsc.gov.

Other Considerations: How many babies are ever asleep in cribs at the same time in a church nursery? Many people believe that there should

be a crib for every child when, in fact, experience dictates that babies rarely sleep in cribs in the church nursery unless there is weekday care. Babies are usually held when sleeping and when they are not sleeping, they are sitting or lying on infant playmats or in childswings.

In addition to quality care, churches should welcome children in worship as well. Parents may not feel comfortable leaving young children in a new place as a first-time visitor may wish to introduce children to worship in this way.

The childcare areas of a church, whether used only on Sunday or every day of the week, are important to how parents and children perceive the church. Combine the building with a quality program, a genuinely welcoming congregation, and well-trained, loving caregivers and the pieces are in place to send a positive message to parents and children.

As part of the General Assembly of the Christian Church meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio, in October 1999, Homeland Ministries was called upon to share a monthly prayer with the whole church. As a part of this issue devoted to childcare issues, we are pleased to provide the avenue to share the prayer for March. Other prayers may be found at www.disciples.org/prayers.htm.

A Prayer for Children

To be shared responsively...

Adults: *Thank you Lord for children: those we have born, adopted, befriended, or promised to guide through their growing up years.*

Children: *God, we pray for children who have no parents: those who are poor and cannot buy food, those who are sick and unable to get well. Lord, please help kids and parents with their living needs.*

Adults: *Guide us as we grow and learn together. Keep our hearts close to our children, even though shadows fall and distance separates us.*

Children: *Please watch over children in the world, those who are starving and at war. And please watch over us. You feed, shelter, and guide us as we grow. Please do the same in other places, for those children have more needs than we.*

Adults: *Challenge us Lord to keep peace in our hearts, homes, nation, and world, so that all may know the bounty of your love.*

—Amen

About the prayer writers

Kelsey Wehr: Kelsey, a fourth grader, has been writing short stories since the first grade. Endeavors include writing plays that have been performed at her elementary school. Kelsey's love of small animals is steering her toward pursuing veterinary medicine, though it is still early. She is also active in church school at First Christian, Muscatine, Iowa. Kelsey is looking forward to the Young Disciples Class which will be held in spring.

Amy Wehr: Amy is Chief Administrative Officer for Unity Health System. Her transfer to the Muscatine community two years ago has kept her busy balancing job, home, church, and school. Despite her organizational and corporate skills, being with family and friends, listening to music, and creative writing seem to please her most.



Prayer written by Kelsey and Amy Wehr (pictured), members of First Christian Church, Muscatine, Iowa.

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