



# Children's Ministry

Help Children Grow in Faith



G U I D E L I N E S

# **Children's Ministry**

**Help Children Grow in Faith**

Kevin Johnson

with thanks to previous author Melanie Gordon

Discipleship Ministries

## CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

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# “A Wreath for Your Excellent Leadership”

**T**hank you for assuming the important and awesome work of providing spiritual leadership to your congregation. The work of church leadership is shared and synergistic. Pastoral and laity leadership combine to provide the widest possible set of gifts, knowledge, abilities, skills, experience, and passions to fulfill our United Methodist mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (*The Book of Discipline*, ¶120). What you do as a gifted, spiritual leader is of vital importance.

Spiritual leadership differs from other forms of leadership in the foundational ways it allows us to live out the vows and promises we make when joining the church: to uphold The United Methodist Church through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.

The first work of all church leaders is to pray for the ministry of the church: local, denominational, and global. Our work is always worshipful work. Our ministry of presence strengthens our church’s ministry and mission. By combining our gifts, knowledge, experience, and passion we can achieve wonderful things together through the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Together, we strengthen our congregation for service to those within the community of faith and beyond. Accepting the mantle of leadership provides a powerful witness to the world of what it means to be a faithful disciple.

Together, we fulfill our mission of making disciples and transforming the world by reaching out and receiving people in the name of Jesus the Christ, relating people to God in covenant community, nurturing and strengthening people in their faith, and equipping and supporting people to live their faith in the world.

The *Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation* draw upon a wealth of experience and expertise to provide you with the basic resources you need to do effective, impactful ministry. Each Guideline focuses on a key area of ministry and church leadership, providing information and processes to help your working group—committee, council, board, or other configuration—excel and support all other working groups. See the accompanying Guide to the Guidelines for useful information on how the *Guidelines* and ministry areas work together.

We recommend that each group member read this Guideline and noted paragraphs from the *Discipline*. Take time at meetings to discuss ways to implement identified tasks and responsibilities, plan for the future, and assess and evaluate your work.

The apocryphal book of Sirach reminds leaders to be humble servant leaders, make sure the needs of others are cared for, and then receive “a wreath for your excellent leadership” (Sirach 32:2 NRSVue). We invite you to lead with humility, compassion, patience, and grace, that The United Methodist Church might be a witness to the light and love of Christ for all the world.

# Intentional Discipleship Systems

As we look out across our churches, the problem is not a lack of people, the problem is the church's inability to see and reach them. As leaders in the church our role is to find clarity in the who & what of discipleship, the how of discipleship formation, but most importantly, the why for being disciples and making disciples. This describes the work of intentional discipleship systems or pathways.

John Wesley said it best in *The Scripture Way of Salvation*: “There is a real, as well as relative, change. We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. We feel ‘the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us’ producing love to all humankind.”

This love for all humankind is what drives discipleship. A basic desire to love God, love neighbor, love self, and repeat. To go deeper and deeper into the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, and to offer what we have found to those that we meet.

How do we get back to a movement of a deep love for people that drives everything we do? How do we get back to seeing all the people that God calls us to reach?

The world, now more than ever, needs disciples of Jesus, growing in faith, growing closer to Christ, with a clear vision of the world and people as God sees them. Disciples who seek to use their God-given gifts to transform their communities and the world.

Early Methodists started a movement that was focused on growing as disciples, inviting others into a life following Jesus, and helping those in their communities that were hurting the most. At Discipleship Ministries, we believe that we need to get back to these basic understandings of church and discipleship, and back to a concern for improving systems that work for all God's children, moving us toward what God intends for all.

We invite you to explore the SeeAllThePeople suite of resources ([www.seeallthepeople.org](http://www.seeallthepeople.org)) designed to equip you and your church for intentional discipleship and community engagement. Although the forms and strategies change, the main goal of the church remains: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It will always be about discipleship!

# Biblical and Historical Foundation

Our first glimpse of Jesus is of a newborn baby who grew and lived each phase of childhood. We assume that Jesus experienced the love and comfort of parents and the fears, sorrows, and joys of a child. Children can relate to Jesus because he grew as they grow. If you've ever heard the term "God Incarnate" to describe Jesus, that simply means God in the flesh. Jesus has human experiences. We can assume that Jesus grew up in a home in which Hebrew parents were obligated to teach their children the Law and to raise them to be responsible members of the faith community. A young Jesus spoke confidently to religious authorities in the temple, exemplifying the importance of teaching children well (Luke 2:41-52).

It is important to remember that Jesus, as an adult, loved and honored children. Parents brought their children to be blessed by Jesus, not just in his presence, but also appropriate (healthy) touch. Jesus publicly claimed children as models of pureness of heart and joy inherent in the kingdom of God. He reminded us that we are to tend graciously to our children and warned us of the consequences of being a "stumbling block" in our children's growth and development (see, for example, Luke 18:15-17).

## Our Connectional Commitment to Children

John Wesley was also committed to the education and formation of children; and traditionally, The United Methodist Church has provided a space for children to learn, grow, and actively engage in the congregation.

In his sermons and actions, Wesley took up the cause of children's issues, especially their intellectual and spiritual development. The Wesleyan movement inspired the development of health clinics and schools that accommodated children from all walks of life. Wesley visited children in workhouses and poorhouses; established Sunday schools, going against the popular writings of the time; and actively participated in social justice issues that impacted children. The Methodist Movement has its beginnings in a context where child labor was the norm, and many of the social goods of the early Methodists vastly improved the health and welfare of children, no matter their economic station or place in society.

The mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This mission, which reflects Jesus' Great Commission, includes children. We are also called to develop the beloved community. Faith formation for children is critical. Leaders in ministry with children live out the Great Commission



(Matt 28:16-20) by offering opportunities, resources, and experiences for children that are steeped in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, making this your primary task.

Paragraph 256.1a of *The Book of Discipline* states, “in each local church there shall be a church school for the purpose of accomplishing the church’s educational ministry.” *The Book of Resolutions*, an official document of the church, contains several resolutions that address our commitment to children, including “Putting Children and Their Families First” (res. 2027), “Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in the Church” (res. 3084), and “Childcare and the Church” (res. 3081). All leaders in ministry with children should be familiar with these documents to understand The United Methodist Church’s deep commitment to children.

The general boards and agencies of The United Methodist Church take seriously the role of children in the life of the congregation. Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church provides resources for leaders engaged in ministry with children in local congregations. Discipleship Ministries holds the responsibility for training leaders; providing research; connecting leaders and congregations; and developing resources for use in local churches, districts, and annual conferences. The United Methodist Publishing House develops curriculum for children, and a Curriculum Resources Committee reviews curriculum for alignment with United Methodist theology.

The General Board of Global Ministries advocates for children worldwide and supports United Women in Faith, which focuses on advocating for greater support for public schools in the United States. The General Board of Church and Society advocates for children in legislative issues. The Commission on United Methodist Men supports the office of Civic Youth-Serving Agencies/Scouting. The General Commission on Finance and Administration provides support for congregations in matters of risk and in keeping children safe.

Annual conferences and districts can have staff dedicated to age-level ministries, leadership development, discipleship, or other titles that include supporting ministry with children. We encourage you to contact your conference’s Episcopal Office to learn about support, training, and resources more local to your context. God loves all children. As Christians, we are called to cultivate the relationship and connections that can form between God and the next generation. John Wesley wanted children to know and love God. Our heritage as United Methodists has shown a commitment to children through baptism, Sunday school, Bethlehem Centers, daycare centers for working parents, and homes for children. The United Methodist Church continues to name children as vital participants in the community, and God calls us to love, protect, and nurture them.

## **Your Role as a Spiritual Leader**

You are a vital part of the connection, and how you live out your life in accord with the biblical and historical principles of the church will have a direct impact on children and their families. In the letter to the community at Ephesus, the author appealed to his sisters and brothers to live into the unity of Spirit that God desires of us through Jesus Christ—one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:1-7). Those called to children’s

ministry live into this unity, and they use their gifts to serve the children of the congregation and the larger community in a multitude of ways. It is important to remember that God has given each of us gifts to be used to build up the community of faith (see Eph 4:11-13).

As a leader in The United Methodist Church, you set the example for the people that you lead—children and their supporting guardians. Your life—both public and private—should reflect the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is difficult to teach what we do not practice or understand. The General Rules (the *Discipline*, ¶104) set forth a rule of life to aid in that practice. Marjorie Thompson, in *Soul Feast*, tells us “a *rule of life* is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. . . . It fosters gifts of the Spirit in personal life and human community, helping to form us into the persons God intends us to be” ([Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995, 2005], 146, italics added). The General Rules expect us to begin by doing no harm and doing good, then to attend upon the ordinances of God through regular practice of the public worship of God; the ministry of the Word, either read or expounded; the Supper of the Lord; family and private prayer; searching the Scriptures; and fasting or abstinence.

While they are not specifically mentioned in this section of the *Discipline*, Wesley also included works of advocacy, service, and justice among them. All these practices will direct your life and support your ministry “to witness to Jesus Christ in the world, and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (see *BOD*, 256.1.b).

Self-care is your gift to God, to those you serve, and to you. Jesus spent time alone in prayer and visited Mary, Martha, and Lazarus when he needed to take respite. It is important to follow this model. Plan wisely. Set boundaries. Take time to care for yourself. Taking time for renewal is a discipline that will allow you to grow in holiness.

# Ministry with Children

A vital, disciple-making congregation provides multiple opportunities for children to participate in church life, and at best, these opportunities are organized into an intentional discipleship system or discipleship pathway. “As people of faith, we are called to teach children through scripture, our tradition as Methodists, the Social Principles, the ritual of baptism, and our concern for families. In responding to the call set before us, we will provide environments for children to be nurtured in the faith and to grow as children of God” (*BOR*, resolution 3081). A process for disciple making can be found within ¶122 of the *Discipline*. The need for intentionality and contextualization for disciple making is as important as ever. Every congregation must have a strong sense of why disciple making is important for their congregation, how they generate opportunities for transformation, and what transformation looks like in their context. We make disciples as we create a welcoming environment for children, offer children engaging occasions to make a commitment to Christ, create experiences where children can grow in faith by participating in the means of grace, provide opportunities for children to help transform the communities in which they live, and celebrate as they grow in spiritual maturity along their discipleship pathway.

## The Spiritual Lives of Children

Children are spiritual beings, born with the essential awareness of God’s presence and with the potential for spiritual experiences with God to activate that potential. The role of those responsible for their faith development is to help children on this journey. Scripture gives the example of Jesus growing strong and gaining in wisdom in his community (Luke 2:40). A congregation that intentionally fulfills this role actively:

- creates experiences that support children in the knowledge and awareness of God;
- models God’s unconditional love for all God’s children;
- provides opportunities that support children in discovering, developing, and sharing their unique gifts from God;
- listens and responds to the needs of children.

## Small Groups and Covenant

Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and building a beloved community in a healthy congregation includes multiple opportunities for children to participate in small groups. During this kind of engagement, children are able to form deeper relationships with one another and with God. Small groups can vary from Bible study to mission groups to groups based on other foundational elements of a discipleship

system. As with any ministry, listen to children and offer them the space to shape the group. Consider helping children develop a covenant that outlines behavior and participation expectations for each of these groups to equip them to recognize the importance of covenant as is found in Scripture and in our Methodist heritage.

## **The Digital Child in Christian Community**

The children we serve today are digital natives. They are growing up in an era of ever-expanding access to data, devices, platforms, biometrics, and artificial intelligence. There are gaps in access of course, but increasing screen time and digital fluency are the norms, not the exception for today's child. Depending on your setting, you will encounter children who are savvy with technology from as early as fifteen months old to children whose families do not have the resources to offer them handheld technology. Most of them will fall somewhere in between. Your role in children's ministry is to understand how interacting with technology is changing learning and development for children. Technology, when all the senses are engaged, can be a crucial part of forming interpersonal relationships in community. Technology lacks the human touch for some, and for others it is the first and preferred method of contact. Technology cannot give safe hugs or appropriate and healthy physical contact, yet virtual playdates are commonplace. Technology cannot console a grief-stricken child, but it is probably the first place that parents look for answers, even before asking a church leader. In recent years, digital interaction has become a more significant piece of ministry for nearly everyone. Learn ways to adapt and/or incorporate the use of emerging technology to better connect children and their families in all aspects of ministry. Additionally, spend time learning about the digital spaces and devices where parents and their families spend time interacting and getting news. This may inform your practices related to calendaring, communication, and community building as well as your approach to the use of technology in ministry.

Jesus grew up in a culture where children were primarily formed and educated through relationships and face-to-face communication. This has been the case for much of human history. In-person community building and learning aren't going anywhere, but neither are digital learning models and online communication. Your primary formational tool is effective communication that builds and nurtures healthy relationships. Help children actively build relationships with peers, with family members, and with the gathered community of Christ using a variety of in-person and online opportunities to grow, learn, connect, and serve.

# Getting Started

A coordinator is a title, the person leading children's ministries can be a staff person or a volunteer. It is important for pastoral leadership and the Staff-Parish Relations (SPR) to recognize appropriate differences in expectations and availability for staff and volunteers. As coordinator of children's ministries, you are

responsible for assuring that children are considered and included within the life of the congregation. The coordinator will lead the children's council, when organized, and will work closely with clergy and other program-related staff. The coordinator will vision, plan, and advocate for children, particularly in the areas of faith development, safety, and discipleship. The coordinator will work with other leaders in the congregation to assure that policies and procedures are in place to help keep all children and the adults who care for and work with them safe. These policies and procedures include such things as background checks, having at least two non-related adults per group, and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first-aid training. The coordinator will also advocate for mission education for children, including The United Methodist Children's Fund for Christian Mission (the *Discipline*, ¶ 256.2a).

## Your Ministry as a Children's Leader

In most congregations that serve a small number of children each week, the coordinator of children's ministry is probably the primary person responsible for seeing that the needs of children are met. In large-membership congregations that serve many children, the coordinator of children's ministry may be one of several age-level coordinators. Medium-membership congregations serve various numbers of children, so the children's ministry may be served by a coordinator or by a children's minister on the church staff.

If your congregation employs a staff person responsible for children's ministry, your job may be modified in relation to the staff person's duties and whether that person is employed full- or part-time. Although the responsibilities of your role as coordinator of children's ministries may vary, your primary task remains the faithful formation of children as they journey as disciples of Jesus Christ. Depending on the size and staffing of your church, your responsibilities may include these practices and tasks. Be proactive in your planning, even if you currently don't have any children participating in the ministries of your church. Create a plan of action for when you do have children attend ministry activities. Identify those families in your community, offer community events that will attract families with young children to your church, and follow through with retaining those that visit one or two times.

**Always begin with prayer.** This is the one means of grace that we can practice alone and in community and the one that is God's gift of communication with God. Pray intentionally for and with the children and their families.

**Gather information** that will guide your ministry with children by talking with key individuals and groups in the congregation, exploring the resources in your local church, and contacting Discipleship Ministries and your annual conference for support and resources. Develop relationships with organizations serving children in your community like schools, care-centers, etc. Information gathering should include time spent in the community to learn about children and families that are not yet connected with your congregation.

**Create a plan of communication** with parents, guardians, and teachers of the children in your congregation. Share that plan with other age-level ministry coordinators and pastoral leadership.

**Know the children.** Learn as many names of children as you can that you will serve in the children's ministry. Address the children by name. Always know how many children you serve. Each child is a gift from God and deserves to be remembered and known. Develop databases of information to help remind you to ask about progress in their academics and extracurricular activities outside of church, their birthdays, schooling, etc.

**Suggest and seek experiences** that may be new or innovative in children's ministries. Compare the intentional discipleship systems or discipleship pathways that other churches have organized. Be willing to step back and ask questions about why things happen the way that they do in your setting.

**Advocate.** Identify key people in the congregation and community who can be advocates for children's needs and issues. Look for those both with passion and expertise. Advocate for all children to be welcome and invited to participate in the church's full life as vital participants. Advocate for quality leadership. Stay informed about the gifts of church members. Advocate for sufficient funding. Keep financial planners aware of the needs of all ministries with children.

**Set realistic and innovative goals.** Appropriate goals are measurable, have a reasonable timetable for accomplishment, and fit the vision. These should also be considered "outcomes" of any transformational opportunities you offer through a discipleship system or pathway.

**Assure training opportunities** for teachers, guides, and leaders at various times of the year. These can also be online or ongoing.

**Be safe.** Adopt a Safer Sanctuaries® policy and enforce it so that the congregation is a safer place for the most vulnerable, and for the adult volunteers who engage with them. Know the Safer Sanctuaries® policy in your annual conference.

**Use approved resources.** Acquaint yourself with the curriculum and resource materials available from The United Methodist Publishing House through [cokebury.com](http://cokebury.com). Look for approved curriculum that says "UMC Endorsed." This endorsement is provided by the Curriculum Resource Committee (CRC). Don't feel limited to using only UMPH curriculum but do your due diligence and pay attention to other resource providers, to ensure that

their curriculum is rooted in Wesleyan heritage and is aligned with UMC theology. If you are unsure, invite a pastor to review or help modify the resource before it is offered to the children.

**Stay connected and communicate.** Partner with leaders in the congregation who work with youth, adults, and families. As children grow, the transition to youth ministries will run more smoothly if you plan intergenerational activities. If you have a good relationship with those leading age-level ministries for older children and youth, you can have greater assurance of the continued growth of children as someone else takes responsibility for their development as disciples. Communicate with leaders of groups with whom children's ministries share space, such as third-party groups like Girl Scouts, Scouting America, Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS), or Alcoholics Anonymous. Open communication will allow everyone to work well together. Connect with leaders in ministry with children at other United Methodist churches, as well as with other denominations and nonprofits, including schools in your community. A network of people who care for children is a valuable resource.

## Build Relationships

Building relationships with ministry leaders and other stakeholders is crucial to creating a healthy community for making disciples. Your responsibility with children places you in a unique position to serve on various church committees and to enter relationships with children's family members.

See the Collaboration Cycle for Planning at <https://www.umofficialresources.com/Guidelines>.

## Relationships with Other Ministry Leaders

Talk with the pastor or other supervisors to establish expectations of your involvement with committees and other ministries of the church. Someone should represent the concerns of children and their guardians as events are planned and decisions are made. Advocate for the inclusion of children's needs. It is important to have an advocate for children in every size church. Recruit others who care about children to act as advocates as decisions are made.

Although children's ministry relates to various groups within the church structure, some naturally have a direct impact on children's ministry. Advocate serving on these various committees and councils to ensure the spiritual needs of the children are raised.

The **Church Council** provides for planning and implementing a ministry of nurture, outreach, witness, and resources. It serves as the administrative agency of the Charge Conference in the local church. This council may have other names in your context.

**Nurturing ministries** in the local church encompass education, Christian formation, and small groups (at least). All these areas have a direct impact on the work of the children's ministry. In addition, witness and outreach ministries are important places to include a voice for the needs of children and as an outlet for teaching children about service and including children in servant ministry.

**The Council on Children's Ministries** should be responsible for planning, implementing, executing, and evaluating children's ministry in the local church. Although the coordinator of children's ministries leads this group, the leadership could vary, depending on the size of the church. If the coordinator of children's ministries leads this group, it is important to invite individuals who share the same characteristics of those in all effective leadership ministries. The Council on Children's Ministries:

shall be responsible for planning, visioning, and advocating for children within the congregation, the community, and the world. The council will set policies and procedures related to children, oversee the planning of short-term experiences, consider children's ministry needs within the whole of the congregation's ministries, and communicate with parents and the congregation. The children's council will work closely with the coordinator of children's ministries and church staff responsible for ministry with children, including children's choirs and weekday ministries. The children's council is accountable to the group responsible for the local church's educational ministry. (the *Discipline*, ¶256.2b)

A **“weekday ministries” advisory board** is responsible to the church and the weekday preschool ministry to ensure that policies, budget, personnel, space, and program regulations are implemented and adhered to by the director of the weekday preschool.

The term *weekday ministry* applies to any regularly planned ministry for children. When appropriate, one or more weekday ministry boards may be organized to oversee the weekday ministry programs of the congregation. The board's membership should be mostly professing members of the congregation, with parents [caregivers], church staff, and weekday ministry staff representatives. The board will set policies consistent with the congregation's policies, state mandates, and sound business practices. The board will guide weekday ministries as appropriate opportunities for faith development, mission outreach, Christian education, evangelism, and safety. They will advocate for inclusion of children from various socioeconomic, cultural, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Weekday ministry board(s) accountability should be placed within the local church organizational structure with consideration to the group responsible for the congregation's education ministry. (the *Discipline*, ¶256.2c)

## **Relationships with Children and Families**

In Luke 2, Jesus talked with the religious teachers in the temple as his parents searched for him. Although Jesus was in his Father's house, his parents fretted, not knowing where their child was. We want children to feel that the church is a sanctuary where experiences with God can be expected, and we want to assure parents and guardians that their children are in a safe and nurturing community.

Building relationships with children and their families is the first step in creating a healthy children's ministry. It is important to:

- listen to children, take interest, and invest in their lives. They live in a world where they are very rarely listened to.



- address all children by name. This creates intimacy and makes children feel special.
- communicate with parents and guardians frequently and regularly. Use all the tools available to connect with parents.
- include parents and guardians in evaluating the children's ministry. They observe in ways that are important to children's ministry.
- know the parents and address them by name. This sounds daunting if you are in a large church; but calling parents by name helps parents know that they are considered a part of the community. This will also make the parents and guardians more comfortable sharing comments and concerns about their children.
- demonstrate intentionality in planning, communication, and execution of ministry. Few things build trust quite like accountability and doing what you say you will do.

### **Relationships with Parents and Caregivers.**

Children's and family ministries look different from just a few years ago. Parents have fast become the most important component of faith formation within their family. Church leaders are wondering how to transform the lives of parents, caregivers, grandparents, and church communities. Parents are on the frontline of faith formation with their children. There is one key belief we need to embrace if we are to position ourselves well to encourage and equip parents: there is no one right way of parenting for faith. Your Children's Ministry will benefit from key relationships with caregivers and will offer help to parents in overcoming major obstacles that hinder faith formation. Relationships with caregivers will also provide ways to lay the foundation of a church culture where parenting for faith can flourish. Taking a new approach to ministry by equipping and empowering parents will develop a better understanding of the role parents have in faith formation and, by nurturing those relationships, change the overall culture in the church.

### **Identify Teachers, Guides, and Leaders**

As you look around for people to share in this ministry, start with the basics. Make a list of people who attend worship often and regularly (both in person and online); pray, read, and study the Bible; give time and money to support the ministries of the church; and have a genuine concern about the sound faith formation of children. Go deeper in discovering the potential for leaders and teachers/guides by looking at the following gifts and commitments:

- **Passion.** People who demonstrate a deep commitment to the faithful formation of children and advocate for the needs of children.
- **Character.** People who demonstrate and model mature Christian faith and who practice the means of grace frequently and regularly.
- **Knowledge of Ministry.** People who possess appropriate experience or academic credentials in Christian education; share knowledge of the Bible and biblical interpretation; demonstrate a basic knowledge of child development; and are familiar with United Methodist history, doctrine, polity, and tradition.
- **Professional Practices.** People who are committed to quality in all areas of

ministry, understand the importance of undergoing a background check and other Safer Sanctuaries® requirements, will take direction, are equipped to lead, exhibit positive interpersonal skills, and will participate in ongoing training.

- **Willingness to learn, grow, adapt, listen, empathize.**

### **Communicate with Teachers, Guides, and Leaders**

Face-to-face communication is vital to building strong leadership in children's ministry. Scripture exemplifies the importance of person-to-person contact. As technology evolves, evolve with it. Use it to send updates, check on meeting dates, issue reminders and announcements, and provide inspiration. Familiarize yourself with the continual changes and latest updates when using technology. Your primary mode of communication should always be in person, where you will gain a deeper understanding of individuals by tone of voice, facial expression, and human touch. Plan regular meetings that give teachers, guides, and leaders an opportunity to voice opinions, compare notes on activities, evaluate past events, and support one another through covenant. Keep records of communications.

# Planning for Children's Ministry

**T**he liturgical calendar defines the seasons and holy days of the Christian year. It stands as an example of the importance of preparation. A well-planned calendar places you in a proactive position and can minimize conflicts with events taking place in the local and general church and in your community. Your children and families can plan well in advance so that they can more freely participate in activities. As you plan, keep in mind the essential process of starting with your intentional goals, then plan for how you will meet those goals so that you reach out to children, nurture them, equip them for discipleship, and then send them out (in age-appropriate ways) as disciples making disciples. It is increasingly important to work with busy family schedules, not competing for a child's time, but complementing the busy-ness of their calendars with life-giving opportunities to grow. Avoid when possible forcing families to choose between activities, and do not be afraid to cancel events and adapt.

## A Calendar for Ministry with Children

This calendar is a basic place to begin in your ministry context. As you plan your calendar, include dates for meetings, financial reconciliations, programs, community activities, child registration documentation, volunteer application, Safer Sanctuaries® documentation, consent forms to include photo release, etc., training, deadlines, and publicity. Consider using the *United Methodist Program Calendar*, available through Cokesbury, a valuable planning tool. It includes special dates and observances and prompts you in earlier months to begin planning. Some of the items here will help you to work and plan, and others indicate dates of events.

### January

- Covenant with a small group to serve as leaders in ministry with children in your congregation.
- Gather your children's ministry group to work on the ministries and programs through the church year, starting with Advent (four Sundays before Christmas, often starting the last Sunday in November). Beginning with Advent gives you the opportunity to set your calendar eleven months in advance. In larger churches, you may want to allow for more advanced planning.
- Celebrate Human Relations Day (see <http://www.umcsgiving.org/ministry-articles/human-relations-day>).
- Offer a training opportunity for children's leaders.
- Plan for a Lenten study for children.

## February

- Celebrate African American History Month.
- Plan for vacation Bible school for children of all ages (and collaborate with other age-level leaders, if VBS is intergenerational).
- Offer a gesture of appreciation to children's teachers and leaders

## March

- Partner with the family ministries leader to observe Christian Home Month in May
- Plan for Peace with Justice Sunday (see <http://www.umcgiving.org/ministry-articles/peace-with-justice-sunday>).
- Celebrate World Day of Prayer (see <http://www.unity.org/wdop>).

## April

- Celebrate Earth Day (see <http://www.earthday.org>).
- Celebrate UMCOR Sunday, formerly One Great Hour of Sharing (the fourth Sunday in Lent; see <http://www.umcgiving.org/ministry-articles/one-great-hour-of-sharing>).
- Offer an intergenerational day of service in the community.
- Evaluate children's ministry: participation, children's needs and concerns, feedback from parents, feedback from leadership.

## May

- Celebrate Christian Home Month
- Celebrate Older Adult Recognition Day
- Celebrate Aldersgate Day (see <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-aldersgate-day>).
- Organize teacher training opportunities for fall.
- Celebrate teachers, guides, and leaders through ritual in worship.
- Invite children to give feedback on what they experienced in children's ministry activities.
- Create and distribute a list of activities to keep children and families connected during the summer months.
- Distribute program evaluations to leaders, parents, and guardians.
- Celebrate Mother's Day
- Celebrate academic graduations and significant grade-level transitions

## June

- Offer a training opportunity for children's leaders, such as Safer Sanctuaries®.
- Review and update curriculum and resources.
- Find a creative new way to offer vacation Bible school in your context.
- Family local mission opportunities.

- Consider offering a family camping experience. Partner with your local UMC Camping and Retreat Center (<https://umcrm.camp/>).

## **July**

- Make plans to participate in United Methodist training opportunities.
- Prepare for charge conference.
- Meet with community school leaders and inquire about developing a partnership with local elementary schools.

## **August**

- Provide a back-to-school blessing and celebration for children and their families.
- Celebrate Promotion Sunday.
- Download the planning manual for Children's Sabbath (<http://www.childrensdefense.org>) and organize a weekend of service activities.
- Plan for Advent.

## **September**

- Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15–October 15; see <http://www.hispanicheritagemonth.gov>).
- Offer a Belong foundational resource study for families.

## **October**

- Celebrate Children's Sabbath (see <http://www.childrensdefense.org>).
- Celebrate World Communion Sunday (see <http://www.umcgiving.org/ministry-articles/world-communion-sunday>).
- Organize teacher training opportunities for spring.

## **November**

- Celebrate All Saints Day.
- Distribute a prayer calendar for Advent.
- Offer a Parents' Night Out.

## **December**

- Celebrate the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

## **Create a Budget**

Jesus repeatedly addressed the issue of money. Some congregations have ample budgets for children's ministry, while others may not have a budget or count on targeted fundraising. One important thing to remember is that you are the advocate for the faith formation of children, and the congregation should invest in the children of the church and community. You may be asked by the finance committee to make recommendations about

the budget for children's ministry for the new fiscal year. Having this information on hand will greatly assist that process and help them create a realistic budget. Fiscal responsibility is part of your role as a leader in children's ministry, so keep these things in mind each year:

- Consider what experiences you want to offer children.
- Develop a budget and justify each line item.
- Perform a monthly reconciliation of the budget to actual costs.
- Calculate the average cost per child per year.
- Calculate the cost per age group, identifying the most and least costly.
- Ask for what you need and be aware of what teachers, guides, or others pay for themselves.
- Determine relative success of fundraisers and if that money is coming from church members or the outside community.

## **Training Opportunities**

Even the most experienced leaders in children's ministry will benefit from training and enrichment events. Plan for some combination of these opportunities.

- Plan a yearly retreat that combines training, information, and fun.
- Ask a church or community member with a specific expertise to share some ideas with the children's ministry group.
- Invite a local teacher to lead a workshop on classroom management. An experienced teacher can offer tips on addressing issues that come up frequently.
- Contact the district office, annual conference office, and United Methodist Communications for free and cost-effective webinars and other virtual trainings. This will alleviate the cost of paying a speaker each time training is needed.
- Connect with other United Methodist churches to plan joint training events for leaders. All congregations are concerned with faithful formation of children.
- Host one-time or ongoing online training opportunities for community building and specialization. These can often be provided at easier-to-attend times than in-person training.

Your annual training retreat may be a district training, an annual conference event on children's issues, or a national children's ministry conference. This training serves three purposes. It gives teachers, guides, and leaders an opportunity to more deeply understand the work to which they are called, to connect with those in other ministry settings who work with children, and to build relationships with those with whom they work. It is important to stay updated on children's issues because children are exposed to more information, more rapidly each year. Consider the following training topics:

- first aid and CPR
- building intergenerational relationships
- Safer Sanctuaries®
- helping children deal with grief
- helping children deal with divorce

- helping children build covenant discipleship groups
- brain development of children
- faith development of children
- equip and empower parents through parenting course
- self-care for the teacher
- positive discipline
- including children with disabilities
- spiritual lives of children
- addressing bullying
- helping children through transitions
- participate in Discipleship Ministries e-learning course
- storytelling
- digital and technological life
- misinformation, disinformation
- at home faith formation
- environment
- healthy relationships and boundaries

## Select Resources and Curriculum

“Train children in the way they should go, / when they grow old, they won’t depart from it” (Prov 22:6). Selecting developmentally appropriate curriculum and resources is a daunting task, one that must be taken seriously. Traditional models of teaching catered to a specific kind of learner, and other children had to adapt. This was followed by the model that entertained children rather than formed them. We are fortunate that research has given us a better perspective on children’s development. Children learn by using multiple senses and intelligences, experience, and play. They also buy-in by having ownership of topics to explore.

We know that:

- Children learn differently and at different rates. Explore options that offer holistic experiences for the child. Understand how trauma informs a child’s faith formation and how that will impact your ministry approach.
- Children need space to experience the holy. Look for resources that allow for quiet reflection and mission opportunities.
- Children learn best in secure surroundings. Create a nurturing environment.
- Children are overscheduled and overstimulated. Offer children a space to unplug.
- Learning and group behavior changes are based upon a wide variety of factors, including cultural background, academic experiences, and stages of development. A variety of approaches is needed to meet a variety of needs.

Be intentional about resource and curriculum selection by keeping these points in mind and by taking care in the way that Scripture is interpreted for our children. Many available curricula are not aligned with the United Methodist doctrine of grace, so they

should be evaluated to determine if they are appropriate. Recruit a pastor for help in this area as needed. The “Curriculum and Resource Selection Checklist” (available at [www.UMOfficialResources.com/Guidelines](http://www.UMOfficialResources.com/Guidelines)) can assist you in choosing curriculum that allows children to deepen their experience of God in a way that stays true to our United Methodist heritage. Discipleship Ministries also offers a *Curricula Checklist* <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/united-methodist-curricula-checklist> to evaluate appropriateness and framework.

## Evaluate Children’s Ministry

Each year, it is important to evaluate the children’s ministries in your congregation.

Several evaluation or planning checklists and visual planning helps are on the *Guidelines* website (<https://www.umofficialresources.com/Guidelines>):

- “Children as Vital Participants in the Life of the Congregation”
- “Children’s Ministries Evaluation Cycle”
- “Collaboration Cycle for Planning”
- “Curriculum and Resource Selection Checklist”
- “Evaluation of Children’s Ministry”
- “Parent Evaluation of Children’s Ministry”
- “Checklist for Implementing and Maintaining the Basics of Safe Sanctuaries® (“Safe Sanctuaries® Checklist”)

Invite input from the children’s ministry leadership group, other ministry leaders, parents, and children.

The Evaluation Cycle document includes a graphic that depicts a process for developing strategies that begin with identifying the specific, intentional results you want to achieve through your children’s ministry. Then, within the several stages of the discipleship cycle (reach out, nurture, equip, and send), you set strategies for how you will work with children of all ages to promote their growth through those stages. As you evaluate, remember the *why* behind your children’s ministry, the beating heart of your church’s intentional discipleship system. The outcomes of your evaluation should always point to whether or not your system and pathways for discipleship are offering opportunities for transformation for children that will help them grow into disciples molded by the culture of discipleship at your church.

But how do you know if you are accomplishing what you want? Attendance or other “countable” indicators are helpful. Those *quantifiable* attainments are easy to recognize: 40 new children in the Sunday school, 5 percent growth in participation in VBS, and so on. For each of the strategies, establish target measures (or perhaps you use the term *metrics*) for what will be considered a “success.” These measures must be age-appropriate and describe what will have happened—not just what you do and how you do it, but the outcome for the people who do it. If, for example, the desired result is “knowing and practicing the spiritual disciplines,” one strategy for early readers might be to provide written copies of the Lord’s



Prayer and to say it together weekly in each class or group. A specific activity for that strategy might be for children to decorate their prayer as a colorful mini poster. The *quantifiable* measures might relate to how many children made the poster, how many weeks they recited it, how many learned it by heart, and so on. These measures can also be called “outcomes” if using intentional discipleship systems or discipleship pathways.

Be sure not to confuse measures with strategies. Measures are outcomes, what children or their families do or become because of your ministry efforts. Strategies are how you and your team decide that you will try and accomplish your mission and vision in ministry. Children have a profound ability to teach adults lessons in generosity, humility, cooperation, simplicity, inclusiveness, and love. Those intangible measures are the *qualitative* indicators of whether a life is being formed and transformed in the image of God, which is the goal. Collect these stories across generations and share with church leadership, or keep in your own files for when you need some additional inspiration.

To continue the “Lord’s Prayer” example, the qualitative measures relate to how well the children understand it, how they have learned about God from it, and what it means to them—in age-appropriate ways (for in-depth help in setting measures and doing evaluation). Disciple Dashboard is a congregational data dashboard that provides an opportunity to set goals, collect essential data and reflect on ministry: <http://umcdiscipleship.org/disciple-dashboard>

You may be asked to report, or to provide information for a staff member’s report, to comply with annual conference requirements for data related to the conference’s strategic goals. Track and record the number of participants, including the trend (up or down) in all the functions, classes, groups, and experiences planned for ministry with children. In addition to the number of children, you will also want to note the number of adults (and youth) who help to provide for this ministry. Keep these records handy and accessible to others. Use these to reflect and make changes in your discipleship system and strategies.

Equally important, be intentional about collecting the stories that children, teachers, and group leaders share about what is happening to them because of their efforts and participation. In these narratives, either self-reported or witnessed by others, you can see the changes in faith maturity, life choices, acquired spiritual disciplines, and other fruit of the Spirit.

## Sharing Space

Sharing space in a church building can be challenging. Our churches’ doors should always remain open to the community and the church’s ministries. As a leader in the church, your role is to create an atmosphere where ministries and programs can live together in the space allowed. The suggestions below will be helpful as you address your church space needs in your context.

Take a deeper look at providing Safer Sanctuaries® to your third-party using your space. Have a conversation about the implementation of best practices and proper supervision when outside groups use your facilities. Include conversations about supervision, legal responsibilities, and rental agreements. To assist you, use this link from Discipleship

Ministries website; <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/liability-and-safe-sanctuaries-with-third-party-organizations>.

- Continually look at ways to improve communication and relationships between the church education staff, the weekday ministries staff, and the leaders of groups that meet in the areas designated for children's ministry.
- Together, write a covenant of how you will be in relationship with one another.
- Offer opportunities for collaborative partnership (i.e., preschool chapel services for weekday school children).
- Develop and maintain mechanisms to bring people to the table to work through issues constructively regarding use of space.
- Develop policies that allow ongoing communication concerning issues around space between the weekday ministries and church committees.
- Communicate with one another so that there is more of a focus on community than on individuality.
- Develop a budget process to maintain ongoing ministries adequately, given varying economic climates.
- Set an example for children through your actions and decisions on shared space.
- Participate in the creation and maintenance of a shared all church calendar, looking ahead at monthly, quarterly, and yearly intervals to be proactive in identifying dates that will be competitive or even cause conflict.
- Work to make and keep children's ministry areas clean, usable, safe, and welcoming in their layout. Ask that all groups who use your space return it to at least its original state at the conclusion of their activities.

# Create Safer Sanctuaries®

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.  
“As for whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and be drowned in the bottom of the lake. How terrible it is for the world because of the things that cause people to trip and fall into sin! Such things have to happen, but how terrible it is for the person who causes those things to happen.” (Matt 18:5-7)

## Safety in Ministry

Every annual conference has established the requirement for churches to have Safer Sanctuaries® policies in place for the protection of the vulnerable, including but not limited to children, youth, and vulnerable adults. *Safer Sanctuaries: Nurturing Trust within Faith Communities* (The Upper Room, 2023) was built upon the foundation of the Original Safe Sanctuaries® to assist churches in safety issues related to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and the protection of leaders who work with the vulnerable. Safer Sanctuaries® as a resource is designed to set the minimum standard of risk reduction and help a local church develop its own protection policy that will complement the policy in place at the conference level. This resource is written by multiple authors and contains a wealth of real-world scenarios and practical information. There are online platforms and providers that help local churches reach beyond a basic understanding of abuse prevention. Safe Gatherings, Ministry Safe, and others offer various degrees of online training and background-check capabilities to ease the burden of offering training and processing paperwork related to volunteers and staff.

## Safer Sanctuaries®

Safer Sanctuaries® is important for churches as a whole and for children’s ministries in particular. This resource helps protect children from abuse. It also helps adult leaders and volunteers from being placed in situations where they could be accused of abuse that did not occur. Safeguard your ministry by instituting Safer Sanctuaries® guidelines. The following suggestions should be considered minimum expectations. You are encouraged to help your church reach beyond these minimums. Paragraph 256.1 of the *Discipline* says that local churches and charges shall “develop policies and procedures to provide for the safety of the infants, children, youth, and vulnerable adults entrusted to their care.” Work with clergy and Trustees if changes need to be made to your church’s existing policy. The provisions

here are addressed to youth ministry, but common sense and prudence should prevail for every age group.

- Adults applying to work with children must complete a volunteer information packet and a background check, which is submitted annually through the state bureau of investigation. (Some churches have modified this to do a background check every one to three years, with 24 months being an expectation.)
- Two unrelated adults must be present with any group of children; never just one adult present and never one adult alone with a child. This can be a challenge in smaller churches, so creative solutions may need to be employed.
- Adults must be at least 18 years old and at least five years older than the oldest child present. This does mean that older children can serve an adult function with children who are at least five years younger than they are, although they should always be paired with another adult. Likewise, young adults should be at least five years older than any children they are responsible for.
- Children and adults never sleep in the same bed and preferably not in the same room on overnight events. If children and adults must be in the same room (camp or dormitory style), they must have separate beds and have more than one adult in the room overnight.
- One-on-one meetings should occur only in rooms with uncovered windows and open blinds and open doors, or in highly public places. If one-on-ones occur in the church, inform another staff or volunteers of the session, including the anticipated start and ending times.
- All meeting room doors must contain windows.
- Leaders are required to attend annual training about abuse and Safer Sanctuaries®; leaders are to sign a form stating that they have been trained and that they understand the issues involved. Volunteers are to be informed about local laws on the mandatory reporting of abuse. This training may take place online, in partnership with other churches, or specifically within your ministry.
- Physical safety should be a priority. Provide adequate adult supervision of all activities, professional safety training, and a well-stocked first-aid kit available at all times for bumps and bruises. Do not provide medication, even over-the-counter items, unless you have medical release forms signed by parents or other responsible parties granting that permission. Even then, consult with your conference or other counsel about relevant local laws on providing medication.
- Draft a medical permission form to be used for all events; include contact information, medical history, medications, and allergies. Include insurance information if it is available and research your state's requirements; some prefer this form to be notarized. Consider a different color form for children, youth, and adults; check with your church's legal counsel about the possibility of a notarized form being kept on file to avoid the paperwork of a new form for each event.

- Consult the Board of Trustees or executive director of church administration to become familiar with your church's insurance, making sure it is adequate for the scope of children and young adult activities.
- Explore needed expectations for online interactions and communication when not in person. Cyber-bullying, linking to inappropriate media, or inappropriate media sharing can also be covered within expectations and policy.

## **Seek Additional Help**

Safer Sanctuaries® policies cover issues of abuse prevention, but other situations arise related to the safety and well-being of children. Be cautious when confronted with issues beyond the scope of your skill and experience. Many problems facing families require professional help, and you are not expected to fix or offer professional level counseling for anyone. Establish a network of recommended experts in the mental health field, including counselors who work with children; clergy and other church staff; and school counselors. Know when to refer.

# Address Disabilities

Jesus shared a special connection with people who lived with disabilities, exemplifying for us that all God's children are welcome participants in the life of the church. It is the responsibility of the leaders in ministry with children to work with the trustees and other leaders to advocate for the accommodation and participation of all people who live with disabilities, including children.

A welcoming congregation makes sure that architecture allows individuals with physical disabilities to navigate space. Attitudes are based in a community's knowledge and understanding about disabilities. Good communication includes the use of sight and sound that allows the least restrictive opportunity for participation. Programs allow individuals with disabilities an opportunity to share their gifts and talents with the community. Liturgical practices, such as sacraments or rituals, are adapted to meet individual needs. Turn to Disabilities Ministries of The United Methodist Church for resources (<http://www.umdisabilityministries.org/resource.html>).

Other basic needs for children with disabilities:

- Provide appropriate support for families of children with disabilities.
- Design ministries that include children with disabilities.
- Prepare and train teachers and guides to address the needs of children with disabilities.
- Teach the congregation to use inclusive language. Do not use the word *handicapped* and avoid phrases like "the deaf kid." Do not use the phrase "confined to wheelchair"; rather, say, "wheelchair user." Use the word *disabled*, and refer to a child as "John, who has autism."
- Include children with disabilities in all child-appropriate activities in the church.
- Learn about and provide adapted materials for reading, drawing, coloring, or painting.
- Allow for the use of multiple intelligences.
- Adapt and make available books for hearing and visually impaired children.
- Provide adapted utensils for self-feeding.
- Provide adapted brushes, pencils, and markers that are easier to grip.
- Pre-cut items and put glue down while children paste them by pressing the items down.
- Tape paper to the table so they will not move around when children try to paint, draw, or color.
- Use instruments that can be strapped to the body or hand.

- Use seating that allows children to be on similar levels.
- Take home support for parents? Online opportunities to connect? So much of this section is about physical space . . . Expand on multiple intelligences to include learning styles? Use of ILPs by schools?

# Ministry in the Community and the World

**T**he Great Commission tells us to “go” and make disciples, and John Wesley did just that. Children’s ministry goes beyond the walls of the church. Wesley used his financial resources to buy food for poor families, hire a teacher for children in the school, and purchase wool for children in workhouses. Wesley also visited children in workhouses, orphanages, and poorhouses to witness and advocate for justice for children. Today, we may live out this scriptural and historical heritage through mission, evangelism and witness, stewardship, and advocacy as we care for children.

## Mission and Service

It is important that children participate in service opportunities, locally and globally. Jesus preached about the importance of serving the poor, and John Wesley’s ministry for children had a running theme of serving children who would otherwise go without. Some of these children may be in your congregation, and they are certainly in the community and in the world.

Collaborate with community organizations and other faith communities to find out the needs of the children in your community, and then ask the children in your children’s ministry to imagine ways to serve those children. You often don’t need to look far from home for needs that your ministry can meet. At the local level, research needs in your community and determine what your church can do to meet those needs.

On the worldwide level, participate in The United Methodist Children’s Fund for Christian Mission, <https://umcmmission.org/advance-project/3021113/>. This joint ministry of Discipleship Ministries and the General Board of Global Ministries undertakes projects in which children learn more about children around the world and about the practice of mission.

Additional opportunities that allow children to be actively involved with mission are available through UMCOR (the United Methodist Committee on Relief). UMCOR provides relief following disasters in the United States and worldwide through relief kits that can be built at the local church level. Also consider supporting UNICEF, Heifer Project International, ZOE Ministries, and CROP walks. All these organizations offer child-friendly resources and mission opportunities for children.

Annual conferences, the United Women in Faith, and districts also offer opportunities to live into our call to social justice. In all mission opportunities, make sure that children understand that this is an opportunity to serve and to learn from others.



## **Evangelism and Witness**

One important way to make disciples is through inviting children from the community to participate in the ministries and programs of the church. Opportunities for evangelism can be intentional or serendipitous; but always be prepared.

Your congregation can evangelize children and families by offering ministries that support families in a nurturing, safe, and Christ-like environment. Work with community organizations, the school system, and other congregations to evaluate your community's needs in after-school care, tutoring, daycare, ill-childcare, and food scarcity. Explore the gifts of your congregation to discern how you can meet these and other needs. A larger and larger percentage of households in the US have no active church or religious affiliations, so outreach and evangelism must be thought of from the perspective of this being a new experience for all in the family.

Talk with children about their faith stories. Ask them regularly and often their thoughts about God, Jesus, the church, love, and doing good. Knowing how to articulate what they believe will give them the tools that they need to talk about their faith to others and to connect what they believe with who they are in the world. Help them understand the gift of sharing their faith story with someone else. Their sharing includes an invitation of a peer to participate in a church activity. Discuss how offering the invitation and being the child invited might make them feel and help them understand their role in evangelism within the church.

## **Stewardship**

Jesus talked about stewardship nearly as much as he talked about the kingdom of God. Teaching children to use God's gifts wisely is important. Stewardship goes beyond monetary giving to encompass care for creation, service to God and others, sharing our gifts, participation in worship, and understanding sacrifice.

Talk to children about the work of the church, including missions, creation care, advocacy, and evangelism. Talk to children about the gifts God has given them. Ask children how they can use their gifts to spread God's love and help others. Invite children to share their gifts as a way of helping God and others. Provide opportunities for them to see how the money that they place in the offering plate supports the work of the church, including the use of apportioned funds in local, regional, and global service and ministry.

It can be a challenge to teach a child about stewardship if you rely on definition alone. Even as adults, we perhaps limit our understanding to defining stewardship as monetary giving. Stewardship is about caring for that which has been entrusted to us; therefore things as intimate as best friendships and as broad as the environment are deserving of our time and energy. As we embrace this understanding, model to our children, and demonstrate, the act of stewardship becomes even more difficult. One activity to demonstrate this is with three jars. Label each jar, spend, save, and give. Divide the child's allowance and earning between the three. Let children determine what they give to the church in general, as well as special fundraisers, and include volunteering together and serving in church activities,

From a Christian perspective, stewardship, should include a more expansive definition of

generosity. By setting a pattern and habits of generosity, adults model a generous lifestyle, for children pay attention to adults' actions. In turn, these actions demonstrate that a generous lifestyle and being a good steward are important. Our actions speak louder than our words. After all Jesus pointed out that our actions show where our heart is (Matt 6:21), which includes our relationships with God and one another and bringing reconciliation and harmony.

## **Advocacy**

Through words and action, John Wesley advocated for poorer children by calling for education for all, visiting families, establishing health clinics, and stressing giving as important to Christian life. As a leader in the children's ministry, it is your role to advocate for children within the church and in the world. It is also your role to share with the congregation the importance of this ministry. Your ministry can and should be economically accessible to all with a desire to belong. Do local research on needs for educational materials, food, clothing, health and wellness, language or accessibility needs, and so on as you continue this tradition of supporting the healthy development of children.

The General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) advocates on behalf of the rights of children "by working toward the elimination of all forms of discrimination and oppression of children and by affirming positive initiatives that result in an enhancement of the quality of life for children" (GBCS, "Children").

The Children's Defense Fund coordinates resources and materials for Children's Sabbath each year. This interreligious event is one opportunity for the church to bring children's issues to the attention of the community through activities, mission, and worship. A guide for Children's Sabbath, which is observed in October, is available as a free download through The Children's Defense Fund.

## **Inclusiveness and Ecumenical Awareness**

When the Great Commission calls us to make disciples, it adds, "of all nations." We are to go out into the world—a world filled with people who differ from us physically, socio-economically, culturally, educationally, and so on. This commission is not limited to those in our country, who look like us, speak the same language, or celebrate like we do. There are many opportunities for children to learn about others who are different from them—in race, ethnicity, economics, physical or mental ability, or religious beliefs. These opportunities multiply as the diversity in our communities increases. Children see this diversity at school and in their daily lives.

- Be intentional in providing opportunities for children to learn about and to appreciate others as created by God.
- Provide antibias training for adults who work with children.
- Provide opportunities for learning about and with other faith communities.
- Invite teachers and children from other faith communities to share their traditions and beliefs.
- Observe Children's Sabbath with people from other faith communities.
- Collaborate with other congregations for vacation Bible school and other ministries of the church.

## Ministries Related to Children's Ministries

Children's ministry does not stand alone in the formation of children, but with a variety of ministries dedicated to making disciples of Jesus Christ. It is important to work together so that all children can know the breadth and depth of what it means to be a disciple for life.

### Camp & Retreat Ministries

Every annual conference provides a variety of camping opportunities for children. Camping ministry invites children to seek God and to grow spiritually. Camping is an opportunity for Christian love in action. Children have the opportunity to become friends through living together, sharing the responsibilities of a community, embarking on new adventures, and reflecting on the meaning of life. All this occurs in nature, which can greatly enhance awareness of and love for God. The lessons learned can be applied to inspire and lead others when children return to their communities of faith and society at large. The camp experience serves as a reminder for children and leaders that we are all God's representatives, meant to care for the whole community of creation—people and the natural world. Visit The United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries Association (UMCRM) website to learn more; <https://umcrm.camp/>.

### Youth Ministries

Youth ministry is the next step for the children in your congregation. This ministry seeks to form relationships and connections for youth, giving them the opportunity to feel a part of something bigger than themselves. Youth are challenged to develop a healthy and authentic relationship with God, peers, and adults through worship, activities, study, and mission opportunities. At this stage, young people have an opportunity to lead while being trained and equipped for leadership. Like children's ministry, youth ministry includes the entire family. Read *Guidelines: Ministries with Young People* to learn more. There may also be children in your ministry with older siblings in youth ministry. Coordinate calendaring, costs, and provide opportunities to be in shared leadership with a youth ministries team so that all faces might be familiar as children grow.

### Family Ministries

Family ministry is identifying and enabling all to see Christlike relationship qualities among those who call one another family, equipping households to be centers of faith formation, sacred places where people experience and respond to God's grace and love. By providing households tools, resources, and opportunities to grow and live out their faith through holy work that includes, but is not limited to, practicing spiritual disciplines together and reaching out through mission and service, your ministry will help families experience, witness, and share the light of Christ. An intergenerational family ministry approach strongly impacts the process of making disciples as the children's ministry goes beyond the church and into the home. Read *Guidelines: Family Ministries* to learn more.

## Scouting Ministries

Scouting America, Girl Scouts of the USA, Big Brothers Big Sisters (Amachi Partnership), Camp Fire USA, and 4-H offer opportunities to minister to young people. They each encompass Christian teachings and long-standing connection with local congregations. The church is endowed with certain responsibilities that allow scouting and civic youth-serving programs to become a ministry, and this differentiates scouting ministries from a civic or community-based club. Read *Guidelines: Scouting Ministry* to learn more.

## Weekday Ministries

John Wesley set the example for us as Methodists as he began health clinics and schools for children to learn to read, and he encouraged pastors to meet with the children regularly. His call to meet the needs of people where they are stands as a marker for us today. Using our buildings—that otherwise might sit empty six days a week—to meet the physical, mental, and emotional needs of children and their families clearly meets Wesley’s expectations. Be creative with how to use your facility with children. Offer a homework help center for an hour or so one day a week. Or offer a Homework Hotline that is provided by volunteers answering the phones. Provide music lessons to children in the community. Partner with a community organization, such as ballet studio or Taekwondo to provide lessons from your church.

**Preschool Ministry:** Weekday preschools are a ministry of the church and should be treated as any other ministry. Make every effort to work with the preschool director and staff to meet the needs of the children served in this ministry. Remember that this may be the only contact that the children have to a faith community. “Guidelines for Weekday Preschool Ministries in United Methodist Congregations” is available through the children’s ministry area of the Discipleship Ministries website. Weekday preschool ministries are diverse, and they serve many purposes. Learn more about weekday ministries by visiting Christian Preschool Association, formerly UMAPFL, <http://www.christianpreschoolassociation.com/>.

**Daycare:** A ministry program for infants, toddlers, and pre-elementary children, daycare may begin quite early in the morning and continue late into the evening to accommodate the work schedules of parents. Daycare provides nurture, care, and meals and offers developmentally appropriate activities in a safe atmosphere of love and concern for each child.

**Preschool/Nursery School.** A half-day to all-day ministry program for children up to five years old, preschool offers developmentally sound curriculum that provides children with experiences and activities that prepare them for kindergarten. Children are taught and nurtured in a safe atmosphere of love and concern.

**Kindergarten.** A half-day to all-day ministry program for children five years of age, kindergarten offers developmentally sound curriculum that provides children with the readiness skills they need to prepare for the first grade.

**Parents’ Day/Night Out Program.** This half-day, all-day, or evening ministry program of care and activities for children allows parents some time away.

**Play Day.** A regular or occasional day for young children to gather with their parents for play, this is a time for parents to interact while their children play safely in the church nursery, on the church playground, or at a park.

**Care for Children with Disabilities.** These are ministry programs for children recovering from physical or emotional trauma or abuse, children with disabilities, or children for whom English is a second language. This type of ministry program provides a service that may otherwise be unavailable in the community.

### **After-School Ministry**

**Before- and After-School Care** is a ministry that provides a safe and enriching atmosphere for elementary school children who otherwise would be without supervision before and after school. Before- and after-school care may be extended to a full-time program during the summer or on school holidays to accommodate the needs of working parents. Activities may include educational tutoring, academic enrichment, music lessons, service projects, faith enrichment, and programs addressing special topics. May also include food and nutrition ministries for those who are food insecure.

**Small Groups** provide an opportunity for children to share their love of God and neighbor, to be in fellowship, to learn together, and to engage in Bible study. These groups meet weekly and provide opportunities for children to learn and have fun, while deepening their relationship with God and peers. These groups frequently provide preparation for entry into the church's youth group.

**Non-Church Programs** are welcome. The church's doors are open to many programs. Scouting America, Girl Scouts, 4-H, and other groups often use the church facility for meetings and activities. These programs are important in the lives of many young people, and The United Methodist Church welcomes them. Children's ministry leaders should make sure that these groups adhere to the policies of the church, including Safer Sanctuaries®.

# What Every Child Should Experience

**T**he proverb, “Train children in the way they should go, / when they grow old, they won’t depart from it” (Prov 22:6), shares the importance of training children; but over years, decades, and centuries, we have come to recognize that there are some essentials that children growing up in Christian community should know.

## A Scope and Sequence

Based on Scripture, our Wesleyan heritage, our experiences in faith development, and a reasonable look at our call to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, the children’s ministries staff of Discipleship Ministries developed and updated “What Every Child Should Experience: A Guide for Teachers and Leaders in United Methodist Congregations.” This guide outlines a scope and sequence in all the areas of faith development of children, birth through age 11. It is available as a free download on the Discipleship Ministries website (<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/what-every-child-should-experience>).

Also recommended is the See All the People website, which provides age-appropriate resources to include, Developing an Intentional Discipleship System for Children, <https://www.seeallthepeople.org/develop-a-discipleship-system>.

What follows are some of the basics that a children’s ministry program should offer.

### All Children

- love and acceptance as children of God
- clean and safe rooms, equipment, furniture, and toys that fit their size, interests, and abilities
- trained and caring teachers
- food, clothing, and shelter, as needed
- a welcoming place in worship, fellowship events, and other events where the congregation comes together
- opportunities for vibrant faith development
- childcare when their parents are involved in church programs

### Infants and Toddlers

- nurture
- songs and prayers of our faith

- creative activities based on biblical stories
- inclusion in corporate worship services of the congregation

### **Preschool Children**

- music experiences through Sunday school and a children's choir
- opportunities to be involved in the stewardship program of the church
- adult friends with whom they feel comfortable
- mission studies and opportunities for involvement in mission projects
- encouragement and support when they bring friends to church
- inclusion in corporate worship services of the congregation
- games, music, and creative activities

### **Children in the Elementary Grades**

- discipleship learning opportunities
- opportunities for mission studies that include projects that address justice issues
- opportunities to be involved in the stewardship program of the church
- vacation Bible school and special summer programs
- choir and other music opportunities
- opportunities to serve in worship through litanies, prayers, Scripture reading, ushering, and serving as acolytes
- concurrent, appropriate programs when parents are involved in adult church programs
- encouragement to bring friends to church activities
- small groups for special concerns such as divorce of parents, death or other significant loss, and serious illness of a sibling
- opportunities for intergenerational relationships

### **Parents of Children**

- opportunities for continuing and vibrant faith development
- parenting classes
- food, clothing, shelter, as needed
- assurance of a safe place for their children
- small groups for special concerns such as loss of a child or spouse, child abuse, substance abuse, or divorce
- support from the pastor, professional educator, and church staff
- opportunities to learn about baptism, Communion, and worship
- information about what their children are studying
- resources to support them as their child's first teachers
- information about community issues that affect children and the role of the church in the community

## Find Support and Guidance

One of the blessings of The United Methodist Church is connection. No one is alone in ministry, thanks to the connectional nature of our denomination. Support and guidance can be found in many places. A contact person who works with the annual conference will support your ministry by offering specific training and directing you to helpful resources. Discipleship Ministries will support your ministry by developing resources, providing training for teachers and leaders, researching best practices, and helping you connect to the people and resources that you need in your church setting. The General Board of Global Ministries responds to the needs of the most vulnerable of society—our children. The General Board of Church and Society advocates for the rights of children. All these groups work to support children's ministries in the local church as you make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Remember, you are in ministry with parents, guardians, grandparents, caregivers, and even ancestors who care for and about children. You are in ministry with:

- members of the congregation who are concerned with creating and maintaining a vital church community,
- people in the community who care about the healthy development of children,
- the pastor and church leaders who are responsible for the faith development of all people,
- people within the United Methodist connection who are there to support your ministry,
- a story that has sustained the Christian community for thousands of years. May the Lord bless you and keep you.



# Resources

Items marked as Discipleship Ministries are available at [www.umcdiscipleship.org](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org).

## Basic Understanding of Ministry with Children

*Child Care and the Church* (Discipleship Ministries). Official document of The United Methodist Church outlining responsibilities in initiating, encouraging, and participating in the highest quality of childcare.

*The Children's Minister* by Rita B. Hays (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), ISBN 9780881775273. Helps those in ministry with children connect with the lives and pastoral needs of children.

*Children and Family Ministry Handbook* by Sarah Flannery (Abingdon: Nashville 2020). ISBN-13 978-1-5018-9623-1. This handy handbook offers advice and how-to's in all aspects of Children and Family Ministries, as well as relatable church-life anecdotes.

## Weekday Ministries

Afterschool Alliance ([www.afterschoolalliance.org](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org)). Works to ensure that all children have access to affordable, quality afterschool programs.

“Guidelines for Weekday Preschool Ministry Programs in United Methodist Churches” (pdf) by Gail Callis, Lynne Paredes, and Melanie C. Gordon (Discipleship Ministries). Lays out the basic guidelines for administering an effective weekday preschool ministry in United Methodist churches, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/guidelines-for-weekday-preschool-ministry-programs-umc>.

Christian Preschool Association, formerly The United Methodist Association of Preschools-Florida, <http://www.christianpreschoolassociation.com/>. Information and support in the area of accreditation for weekday preschool ministry nationally.

## Safer Sanctuaries®: Keeping Children Safe

*Safer Sanctuaries: Nurturing Trust within Faith Communities*, <https://www.upperroom.org/safersanctuaries> (Nashville: Upper Room, 2023). ISBN: 9780881779622. Practical guidance is provided in developing and implementing a substantive, holistic action plan of abuse prevention.

Safer Sanctuaries® Online Companion Guide. An interactive companion for your team

as they work through developing and implementing a Safer Sanctuaries® policy.  
Formational Studies and Lessons for Children

Godly Play ([www.godlyplayfoundation.org](http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org)). Teaches children as young as three the art of using religious language.

Messy Church ([www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk)). Messy Church values are about being Christ-centered, for all ages, based on creativity, hospitality, and celebration.

Worship with Children (Discipleship Ministries). Online resources that support including children in worship and the life of the congregation.

## **Faith Development and Formation**

“What Every Child Should Experience: A Guide for Leaders and Teachers in United Methodist Congregations” by Melanie C. Gordon (Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/what-every-child-should-experience>). Free, comprehensive scope and sequence supports teachers and leaders in addressing the scriptural, developmental, and formational needs of children.

## **Training Opportunities**

Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church offers resources, training, and support for leaders engaged in ministry with children. (1-877-899-2780; <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org>)

Web-Based Training (Discipleship Ministries, <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/webinars>). Connects leaders and teachers engaged in ministry with children with the opportunity to learn new skills and address timely issues with leaders in specific areas that concern faith formation of children.

## **Resource Agencies and Organizations**

Children’s Defense Fund ([www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)). Nonprofit agency that advocates for the rights of children in the United States, sponsoring Freedom Schools for Youth and Children’s Sabbath for Children.

Christians Engaged in Faith Formation ([www.cefumc.org](http://www.cefumc.org)). Professional affiliate organization for those leading Christian Education ministries in congregations; national organization with chapters in annual conferences.

## **Mission Opportunities for Children**

The United Methodist Children’s Fund for Christian Mission (Discipleship Ministries). Teaches children about mission work and allows them to contribute to projects that help other children.

United Methodist Committee on Relief ([www.umcor.org](http://www.umcor.org)). Provides supply kits and other assistance during times of crisis.

## UMC Agencies & Helpful Links

The United Methodist Church, [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org)

General Commission on Archives and History, [www.gcuh.org](http://www.gcuh.org), Madison, NJ,  
973-408-3189

General Board of Church and Society, [www.umbc.org](http://www.umbc.org), Washington, DC,  
202-488-5600

United Methodist Communications, [www.resourceumc.org/communications](http://www.resourceumc.org/communications), [www.ums.org](http://www.ums.org),  
Nashville, TN, 615-742-5400; InfoServ 1-800-251-8140

General Board of Discipleship, [www.umbd.org](http://www.umbd.org), Nashville, TN, 877-899-2780;  
Discipleship Resources, <http://bookstore.upperroom.org>; The Upper Room,  
<http://www.upperroom.org>.

General Board of Finance and Administration, [www.gbfa.org](http://www.gbfa.org), Nashville, TN

General Board of Global Ministries, [www.umbgm.org](http://www.umbgm.org), Atlanta, GA, 800-862-4246

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, [www.gbhem.org](http://www.gbhem.org), Nashville, TN,  
615-340-7413

General Commission on Religion and Race, [www.gcorr.org](http://www.gcorr.org), Washington, DC,  
202-495-2949

General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, [www.gcsrw.org](http://www.gcsrw.org), Chicago, IL,  
1-800-523-8390

General Commission on United Methodist Men, [www.gcum.org](http://www.gcum.org), Nashville, TN,  
615-340-7145

The United Methodist Publishing House, [www.ump.org](http://www.ump.org), [www.abingdonpress.com](http://www.abingdonpress.com),  
[www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com), [www.ministrymatters.org](http://www.ministrymatters.org), Nashville, TN, 615-749-6000

United Women in Faith, [www.uwfaith.org](http://www.uwfaith.org), New York, NY, 212-682-3633

United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries, <http://www.umcrm.org>,  
862-200-7260.

Wespath (retirement/benefits), [www.wespath.org](http://www.wespath.org), Glenview, IL, 800-851-2201

**For additional resources, contact your annual conference office.**