

Toddlerastic!



Joanna Gordon offers guidance on setting up a toddler group at your church.



They say that the birth of a baby changes everything! We can only guess at the mix of emotions Mary felt as she laid her precious newborn in the makeshift crib that very first time. Parenthood today can still be both joyful and overwhelming. Families often require practical support and care to nurture their youngest members, so having a local baby and toddler group can be a real lifeline for caregivers.

The Talking Toddlers report from May 2020, found that that 74% of parents of under-fives are connected to a church-run toddler group. This important ministry, which can be overlooked, should be celebrated for its huge missional potential: providing a means to build relationships, impact the community, welcome families into church, and support them during a season of profound change.



Parent and toddler groups are one of the mainstays of churches, week in and week out they welcome families of all shapes and sizes. Children and adults find a safe space to play, make new friends, learn new skills, develop confidence and more besides. The opportunities to touch people's lives are plentiful. God's love can be encountered through the care offered by volunteers and members: whether it's a shared cup of tea, a shoulder to cry on, a prayer prayed, a timely conversation or being offered a bunch of flowers. Many groups tell a Bible story and sing Christian songs – this may be the first time that children and adults learn about the Christian faith. But there is no one-size-fits-all toddler group, and we celebrate the diversity that is offered in a range of contexts.



Toddler groups are society's 'hidden treasure': much of what they do goes unseen yet is invaluable to family life. Groups are often run by volunteers, which brings its own joys and challenges. After the pandemic, many groups were not able to re-open due to a lack of volunteers, and this is a real issue. Running a toddler group is hard work and having a good reliable team is vital!

What do you need to do to start a group?

- Pray – ask God to give you a vision for what your community needs and how a toddler group can help.
- Recruit a leader and team – having someone with the passion and vision to run a group is vital. Aim to recruit volunteers from the community - not just the church. There is a wealth of people who want to help, but need to know how, so clear role descriptions are important.
- Identify a space to meet – this could be a church hall, in the church itself or a community space e.g., a local school hall. The important thing is that it must be accessible and have a toilet, storage, and space to prepare refreshments.
- Gather toys and equipment – make a simple list and let people know you are starting a group. People often want to give away toys their children no longer play with. Check equipment for safety and cleanliness.
- Look at what is already available in the area and on what days – avoid running something on the same day and time as another group nearby.
- Consider how to structure your session and what you will offer participants. Take a look at ROOTS weekly Under5s resources for craft, games, song and story inspiration.
- Advertise – posters, social media, local WhatsApp groups, community groups and your local authority may have a list of groups. Word of mouth is your greatest tool, but remember those in your community who may be new and know no one.
- Set a date to open and do it!

For those currently running groups, I hear many saying, 'Oh, we are really struggling ... There are too many/too few families. We don't have the storage space. I'm tired. My vicar never visits. We're not reaching those families who are in real need, etc'.

Running a toddler group is a challenge, so meeting with other toddler group leaders can really help. I lead an online community on Facebook called '1277 Make Them Count.' This is a forum to share ideas, ask questions, receive support, and remind you that you're not the only one with these challenges. In some areas, there are local support groups where leaders meet to share joys/challenges and pray. There are also training events, conferences, etc available across the UK – both online and in person.

The vision to see a toddler group within walking distance of every family in the nation is bold, yet possible. If every church or group of churches ran one, this could become a reality – now that's something to think about!