

The gift of your tiny children's group



Melanie Cave, Managing Director of Roots, explores the challenges of small groups with a wide age range, and unpacks how Roots can help.

Small is beautiful

My daughter attends a drama club twice a week. On Thursdays it's a large group, where they rehearse for performances, but on Mondays, it's a very small group that does film acting. It's often just her and the leader. She comes home absolutely buzzing.

Small settings are brilliant. Children feel seen and known. They can ask questions. There is space for their uniqueness. Those with sensory challenges are less likely to feel overwhelmed. Children can learn at their own pace, step out into leadership, follow their curiosity.

Challenges all round

I've led large groups and tiny ones, and both have their challenges. For large groups (I have over 50 in my year 5/6 Sunday group!), challenges involve logistics, remembering names, and having enough volunteer consistency to build meaningful relationships. These settings are often led upfront by charismatic personalities and children are usually listeners, instead of actively contributing or shaping what's happening. Leaders put lots of effort into being high energy and engaging, so children don't get bored and misbehave. The energy is primarily flowing from leader to the child.

A caveat: That's how large settings are traditionally structured, but you can make large settings interactive. It requires offering more multisensory activities, facilitating participation, and prioritising hearing the voices of children. This has real logistical challenges – Do we have enough leaders and space? – but it's not impossible. It just requires a culture change of expectations. We see these principles and challenges in intergenerational worship settings. See our series on intergenerational worship [WEB](#).

With tiny groups, the challenge is there is nowhere to hide. If a child doesn't get on with someone, who else is there to play or work with? If they are shy, interactions can feel awkward. You have a different leadership role in this setting. You are less of an up-front teacher or facilitator, and more of a collaborator, playing, creating and discovering alongside the children.

Top tips for tiny groups

- **Find simple card or board games** like Uno™, Jenga™, Connect 4™, Chess/Checkers. Use these as Gather activities, or, as a way to build relationship.
- **Choose fewer activities and extend them** Build a junk model or Lego™ scene of the Bible story, then make a video of the story moving the characters around. Allow the children freedom to create and direct what happens. Asking questions and chatting during these activities can lead to deeper conversations.
- **Think creatively** With fewer children, more hands-on activities are possible, such as outdoor activities, cooking, filmmaking, using technology for creation (like Minecraft™), visiting nursing homes, or undertaking more ambitious crafts (with appropriate risk assessment and safeguarding).



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Running a group with a wide age range

In our recent subscriber survey, some of you told us you struggle with including a wide age range in your groups. Roots is ideal for this scenario because each week, we offer lots of ideas on the same theme and Bible passage. There are three strands for **Under 5s, Children and Youth**, but you can pick and choose activities from these (or Intergenerational from Roots' *Worship Together* title), to suit the abilities and interests of your group.

- **Focus on Spiritual Styles rather than age** What could you include to engage those with Word, Emotion, Symbol or Action styles (see [WEB](#) and inside front cover for info)? Whatever age we are, we can get involved in serving together, wondering at creation, singing together, or engaging with a Bible story. Those interests and preferences unite us more than ages divide.
- **Offer more than one activity at the same time, giving choice and flexibility** Try to have times of bringing everyone together to acknowledge what each person has learned or created.
- **Share how you receive or are encouraged spiritually by children of all ages** This models language (for adults and children) to appreciate God at work in the play and creativity, 'Tyson (aged 9) persevered with his clay model, and it's really detailed. It made me think about how God doesn't give up on us, shaping us to be like him.' 'Maisy and Albie (aged 2) have been playing house, looking after the dolls. Play helps us grow in our relationships. We're learning how to love others and be loved. The more we do that with each other, it helps us to receive God's love.'

Think intergenerational

- **Empower older children teens as leaders**, giving roles like preparing snacks, presenting Bible stories, leading prayers, running games, or helping younger children with crafts.
- **Make sure these young leaders don't feel it's all work and no fun.** Offer privileges or spaces just for them. Perhaps they arrive early for pastries and prayer. They feel special and receive spiritual input and leadership coaching from you.
- **Involve young leaders** in planning, review, and decision-making processes to develop their leadership.
- With lots of younger children, and not many older children, **encourage more parents to stay and run the session more intergenerationally.** Making sure there are touch points for adults and children. Roots' *Worship Together* resources include intergenerational activities on the same theme as the children's session. Even if your Sunday worship service is primarily for adults, your children's space could become more intergenerational.