

# **Your Children's Facilities: Are Children Attracted Or Distracted?**

**We sometimes place children in uncomfortable situations. Then we are surprised when the children want to get off the bus.**

A child's experience at church is just as important as an adult's—perhaps even more important when you consider the long-term impact early impressions have on a youngster's understanding of God and the church. When children receive "leftovers" from the facility banquet table, their experience may not be much more than a ride on an overcrowded, stinky bus.

What can we do to make the "ride" more comfortable for children? Listed below are several suggestions that can make for a smoother ride.

## **SPACE**

...Children respond to a lack of space even more dramatically than adults do. Some children become overactive and destructive; others become reclusive and quiet; a few simply refuse to return. The need for adequate space for children is of the utmost importance if we are going to draw and keep children and their parents in our churches.

## **SPACE CONSIDERATIONS**

Minimum square footage: In most states, the minimum space requirement for schools and child-care centers is 35 square feet per child. Violations of this minimum can cause classroom difficulties.

I visited a church that had run out of space for their Sunday school classes and had created a classroom for children in a closet. The children had approximately 10 square feet per child. In some churches, there is no other option. But in this church, the adults had a large sanctuary. Yet their children were crammed into small, undesirable spaces.

Adults who are capable of dealing with space restrictions are often given larger spaces. Children less able to control their responses to limited space are given smaller spaces. I am not advocating that the adults of any church be crammed into a tiny classroom. But when churches are faced with space limitations, the children's need for adequate space must be considered.

## **CREATIVE SPACE USAGE**

What do you do when there is simply not enough square footage per child? You get creative! We faced this problem when our early childhood program had outgrown its facility.

Because we live in Southern California, the weather is nice most of the year. We decided playgrounds for the children would give us the additional space we needed and enhance our program. We built two small playgrounds for our toddlers and preschoolers.

With a little paint, a blank wall can be transformed into a pathway to adventure.

During our fullest hours, we divide each class into two groups. One group plays on the playground while the other remains in the classroom for the lesson. We have virtually doubled our classroom space. And the children have a playground—a plus to any children's program.

There are many ways to create additional space without building a new building; it just takes some brainstorming and the support of the pastor. Some churches build lofts on which children can read while others play underneath; develop outside areas adjacent to the classrooms; partition fellowship halls to accommodate children's classes; reconfigure patios to fit the needs of kids; and convert office spaces into classrooms.

The key is to assess your current and future need for space and begin to dream. As you do, uninviting space can become useful space for children.

## **NATURAL LIGHT**

Many churches are creating areas of natural light in their children's facilities because natural light has a calming effect on children. Young children can become irritated and unhappy when there is inadequate natural light. Children's classes are often in the church basement. To the visiting child and his/her parents, this may communicate a message—our children are not valued.

Our elementary-aged children are on our basement level. Fortunately, we have a patio on one side that opens to the light. We have converted the patio into a small amphitheater for our "Construction Zone" (our version of children's church). Currently some of our Sunday school classrooms have large windows that look out into the amphitheater. We want to open up the entire level by taking down the walls and exposing all of the classrooms to the light. This would make natural light available to every area. We would then use moveable partitions to divide the space into classrooms.

## **COLOR**

I recently visited one of our boys in the hospital. Walking the halls, I realized how unfriendly and uninviting this was to a child. Then I entered the pediatric ward. It was as though I had walked right into a world of imagination. The walls were painted with fun, colorful scenes from storybooks. The cold, sterile environment had suddenly become warm and inviting.

In some churches, children are placed in rooms lined with stacks of chairs, tables, or someone's junk. No wonder children are not attracted to these rooms. I have yet to walk into a sanctuary lined with chairs or with old sheets of plywood leaning up against the walls.

Children's space needs to be filled with color, not junk. Even in a small church, walls can be painted with colorful murals of Bible scenes. With a little paint, a blank wall can be transformed into a pathway to adventure.

Each of our early childhood rooms has painted on its walls a bright, colorful mural depicting a Bible theme. Our outside "Construction Zone" amphitheater is painted bright blue with a speckling of other bright colors. The bleachers are bright orange, yellow, green, and mustard. The other "construction zone" items that hang from the walls are painted in bright pinks, purples, and greens.

The physical environment is compelling to the children. We believe this is partly responsible for the dramatic increase in children bringing their friends to church.

## **KID-FRIENDLY FURNITURE AND EQUIPMENT**

When I was a new children's ministries director, I held meetings in the children's classrooms and the teachers sat in the preschoolers' chairs. One day a teacher brought in her own chair. I realized I had inadvertently placed this teacher in an awkward position. She had been distracted for entire meetings by her discomfort. She finally decided to bring her own chair. I was somewhat embarrassed but discovered an important principle: people are more comfortable in furniture that is suited to their size.

Children need furniture and equipment that encourages independence as well as comfort. We recently purchased very small tables and chairs for our 1-year-old classes. The toddlers freely move on and off the chairs and around the tables. They are delighted at their ability to move independently of the adults.

## **CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES**

Children are drawn to bigger-than-life characters. These characters embody a child's imaginative power. At our church we have several different characters the children have come to love. One is our big "pussy cat" of a lion named Clayton—our theme character. Between services he mingles with the children and adults, shaking hands and nodding enthusiastically. Another favorite character is Scriptureman—a Superman look-a-like. He uses Scripture to show that his true strength lies in knowing and serving God.

You can enhance your environment by having your staff dress in costumes that fit your theme. (Toddlers and young preschoolers are more receptive to characters and costumes from a distance.) When a child approaches the classroom, his or her first impression is of a room filled with the possibility of fantasy and adventure.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many children's workers face challenging space issues. They must use their creativity to transform seemingly unusable space into rooms children will enjoy visiting.

A quality children's environment begins with adults who trust and value each other. Once that relationship is nurtured, the creative juices can begin to flow and then...watch the kids—children's ministries never looked this good.

Sharon Noble is director of early childhood and elementary children's ministries of Newport Mesa Christian Center, Costa Mesa, CA.

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