

Reaching Young Families:

**RUNNING  
A TODDLER  
GROUP**

TED Family Ministries Department





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# Introduction

Toddler groups can change lives. The best toddler groups can:


- help isolated carers and children to make friends in their local area;
- offer support, understanding, and acceptance to carers;
- create a safe environment for children to play;
- build community amongst carers that continues throughout the week;
- be a lifeline to families going through a crisis, supporting them through illness, grief, or loss;
- connect carers to other services for more advice or support;
- be a first point of contact to bring families into a church community, by inviting carers to other events such as parents' groups, craft evenings, or family-friendly church events;
- bring young families to Christ.

In this guide we will explain in more detail why running a toddler group can help you support and connect with your local community, and how to start and maintain a successful toddler group that can change lives. We'll also provide links to further support, and inspiration from other thriving groups.

Throughout the guide we will refer to the adults bringing children to the toddler group as 'carers'. Carers might be mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or childminders; it is important to use inclusive language so that everyone who attends feels welcomed.



## Why start a toddler group?



Toddler groups are an invaluable source of support for the carers in your community. When carers have strong connections in their local area, they are much more likely to feel happy and capable, and the children in their care will be happier too.

Carers might attend a toddler group for a variety of reasons:

- to make new friends;
- to find support and advice;
- to have a break from their routine and isolation;
- to get out of the house, especially during seasons where the weather makes it difficult to play outside;
- to help their child learn to play and share with other children;
- to give their child a chance to play with different toys and try different crafts;
- to get ideas and inspiration for activities to do at home;
- to be somewhere warm and safe with a cup of tea and a biscuit;
- as an inexpensive alternative to specialised classes or play-centres.

Throughout the planning and the running of your toddler group, it's important to think about the different reasons carers might value your group, and to keep working to meet those different needs.

## Serving carers in your community

### Creating opportunities to connect

Children tend to find it easy to make friends while they join in the activities at toddler group. Help children bond with each other by offering lots of opportunities for group activities. For example, running a craft table allows children and their carers to sit down next to other children for a period of time while they create their masterpiece.



By joining with their children as they explore and play, the carers have a chance to chat and connect with other carers as well as the children. Having a snack, story and song time at the end of a group brings all the children and parents together to connect as a community.

### Supporting carers and their families

Sometimes, carers simply want to come to the playgroup, and don't want or need to share their problems, or ask for advice. Other carers may just need to hear that they are not alone in finding something difficult, and that they are with people who can empathise or sympathise. Make sure that your playgroup helpers ask open-ended questions and listen warmly and deeply as they chat with carers, to give the carers a chance to talk if they want to.

Occasionally, though, a carer might be going through sometime more difficult and may need to have a longer, heartfelt chat with a helper. Ideally, all playgroup helpers should be trained in the basics of counselling so that they can listen sympathetically to anyone who might need to talk.

# Principles of active listening and open-ended questioning

Prepare your playgroup helpers to support carers' emotional needs by discussing with them how to engage in active listening and open-ended questioning. Open-ended questions are ones that cannot be answered in just one or two words. Instead of 'Are you having a good day?', ask, 'How is your day going?'

If a carer wants to talk more, encourage the helpers to actively listen by:

- giving the carer their full attention;
- making eye contact, leaning in towards the carer, nodding to show that they are being heard;
- allowing the carer to continue talking until they have finished;
- checking that they have understood the carer by repeating back in their own words what they think the carer has said;
- sympathising by saying things like 'I'm so sorry to hear that. That sounds really hard.'
- try to avoid offering any advice unless the carer specifically asks for it;
- once the carer has confirmed that the helper has understood, ask the carer if there is anything the helper can do to help with the situation or problem.

If, however, the issue is too big for the playgroup, make sure you have a list of local support groups. Carers might come with problems such as:

- debt or poverty;
- domestic abuse;
- mental illness;
- post-natal depression or anxiety.

As a church community, consider how you might be able to offer practical support to those carers, while also ensuring they receive expert help. Perhaps you can arrange a rota of people to cook and deliver meals to the family, or make a collection of items the family might need (baby clothes, nappies, toys, etc) and deliver them anonymously.

## Summary:

- Toddler groups offer a valuable service to your local community, supporting carers and their children to become happier and more secure.
- Try to be aware of, and meet the needs of, the different carers who

are attending: needs for friendship, or emotional/practical support.

- Encourage your team to ask sympathetic, open-ended questions, and actively listen to carers.
- Ask your helpers to look out for carers who might need help making friends, and for carers who look like they might need a longer chat.
- If possible, get training for your team in the basics of counselling.
- Agree an action plan with your church about practical ways you can support carers in need.
- Be aware that in listening to the carers you might identify other services your community needs: consider how you as a church could meet those needs too.



# Planning a toddler group

Having run through some of the ways that a toddler group can be a fantastic service to your community, you've decided to start one. Congratulations! This is a fantastic service for your area. Start your planning by considering who the group is aimed at. The most inclusive toddler groups will welcome all carers of children aged 0-4. However, it may be that there is a particular need in your area for a specialised group. For example, a group for male carers, or a group for young mums, grandparents, carers of multiple birth babies, or carers of children with special needs. These groups will require some extra planning to ensure that you are meeting the different needs of those specific groups, instead of something more general.

Write a vision statement for your group, which includes who you hope to serve with the group, and how you will strive for excellence in it. With a strong purpose, it will be easier to recruit volunteers and donations to help start the toddler group.

Think of a special name for your group. Make sure that it is not already in use by another local group. This helps carers and supporters identify your group from among the others in your area. Keep it simple and fun, and something that a child can easily recognise too, so that any children who attend can start to associate the name with their experience of attending your toddler group.

## Leader and team: vital to a successful toddler group

As the team leader, you are essential to the success of the group. You will be the one responsible for how the playgroup is run, and for sharing your vision for it with your team. You will need to maintain standards and ensure that your team and the carers follow any guidelines you've set in place to create the playgroup's culture. You'll make decisions about the running of the group and oversee any budget or resources if you have them.

Your team will make or break the group. You are much more likely to succeed as a group if you have

friendly, supportive helpers who are understanding and warm towards the carers who come. Here are some things to think about when choosing a team:

- **Commitment:** do the team members have the time to fully commit, long-term, to helping with the group? It is valuable to have people on your team who can build relationships with carers over months and years.
- **Age range:** ideally choose a team that represents a variety of age ranges. Perhaps there are some younger people at college or in high school who are available to help as part of their volunteering or service? They might be able to help make some younger mothers feel welcome. Some carers with school-age children, who work part-time, might be able to dedicate a few hours to supporting carers who have children only a little younger than their own. Older people who have more flexible schedules due to working less or retiring, may be able to offer helpful perspective to the carers who attend, and can empathise with carers who are bringing their grandchildren. A range of ages on your team will give the greatest opportunity for carers to connect with the helpers.
- **Skills:** some helpers might enjoy making cakes to bring, and then serving the snacks and drinks. Others might excel at preparing the craft activities or telling the stories. Still others might be particularly good listeners, or welcomers. Try to make sure that your team includes people with different skills so that your group can manage all the different activities necessary to support a well-balanced and healthy toddler group.
- **Life experience:** this gets more personal, but it would be helpful to consider the life experiences of those on the team. Helpers who have struggled with parenting, experienced infertility, pregnancy loss, bereavement, or mental illness can be very valuable as you support carers who might face similar experiences.
- **Diversity:** Ideally you should make sure your team has both men and women on it, so that both male and female carers feel



welcome at the toddler group. For the same reason, try also to recruit volunteers from a mix of ethnic backgrounds, so that your team reflects the community in which you are based.

Don't forget: it's vital that all the children and carers who come to your group are safe and protected. Your team members should also meet the safeguarding requirements of your country as well as those of your local church.

### Supporting your team

Spend time together as a team before you launch the toddler group, and make sure you meet regularly afterwards as well. Discuss the running of the playgroup, listen to any concerns or ideas the team might have, take the time to celebrate any successes, and praise them for things they have handled well.

Try to have social outings together from time to time. Some playgroup teams will have a monthly toy cleaning session, followed by a communal meal, to connect and bond with each other.

If your team of playgroup volunteers is small, it can be very helpful to have a rota of attending carers who are willing to take on an extra responsibility once a quarter or so. For example, lots of playgroups have a baking rota, or a craft rota, where the carers themselves take turns to bring snacks, or plan the craft.

### Looking after yourself

Make sure you have someone outside the group, such as a church leader, to support and listen to you. Alternatively, you could form a playgroup board, of a few other church members, to help you make decisions and to look after the needs of the team and the carers.

### Know your own limits

Remember that you aren't responsible for solving everyone's problems and carrying all their burdens all by yourself. If someone on your team, or at the playgroup, needs more help than you can give, you should help them find support elsewhere. Have a list of local specialist support groups ready.

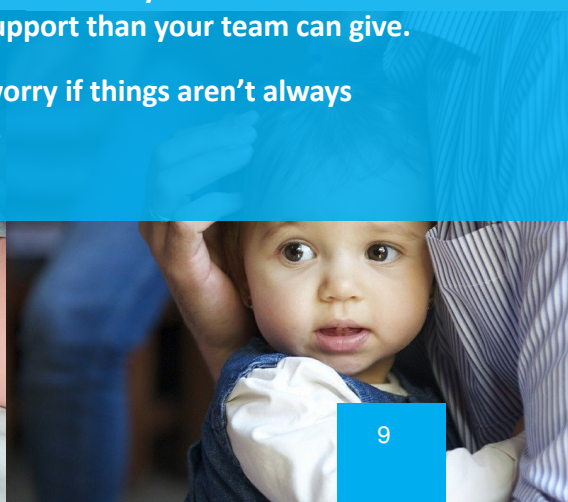
Carers are responsible for their own children while at the toddler group. However, if a carer is causing problems for others, either in telling off other peoples' children, or in allowing their own children to upset others, it's appropriate for you to ask them to be more considerate of the group. Try to stay supportive and make it clear that they are still very welcome at the group.

### Just try your best!

Don't worry if you aren't perfect, if the playgroup toys aren't brand new, if the snacks aren't always delicious. You are doing a wonderful thing by offering support to your local community of carers. Just keep on being welcoming and understanding, and trying your best, and carers will appreciate that.

### Summary:

- Try to build a supportive, friendly, committed team, from a variety of skills, ages, backgrounds, and life experiences.
- Spend time connecting with your team, listening to their ideas about the playgroup, and supporting them socially too.
- Make sure to find your own support system outside the group.
- Have a list of local specialist organisations ready in case a carer needs more support than your team can give.
- Don't worry if things aren't always perfect.





# Considering the ethos of your toddler and carer group

The best toddler and carer groups in churches have a special ethos. They focus on mingling with the young families in their community and building compassionate relationships with them. One of the most successful toddler and carer groups has chosen to lavish their families with God's love. They do this by providing home baked cakes each week, and looking for ways to be kind, generous and supportive. They also listen to people, and they're available whenever people ask for prayer, or whenever they want to ask questions about God. But nobody "preaches" or prays out loud during the session. The pastor comes as often as he can. He makes and serves each carer with a drink so that he has time to connect with them and build trusting relationships. The people who come along know that they are coming to a church, they see the inspiring posters on the wall, and they feel the love of God through the care they receive. Behind the scenes each leader has a number of families to pray for, and they try to connect with these families each week.

“Our spirituality is always there in the background. This isn’t the place to be overtly evangelistic, that would completely kill what we are trying to do. But we allow God’s love flow through us into every relationship, and we let the Holy Spirit do the rest of the work. Some families are coming to Messy Church, and some people have asked for prayer. The great thing is that we are known as the best toddler group in the town, and those who come along are our best adverts!”

*Toddler group leader*

“Starting a toddler group has been the best thing our church has done in this community! It has put us on the map and given us a reputation of being the most caring church in the town!”

*Toddler group helper*

“The toddler group is the most effective evangelism I have ever done. We now have 50 families coming to our church every week. They all know I am the pastor, and we have some interesting conversations...I could never visit that many families in month!”

*Pastor*

“We started a toddler group four years ago. Since then we have started five other ministries connected with the group. We have Messy Church, a dads and kids adventure group, an after-school club once say a week, a kid’s choir and a craft club. None of them would have got started without the interest that came out of the toddler group.”

*Pastor*



# Creating a welcoming atmosphere in your toddler group

Carers can sometimes feel insecure and inadequate, particularly when faced with a new group of other children and their carers. It's really important to make them feel welcomed and accepted throughout their time at the toddler group.

- Give a genuine welcome – make sure you have some truly friendly, loving, sympathetic people in your team, and plan how you will all look out for ways to be welcoming to the carers and their children. If someone is attending for the first time, introduce them to the team but also to some friendly carers who can include them in conversations.
- Keep on being friendly. Even if someone has attended the toddler group for a while, they may still be struggling to connect and feel comfortable. Make sure that you and your team stay on the lookout for carers who seem isolated and keep trying to engage them with other carers and staff. Make sure they have space to talk if something is worrying them. If you need to, refer them to someone else on the team who has had a similar experience, and who has learned about the principles of active listening (see sidebar above).
- Make sure that the room is welcoming. Keep in mind that some carers may struggle to be as active as their little ones. They might be older, pregnant, or have other mobility issues. Make sure that there are accessible toilets with baby changing facilities. Also don't forget to

put out plenty of chairs for grown-ups, not just children's chairs and floor mats.

- Involve the carers who come to the group. It can help carers to feel more welcome if after a few weeks you ask them to help in a small way. Perhaps tidying up equipment at the end, bringing some snacks, or looking out for newcomers. Find an activity that seems appropriate for that carer and their skills (and something achievable according to the level of need of their children they bring), and make sure to thank and affirm them afterwards.
- Be prepared! Some carers may be having a bad day. They may just need someone to offer to play with their child for a few minutes while they have a cup of tea. They might need to borrow a nappy or some baby wipes, or a change of clothes. If you can, try to have a stash of spares to give out to those in need. You could take a collection of worn but clean clothes of various sizes from your church members and ask for donations of small packs of nappies and wipes.
- Be open! Don't forget that these carers might also be a friend to you, or that God might use them to teach you something. Make sure to be humble enough to let the carers serve you, and befriend you, and listen to you, if that's appropriate.



# Getting everything together:

There are a lot of things to do when preparing to start a toddler group.

You have your team, but now you need to make sure that the toddler group is a well-equipped, comfortable, fun, and safe place for carers and their children to play.

## Basic equipment:

- If you take donations for attending the playgroup, you'll need a lockable petty cash box, with plenty of loose change in it in case carers come with higher-value cash.
- You may need a CD player, or a connector cable and speakers, if you want to play background music or pre-recorded accompaniments to your song time.
- First aid box: you'll need to include plasters, sterile eye pads, sterile triangular bandages, safety pins, sterile un-medicated wound dressings, disposable gloves. Do not keep tablets or medicines in the first aid box.
- Name badges for team members: it's helpful for carers to be able to easily identify team members. If possible, make sure that all your team members wear a name badge, or a name sticker, at each session.

## Policies and Paperwork:

You should prepare a few forms and leaflets for carers before the toddler group starts:

- Welcome leaflet: these should be printed for each new carer to take away with them and these should include written details about the group. Make sure it covers:
  - when and where the playgroup happens;
  - whether the playgroup runs during school holidays;
  - any requested entrance donation;
  - contact name and telephone number of group leader;
  - any health and safety guidelines (such as where to leave buggies and car seats, any specific fire escape procedures, where you can dispose of nappies);
  - how to share any comments, ideas, or concerns about the toddler group;
  - any ways that carers can help the toddler group (for example if there's a rota for people to bring snacks, or stay late to tidy up, etc);
- Carer agreement: a short and friendly explanation of the carer's responsibilities at the group, including any group rules. These might include asking the carer to supervise their child and intervene if their child is playing in a way that is upsetting another child or damaging the group's equipment. Other guidelines include asking all carers to respect the other carers and the volunteers, as well as the room and the toys. A sample carer agreement is in the sidebar.



- Registration form: take contact details for the carer, as well as names and birthdates of each of the children the carer might bring, and any medical conditions or allergies for anyone attending. You also need to include a statement about why you are collecting this information, and how you will store and use it. Please refer to your church and national requirements for the protection of personal information and date (eg. GDPR).
- Data protection notice: on each registration form you must explain briefly why you are collecting the information, how it will be stored, and what you plan to do with it. You must then commit to only using the carers' details in the way you have set out. If you want to contact them by email with news about the playgroup, they need to explicitly opt in to this in writing. The easiest way to do this is by asking them to tick a box if they are willing to be contacted by email with news about the playgroup. You might want to add a box inviting them to opt in to receiving information about other church events they might be interested in, and this allows you to share their contact details with other groups at your church who are running



special events for families with young children. However, if the carer does not tick the box, their information cannot be shared outside the group.

- Photography consent form: it can be helpful to have some photographs and/or video

footage to use when creating reports and promotional materials about the toddler group. If you would like to take any images of the toddler group when children or carers are present, you will need to get written consent from the carers whose children are in the images. The best thing to do is to include a short consent form as part of the registration form. Add one extra paragraph explaining why you might like to take photographs or video from time to time, and where you would like to use the images. Offer a tick box for the carers to consent separately for each type of usage (for example, for use on printed promotional materials, for use on internal reports about the toddler group, for use on the group's social media channels, for use on the church's website, etc).

You also need to keep the following records:

- Registration forms and consent forms (photography, newsletter, data protection): keep these in a dedicated, well-marked folder, in a locked drawer or cupboard.
- Medical conditions/allergy records: any medical conditions or allergies noted on the registration form should be entered into a record book that is easily accessible each week, so that all staff are aware of the children's needs. Parents are responsible for what a child eats at playgroup, but it's still important for your team to be aware. If an allergy is severe you may need to tell all the other carers at the group not to bring any snacks into the building that contain a certain allergen.
- Waiting list record. As your toddler group grows, you may have more carers wishing to attend than you can safely fit into the space. Many groups expect that only 75% of those registered will attend each session. It is useful to start a waiting list. Carers who would like to attend can then register for a place. As a carer's situation



changes and they move on, you can contact carers from the waiting list and invite them to attend. Keep waiting list registrations in a separate section in your registration form folder.

- Attendance record: as well as completing a registration form when they first attend, you should keep a record of who is at the toddler group in any given week. This is vital because it shows at a glance who is in the building, in case you need to evacuate the premises for a fire or other emergency. It is also helpful if you have children with restricted diets or allergies, so you can be extra vigilant about your food preparation on those weeks. Furthermore, it helps to alert you to potential problems with carers who haven't been attending. If you notice that a carer has not attended for three or more weeks, you should contact them to check on them and make sure that they are alright. If they do not wish to attend any more, see if you can gently (and without being defensive, or dismissive of their experiences) find out why. If they still do not wish to attend, then you can remove their name from the list and invite the first family on the waiting list to join instead.
- Accident book: any accidents that take place during the toddler group must be recorded: the cause of the accident, the result, any first aid that was given, and whether a trip to the doctor or hospital was necessary. The carer should sign the record to confirm that they agree with the account. This helps to prevent unnecessary lawsuits, which can be very stressful and destructive.
- Incident book: keeping a note of any other incidents, for example if a child is aggressive, or destructive, can also be helpful, in order to look out for any patterns of negative behaviour that might need to be addressed, or that might require special strategies.

## Making the toddler group comfortable:

Think about the space you'll be using for your toddler group.

- Is the room clean and attractive? Does it need a fresh coat of paint?
- Is it easy to access the room? Is there a step-free way to get there? Think about carers coming with buggies, or with reduced mobility: how will they get into the building?
- Is there a car park? Will many carers walk to the group?
- Where can carers safely leave coats, buggies, changing bags, welly boots?
- How will you set up the space? Is there room to create different zones dedicated to different types of play (for example, a dressing-up area, a building area, a craft area, a baby area, etc)?
- Do you have enough grown-up chairs to put some around each of the 'zones'?
- Where are the baby changing facilities? Are they accessible to both male and female carers? How about facilities for the toddlers who are potty trained? Are there potties and step-stools available?
- Are you able to access the heating settings for the rooms you'll be using? Will you be able to make the room a warm enough in Winter? In the Summer, will there be ways to keep the room cool enough?
- Is there somewhere a carer can make up a bottle of formula, and bottle feed or breastfeed her baby somewhere quiet if necessary?

## Making the group fun:

Think about the toys and activities you'd like to include at the toddler group: you'll need to either raise money (from your church budget or as an additional fundraiser) or involve the congregation in collecting toys and making donations. If you have a generous budget, you can buy sturdy and

sustainable toys from preschool suppliers. If you are on a tighter budget, you can ask your team to visit charity shops looking for appropriate toys or make a request on a community website. You'll need to have a variety of different toys to appeal to different interests and ages, and you'll need to make sure you have enough toys that children don't get bored or jealous.

Here are some types of toys that work well at a toddler group, and can easily be found second-hand:

- Baby toys: you'll need a baby section, with the floor covered in soft mats or blankets and cushions, with baby gyms, soft musical toys, toys with good colours and textures. Choose only washable or wipe-clean toys so you can easily keep them clean.
- Construction toys: Duplo, wooden building blocks, magnetic plastic blocks, Mega Bloks, etc. Some children will just want to build for the whole playgroup, so make sure that there are plenty of pieces available. These are durable toys, too, that make them very suitable for the wear and tear of a toddler group.
- Small vehicles: wooden railways and trains, Hot Wheels, wooden cars, parking garages with ramps, playmats with roads printed onto them. There will be some children who won't want to leave this area. If you have the budget consider getting some low tables on which to build a train track, or race cars, to keep them off the ground.
- Dressing-up: some children will want to put on a costume as soon as they arrive. If you offer dressing up, think about how to store and display the clothes. Budget furniture companies offer very simple low rails on which you can hang dressing-up clothes. Try to acquire a variety of costumes to suit different tastes.
- Small world: for children who have big imaginations, small world toys are a great addition. Little plastic figures of people and animals in different settings (a circus, a playground, a house, a hospital,

a school, etc), make sturdy toys for a toddler group.

- Playing at being grown-ups: if possible, have an array of toy 'grown-up' items, such as a tea set, a play kitchen, pots, pans, irons, play food, a doctor's set, etc.

Optional: these types of toys are nice to have, if you have the chance to offer them, but they are not as necessary as the previous groups:

- Ride-on toys: some playgroups will be lucky enough to have space for ride-on toys to be out throughout the playgroup, kept safely in one zone. For other playgroups, ride-on toys can come out for one section of time, perhaps while snack is cleared away, before story and song



time. These are things like small push-along motorbikes, tricycles, cars, scooters, etc, that children can take turns to ride or push.

- Books: it's a great idea to have a book corner if you can, with comfy seating, floor cushions or bean-bags, board books, and paper books for carers to share with their children. Check them to make sure they aren't ripped or broken, and make sure that the stories are appropriate.
- Dens and playhouses: children love to make their own spaces. Toys like play tents, teepees, and small plastic playhouses make a great addition to a toddler group.

- Play dough, drawing, and painting: these are trickier as they may require more cleaning up, as well as protective coverings for the tables, floors, and children. They are also resources that are quickly consumed and need to be bought or made quite frequently. But many children love to colour, draw, and model, and may not have frequent access to paint or play dough at home, so this can be a great addition to your toddler group if you think you have the space and the funds.

### Extra features

As well as the collection of toys that will be available each session, you need to think about

song list if there is a child with a birthday that week. For your welcome and goodbye songs, choose ones that have simple actions for the children to follow.

### Story time:

Some toddler groups will choose to tell only Bible stories, and others might choose stories with an age-appropriate message about love, family, or making good choices. You can read the stories from a book, showing the pictures to the children, or if you have a strong storyteller on the team you could ask them to prepare something themselves. They could use props such as hand puppets to help engage the children. If there is a significant time of year coming up, stories (and their corresponding crafts) could be themed



songs, story time, crafts, and snacks, and perhaps special sensory activities. What format would you like your toddler group to take? What strengths do you have on your team?

### Songs:

If you have a team member who can play a guitar or other instrument, or who is a confident singer, you could ask them to lead song time each week. Otherwise, you could find a CD with tasteful arrangements of the songs you want to include. Most successful song times will have the same welcoming song each week, and the same goodbye song, for consistency. Then some will choose to teach a song on the same theme as the story of the week, or some might offer children the chance to choose some favourites. It's good to also have 'Happy Birthday' on the

around the season. For example: Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Grandparents' Day, etc.

### Crafts:

There are plenty of resource books available including, from your local library, that are full of simple, inexpensive crafts appropriate for toddler groups. Or, you can find thousands of ideas online by searching for toddler group craft ideas. It's a good idea to theme the craft around the week's story, as this helps build on the child's memory and understanding of the theme. At the very least, you'll need to have a supply of glue, paint, washable felt tip pens, coloured paper, and blunt children's paper scissors.





### Snacks:

It's good to provide a small snack for the children, and ideally the carers too. Not only do they get hungry and thirsty while playing; it's also a great time to bring the carers together around the table to connect and talk as a group. You'll need plastic tablecloths, plastic plates, cups and covered beakers for the children to use for their snack. Good snacks include cut-up fruit and vegetables, breadsticks, crackers, toast, and perhaps a healthy biscuit. For carers, offer a hot drink and a cake or biscuit. It's a good idea to invest in plenty of eco-friendly, lidded and unbreakable cups for the carers hot drinks to minimise the risk of breaks, spills and scalds.

### Sensory play:

Children's development can really benefit from sensory play and it can be a very appealing feature of your toddler group if you plan it well. Large, low-sided tubs can be put on top of waterproof sheets on the floor and filled with a variety of appealing textures and colours for children to explore with their senses. Thick, soft, washing up liquid bubbles, autumn leaves and pinecones, small toys frozen in ice, shells hidden in sand, shredded paper, even grass cuttings, can all provide a good starting point for a sensory experience. You can find hundreds of great ideas and resources online for creating inexpensive sensory tubs.

### Keeping the group safe:

You need to be aware of any rules your country has put in place to keep children safe, as well as any safeguarding policies that your church has (either at the local, national, or divisional level). Things to check include:

- Your team:
  - You need to ensure that they are legally allowed to work with children.
  - All volunteers also need to know about your safeguarding policy, including practical procedures for keeping children safe, but also how to detect abuse, and what to do if it is suspected or reported.
  - You'll need to make sure that there is at least one person present at the playgroup who has been trained in giving first aid to children and is aware that they need to be ready to do so if needed.
  - Are your snacks team aware of how to prepare food safely, and how to keep allergy-friendly foods safe from contamination? EU rules state that you need to have a food safety policy in place.

### Your carers:

- You need to make sure that all carers are aware that they are responsible for their child or children at all times while at the toddler group. Nappy changes, visits to the toilet, and any clothes changes should only be handled by the carer.

### Your room:

- Are there any guidelines about the maximum number of people your room can safely contain, for fire purposes?
- What are the fire escape routes, and are they accessible at all times?
- Are there any exposed hot water pipes, electrical sockets, or other hazards to children?
- Does your fuse box have an RCD (residual current detector), which cuts off electricity if it detects any faults? These devices save lives by helping to avoid accidental electrocution.
- Are the fire extinguishers easy to access, and do they still work?
- Does your building have working smoke and carbon monoxide alarms?
- Do you have a well-stocked first-aid box available? Is there a phone available to use for calling any emergency services?
- Do you have a dedicated nappy bin? Are the toilets and changing areas kept clean and tidy?
- How will you keep babies safe from toddlers? Often toddler groups will have a dedicated baby area, enclosed by gates or chairs, to keep older babies and children from accidentally running over the non-walkers.

### Your snacks:

- Are you allergy-aware? Make sure that you check with all toddler group attendees whether they have any allergies, and make sure other parents know not to bring those allergens to the toddler group.
- Is the food preparation area blocked off safely from the rest of the toddler group? Ensure in particular that knives are kept out of reach of children, and that hot drinks cannot be pulled down from a surface.
- What will you do about keeping the adults' hot drinks safe during the toddler group? Some groups buy reusable lidded cups, others ask that hot drinks in mugs are kept in one section of the room only, and never be placed on the floor or a low table.

### Your toys:

- All toys should be cleaned and checked regularly to make sure that they still work and that they are safe to play with. Plastic toys can often be cleaned in a dishwasher, and any soft toys should be machine washable.
- If you are having toys donated, check for any nationally recognised safety symbols. In the UK, the Kitemark (a heart shape with an S running through it), and the Lion Mark (a triangle with a lion in it) show that a toy meets national safety standards.

### Your equipment:

- Any electrical equipment should be inspected every year to make sure that it is safe to use.

## ***Inviting carers to the group:***

Now that your group is all planned, and you have your team and toys in place, you might need to consider how to go about inviting members of the community to attend. Here are a few ideas:

- All your promotional materials need to make it clear that this is a group for babies and young children, and those who care for them (see the planning section earlier).
- Start a Facebook page for your group. Make sure it has all the details, such as when and where the toddler group will take place, any requested donation for attending, and any particular features (sensory play, craft time, painting corner, a really strong music time, etc) and start by inviting parents in your church to like it. Then, ask them to post about it on their pages, and invite their friends with young children to follow your page as well.
- Make posters about the group and give them to parents in your church to give out to friends, or to put up in other places in the community, such as schools, libraries, doctor's surgeries, hospitals, and other community gathering places.
- Contact local nurseries and preschools to ask if they might be willing to display a poster or give out flyers for your toddler group.
- Contact local community support services such as local parenting and childbirth charities, and health visitors, and ask if they give out lists of groups to new parents. If they do, ask if you can be added to the directory.
- Some areas might have several free magazines that are distributed through letter-boxes once a month. Contact those in your area to see if they would be willing to write a feature on your group for free.
- Contact your local paper to ask if they would like to write a story about the

opening of your toddler group. Make sure you highlight anything that's particularly special about your group, or an interesting story about how you started, so they can find a newsworthy angle.

- Consider having a free family event on a weekend, to celebrate the start of the toddler group. Offer activities, treasure hunts, crafts, bouncy castle, face painting, free or at-cost snacks such as biscuits or ice cream. Get all the church to support you by attending, helping, donating, and inviting their friends and neighbours, as well as representatives from local papers, magazines, newsletters, and even local politicians or councillors.

## ***Step-by-step: a toddler group session from start to finish:***

### **Set up**

Have your helpers come around thirty minutes early. Start by praying together about the day's group, and then set up the toys, lay out the registration area, switch on the hot water system for drinks, and complete a safety and cleanliness check of the room, toilets, and entrance area. If you play music during your session, make sure it's playing before carers start to arrive.

### **The welcome**

Set up a welcome station by the entrance to the playgroup. Have a warm and genuine helper sit at a desk to greet and register carers and their children as they arrive. They should sign the carer in on the group attendance record, take any donations, verbally pass on any essential playgroup news or notices (such as if the next playgroup session is cancelled for school holidays, etc), and have a quick catch-up chat with them if appropriate. Some groups will write each child's name on a sticker for them to wear during the session. Keep a tally of how many people have come in. When the session is full, you may need to turn carers away sensitively, and ask them to fill out a waiting list registration instead. It might be helpful to have a large sign ready to put outside the building if the



session is full, so that children don't have the disappointment of coming into the building and seeing all the toys before being told they can't stay.

### First time?

By keeping a register of all the carers who have visited the playgroup, it's easy for the greeter to identify newcomers. Have new carers fill out the registration form and photography consent (or non-consent). New carers should be given the welcome leaflet and a quick tour of the building, pointing out toilets, baby changing areas, and fire exits. Then make some introductions to help the newcomer feel welcome. If you have enough helpers, assign two people to the welcome desk so that one helper can stay on the desk while the other specifically cares for newcomers.

### Unstructured beginning

Have open-ended play and toys available for the children as soon as they arrive, so that they can quickly engage with the group. Toys like train sets, dolls houses, books, play kitchens, etc, are a good fit for this section of time.

### Story and singing time

Bring the children into a circle to sing songs and listen to a story together. Follow this with any birthday traditions you have (singing happy birthday to any children with birthdays before the next toddler group session, and perhaps giving them a card or small book). Finally, this is a good time to make any announcements, such as who's on the helper rota for the next session.

### Ride-on toys and running around time

Finish the group session with the children being allowed to run around or ride in the empty space, letting off steam before the journey home.

### Clearing away

Your team will need to stay around for at least thirty minutes after the end of the session to clean the room and toilets, wash up and tidy the kitchen, and debrief about the session. You might want to keep some confidential notes about any prayer requests, or community needs that your team identified during the session. Finish by praying together for the carers and children who were at the group, as well as those who were absent.

### Craft table

The craft table can run throughout the session, or just for a short time if there is not enough adult help.

### Tidy-up time

Children can enjoy being involved with tidy up time at a playgroup. Play the same 'tidy-up' song every week when it's time to put the toys away, and bring out boxes, clearly-labelled with pictures, so that the children can see where the toys need to be placed.

### Snack time

Bring out the snacks and have the children sit at tables or on picnic blankets to eat together.



## **Sample Toddler Group Materials**

### **Sample registration form – one per child**

Carer's name		Child's name	
Phone number		Date of birth	
Email		Medical / dietary requirements	

### **Sample attendance record**

The team pre-fills the first two columns with the names of each carer and child who has registered, and then each session the carer simply ticks the correct date column:

Carer's name	Child's name	Date 1	Date 2	Date 3 etc...

### **Sample carer agreement**

It is important that every member of the group feels relaxed, supported, safe and secure, and that they have fun while they are here. You can help us do that by agreeing, every time you sign in, to a few group ground rules:

- You are responsible for your child's safety, and the way they relate to and play with other children. Please intervene if your child is at risk of being hurt, or of hurting others.
- If another carer is concerned about what you or your child is doing, please listen graciously, even if you don't agree or feel you are being misunderstood. Stay friends!
- Appreciate the team members who are here to organise and facilitate the group, and who are also part of the group family.
- Take care of and encourage your children to look after the room, the equipment, and each other, and to take care around drinks, buggies, and belongings.

Everyone enjoys toddler group more when each carer supports our ground rules!

## **From Maryfield Toddler Group, Dundee: some real-life examples**

### **Welcome letter**

#### **Bumps to Tots – Maryfield Toddler Group**

Welcome and thank you for choosing to visit our toddler group today. We hope your child will enjoy it and will want to come back next week!

We are open every Tuesday morning from 10am until 12 noon. Cost: £2 per family (up to two children), and 50p for each additional child.

Our morning goes something like this: Quiet Play, Healthy Snack, Craft, Play, and Songs.

We want your child to feel welcome, safe and happy while you are here.

Please let us know if your child has any dietary or health issues that might affect their time at playgroup.

We'd also appreciate it if you would keep your child at home if he or she has an infectious illness.

This group is run by unpaid volunteers, so if you would like to help in the kitchen, do a craft, set up or put the toys away, etc., it would be much appreciated!

Our group is registered with the Dundee City Council and is also a member of the Scottish Pre-School Association.

Jane Walton – toddler group leader – (phone number)

Barrie Centre SDA Church – (website for church)

## Waiting list letter

### Bumps to Tots – Maryfield Toddler Group

Welcome to the Maryfield Toddler Group. We're sorry there isn't a place for you right now, but since your name is on the Waiting List, we're sure it won't be too long before you can join us each week.

We are open every Tuesday morning from 10am until 12 noon. Cost: £2 per family (up to two children), and 50p for each additional child.

Our morning goes something like this: Quiet Play, Healthy Snack, Craft, Play, and Songs.

We want your child to feel welcome, safe, and happy while you are here.

Please let us know if your child has any dietary or health issues that might affect their time at playgroup.

We'd also appreciate it if you would keep your child at home if he or she has an infectious illness.

This group is run by unpaid volunteers, so if you would like to help in the kitchen, do a craft, set up or put the toys away, etc., it would be much appreciated!

If you no longer require a place, please let us know so we can offer it to someone else.

Our group is registered with the Dundee City Council and is also a member of the Scottish Pre-School Association.

Jane Walton – toddler group leader – (phone number)

Barrie Centre SDA Church – (website)

## Flyer: How we can help

Pastor Jimmy would be happy to:

- a) **Pray for you** or for someone you know
- b) **Listen and talk** about any personal concerns you may have about your job, family, money or health

This is a **free service** and it can happen at the Toddler Group or you can phone him on: (pastor's phone number).

**We're here to help you if we can!**

## Volunteer Prompt Sheet for timings during a toddler group session

- 9.30am:        - Put attendance sheet out with basket for money
- Check toilets: that there's toilet paper and enough paper towels
- Put drinks and cups out: in kitchen and babies' room
- 10am:         - Put music CD on
- 10.30am:      - Chop up the fruit and get snacks boxes out
- 10.35am:      - Clear tables and wipe
- 10.40am:      - Put out a basin of warm water and towels for children to wash    their hands
- SNACK TIME (afterwards, please fill boxes with snacks ready for next time)
- 11.20am       - Craft time and tidy up time
- 11.35am:      - Bubble Time
- 11.40am:      - Songs

Afterwards, please could the helpers:

- Collect rubbish from toilets, baby room and kitchen for Isabella to take home
- Fill up bubble tubes with bubble solution
- Return CD player to baby room
- Hoover rooms and make sure everything is put away and tidy
- Take towels home to wash and iron
- Helpers to take spare milk and fruit home.

THANK YOU SO MUCH

## Feedback form

- a) What did you like about the group?
- b) How did you hear of the group?
- c) How could the group be improved?
- d) Any other comments?

## How Maryfield Toddler Group witnesses to the families who attend:

- a) Four times a year each toddler receives a free Bible story-book to take home. Many of the mums read the book each night to their child.
- b) All the children are invited to Messy Church.
- c) Lots of passive witnessing through the posters on the walls in the hall, the wall displays in the children's rooms and the books and tracts in the foyer that are available to take home.

- d) Conversation: we ourselves are witnesses by being friendly and Christ-like. Pastor Jimmy also comes most weeks. He's offered to pray with the adults if they want to and has also offered free counseling sessions.

## ***Planning, Preparing, and Running at Toddler Group: Checklist***

### **Planning:**

- Who is the toddler group aimed at?
- What is your vision statement?
- What will be your toddler group's name?

### **Preparing:**

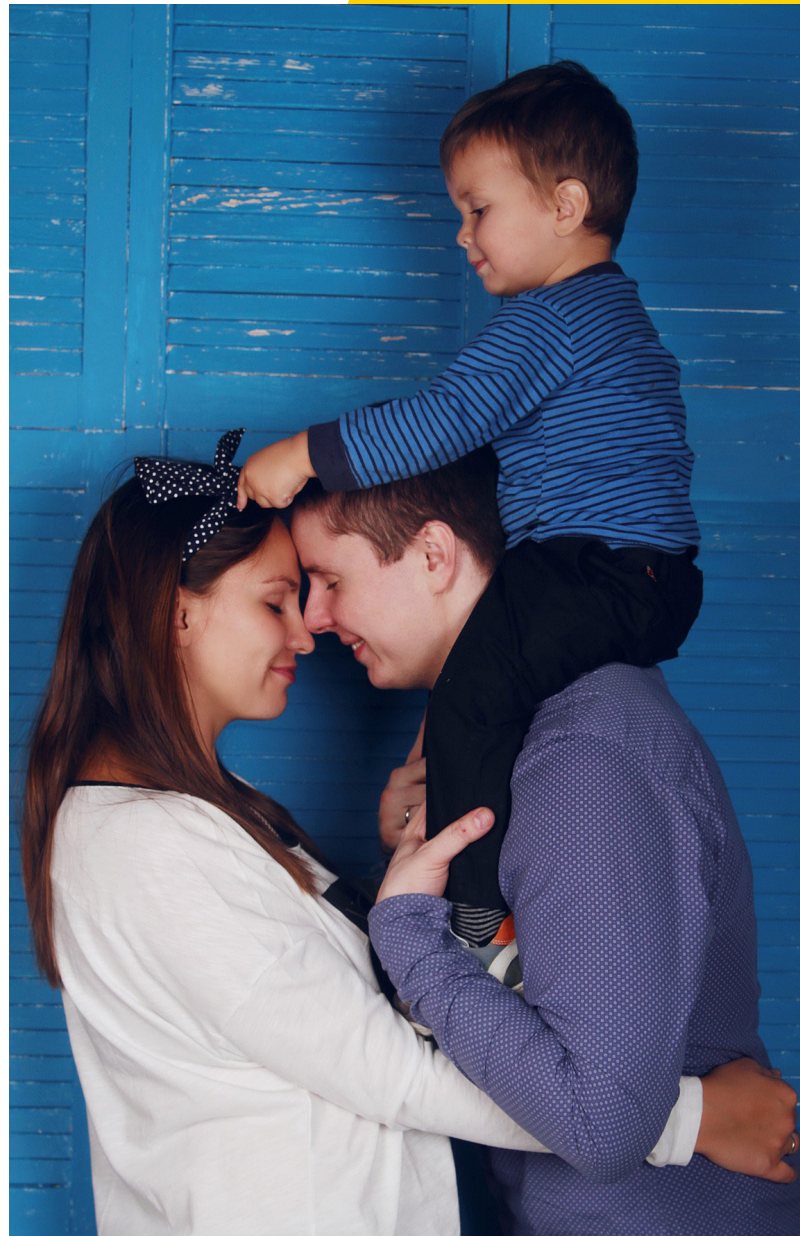
- Does your team have all the training it needs?
  - Safeguarding
  - Food Hygiene
  - Data protection
  - First aid
- Is your room safe to use?
  - Fire safety
  - Electrical safety
  - Other hazards
- Is your room welcoming?
  - Accessibility
  - Cleanliness
  - Decoration and light
  - Appropriate furniture for carers and children
- Do you have all the paperwork and records ready?
- Do you have all the equipment you need?
  - Crockery and beakers
  - Covered cups for hot drinks
  - Sound equipment
  - Lockable cash box
  - First aid box



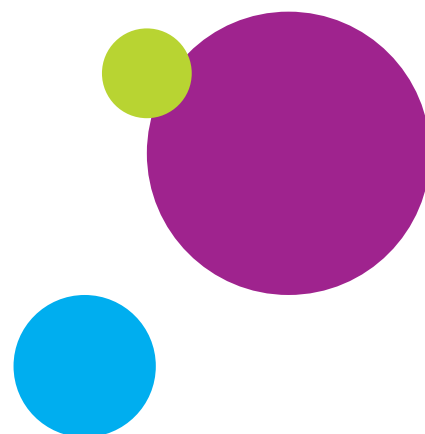
- Protective table covers
- Do you have all the toys you need?
  - Are they clean and safe?
- Have you promoted the group?
  - On social media
  - Through posters
  - Through personal invitations
  - Through health visitors and parent support charities
  - Through local magazines and newspapers

### Running:

- Setting up
- Registration and welcome
- Introduction of newcomers
- Unstructured play time
- Craft table and sensory play
- Tidy up time
- Snack time
- Story and song time
- Ride-on toys and running around
- Clearing away



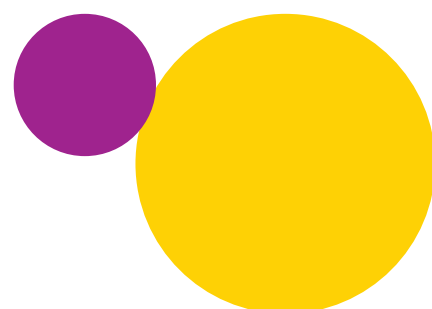
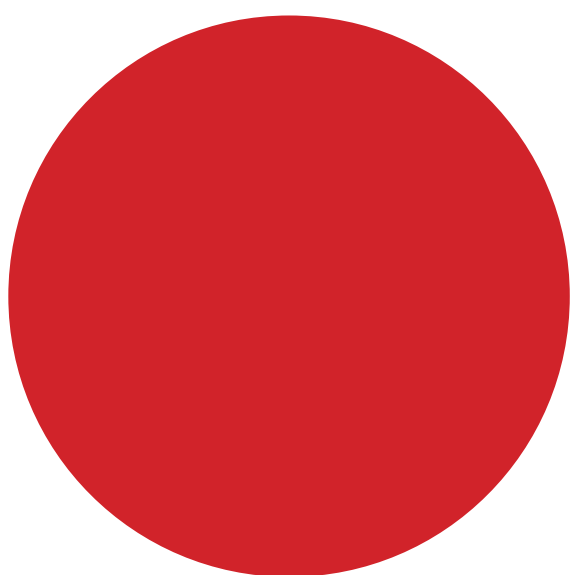




This information pack has been developed by the Family Ministries Department of the Trans-European Division to encourage churches to build positive relationships with young families. If you have any suggestions to improve this pack, please email us and let us know. Please tell us about any positive experiences that you have had in your own toddler and carer groups so that we can encourage others. Thank you!

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A resource developed by  
the Family Ministries Department  
of the Trans-European Division