

CREATIVE DISCIPLING ENVIRONMENTS –

CHURCH NURSERY/PRESCHOOL: CHILDCARE OR GOD'S SPIRITUAL GREENHOUSE?

If you wanted to begin growing healthy plants, you could read a book about it...or, you could visit a local nursery to actually see how it's done. If you choose well, you will quickly discover that quality nurseries don't happen accidentally. Establishing strong roots at the beginning of a plant's life cycle is important. In fact, farmers and nurseries utilize greenhouses for this very purpose, while anticipating flourishing blooms and abundant fruit. Those in charge not only love their work—they are skilled, experienced, and very intentional about growing healthy plants. And if you ask them, they will undoubtedly tell you that beautiful blooms begin with strong, healthy roots.

"Nursery" actually comes from the Latin word, "Nutritus," which means to nourish, protect, and sustain. What great implications for the church! While nurseries are usually good at childcare, discipling is more than that. Although we rarely see the words "nursery" and "discipleship" in the same sentence, local church nurseries present unique opportunities to help children become firmly rooted in Christ. The key is intentionality.

In the nursery/preschool area, discipleship looks different from any other classroom. We begin preparing the "soil" through creative caring and touching the heart. Listening, sharing, praying, moving, laughing, singing, reading...there is no single method. Our goal is to build a sacred discipling environment. This starts with establishing loving, nurturing relationships with parents and children alike. When the motivation for every word, attitude, and action flows from our love of God and others, the seeds of God's grace and love begin to take root.

How do we shift prevailing expectations of weekly rotating workers, leaders, and parents from the nursery's identity as childcare provider to God's greenhouse, a place where His love nurtures deep roots in the lives of actively sprouting, young worshipers? I'm going to share a few tips to help you transform your church nursery from a drop-off childcare station into a productive discipleship greenhouse.

1. Commit to Safety. Creating and maintaining a safe environment must be our top priority. Trustworthy teachers consistently following proven policies and protocols create confidence in parents and children alike. Church leaders must commit resources to continual screening, training, and monitoring. Regularly trained workers are more consistent in effective methods and safe practices that create a secure environment. If parents don't believe their children are safe we will not have the opportunity to share the gospel and plant the seeds of faith. For more see www.nazarenesafe.org

2. Provide Consistency. Schedules and routines that are clearly communicated and consistently followed provide predictability. Predictability, in turn, creates a strong sense of security and greatly diminishes fear. This translates into worry-free worship for parents and cooperative trust for children. The result: healthy discipleship for both! **What does this look like? Establish routines by simply posting a schedule and check lists** to provide consistency of care for children and rotating workers. This communication instills confidence in workers and reassurance to parents that children's needs are being met, helping parents to be fully present in adult worship and Sunday School. The predictability established by routines lessens children's anxiety, improves cooperation and builds confidence, creating an open door for discipleship.

3. Partner with parents. Communicate intentionally, communicate effectively, and communicate often. Use all available means and media to connect, support, and encourage young parents. Recognize their role as their child's primary spiritual influencers, and equip them to parent effectively. **What does this look like?**

A. Send home the lesson or a take home sheet the week ahead so that the teacher is reviewing what kids already have been taught by their parents (*rather than vice versa*).

B. Give every new parent a copy of the schedule so they will be familiar with the classroom routine and can talk with their child about their experience each week.

C. Create a nursery handbook for parents to understand your mission to disciple even the youngest and minister to their needs. This piece also helps to establish expectations — what they can expect as well as how they are expected to participate as part of the team. Important areas to address are policies for allergies, diaper changes, sick babies, sign in/out system, use of name tags, and safety/screening policies.

D. Establish a separation plan with parents. Young children experience cycles of anxiety as parents begin to leave them in the care of others. A separation plan gives children an opportunity to trust parents will always come back. It gives parents comfort to know supportive workers are partnering with them on the parenting journey.

1. Start by allowing a parent to be in the classroom but not engaged with their child, allowing teacher/child relationships to form.
2. The next week have the parent leave for ten minutes before discreetly checking in or returning to the class if needed.
3. Continue to increase the time the parent is gone each week before returning until it is no longer necessary for them to return before dismissal.

E. Equip, encourage, and celebrate parents as their child's primary spiritual influencers.

1. Provide parents family devotional guides that connect with the Bible story, biblical concept, or memory verse for the week or month.
2. Regularly pass on information about age level development and spiritual concepts they can introduce to their child, such as "God made all things," "God made me," "God loves me," "God the Father, provides for me," "Church is a special place where I learn about God," "I can express love and kindness to others," etc.
3. Plan a baby day to share the joy of having new life within the church family.
4. Celebrate dedications and baptisms. Affirm the parents' role and commit to support them as the family of God.

4. Design environments that stimulate God-centered play, conversations, and learning. This can happen through simple steps regardless of the size of your budget. The most effective discipleship environment impacts all five senses. The environment communicates the level of care parents can expect through smells, sounds, and lighting.

A. Practice these basic minimum standards of comfort:

1. Keep the room and toys clean, organized and uncluttered, leaving room to move.
2. Provide comfortable temperatures, ventilation, and lighting.
3. Provide small bags with twist ties for dirty diapers, and remove the trash from classrooms after morning and evening services.
4. Separate areas for active play and quiet, structured activities.
5. Broken toys and torn books create safety hazards and send the wrong message. Throw them away.
6. Simple rugs and pillows create cozy spaces for little ones to snuggle while reading Bible storybooks.
7. Celebrate creativity by displaying children's work in a prominent place.
8. Play soothing music during arrival, and rest times. Create easy transitions by associating activities with certain songs, i.e., clean up, Bible story, prayer time, snack. Make up your own songs using familiar nursery tunes and changing the words.

B. Give your nursery a makeover. Create a new name that communicates what happens inside - one that invites and excites, i.e., "Promiseland" or "Faith Factory," etc. Check out Pinterest or Google for ideas, like:

1. Place the words "Thankful for Families" or "God Loves Us" over personalized cubbies with labeled pictures of children and their families.
 2. Install a mirror, picture, or a verse over the changing table where children and teachers can focus. This can become a purposeful opportunity for one-on-one conversation about God and his love.
 3. Place laminated teaching posters, pictures and verses at *children's* eye level.
 4. Name classrooms after animals and or colors rather than age levels. This may help with expectations or confusion as children promote from one classroom to the next. Try matching characteristics of animals' movements to children's development. For instance: the crib room may become the "Little Lambs," while the crawlers or toddlers are turtles. Two's are bunnies, and so-on with squirrels, monkeys, and the Fives/Pre-K are giraffes because they are tallest, etc.
 5. Decorate walls with colorful Bible scenes, and verses. You might match something in the artwork or verse with the name of the room. For instance, the "Frog's" room may have a mural of pond with water life both above and below the surface and verse about leaping for joy
 6. Purchase multiples of the same toy or book to allow parallel play for young children who are aren't developmentally ready for sharing.
- 5. Resource time-starved teachers & workers with great curriculum.** Great curriculum stimulates curiosity & invites learning with scripturally sound, user-friendly, age-appropriate content requiring little advance preparation. Above all, great curriculum

must be effective. Foundational learning is taking place in nursery-age children. During this stage of development, simple spiritual concepts, ideas, and attitudes toward God, His house and His Word are formed. **Train workers to establish repetition and routines with the Bible story, scripture, Bible truth, and prayer.**

A. Attention spans follow the pattern of 1 minute for each year of age. For example, expect a two year old to focus for two minutes.

1. Young children love repetition. Tell 1-2 minute Bible stories and repeat them throughout the session.
2. Use a variety of colorfully illustrated children's Bibles to tell the same story using different illustrations.
3. Use large, laminated teaching pictures, props, or even toys when telling the story.
4. Use motions to represent key actions in the story as memory aides.
5. Afterwards, encourage children to retell the story.

B. Coordinate activities, snacks, games, centers, and music to reinforce the Biblical concept, story, or verse.

1. Choose crafts that encourage a child's creativity, not teacher reproductions that use a lot of fine motor skills.
2. Repeat the points of the story that are being illustrated by the activity. Ask the children why we are doing this, and what does this remind us about the story. This will tell you if the activity is connecting and give you an opportunity to have the children retell the story or what they have learned.
3. When using centers, change out activities to reinforce the lesson. See below.

C. Worship and Praise God with singing and movement. Encourage motions that reflect what you are singing about. Balance fun, "get the wiggles out" songs with more reflective, calm, and prayerful songs leading up to a story.

1. Teach memory verses and Bible concepts with modified sign language, music, and movement.
2. Give children opportunities to praise, sing, give thanks, petition, listen, share, and serve.
3. Allow children to move and participate in stories, and encourage lots of repeating.

D. Memorize scripture by using sign language, motions, or movements that reflect the words.

1. Music and rhythm are also great memory tools.
2. Use familiar tunes and change the words using scripture.
3. *The purpose is to understand how scripture applies to my life. So always check to be sure the children not only memorize but understand what the words mean.

E. Pray. Talk to God with children.

1. Pray not only over snacks but throughout the course of your time together using rhymes, songs, finger plays and/or motions.

2. Invite children to pray for others and themselves.
3. Employ simple aides to teach children ways to pray using their fingers, body movement, or colors.

C. Preschool Centers should enhance and extend the lesson, not just keep the kids busy. Stations can be used to teach or reinforce the lesson through a hands-on activity.

1. Allow small groups of 2-5 children at each station.
2. Provide a new activity every one or two weeks. Use blocks, sensory table, dramatic play/kitchen, puppets, art/crafts, Play-doh, Legos, individual white boards or paper for drawing. *Remember, everything should relate to the lesson.
3. Try telling the story at one rotation with 2-3 children.
4. Consider using a station to experience prayer and change methods each week.
5. Memorizing scripture is also a center possibility.
6. Stations can last up to 15 minutes before transitioning.
7. Use a signal or music to transition.
8. Before beginning, give instructions for each station.
9. Repeat instructions with each rotation.

6. Equip adult disciples to nurture young disciples. Effective equipping entails ongoing resourcing AND training. Good things happen when church leaders commit to effectively equip their nursery facilities and personnel. Teachers and workers feel valued, and lives are changed.

Workers can successfully disciple children when trained in policies and routines, but above all else they must communicate God's unconditional love.

1. Place workers in teams and train by modeling good teaching techniques.
2. Train teachers to follow a schedule of planned activities.
3. Call children by name, and make eye contact often.
4. Train workers to name children through a rhyme, song, or phrase as they arrive and leave.
5. Keep in mind teaching may happen in groups or individually through other play or activities.
6. Use music to establish transitions from one activity to the next. For example, play or sing a cleanup song.
7. Give children a 5 minute warning that a transition is coming.
8. When changing a diaper, have workers sing a song, talk to the child, or repeat the story or scripture.

7. Bless children and parents with Scripture and prayer. Just as we greet children warmly when they arrive, be prepared to send them into the world with a benediction from Scripture (i.e., Psalm 139: 13-14; Jeremiah 29:11, Psalm 139:14, Isa. 43:4; Luke 2:52). When it is time to leave, quote a scripture including their name and/or pray a blessing over them by name. For example, “Lord, Bless Cayden this week and help him grow. We love you. In Jesus’ name, Amen!”

The gardening principle of nourishing roots to produce healthy growth applies to our growth as Christians. Jesus often used gardening parables and imagery. Effective gardening requires consistent attention and an ongoing investment of planning, time, and energy. Providing nurturing church nurseries is essential for attracting and ministering to families with young children. Greenhouse nurseries are intentional, nutrient-enriched environments for spiritual growth where children begin to understand God, His church, and how they belong as valued members of God’s family.

This list is by no means exhaustive. The point is simple: get intentional. By intentionally reaching parents and their children through a nurturing, loving environment, we can convert our church nurseries into God’s greenhouses, establishing healthy roots for vibrant, growing, productive disciples of Jesus Christ.