

**CHILDREN'S  
MINISTRY**  
VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

# CHILDREN'S MINISTRY VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

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*Equipping You to Serve*

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**CHURCHLEADERS**  
P R E S S

Colorado Springs

# CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

## VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

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*Equipping You to Serve*

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***Written by***

Danielle Bell  
Heather Dunn  
Brooke Gibson  
Dale Hudson  
Kal Otis  
Katie Wetherbee

***General Editor***

Stephanie J. Martin

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## FOREWORD

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*J*remember the first children’s ministry class I taught one fateful summer, in a small country church in Oklahoma. Because I was a brand-new Christian with lots of passion for serving God, I came home after my sophomore year of college to do whatever my little church needed.

Turns out, they needed someone to lead the kids. The children’s ages ranged from 3 to 17, and we all met together. It’s what experts now call a mixed-age group—and was it ever mixed! Girls and boys of all ages clamored for my attention.

“They keep sitting so close to me!” I told my mom, who wisely advised me to just put my arm around their shoulders. They snuggled even closer. One day, after calling my name repeatedly in the large group, a frustrated preteen turned me around and slapped me across the cheek. And an elderly helper accidentally drank the bleach from the object lesson, even though I’d placed the liquid on a high shelf.

I was a mess! The class was a mess!

But in the middle of all that chaos, we were making a difference in children’s lives. They had a safe place to come learn with people who loved them. They had something fun to do on Wednesday nights that kept them—at least the older ones—out of trouble. That summer, many kids got to know Jesus as their Savior.

The mess became a ministry.

What I would’ve given that summer for a handbook like this! I needed the practical tips and insightful advice from children’s ministry experts such as Danielle Bell, Heather Dunn, Brooke

## FOREWORD

Gibson, Dale Hudson, Kal Otis, and Katie Wetherbee. Each of these seasoned children’s ministry leaders has devoted years to loving kids in Jesus’ name and leading volunteers to do the same.

Whether you’re new to children’s ministry or have been serving for a while, you’ll find the help you need to turn any mess you encounter into a ministry that changes children’s lives—and yours! You’ll find age-appropriate tips that might even keep you from getting slapped. (Just kidding!) You’ll discover answers to the questions and challenges you may face along the way.

In Matthew 18:1, Jesus’ disciples ask him, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus invites a little child to stand among them and then reveals his love for children: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (verses 3-5).

When you serve children in Jesus’ name, you’re dealing with greatness in God’s kingdom. God bless you in this very important ministry to children in Jesus’ name!

— **Christine Yount Jones,**  
Content Director at *Outreach*

## INTRODUCTION

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### to the *Outreach Ministry Guides Series*

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms*  
(1 Peter 4:10).

This handbook is part of a series designed to equip and empower church volunteers for effective ministry. If you're reading this, chances are you're a church volunteer. Thanks for your willingness to serve!

Several things make this handbook unique:

- The content is specific and practical for your given area of ministry.
- The information is compiled by experienced ministry practitioners—folks who've worked, served, and helped to train others in this particular area.
- It's written with you—a ministry volunteer—in mind.

Within these pages, you'll find three sections. The first gives a brief overview of fundamental principles to provide you with a solid foundation for the ministry area in which you're serving.

Section 2 unpacks various roles and responsibilities. Understanding your role and the roles of your fellow teammates helps the ministry team serve together well.

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Finally, Section 3 provides a multitude of practical ministry tools. These ideas and tips will help you demonstrate Jesus' love to the people you serve at your church.

Whether you're a first-time volunteer or a seasoned veteran, my prayer is that the information and practical tools in this handbook will encourage and assist you. May God bless and guide you in your ministry!

— **Matt Lockhart**, Project Manager

## INTRODUCTION

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### to the *Children's Ministry Volunteer Handbook*

“*I*n the race to a child’s heart, the first one there wins.” That quote from researcher George Barna sums up why children’s ministry is one of the most vital programs in the local church.

“If I could relive my life, I would devote my entire ministry to reaching children for God.”

Studies repeatedly show that most people become Christians before age 18. That puts children’s ministry volunteers at the epicenter of exciting conversations and choices that have eternal impact. Perhaps that’s why nineteenth-century evangelist D.L. Moody said, “If I could relive my life, I would devote my entire ministry to reaching children for God.”

Because children’s ministry changes lives, it’s one of the most rewarding ways to get involved at church. And as you’ll soon discover, it’s also a lot of fun! This handbook provides an overview of children’s ministry, including a bit of history and theory. But most of the content consists of practical advice and ideas from in-the-field experts. You’ll be able to implement many of these tips right away, no matter your experience level.

To learn more about the impact you’ll have as a children’s ministry volunteer, read the short chapters in Section 1. For developmental insights about specific age groups and classroom management techniques geared toward those groups, dive into Section 2. The final section covers a wide range of relevant ministry topics, with answers about everything from learning styles to safety

## INTRODUCTION

procedures. Be sure to check out the helpful FAQs and resource lists, as well as Discussion Questions that will spark interesting conversations among your ministry teammates.

Make the most of this handbook by first zeroing in on the chapters that address your interests or immediate questions. As time allows, review the other parts to learn about other ministry areas and age groups. Jot down notes, questions, and ideas along the way.

Blessings as you begin this exciting volunteer adventure!

— **Stephanie J. Martin**, General Editor

## SECTION 1

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# THE HEART OF CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

<b>Chapter 1</b>	Children's Ministry 101	13
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## CHAPTER 1

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### CHILDREN'S MINISTRY 101

In the late 1700s, Christian outreach to young people began in England—and then the United States—as a way to help poor children who worked in factories and textile mills. On Sundays, their only day off, these kids (often orphans) tended to go hungry and turned to crime. So people began offering classes, along with food and warm clothes, for kids on that day of the week, when they had no other place to go. Teachers provided basic instruction in reading, writing, and morality, using the Bible as the “textbook.”

Various religious groups soon followed that model, making Sunday school a common childhood experience during the 1800s. As America's public education system was established, “church school” narrowed its focus to spiritual practices such as prayer, Christian hymns, catechism, and Scripture memorization. In its early forms, Sunday school was the primary tool for church growth and evangelism, while today it focuses more on spiritual growth and discipleship.

Sunday school, which serves all those purposes well, now fits under the wider umbrella of children's ministry, sometimes referred to as “kidmin.” That often includes traditional Sunday morning classes plus small groups, children's choir, midweek worship, children's church, and programs such as vacation Bible school. Volunteers from teens to senior citizens—and sometimes paid staff—dedicate time and energy to nurturing children's faith in meaningful and memorable ways. Your help furthers not only the work of your church but also of God's kingdom.

In churches of all sizes, children's ministry is valued and vital. Scripture addresses the importance of ministering to all people, as well as to children specifically. In Deuteronomy, an Old Testament book filled with instructions for life, God makes it clear that parents should teach their children his Word and everything he's done for them (for example, see Deuteronomy 4:9-10; 6:4-8, 20-25; 11:18-21). Psalm 78 is a plea for the Israelites, God's chosen people, to share their history—and God's faithfulness throughout it—with their descendants. Verse 4 says, "We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done." That, in a nutshell, is the purpose and heart of children's ministry: telling future generations about Jesus.

Three of the four Gospels recount Jesus calling children to him and saying the kingdom of God belongs to them. When parents approach Jesus seeking a blessing for their children, his disciples try to send them away. But Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14).

Accounts of Jesus interacting with children show that he not only loves and warmly welcomes them but also believes they're more than capable of having faith. In fact, Jesus says a childlike faith is the purest type—and the type of faith all his followers should strive for (Matthew 18:3). From babies to preteens, all children are important to Jesus. Even if older students start to bristle at being called "children," they always remain children of God.

When Jesus' disciples argue about who among them is the greatest, Jesus calls a child over and says, "Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). He also promises, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). When children step foot in your classroom, choir room, or any other area

where you might meet, you have the privilege of welcoming Jesus, as well as God the Father. In other words, you're serving children, the church, and the Lord!

Today, ministry to children is as important as ever. Research consistently shows the importance of early exposure to matters of faith. A Barna Group study found that 43 percent of all people who become Christians do so before age 13, and 64

Kids need adults  
in their lives  
who consistently  
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biblical truth.

percent do so before age 18. That information, summarized in the Barna report “Evangelism Is Most Effective Among Kids,” provides parents and teachers with a “primary window of opportunity for effectively reaching people with the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection,” note Barna researchers. That’s when people “develop their frames of reference for the remainder of their life—especially theologically and morally.” To develop spiritually, the study adds, kids need adults in their lives who consistently explain and model biblical truth.

Outreach to children also is a major conduit for welcoming new families and helping them get involved and invested in church life. In the process, your congregation grows and becomes more vibrant. A *Children's Ministry Magazine* survey finds that families with kids tend to be “some of the most active and committed” church members. According to survey results, summarized in the article “Children’s Ministry’s Impact on Your Church,” 65 percent of parents indicate they’re regularly involved with the children’s ministry. And 62 percent say children’s ministry is a key factor in whether they’ll stay involved with their current congregation.

The benefits of children’s ministry extend well beyond the church and classroom. The majority of parents say these programs positively impact their children as well as their entire family. When *Children's Ministry Magazine* asked parents to rank the benefits of

their church's ministry to kids, the top answer was "It helps my kids develop a personal, growing faith." Sixty percent of parents

The time and love you devote as a volunteer has profound ripple effects.

said the children's ministry at their church "has impacted them moderately or somewhat," and that they've used the materials their kids bring home from Sunday school. In other words, the time and love you devote as a volunteer has profound ripple effects.

As impressive as statistics may be, what matters most is that children's ministry impacts individual hearts and minds. By teaching kids about Jesus and his love for them, you plant spiritual seeds that last for a lifetime—and throughout eternity. From a young age, children can learn to listen to, appreciate, and follow what the Bible says. They'll turn to you with questions, observe your actions and attitudes, and find joy in sharing their developing faith with others. Children's ministry provides a solid foundation on which young people's faith can grow, while offering age-appropriate tools for being in relationship with God and others.

Children's programs draw families to church and encourage them to discover more about faith together. Ministry to little ones provides families with an entry to faith, a place to celebrate spiritual milestones, and many avenues to discover and use their God-given talents. Countless church leaders credit Sunday school teachers for sparking their love for Jesus and his Word. What an exciting journey you're beginning as a children's ministry volunteer!

Working with children in this capacity is a big responsibility, but don't be intimidated by the task ahead. The good news is that you're not alone, and the results don't depend on your effort or creativity. As Philippians 2:13 says, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

## CHAPTER 2

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### ANATOMY OF A CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

As with churches, children's ministries come in many shapes and sizes. There's no one most effective way to teach kids about Jesus and his love. The best approach to children's ministry for your church is the way that fits your church the best. The director, staff, and volunteers likely will need to experiment a bit, making changes when circumstances and conditions warrant. Certain aspects of the program may be "tried and true," rarely varying from year to year, while others contain more wiggle room for trying something new. Change can be fun for children as well as adults, but it's important not to mess with success merely for the sake of tinkering.

In very small congregations, children of all ages may be grouped together for Sunday school. As churches grow in size, they often add a nursery and preschool component, as well as elementary classes. Younger children tend to prefer predictability, so it's best to keep them in the same area or room for the entire class period. Variation and movement tend to be easier with older children, so learning activities can extend to different spaces—as long as kids stay with the same people and know what to expect.

Various options exist for Sunday-morning classes, midweek programming, and special events:

- Traditional Sunday school is modeled after "regular" school, with children divided by ages or grade levels. For the most part, kids learn in

classrooms, with lessons tailored specifically to each level. Strong relationships develop between children and leaders as they spend time learning and growing together.

- Another format that's become popular is called "large group/small group." First, children all gather in a large group to worship together and learn a Bible lesson. Then they split into smaller groups, led by older youth or adults, to dig deeper into the lesson. (Depending on numbers, kids may or may not be grouped according to age.) This format allows speakers, teachers, and musicians to lead from their individual strengths during large groups. Strong relationships are then built during small groups.
- A "rotations" format allows adults to teach in their preferred method, while exposing children to the most variety. One person may specialize in arts and crafts, for example, while another is skilled at drama and another at storytelling. Each leader stays in a certain place while groups of children, each led by a volunteer, rotate through the different areas. Several rotations may occur during a single class session, or children may rotate to various areas weekly or monthly. Benefits of this format include increased creativity and the time to explore one topic from multiple perspectives.
- Multigenerational formats offer learning opportunities in family-friendly settings. Some churches offer one combined worship service for all ages, from adults to infants. Sometimes children are excused partway through to attend

children's church or an abbreviated class. Some churches offer a separate "family service," giving worshipers devotions or talking points to use at home throughout the week.

For each of these models, many curriculum options are available. Most follow a "scope and sequence," meaning there's a plan to give children a solid biblical foundation during their years in the ministry. Publishers usually post a curriculum's scope and sequence online for easy access by volunteers and parents.

Churches that belong to a larger Christian denomination or faith body may use the materials produced by that group's publishing arm. Some churches write their own curriculum but still have a long-term plan for covering the entire Bible and basics of the Christian faith. No matter the source

No matter the source of your lesson materials, take time to know the plan for your class.

of your lesson materials, take time to know the plan for your class. That provides long-term perspective for what you'll cover during your teaching tenure. It also helps you share with parents what children will be learning during the upcoming weeks and months.

Typically, lesson plans walk through the Bible in two to three years, following a systematic journey from Genesis through Revelation. Some plans alternate quarters (typically 13-week chunks) between Old and New Testament lessons. Others use a thematic approach, such as characteristics of God or the fruit of the Spirit.

Near Christmas and Easter, the two most important Christian holidays, regular lesson plans may be set aside briefly to focus specifically on Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection. During the summer, some children's ministry programs maintain a regular Sunday school schedule, some take a brief break, and others try something new. From June through August, for example, an all-

ages group of children might meet to explore a “stand-alone” topic, such as the Ten Commandments or the parables of Jesus.

These days, most curriculum comes ready to use, requiring minimal preparation by volunteers. Lessons usually include scripts of everything a teacher needs to say, as well as step-by-step directions for crafts and games. Depending on your director's guidance and your comfort level with ad-libbing, you can adhere to scripts closely or loosely. The internet is a great source of additional craft and game ideas on a wide range of Bible topics. Keep a few extra ideas handy, in case you have time to fill after a lesson.

Family-based take-home materials are another helpful curriculum component. These handouts recap the day's lesson and key points, list Bible verses (possibly to memorize), and offer extension opportunities or devotions so parents can lead spiritual growth at home during the week. The children's ministry director or administrative assistant also may produce a newsletter to keep families informed about lesson topics, class schedules, and church happenings.

## CHAPTER 3

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### SPACE AND PLACE

*B*ehind-the-scenes logistics such as classroom space and storage might not be your responsibility as a volunteer, but make sure you know where various ages meet and where supplies are located. If you don't understand why items are in certain places or organized in certain ways, be sure to ask. Understanding the reasons can help you be more effective and efficient.

Your “in-the-field” interactions with children and parents may inspire ideas for improvement. If you notice something, speak up! Your suggestions can benefit you, your teammates, and your students.

Children's ministry volunteers tend to become experts at winging it—making do with whatever happens to be available at a given time. Prepare to be flexible, especially when you're starting out. As you get more familiar with your role, you'll adapt and find innovative ways to make things work. You'll also grow more comfortable requesting what you need in order to be successful. Also remember that you can usually adapt lesson plans based on the available time, resources, and supplies. Ask the director for guidance with this, as needed.

You can usually adapt lesson plans based on the available time, resources, and supplies.

Some churches and children's ministries rent space in schools or storefronts, which can make “space and place” decisions more complicated. If there's one larger room, maybe you can creatively

transform it into several smaller areas. If there's an assortment of smaller spaces, determine which age groups—and how many children—fit best in each.

In case you need to make your classroom totally portable, wheels are your best friend. Invest in a cabinet on wheels from a store such as IKEA and request a place to keep it. Put everything you use each week into bins in the cabinet, keeping extra supplies at home. If a cabinet won't work, try a suitcase or craft tote with wheels.

Churches that have the luxury of their own regular spaces for children's ministry likely follow daycare and school regulations. General room-capacity guidelines range from eight to 12 children in nursery and toddler rooms, to 20 in elementary classrooms. Recommended volunteer-to-child ratios range from 1-to-2 in the nursery to 1-to-8 in elementary classrooms. However, at least two unrelated adults should always be in every room, regardless of how many children are present. If only two babies are in the nursery, for example, two volunteers are still needed.

Safety and security always must be at the forefront, as chapter 15 discusses in more detail. "Space and place," involves knowing where bathrooms and emergency exits are located, being aware of any stairs to navigate, and assessing how many children one adult can safely supervise—and carry, if needed—in case of emergency. Chapter 16 addresses emergencies more comprehensively.

In general, it's best to keep youngest children on the main floor, with a direct emergency exit. Nursery and toddler rooms should have an evacuation crib with extra-large wheels for easy transport. Preschool rooms should have a wide rope with knots tied in it for children to use whenever they move from one room to another (even to the bathroom). This helps them learn to walk in a line and to use the rope during an emergency situation without alarm.