

The Free Church, St Ives, Cambs.

Tots & Carers' Group and Café Worship

Story

The Free Church, St Ives set up a Tots and Carers' Group in order to link more with younger families in our town who do not normally attend church. The Tots and Carers' group meets weekly on Wednesday mornings 10 am to 11.30 am. This led us to change our worship to be more family friendly by having café worship as our Sunday morning worship once a month.

Notes:

1. PRACTICAL

Where did the idea come from? How did it start? Who is it for? What need is it meeting?

There was a play group in our church in the past but it closed down a few years ago. Several mothers in the community were asking if we ran a group so we realised that there was a need to provide something for pre-school age children and parents/carers to meet others in similar age and to have things to do with their young children. As a Tots and Carers group it did not need to have trained teachers or to meet education targets, but a parent or carer would need to stay and be responsible for their child. As some parents had more than one child of different ages we decided to make it available to those age 0 to school age.

What preparation did we do? What legislation did we have to deal with? Who did we consult?

We recognised that whoever would be involved in leading such a group needed to be DSB checked. We also noted that we needed to follow safe guarding practices. We asked for volunteers and had each one DBS checked and went to a synod training event on safeguarding for children.

What resources were needed?

We already had toys and space in the church hall linked to the kitchen and to children size toilets. We needed to plan crafts and buy videos of children's Bible stories. We gathered three women plus several volunteers, set up themes and rotas for helpers. We bought a register and made a form so that we had each parent give their and their child's details and sheets to make name tags. It was self-funding as parents are asked to donate a pound for each child as they are able. This pays for their snack and as we raised more money we put it to books shelf and mats and other equipment as needed.

External Partnership?

Not for this project.

How did the congregation get on board?

The congregation were informed that we were planning to set this up at Elders' meeting and Church Meeting and at church services. We asked if there were people who would be willing to volunteer to help with this project. One woman came forward and said she would do crafts, another said she would do food on a weekly basis and many others said they would come to help on different weeks.

How did we set it up? How long did it take? What advertising did we do?

It took a couple of months with minister and two main volunteers to plan the programme for the autumn and to make rota of helpers and then we opened at the beginning of school year. We advertised in the church magazine, to the town and county council and town magazines and local newspapers.

2. IMPACT ON COMMUNITY

We had two families with two children turn up on our opening day. Whenever anyone came to our group we explained that it was a church run group and that we had a Bible story and prayer with the other activities. Then the following week four, and very soon had about 20 to 24 children each with parent/carer coming regularly. They gave us feedback that ours was the only group in town that was structured according to different activities and the parents said they like that approach. In two to three months the two year olds learned the structure and would call out 'story time', or 'music time' or 'snack time' as we came to it. We received referrals from the Town Council but most people came by word of mouth from other young families. We added a unique resource for young families in our town. As the children grew up and went to school, the parents continued to come with younger siblings and said that their child was ready for school because of the socialisation and structure that they experienced at Tots and Carers.

3. IMPACT ON CHURCH

How does the Tots and Carers' Group connect with our church's faith and mission?

We strive to welcome and include, teach and lead worship for people of all ages in our church and recognised that we needed to make new contacts with younger families. We decided to run it explicitly as a church-run group so that we could be upfront with our Christian input and develop links with them with worship and baptisms. We provide a Bible story, usually a video clip and related craft, large and small play, singing and music, healthy snack and toys and reading corner. After the Bible story during which we light a candle, we have a short prayer and then blow out the candle.

How has the life of the church been transformed because of this project?

By doing this as part of our church ministry we developed links with younger families and offered some Christian worship and teaching to younger families through Bible story time and prayer. Over time several parents asked for their children to be baptised at our church. I

invited parents to bring their children to special worship services, such as Christmas and Easter. When a couple of families came to church there was some concern when the children were noisy and walking around during worship. At festivals we tried café style worship where the children could sit with their parents and have refreshments and do a craft together and worksheet while worshipping. This is a less formal form of worship in which we have a video clip as theme introduction and instead of a sermon, we have an interactive talk and people have a chance to chat about the topic at their tables. We found that the children were more involved so quiet and the parents said they felt comfortable with the less traditional nature of the service. We had several families come to Christingle, Mothering Sunday, an all-age Christmas Eve service. The café style worship developed so that we offered it monthly and made a leaflet for the families to let them know theme and when it was held. We have had two or three families come to the church since then – not necessarily on a regular basis, but for festivals etc.

Additional resources and web links

Our Youth and Children's Training and Development Officer of the Eastern synod, Nicola Grieves was a great help, in giving us advice, coming and leading a session and providing training for helpers.

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