

## Making Families Welcome

Arriving for a church service can be incredibly stressful for families!

Just getting dressed and out of the house can be a struggle, let alone the worries about whether the children will behave, be quiet, sit still, not shout out something inappropriate, need the toilet, need feeding... It's perhaps not surprising that some families find it much easier to stay away 'until the children are older'.



Offering a genuine, warm welcome can make a huge difference in helping families find a home within your congregation. Here are some top tips which churches have found to be effective:

### Welcome with a smile

Brief sidespeople to smile as they welcome families. Opening heavy doors to help parents who are already struggling with a buggy, toddler and changing bag will demonstrate practical care.

### Seating solutions

It's not always easy to see where there is enough space for a family to sit together. Sidespeople and wardens can see where the spaces are, show families to them and (if necessary) ask people to move up and make room.

Church seating is usually adult orientated. Have two or three child booster seats or cushions which sit safely on your pews or chairs to help children see what's going on.

### Baptism Buddies

Research shows that relationships make a huge difference in helping newcomers feel welcome in church. It's easier to come along if you know there will be someone you recognise and who will speak with you. Invite



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established church members with young children to become Baptism Buddies, paired up with Baptism or other new families. Encourage friendships to grow through personal invitations to church events, toddler groups, a walk in the park or just hanging out over a coffee.

### Bibles, books and bags

Sometimes children need something extra to help them settle in a church service. Cloth bags containing a small assortment of toddlers Bibles or Bible story books, some crayons and paper, or a soft toy can help parents in those difficult moments. (NB a box full of assorted noisy, clacky toys probably isn't a good idea!)

### Stay for a drink

If refreshments are on offer after church, make sure someone shows new families where they can find them. Have water or fruit juice in plastic or sippy cups available for children, and try not to be mean with the biscuit provision! A low table and chairs will make it easier for some children to have their drinks.

### Toddler praise

Church doesn't have to happen on Sunday! Some parents may find it easier to get to a short, child friendly service during the week. Create a structure which has plenty of repetition, active songs, a Bible story told using toys or 3D materials and simple prayers followed by time to play and chat. Older church members might enjoy getting to know the families as they serve coffee and juice.

### Happy (church family) Birthday

Every family remembers birthdays – so encourage your church family to remember Baptism anniversaries. Find an organised person to take on the sending of cards, perhaps with an invitation to a toddler group or child-friendly church event. Include contact details so that the family know how to get in touch.

### You'll want to know.....

Design a simple leaflet which outlines all that's on offer for families – toddler services, playgroups, crèche/Sunday groups etc. Photographs of the people associated with the activities (and contact details) make it more personal and easier for newcomers to work out who to approach.



Families might also want to know where to find the toilets, how long the services last, where it's OK to breastfeed and how to find out about baptism.

If you have several leaflets, put them together to make a Families Welcome pack. Include a fridge magnet with a picture of your church, service times & contact details so that they can have the information easily to hand.

## Toilet Time

Clean toilets, with child toilet seats and a booster step available, are much more welcoming for families rather than an unsanitary state of affairs. A wipe clean changing mat, with nappy sacks and clear instructions as to where soiled nappies can be disposed of, are also important provisions. And don't forget to check that soap, toilet rolls and hand towels are stocked up.

## Picture time

Look at your service sheets with fresh eyes. How easy are they to follow if you are new to church? Simple, appropriate line illustrations will make them more attractive and easier to follow for children who are not yet reading.

## Let's Get Together...

Sometimes families need a reason (or excuse) to make contact with the church again. Arrange a picnic/barbeque/tea party and invite families who recently had a baptism or started coming to church. Include any baptism visitors in the invitation, along with a few other congregation members (with and without children). Some simple games or crafts on arrival will give people a focus and chance to mix.