

MAKING THE NURSERY A PLACE OF BELONGING

“Where is the nursery?” That is often the first question when young parents visit a new church. At a minimum, they expect their question to be answered with confidence, not bewilderment. Beyond simply asking directions, the inquirer wants to know, Does this church care about us and our children? Is this a place where we can belong?

Out of the Basement

Diane Olsen, a children’s ministry specialist, describes how her church’s ministry for children when she was a child occupied a place in the humid, slightly dark, and largely inaccessible basement. When visiting after returning from college, she noticed that the recently erected new building included only one floor and no basement. Suddenly it felt like the children’s ministry existed on the same level with every other aspect of church life.

“Out of the basement” began to function for her as a metaphor for integrating children’s ministry into the congregation’s overall mission.¹ The same applies to the congregation’s ministry with infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds. Wherever located, the nursery deserves equal treatment with other aspects of church life.

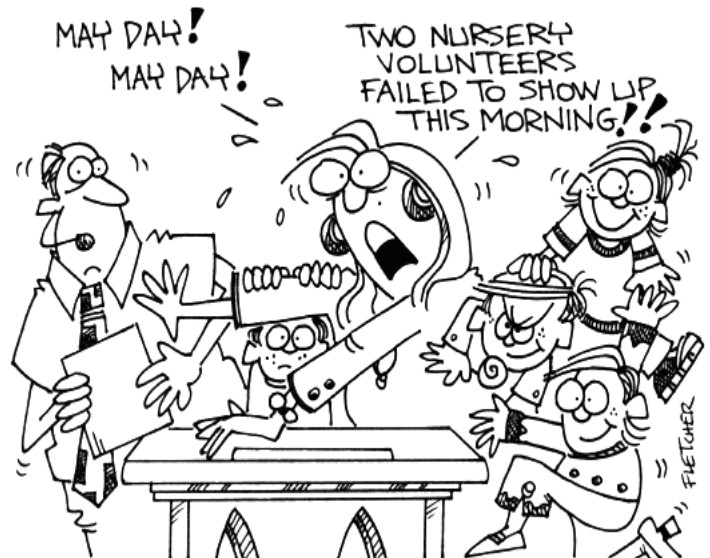
What about room size and location? Offer at least thirty-five square feet of playroom floor space per child, not including bathrooms, closet space, or hallways, as children need space to explore. Choose a central location, ideally adjacent to a primary hallway with visual access for security reasons. A bathroom should be located nearby with a sink low enough for toddlers to use, and a potty chair and diaper changing table located somewhere in the nursery area. The main nursery should be open, bright, and comfortable. Allow space at the entrance for parents to gather when they sign children in and out.²

Calling Mr. Clean

Granted, some congregations may not have much choice in where to locate the nursery, but they can still keep it clean, well-lit, and safe. The cleaning operation starts with four large boxes or trash cans labeled: Keep, Discard, Ask, and Recycle. (“Ask” means consulting with someone before discarding or recycling an item.) Look for toys that need to be thrown away or replaced due to missing parts, broken pieces, or otherwise being unsafe. Next, examine basic equipment such as cribs, tables, chairs, and high chairs. Trust your instincts. When in doubt, toss it out! Finally, clean and wash the floors, walls, toilet, and wash or dry-clean the rugs or draperies. Making the space clean and safe can be an easy way to revitalize your nursery.³

Volunteers or Paid Staff?

Caregivers provide the heart of any childcare system. It all starts with a nursery coordinator to recruit and supervise nursery staff, keep important information about each child, greet parents when they arrive, and generally set the tone for nursery care. With the



coordinator in place, the question becomes, Should we use paid staff, volunteers, or a combination?

Using volunteers may be financially advantageous by saving money on staff salaries, and it may give church members opportunities to use their gifts in the congregation. On the downside, scheduling volunteers may take up too much of the supervisor's valuable time, and volunteers who are less than committed may not show up on the appointed day, leading to a panicked search for a replacement. In addition, some children may feel unsettled by a round robin of ever-changing volunteers and prefer a more consistent routine.

Youth who want to volunteer because they enjoy working with children form a special category of their own. These young persons may already be known by the parents or even babysitting for them. Be advised that at least one adult supervisor must be present at all times, which may stretch some volunteer teams thin. Also, youth need to understand that their primary responsibility is to attend to young children, not socialize with other youth. Some churches provide training to youth on basic matters like changing diapers or sanitation or even offer to pay for a certified babysitting or childcare course in return for a certain number of hours worked.

Paid staff may result in the best guarantee of reliable caregiving, though for smaller churches, expense may be a factor. In recruiting, look for parents of older children or youth, or parents of young children who might be willing to give a few hours per week as long as they can bring their own child along. Other ideas include posting a job announcement at the student center of a local college, talking with a professor of child development, or checking with congregations with worship hours different from your own. With paid staff as the foundation, some churches fill their needs using a combination of employees and volunteers, with one or two paid caregivers ensuring continuity and a safety net for volunteers who step in as the need arises.⁴

Protecting Children from Harm

Churches must screen all staff, whether volunteer or paid, to ensure that young children are safe from inappropriate behavior or sexual abuse. At a minimum, everyone must be required to complete an application form and be subject to a criminal background check conducted by an agency such as Trusted Employees

(www.trustedemployees.com). Include documentation concerning background checks in the personnel file. Make sure to have at least two nursery attendants present at all times, with at least one worker who is eighteen years old or older. For more information, see Church Mutual's web page, "The Background Screening Basics."⁵

The Nursery Home Visitor

To maintain ongoing care for a family with young children, Mary Alice Gran recommends recruiting a nursery home visitor who sees the family at home at least once after a child is born in order to welcome the child on behalf of the church. This person's primary role is to be someone who listens, supports the family, and, if necessary, acts as an advocate for the family's needs with the congregation. Given the time and stress that young families experience, plan to stay only a brief time. The visitor may bring information about baptism, a nursery handbook, a statement of the church's philosophy on caring for the young child, or a gift such as a book on parenting. Mary Alice Gran's *The First Three Years* provides a variety of parent support leaflets.⁶

Commit to Children's Ministry

As one pastor said, "I learned as a pastor that if the preschool ministry was not going well, the rest of the church probably was not going well either."⁷ Conversely, a church that pays special attention to its nursery may be laying the foundation for revitalization. It signals to young families a commitment to provide a place of belonging for anyone, no matter what age.

1. Diane C. Olsen, *Out Of The Basement: A Holistic Approach To Children's Ministry* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 5-6.

2. Mary Alice Gran, "Room Size and Location," in Mary Alice Gran, ed., *The First Three Years: A Guide for Infants, Toddlers, and Two-Year-Olds* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 81.

3. Olsen, 29-30.

4. Sarah Heckert, "Hiring and Recruiting Personnel," in Mary Alice Gran, ed., *The First Three Years*, 56-58.

5. <https://www.churchmutual.com/10451/The-Background-Screening-Basics>. See also Joy Thornburg Melton, *Safe Sanctuaries For Children And Youth* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008).

6. Mary Alice Gran, "The Role of the Nursery Home Visitor" and "Parent Support Leaflets," in Mary Alice Gran, ed., *The First Three Years*, 101-102, 91-105.

7. Janice Haywood, *Enduring Connections: Creating a Preschool and Children's Ministry* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 1.