

Illustration by Oli Winward

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What about families and children?

Discipleship of children is fundamentally the same as discipleship at any age, so in this document we have summarised our philosophy for discipling children under the same points as our leaflet '*What is a disciple-making church?*'.

1. Radical apprenticeship to Jesus in all of life, for all of life

Children are the little disciples of today (not only of tomorrow). The process of discipleship — learning about who Jesus is, what he has done, and what it means to follow him — can (and must) begin before a formal confession of faith (just as with an adult). In other words, discipleship is the goal for now — not for 'later'. As Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me [now, not some time in the future] and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19.14).

2. Discipleship happens by God's word and in community

It is the teaching of Jesus (contained in the New Testament and the Old, which Jesus held up as the authoritative word of God) not merely 'fun', or 'activity', which is necessary for discipleship. Therefore, it is vitally important that children learn from an early age — and see modelled — how to listen to the word of God when gathered for worship. Discipleship is 'caught' *and* 'taught'; thus it is vital that children are a part of church community in every sense so that they can watch and learn from older disciples.

While we believe there is a place for age-appropriate instruction in the faith, we think the priority in Sunday worship is for the whole church community to gather together to worship God, hear his voice and respond. We note that Paul assumed children would be listening as part of the gathered church when he wrote to the Ephesians, addressing them directly in chapter 6. Young Israelite children are often explicitly mentioned as being gathered for worship alongside the adults (Deuteronomy 31.12-13, Joshua 8.35, Joel 2:15-16).

'But won't my kids be bored?!' C.S. Lewis famously said that, 'we used to make children fit for the world, now we make the world fit for children'. Perhaps sometimes this is also true of the church. Our fundamental mission as Jesus' church is to make disciples of him. There is no greater gift we can give our children than to help them develop a love and hunger for God's word. At root this is an expectation issue — what do we expect the church should be doing, and what do I expect from my children?

'But my children can't sit still!' The goal is training to worship and listen. Christian listening is different to listening for mere information. It is listening with heart, mind and soul — for wholehearted response. As such, it takes teaching, modelling and training. We are all growing, and we are a community of grace. So when (not if) our children embarrass us a) remember that we've all been there, and b) release the embarrassment, since this is a community of equality and acceptance in Jesus' name.

3. Disciples make disciples 'as they go'

Special events can certainly help to crystallise young faith, but the actual formation of a disciple happens in the midst of everyday life – often slowly, frustratingly and even discouragingly, but also unstoppably over time (focus on ten years rather than ten days). Therefore, our priority is supporting parents to disciple their children through the week. We strongly recommend the habits of family worship, and systematic parental instruction in the faith (sometimes called 'catechesis').

For guidance on both of these, ask for a copy of GCG's Dig Deeper notes on *'How to Read the Bible as a Family'*. Sunday is a weekly 'event' which gives extra impetus and support to the discipleship of children in their families (and Community Groups) through the week.

What we do to help on Sundays:

- We have worksheets accompanying the sermon with a range of age-appropriate activities for children to use during the sermon (if you have a suggestion for how to improve these, please let us know!) Over time you could help your children build up their own file of their worksheets.
- The preachers work hard to include parts of their sermons which will be particularly accessible to younger hearers.
- Community Groups are places for the whole family to pick up where Sunday left off.

