

LET'S MAKE OUR CHURCHES CHILD-FRIENDLY!

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Nothing gave me more pleasure recently than to see lots of children having fun at an evening service. True, it was an evening service with a difference. The service 'proper' only lasted 35 minutes, and even then it included a video of Eeyore's birthday party (it acted as a lead into my eight minute address on God's party to which we are all invited). The service was then followed by an ice-breaker questionnaire, a game of Chinese laundry and then musical mats, followed by a veritable feast laid on by our African members – all in honour of my 60th birthday. The children that evening discovered that that church is a great place to be – a place where the family of God can come together and enjoy life together. Years ago I remember one of my lady deacons telling me that it was more important for children to experience God's love through the love of his people – than for them to learn of God's love from Sunday School lessons. At the time I was taken aback by this statement – but on reflection I realised how right she was. Our church, like many other Baptist churches, runs all kinds of activities for children, but activity itself is not enough. What is required is for children to see and experience love in action. Apart from love and laughter, what else can a church do to ensure that church is a place where children like to be? One splendid idea, on which we stumbled by accident, is to allow children to play with computers with access to the internet. The original intention of our cyber café was to be a low-key midweek evangelistic tool for attracting younger people and older people too to our church. However, what we have discovered is that on a Sunday the cyber café is the place where young children immediately head for. While their parents are busily engaged in setting up for Sunday School or whatever, the children have a whale of a time roaming the net (naturally, the computers have been set up in such a way that unhelpful web sites cannot be accessed). They are also learning that church need not be divorced from the world of today. But what about the services themselves? They too need to be child-friendly. The first 20 or so minutes before the children go to their own teaching sessions must bear in mind the needs of children. This does not mean that there has to be a 'children's talk' – in our church they tend to be a rarity. It does mean that prayers need to be simple enough to be understood by a six-year old; that Scripture readings are taken from the Good News Bible rather than the more difficult NIV or NRSV; that hymns and songs should be able to have meaning for children. It doesn't, however, mean that everything therefore has to become childish – it simply means that the needs of our youngest worshippers are kept in mind.

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