

Thoughts on Reopening Your Congregation to Children

Rev. Debby Fox

All of us are anxious and excited about gathering once again in our congregations. Pastors want to see your faces as they preach. Choirs want to practice and sing together. Youth groups want to hang out in person. Children want to play and pray with their special church friends and adult leaders. While this is a natural reaction to the time we have spent apart, now is not the time to ignore the changes in how we must interact with each other. Until there is wide-spread testing available, treatment options and/or a vaccine our gatherings will need to look differently.

It is likely that when we first gather again, families will be asked to worship together. As time progresses, in-person Children's Ministry will resume. Below are thoughts to consider now as you think ahead to Children's Ministry with ages 3 years to 5th grade. These thoughts do not include nursery or toddlers.

Do you have a team of people creating your reopening policies and procedures?

Churches should form a team to help shape and then guide the process for reopening in your congregation. Recommended members include a medical professional, plus representatives from Trustees and Hospitality/Greeters. This team should also be informed by your local health department. Additionally, a team should consider children's ministry. This team may include staff members, lay leaders, parents, and those with special expertise in your congregation who can assist in creating and implementing the plan.

Once your plan is in place, publicize it! Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. Make signs, send emails, make phone calls, use social media, get the word out so no one is surprised or concerned by what they find when coming onto your church campus. You cannot overcommunicate.

Consider sending a survey to parents as you plan your reopening.

This will give parents an opportunity to be heard and give those planning information as to how people are feeling in their attendance area.

Sample survey could include the following:

Which of the following would you deem absolutely necessary before you consider bringing your child to church?

- *An official all-clear from the national government (or CDC)*
- *Lifting of state guidelines or recommendations of group size*
- *Temperature and symptom checks of all volunteers and attendees*
- *Guidelines limiting the number of children in a room*
- *Stringent cleaning protocols for all rooms, furniture, and toys*
- *There is nothing that will make me feel safe to send my child to church*

If you have a child who is preschool age would you allow him/her to go to his/her Sunday School class?

If you have an elementary child would you allow him/her to go to his/her Sunday School class?

What are your concerns regarding your child(ren) as you think about returning to our church building?

What would need to be in place for you to allow your child (preschooler or elementary age) to begin to be a part of in-person ministries at our church?

Where will children enter the building?

If there is a separate children's building, drop-off and pick-up should be done there. No adults other than teachers should be allowed into the children's space. Sign-in and Sign-out should be done at the lobby doors or before classroom spaces. Children can be signed in by an assigned volunteer. Once signed in, the child can be escorted to his/her classroom. Pick up should be handled in a similar manner. This may require additional volunteers who are not classroom teachers. If your church does not have a separate entrance for children's ministry, what route will be used to get children to their classrooms? Where is the logical place for sign-in and -out that will maintain social distancing? Do not forget signage and to post instructions.

How many children can be in a class?

The current recommendation by the CDC is that no more than 10 people be in any classroom. That is 8 or fewer children with 2 adults. This may mean that you will need additional classrooms, a second Sunday School hour, or another way of keeping class size small. Large group gatherings and then moving to break-out groups is not recommended. This may mean you will need to look at your curriculum choices and be creative.

Who should be working with children?

It is recommended that those working in children's areas not have pre-existing conditions. They should be under 65 years of age. In most of our congregations this will impact the number of volunteers available. Determine who is willing and able to work with children. That number will help you make good decisions about the number of classrooms available for children.

How will you keep the children's area clean and disinfected?

Children should have a temperature check before they leave home for the church. If a child has a temperature of 100.4 or higher, he/she should NOT be brought to the church. Children will wash their hands with soap and water before entering the classroom. Classrooms will be cleaned prior to the children arriving and after they leave, with attention paid to objects and surfaces frequently touched, doorknobs, light switches, desks or tables, chairs.

As is already the standard in preschools and children's ministry areas, cleaning with a solution of bleach and water in a spray bottle is recommended. For very young children a solution of Odoban which is contact safe may be used.

Will children and adults wear masks in the children's area?

The Academy of Pediatricians does not recommend that very young children wear masks or face coverings. Elementary age children may wear masks. All adults should wear masks.

What essential items do you need to have in each classroom?

Availability may be limited. Start ordering now so you have what you need prior to opening.

- Masks
- Hand Sanitizer (if the children are elementary aged)
- Antibacterial Soap
- Paper Towels
- Bleach and Water Spray Bottles for cleaning and disinfecting

What do volunteers need to know?

Develop a list of procedures and train your volunteers prior to opening. Use Zoom or another online platform to do this.

How long do we need to continue to meet this way?

No one knows. Continue to monitor the guidelines from your local public health officials, the CDC and the state government resources. Every city, every county, every church is different. Know your area and make your decisions based on the best local information you have. You can count on the Bishop and Cabinet to continue to monitor the situation in North Georgia and make recommendations to the NGUMC congregations.

RESOURCES:

The following articles will help with reopening preschool and childcare programs. Recommendations for these state licensed programs are helpful in thinking about procedures for weekday preschools, afterschool care, and childcare centers. You may also find this helpful for basic information for children's ministry programs.

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html>
- <http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2020/images/04/30/reopening.guidelines.pdf>
- There is a sample plan for reopening your church in phases available. Contact me for a copy.
- The Georgia Association for the Education of Young Children (GAEYC) April 25th Newsletter is about opening your preschool and early childhood education centers. The policies and procedures outlines will be helpful for Sunday School and other children's ministry programs.
<https://gaeyc.net/>
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) resource page is very comprehensive.
<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/covid-19>

- A conversation between several church leaders led by William Vanderbloeman about reopening church ministries with children. There are helpful questions, resources, and suggestions for any church determining their plan.
https://www.vanderbloemen.com/blog/childrens-ministry-after-covid19?fbclid=IwAR0J3QJ2MyQZVynM7dKa1sC0kmlieDwpw5kTL4SEU9KII1pmuMPYMuD1j_s

Rev. Debby Fox
May 4, 2020