

5

Elements

at the

HEART

of every

Children's

Ministry

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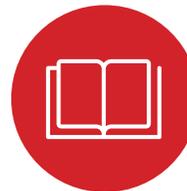
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Defining Children's Ministry

What is children's ministry?

Have you ever stopped to answer the question? If you haven't, take a moment now and think about how you might define it.

Without looking any further in this book, try to develop a one-sentence definition to answer that question in your mind. I would even recommend grabbing a pen and paper to write it down.

Once you have come up with your own definition, please keep reading.

Now, why is answering that question so important? Because, for many of us, **we tend to define children's ministry by what we do, not what it actually is.**

We may say children's ministry is:

- Recruiting
- Teaching
- Sharing the gospel
- Managing our team
- Leading special events
- Training

As leaders in our churches, we may define children's ministry by any of the many things on our to-do list. Yes, all of these might be included in what we do. All are important and necessary in leading children's ministry.

But children's ministry is so much more! We need to keep in mind what our end goal is, not just what we have to do in order to get there.

We also need to understand who the most important players are in reaching that end goal. And of course, it's not us.

So, answering the question "*What is children's ministry?*" is critical to understanding and shaping our ministry. It is also critical to communicating our vision for children's ministry.

Have you noticed that people can have wildly different ideas of what children's ministry actually is? Sometimes, we may even find that our colleagues and team members don't understand exactly what we're trying to do.

In fact, more often than not, children's ministry is equated to childcare with a few good Bible stories thrown in. While caring for children in our ministry is essential, childcare is not and cannot be our purpose for children's ministry.

It's just not good enough.

The need is too great, and the calling too important, to settle for mere childcare.

So, we have looked at what children's ministry is not. But what *is* children's ministry?

Here's how we define children's ministry, or kidmin as you and your church may call it:

Partnering with parents to guide kids toward a HEART for God

In this eBook, we will consider this definition phrase by phrase. Whether you are a veteran leader or a brand new volunteer, this guide may offer a new lens through which to view children's ministry.

My hope is that together, we can serve the children and families in our communities even better.

Thank you for responding to the call to share *your heart for God* with the children and families you serve. I can't wait to see how we continue transforming lives together.

Partnering with Parents

Parents, from a biblical perspective, are designed to be the primary influence in a child's spiritual formation. They may have a positive or negative influence on their children, but either way, they affect their children more than anyone else.

Most of what we do through kidmin may be irrelevant in the spiritual life of the child if we are not *intentionally* partnering with parents.

What does this mean? Regardless of what model you may gravitate toward—be it traditional classrooms or a group format—children's ministry is family ministry and family ministry *is* children's ministry.

We can partner with parents in any model we choose to embrace. Within each individual church, our partnership will naturally vary with the environment, culture, leadership, and needs of the particular families we serve.

The important thing is that partnering with parents is an essential part of the definition of children's ministry, and our work must begin and end with this partnership. Without it, we are unlikely to have a lasting influence on the spiritual formation of children.

To Guide Kids

At the end of the day, parents and those of us serving in the church are guides. We can't force anyone to embrace faith, nor can we know how their journey will unfold as they mature to adulthood.

Understanding and embracing this fact should both relieve us and empower us.

It relieves us because it means that the spiritual future of our kids is not our responsibility. As guides, we point the way, but those we guide have to make the journey themselves. We must be faithful to do everything we can to point the way effectively but, ultimately, everyone chooses their own way.

But this empowers us, too!

Once we realize that we do not carry the sole responsibility for anyone else's faith, we are free to creatively engage with children in our ministry, as well as with their parents.

We can become champions of the whole family. We can offer what we have in the way of spiritual nourishment and cheer them on their way to spiritual formation. We are empowered to walk (or run!) along side them, to help them up when they stumble, and to guide them when they are lost.

That is, we can do precisely what we have been called by God to do.

You have a heart for God, and have responded to the call to share it with the children and families you guide. As you partner with parents to guide children, you become a co-influencer in the lives of children in your ministry.

Toward a HEART for God

What are we influencing children toward? A HEART for God.

Ultimately, spiritual formation for anyone is about the heart.

Consider this:

- The word “heart” is mentioned hundreds of times and in many different contexts throughout Scripture. (As an aside, this is a great study to do for your own devotions. [Here is a list](#) of everywhere the word “heart” is mentioned.)
- Among these many references, we are told: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” (Proverbs 4:23)
- In Scripture, references to the “heart” generally encompass our thinking, our will, and our emotions.

Our goal then is to guide kids to have hearts for God, and our prayer is that everything they do will be guided by His love.

5 Elements of a **HEART** for God

You may have noticed that HEART is capitalized in our definition of children’s ministry. It’s an acronym we use for five elements that help us guide kids toward a HEART for God, in partnership with parents.

- Heartfelt Relationships
- Engaging Teaching
- Authentic Worship
- Real Service
- Telling the Good News



1. Heartfelt Relationships

The first element in guiding kids toward a HEART for God is **Heartfelt Relationships**—the H in HEART.

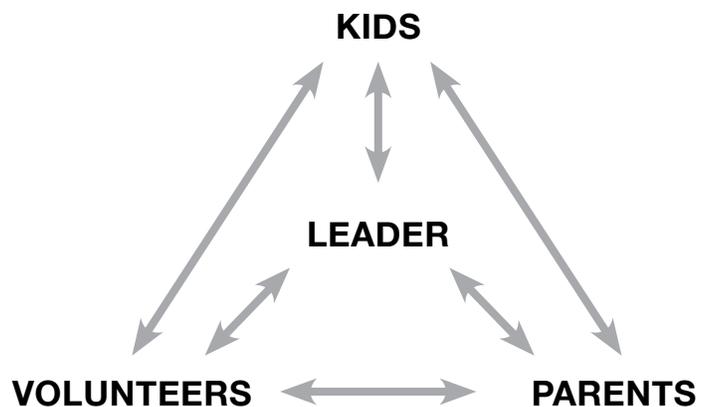
You might want to memorize this:

Ministry always happens best in the context of relationships.

Programs, curriculum, facilities, resources, and many other things are important. But relationships are essential.

Ministry is about people!

As a leader, we have a responsibility to ensure that our ministry is characterized by heartfelt relationships in all directions—a 360-degree approach to relationships that might look something like this diagram, with the assumption that all relationships are ultimately to point toward and deepen our relationship with God.



If our ministry is characterized by these relationships, the foundation is laid for meaningful connections in all directions.

So how do we do this?

Realize that heartfelt relationships require commitment.

Building relationships is harder than building facilities, or a great program, or just about anything else.

It takes time, effort, and vulnerability, *starting with you, the leader*. Talk about serious commitment, especially if you're a bit of an introvert like me.

It takes forming a habit of reaching out to initiate relationships, sometimes over and over again.

It takes time to cultivate relationships.

It takes developing a language of relationship instead of a task-oriented language that may come more naturally to us at times.

If you're anything like me, it can be so much easier to focus on the tasks that need to get accomplished each day. But the call to heartfelt relationships demands a willingness to set aside our to-do lists in order to elevate the value of the individual in our ministry.

Model the relationships you want.

When you, as the leader, model the importance and value of relationships, those around you will follow.

Have you taken time to intentionally define the relationship you want to have with volunteers? Does it go beyond scheduling, making sure they have the right curriculum, and training them on policy?

How are you investing in them spiritually? Do you know the challenges they are facing in their personal lives, which most certainly impact their "church life?" How are you encouraging and equipping volunteers to develop relationships with other volunteers? With parents? With children?

Have you taken time to intentionally define the relationship you want to have with parents? How are you going beyond just informing them of your ministry, or even offering to equip them as parents, to really creating relationship with them?

And because we're talking about kidmin, how about the kids? Do you know the kids in your ministry? I mean, really know them? How do you develop and invest in relationships with the children you are serving? It's easy to organize the ministry, check on classes, and even take part in teaching—but do you really know the children in your ministry? And are you encouraging your team to really know the children, too?

Cast vision for relationships.

In order for anyone in your ministry to really commit to investing in relationships, they have to value others. And value begins with vision.

So, how are you talking about relationships in your ministry? How do you encourage them? How are they built into your planning and preparation? Does your program structure provide real opportunities for relationship-building between each group?

Consider the basics, such as traffic flow and program time structures. Do they enhance or hinder relationships? What about your overall program schedule? Are you keeping families so busy that quality time for developing relationships is hard to come by?

Ask yourself questions about every little element of your program, looking through the lens of relationships. You might be surprised at what you find.

As you value and invest in relationships, as you talk about them, as you encourage and equip for them, and as you make room for them—only then will this HEART element become important to all involved.

These are just a few ideas on creating opportunities for heartfelt relationships. All of our ministries are different, so they will all look a little different. Larger ministries face different challenges than smaller ministries. Leadership styles in other areas of the church will impact how relationship building is received in children's ministry. There are many factors that will affect the relationship-building process. These aren't excuses or reasons to disregard the importance of heartfelt relationships, but rather the realities that must be considered.

The most important thing is being intentional about the value of relationships in your ministry. It is the first element in partnering with parents to guide kids toward a HEART for God.



2. Engaging Teaching

The second element in guiding kids toward a HEART for God is **Engaging Teaching**.

Long gone should be the days of mere childcare in children's ministry. While we must provide quality care for children, that is not our primary function. We are there to guide them in spiritual growth.

And we cannot do this with bored, disengaged children.

In order to provide a platform for transformation, children must participate in an active and meaningful manner. They must be engaged and discovering spiritual truth for themselves.

That doesn't just mean that they are occupied, of course. A word search might occupy a child's attention for a time, but that's not going to lead to life-change. No, when I say "engaged," I mean that the child is investing in the process of what is happening, giving of themselves in order to receive what is being offered.

How do we do this?

It's not as hard as you might think.

Build relationships.

Hmm, have you heard that before?

Ministry happens best in the context of relationships.

I say this over and over again because it's worth repeating.

It's tempting for us to think: *It's the curriculum... or the program... or the facilities... or the music... or the equipment... or the room design and decorations.*

But it is all about the people! All these other things are important, but they do not make or break engaging ministry that leads to life-change.

Relationships, however, are irreplaceable.

Learn to connect with kids on their level.

What words come to mind when you think of connecting with kids on their level?

I think of *fun, simple, active, personal, and repetition.*

Too often we think like an adult in our ministries. Our environments are adult-friendly, not kid-friendly. Our words are adult-friendly, not kid-friendly. Our teaching style is adult-friendly, or at least we may think it is as we lecture.

It's natural—*we are adults.*

But in order to connect on a child's level, we need to look through their eyes and see, hear, and do things the way they see, hear, and do them.

It's not hard, but it takes intentionality.

Make it relevant and applicable.

A good practice is to measure our teaching by what I call the "This Week Principle." In other words, I want those who are learning with me to be able to take what they learn and use it this week in their everyday life.

I ask myself: *Can they?*

In order to use what they learned at church this week, it must be relevant to their everyday life.

Our pastors do this when they preach. Our adult leaders do this when they teach. Why wouldn't we do the same with children? Find ways to make what they are learning relevant to their everyday lives, and offer them ideas and practical ways that they can apply it right away.

As we partner with parents, what we do in the church matters. It is built on the foundation of heartfelt relationships and extended through engaging teaching.

3. Authentic Worship

The third element in guiding kids toward a HEART for God is **Authentic Worship**.

Offering authentic worship opportunities is one of the most challenging parts of leading in kidmin. It's hard! Understanding what works in terms of teaching kids true, authentic worship is difficult. Many of us don't have a firm grasp of just how to do it.

So, if authentic worship is essential in our children's ministry, where do we begin?

Here are a few things I try to keep in mind to help kids experience and learn authentic worship.

Model authentic worship and equip other leaders to do the same.

More than anything, kids learn what they see. And because of this, it's critical for you and your leaders to model it, worshipping right alongside the kids.

Authentic worship is a deeply personal, emotional experience. As we model it by actually doing it with the kids, they will emulate what we do. This is an important part of teaching kids authentic worship.

Make authentic worship a focus in your teaching.

Acts of authentic worship are part of virtually every Bible story. We must lead our team into intentionally highlighting these acts of worship in their teaching.

Of course, these acts are not always what we might traditionally think of as worship.

They might be in the form of simple obedience, sacrifice, or service—but they are there, within the lessons we teach every week.

We need to help kids understand that the stories we tell include authentic worship by real people. Then we can explore ideas of how our kids can do the same in their own lives—*this week, even!*

Consistently provide kids the opportunity to practice authentic worship.

What we practice becomes part of who we are, a natural part of our lives. So as kidmin leaders, we want this for the children we guide, so we must provide opportunities to practice authentic worship.

Mind you, this kind of practice is not for the sake of perfection, nor is worship a performance. It's not about going through the motions in an elaborate dress rehearsal.

What we practice, and what we invite kids to encounter, is authentic worship—building meaningful habits that continually orient our hearts toward God.

Facilitate family worship experiences.

Few things are more impactful in a child's life than worshiping together with Mom and/or Dad. As we facilitate these opportunities, we can equip parents, show value in worship, and teach children how to participate in authentic worship.

These experiences don't have to be complicated or spectacular. The value is in the opportunity. Too often, families may not get this at church.

Guiding children to hearts for God requires heartfelt relationships, engaging teaching, and these opportunities for authentic worship.



4. Real Service

The fourth element in guiding kids toward a HEART for God is **Real Service**.

The Bible is full of stories of children serving:

- Samuel in the temple
- The servant girl in the story of Naaman
- Daniel and his buddies
- Joseph and David as teenagers
- Josiah as the King (at 8 years old!)
- Oh, and Jesus was serving others by teaching in the temple at age 12

Real service is putting practical application to faith, regardless of how old you are.

Most parents can relate stories of their child taking the lead in serving others. Perhaps it was asking if they could give to a homeless person on the street. Perhaps it was identifying a family at church who needed assistance. Or perhaps it was simply showing compassion for another child who was hurting in some way.

Children often show this ability and desire to serve others. They were designed to serve.

The problem is that we adults don't give them the opportunity often. Whether we are too busy, believe that the kids aren't capable, or just don't want to take the time to make it happen, we are short-changing our children when we don't give them opportunity for real service.

In his terrific book, *Rock Solid Kids*, Larry Fowler talks about the benefits of children serving. He lists the following:

- Relevance—they apply their faith.
- Acceptance—they feel part of the church.
- Influence—their children are greatly affected.
- Motivation—they are spurred on to more learning.
- Permanence—they are less likely to abandon their faith.
- Strength—families are strengthened when they serve together.
- Fruit—parents and others are reached when others are ineffective.

As kidmin leaders, we have an amazing opportunity to be part of strengthening a child's faith by inviting kids and families to do real service.

Be creative and see what is being done in your church through a new lens. Can a child be trained to do it? If so, get the kids involved.

What can families participate in? It can be anything from a major weekend event, a Christmas gift drive, or even a small, one-time act of service at home.

How about asking families to visit sick children? Or finding other ways that families can serve other families within the church?

There are countless ways to get children and families involved in serving if we just think creatively and invite the kids to come alongside us.

Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us that we were saved by *grace through faith*.

And keep reading! Verse 10 then invites us to consider the why of our salvation—for good works. This is real service.

A person does not have to be a certain age for this to be true. Every believer—even a young child—is called to demonstrate their faith through good works. As parents and church leaders, it's our responsibility to give them the opportunity to do so.

Alongside heartfelt relationships, engaging teaching, and authentic worship, real service is a key element of forming a HEART for God in the children we serve.



5. Telling The Good News

The fifth element in guiding kids toward a HEART for God is **Telling the Good News**.

This might seem obvious—*it's the heart of everything we do, right?* Yes, it is—and yet, sometimes it gets lost in the midst of what we do.

Curriculum is important, and it's there as a guide.

Environment is important, and it enhances what we do.

Communication techniques are important, and they can be used to engage kids.

Facilities and technology are important, and they are part of our kids' lives.

There are many, many aspects of our ministries that are important—even vital. But what do they matter if we aren't telling the simple good news of Jesus Christ?

I don't want any child leaving my children's ministry without the opportunity to know Jesus personally.

So what does that mean for us as kidmin leaders?

Telling the good news must be part of the DNA of our ministry.

When we plan, we plan around telling the good news. When we cast vision, we cast it around telling the good news. When we teach, telling the good news must be central to every lesson.

In other words, it must be part of our ministry DNA, second nature in our thinking and at the core of everything we do.

We must equip parents and teachers for telling the good news.

Sometimes parents and teachers don't share the gospel simply because they aren't sure how. That should not be acceptable.

We must ensure that every parent and every volunteer in our ministry understands and is equipped with the knowledge and tools to share the gospel with a child.

We must build the kingdom of God by telling the good news.

This is where the curriculum, environment, communication, facilities, and technology come in, among many other things. All of these must lead to facilitate the simple telling of the good news.

As someone involved in children's ministry, you already know you're serving in the greatest mission field in the world. Why? Because there are more children than any other unreached people group.

The youngest among us are the most receptive to the gospel. Studies show that up to 85 percent of those who accept Christ as their Savior will do so between the ages of 4 and 14.*

Jesus pointed to little children as models of ideal faith for all of us. Therefore, we must grasp every opportunity we have to initiate that faith in Jesus and build His kingdom.

Telling the good news—along with heartfelt relationships, engaging teaching, and authentic worship, and real service—it is at the HEART of meaningful children's ministry.

** Nazarene Church Growth Research showed 85 percent; International Bible Society survey showed 83 percent*

Conclusion

Children's ministry might easily be considered the most important ministry in the church.

Dwight L. Moody, a great evangelist and church leader during the the 1800s once said, "If I could relive my life, I would devote my entire ministry to reaching children for God."

What could be more important than **partnering with parents to guide kids toward a HEART for God?**

This important work demands excellence.

As we seek to build the kingdom of God, inviting the youngest among us to know and follow Jesus, these five elements must be at the HEART of every children's ministry:

- Heartfelt Relationships
- Engaging Teaching
- Authentic Worship
- Real Service
- Telling the Good News

As you have seen in your own ministry, children can be the most receptive audience to the gospel. They are also the most responsive to discipleship.

Kids are wired to have a HEART for God, and they need you to partner with their parents to guide them on their way. The kingdom depends on it.