

# Practical Ministry Skills: Effective Intergenerational Small Groups



<b>Contents</b>	PAGE
HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE .....	2
<b>Overview</b>	
CLOSING THE GAP <i>by John Ortberg</i> .....	4
CONNECTING THE GENERATIONS <i>by Drew Zahn</i> .....	7
<b>Mixing Adults and Children</b>	
OVERCOMING ASSUMPTIONS <i>by Scottie May</i> .....	9
MOVING BEYOND ENTERTAINMENT <i>by Trevor Lee</i> .....	12
INVESTING IN ONE ANOTHER’S CHILDREN <i>by Carolyn Taketa</i> .....	14
THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHILDCARE COVENANT <i>by Seth Widner</i> .....	17
WHEN CHILDREN BEHAVE BADLY <i>by Rachel Gilmore</i> .....	19
<b>Mixing Adults of Different Generations</b>	
A TALE OF TWO INTERGENERATIONAL GROUPS <i>by Rick Lowry</i> .....	21
THREE KINDS OF MENTORING <i>by Fred Smith</i> .....	23
<b>Resources</b>	
SAMPLE: CHILDCARE COVENANT.....	25
FURTHER EXPLORATION.....	26



## How to Use This Resource

*Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.*

A lot of people that go to church have children. And a lot of people who go to church are involved with small groups. But generally speaking, there is not a lot of intersection when it comes to those children becoming involved in those small groups. Normally parents in a group find a way to “manage” their kids for the group time—through childcare, through entertainment, or through inattention.

And that’s kind of a shame. Or at least a wasted opportunity.

This resource will introduce the growing trend of intergenerational small groups. These groups are intentional about involving multiple generations, which includes both children and adults of different ages.

Intergenerational groups certainly pose a unique set of challenges and obstacles, but they also bring a great deal of blessings—both for children and adults. Check out the articles below to learn more.

### Target Audience

This resource has been designed both for churches and individual small-group leaders. The material gives a broad overview of intergenerational small groups and intergenerational ministry, as well as specific tips for use during group meetings.

### Overview

John Ortberg’s article is a great introduction to the topic of intergenerational leadership and ministry. It was originally written for pastors and church leaders, but the questions he asks and principles he gives are very much applicable for small groups. The same is true for “Connecting the Generations,” by Drew Zahn.

### Mixing Adults and Children

The opening article of this section—“Overcoming Assumptions,” by Scottie May—gives a great window into the way that many people view the intersection between children and “adult” ministry. And “Moving Beyond Entertainment” is a practical, step-by-step look at how to legitimately include children in a small-group environment with adults.

At the same time, it’s true that the presence of children does include some unique challenges—one of them being discipline. “The Importance of a Childcare Covenant” and “When Children Behave Badly” both provide terrific insight on these potential obstacles.

### Mixing Adults of Different Generations

Rick Lowry’s “Tale of Two Intergenerational Small Groups” offers some great reading, and some great lessons about how to make mixed-age adult small groups work. And you can’t get a better voice on the importance of mentoring than Fred Smith.

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

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## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS



## Closing the Gap

*Enter the fractured world of multi-generational church leadership.*

By John Ortberg

*Note: This article was originally written for church leaders in a broad sense, but the issues discussed here have a great deal of application within small-groups ministries, as well.*

When Pastor Rehoboam took over the flock after the long tenure of his father, change management was his number one challenge. Everyone had different ideas about how he should lead the community. Some of the members of the congregation met with him to politely suggest some policy changes focused largely on the optimal intensity of membership requirements.

Rehoboam requested more time and decided to meet with his leadership team. He split the team into two groups: the rapidly aging Boomer leaders and the emerging leaders. Not surprisingly, they gave him diametrically opposite advice. He took the advice of the leaders from his own generation and crafted a compelling strategy (“My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.”) People by and large did not get on board with the new vision.

The moral of the story is that you should have all generations represented in a single leadership team. Actually, you could probably draw other insights from the passage (2 Chronicles 10) as well. But it is striking that even in the Bible, one of the ways that human community becomes disrupted is the generational divide.

And if the generational divide was a gap then, it is a canyon now. We are niched by generation as never before. I serve at a 135-year-old Presbyterian church with a wide span of ages in the congregation and a leadership team with members who range in age from 26 (not me) to 68 (also not me). They are a fabulous group of human beings. Navigating change wisely is the subtext beneath almost every conversation we have. I will tell you what we are learning about generations working together.

### We Are Making It Up as We Go Along

I was looking at church websites not long ago and noticed a fascinating dynamic. Many new churches have been formed with “multi-cultural” as part of their DNA and a stated value. But I have not yet seen a new church plant with “multi-generational” in its vision statement. In all the cases I read (in an admittedly non-scientific sample), “multi-generational” in a church’s self-description was a euphemism for “we are an aging church that wants to have more young people attending so that we don’t die, but we don’t want to change enough to actually attract any of them to come.”

In other words, multi-generational church ministry in our day is uncharted territory.

When we began to talk about multi-generational community at Menlo Park, one of our (younger) staff leaders asked a terrific question: what does it mean? How do we know if we’re successful at it? One of the most common ways to define it is in terms of a worship service. By this definition, effective intergenerational worship would be a congregation of diverse ages sitting through a service of mixed styles that displeases everyone equally.

But another way of defining it is relational. How many relationships with people of different generations do folks at our church have? This leads us to look at the kind of activities and events that are actually relationship building.

For example, this past week our church held a Compassion Weekend. We canceled our regular services and worshipped God by serving throughout the San Francisco Bay area. One of the highlights of the weekend is the relationships that form when young and old serve together. Musical tastes often separate people; serving brings them together. We had a 98-year-old woman serving at a Habitat for Humanity construction project. We had a two-year-old helping with folks building kits for AIDS caregivers in Africa.

We’ve also had an increasing number of people signing up for multi-generational small groups. One of the biggest requests in churches is also one of the least delivered—intergenerational mentoring. But you can’t get

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

mentored by a stranger. Finding a mentor is like finding a spouse; it works best if you start out by being friends first.

### We Must Get Past Terminal Niceness

There is an old saying in the church world that “the issue is never the issue; the issue is always control.” And when it comes to generations working together, the question of control is never more than about a micron below the surface.

We had a conversation around our leadership circle recently about food in the sanctuary. It was fascinating to track the discussion. To some, bringing food into the sanctuary communicates a dumbing down of worship, a devaluing of sacred space, and a loss of transcendence and wonder.

To others, being able to bring coffee or a bagel into church communicates a sense of community, warmth, and acceptance that is desperately needed. It’s a way of defusing the expectation of a stuffy, formal, inauthentic, foreign experience that tells me I’m not welcome and the church doesn’t care.

But underneath the issues of food, or dress, or style, often lies the deeper issue of control.

One researcher put it like this: we often think people are opposed to change, but that’s not quite true. Everybody changes all the time—particularly when they are the ones proposing the change. It helps to distinguish between two types of change: technical change and social change.

Technical change has to do with logistics and props. Switching from typewriters to computers, or pews to individual chairs, or hard copies to email are technical changes. Social change has to do with who is making the decision. Social change has to do with who is in control.

Any time a technical change is made, it raises the issue of social change. Am I and my group gaining or losing our influence? Who gets to call the shots around here? If my influence is receding, then probably my sense of ownership and commitment will diminish as well. This is why trying to sneak changes past people is generally a bad idea.

This also means that on the leadership team, we have to embrace conflict. Where there is a difference of opinion that falls out along generational lines, we have to be willing to enter the tunnel of chaos. If there are not regular, passionate, energized disagreements about what our future should look like, I know I have not done my job as a leader to engage people fully.

### We Don’t Know What We Don’t Know

Those of us who are older tend to underestimate the difference between generations. We think that what feels comfortable to us will not—or should not—be a barrier to those who are younger. Those of us who are younger tend to over-estimate the difference between generations. We feel as if those who are older are a different species and could never understand our experience. One of the most important concepts along these lines has to do with the notion of connection. Who feels “connected” at our church?

I used to think that connection had primarily to do with relationships. But it does not. Connectedness is a separate notion. It has to do with whether or not, when I enter a church, it feels like a place for “people like me.” How people dress, how they talk, what the music is like—many details create a sense of connection or disconnection.

If I feel connected, I am likely to overlook how disconnected people of another generation may feel. So we have to have constant conversations about the experience of people in our generation at our church. We will never be able to make all people feel totally connected at all services. But at least we have to be aware of the dynamics.

### How Another Generation Needs Me

One of the younger women on our leadership team, a recent seminary grad with tons of leadership gifts, was speaking recently about her desire to contribute. “I want to be developed,” she said. “I know I have lots to learn, but I want to have some people who believe in me. I want to be part of a team where people are cheering me on and helping me soar. And I want to do the same for them.”

As someone who has been involved in church ministry for almost 30 years, it struck me that I get a chance now to do for younger team members what mentors did for me. I thought about how much joy there is in helping someone discover her gifts and flourish.

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

At the same time, one of the older members of our team talked about how much energy he received by sitting around the circle with people who were decades younger. I recalled a conversation with a man in his eighties who had done church ministry all his life but had never reached out to younger people. He spoke of his sadness and loneliness now that his contemporaries were dying off.

Churches do not hit the multi-generational crisis until after their first 30 years or so. Churches often begin by targeting young people, and may attract a fair number of older folks who want to be around the energy. But the real challenge comes when the core that the church was built around begins to age, and the people the church needs to reach are different from the people the church already has. It's one thing if I go to a "younger" church because I choose to. It's another thing if my church decides to go "younger" while I'm there.

### Making the Transition

It's up to the older generation to figure out how to hand the faith to the younger generation. God's plan is that wisdom and love and especially knowledge of him be passed from one generation to another. That means the church needs to recognize which generation has the burden of faith transmission, and that is almost always the older generation.

We can't say, "We were faithful; good luck to whoever comes next."

We can't say, "Here are the methods we responded to when we were young. If you look like us, dress like us, sing like us, talk like us, then we'll pass on the faith and you can know God. Otherwise, we'll just let you drift into an eternity apart from God."

So as a leadership team, we have to have a firm commitment from each person that the big issue is not "Who gets to determine what's cool?" or "Who is it that gives the money that supports the church?" or "Who carries the DNA?"

The question is: How do we pass the torch?

### God is the God of Every Generation

Sooner or later every church hits the generation issue. We are richer people when we work together. Our relationships are enhanced when we have multiple generations around the table.

God's plan is not for the church to be a one-generation operation with a 30-year shelf life. It is a richer thing to be part of a church that embraces multi-generational ministry and multi-generational leadership.

—JOHN ORTBERG; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [www.leadershipjournal.net](http://www.leadershipjournal.net).

### Discuss:

1. In what ways have you experienced the generational gap in your church?
2. Has that gap extended into your church's small-groups ministry? How so?
3. What steps can your small group take to begin bridging the generational gap?



## Connecting the Generations

*How intergenerational ministries close the gap*

By Drew Zahn

Regardless of setting—teaching, worship, outreach—intergenerational ministries are built on several principles:

- **Age-integration.** Rather than separating into groups by age or grade-level, intergenerational ministry purposely teams people from different age groups.
- **Generational understanding.** Relationships are fostered that reduce intergenerational conflict and misunderstanding.
- **Integration of “households.”** While not all intergenerational ministries use the same terminology, singles, widows, and other heads-of-household are validated as family units and are often mainstreamed with nuclear families.
- **Parental responsibility for faith development.** Parents are encouraged and equipped to take the primary role in their children’s faith education, to “impress” upon their own children the truths of God (Deuteronomy 6:6–9).

This paradigm integrates whole households—mothers, fathers, widows, singles, and children of all ages—into the same activities. An intergenerational ministry (also called inter-gen, multi-gen, or age-integrated) brings diverse ages together in the same place, with the same materials, for the same purpose. The goal: to build cross-generational relationships that strengthen faith formation in the community and at home.

Stephen Ong, pastor and founder of Victory Baptist Church in Greeley, Colorado, chose to build the church on an intergenerational model. “Too many families were living Christianity only at church,” Ong says. “It wasn’t being applied at home. I figured if we could bring families together in their walk of faith on Sundays, it would create a mutual accountability that would stay with them throughout the week.”

Advocates of this ministry model tout the home as the primary center for faith formation. Often their top priority is training parents to impress the faith upon their own children. But successful intergenerational ministries incorporate more than just mom, dad, and the kids.

“The single most important thing in intergenerational ministry is to include the non-nuclear family units,” says Eric Wallace, director of teaching services at Harvester Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Virginia, and author of *Uniting Church and Home*. “We call them ‘households’—the widows, singles, single-parent families, etc. If you don’t include them, you’re just creating a ‘family’ fragment with separate needs and separate relationships from the rest of the body. The goal is to build unity and faith in every home, no matter who lives there.”

### Meeting the Objections

Intergenerational ministries begin in one of two ways: either the church is founded with core inter-gen values, or the idea is introduced slowly. In the latter case, inter-gen proponents often face stiff opposition. The cultural norm, common in schools and most church environments, is to separate people—especially children—by age. Cultural norms aren’t amended easily.

“Not everyone is going to want to do this,” says Mike Sciarra, pastor of families at Voyagers Bible Church in Irvine, California. “That’s okay. We don’t want to swing the ministry pendulum all the way from age-specific to totally age-integrated. The two can co-exist.”

A pastor at Christ Church in Phoenix, AZ, Ben Freudenburg explains: “Age-specific ministries, like the traditional Sunday school, children’s church, and adult Bible studies, are great for teaching the stories and concepts of the faith. Age-integrated ministries, however, teach us how to incorporate those truths into relationships. There needs to be a place for both.”



## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

Instead of complete overhaul, some innovators have succeeded with small, experimental forays into inter-generational ministry. For example, Lightsey Wallace was an elder at Harvester when he first introduced the church to the idea of intergenerational ministry. He wanted to try including his 12-year-old daughter in the adult Sunday school class. He was convinced that his daughter was capable of understanding at a more mature level than her Sunday school class was offering.

Wallace asked for the chance to try it. After two years, the experiment was so successful, Harvester's Sunday school was rebuilt around age-integrated classes. "Implementing this approach is not a process you should expect to happen quickly," advises Eric Wallace, that 12-year-old girl's older brother, who is now director of teaching services at the church. "The majority of churches will apply these principles to already existing age-segregated ministries and will take a gradual approach."

### A Well-Placed Question

Introducing people to intergenerational ministries, whether by experimenting or by tweaking, is simple. Building a permanent culture of intergenerational cooperation, however, is not. "Age-integrated ministries cannot become one more thing to add to the calendar," says Mike Sciarra. "You've got to consider which programs can be cut to make room."

John Erwin, pastor to families at Edina's Grace Church, and chairman of the National Association of Family Ministries, recommends conducting a needs assessment before launching new intergenerational ministries. Erwin recalls an important survey he took.

Grace Church had been sending families to parent/child retreats at a nearby camp for years. The retreats for fathers and children were well attended, but the retreats for mothers and children were not. Erwin wondered why. He found it wasn't because of the mothers' lack of interest, but because fathers were the ones searching for help. So Grace Church began "Super Saturdays," a training course for fathers on topics like leading devotions, anger management, and creating family memories. Assessing needs helped Grace Church launch inter-gen initiatives without cramming the calendar.

### Can We Do This?

The biggest obstacle to intergenerational ministry is personal insecurity. "Parents are so used to the church planting their children's faith development that they don't feel they have the know-how," Freudenburg contends. "Therefore, when we give them options, they feel frustrated. The solution: we need to equip parents to lead their family's faith development."

For Freudenburg, equipping parents includes a devotional fair. Bible studies, models for instruction, and other resources are on display at various stations. At each station parents are invited to try each resource with their children. If parents find something that works well for their whole family, they can buy it and use it at home.

When Rod Janzen was family life pastor at Olathe Bible Church in Olathe, Kansas, he introduced ways to make the church's faith education more parent-inclusive. "We switched our parenting class curriculum to one that helped parents become the primary disciplers of their children. Our youth ministries began incorporating parental involvement. And the message from the pulpit stressed oneness across all generations."

Grace Bible Fellowship in Walpole, New Hampshire, takes it one step further. The church provides "traveling teachers" who visit households on a rotation basis, coaching parents to teach their children. The encouragement and accountability help parents to grow in their confidence and willingness to shape their children's spiritual journeys.

Many churches that incorporate intergenerational ministry report unexpected benefits. Some have found it increases involvement of singles and seniors. Others appreciate that the added parental involvement reduces staff workload. Still others discover their innovation brings in new families who are looking for ways to strengthen their home.

The people of Olathe Bible Church were relieved their generational differences were more easily overcome than anticipated. "We have older people who actually enjoy worshiping with the Gen-Xers," says Janzen. "And some of our teenagers like hanging out with the elderly. We found the different generations have more in common than some of them are willing to admit."

—DREW ZAHN; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, copyright 2002 by the author and Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [www.leadershipjournal.net](http://www.leadershipjournal.net).





## Overcoming Assumptions

*They really are valuable and they really can work.*

By Scottie May

There are three common assumptions held by churches and small-group leaders that often convince them it would be difficult for children and adults to be together in a group. First is a low view of children. Second is a misunderstanding of how learning should occur in small groups. And third is that parents feel they need a break.

Let's take a deeper look at each one:

- **Assumption 1** assumes that children have short attention spans and are easily bored. I've been visiting some of the newer churches across the United States to see how they minister with children and families.

While at a West Coast church, I met with the staff. After listening to the challenges that dynamic growth is creating, I asked if the whole faith community (including children) worshiped together. One of the pastors said, "The only way that would work is if we gave them all game boys." I silently groaned. Then another pastor excitedly spoke up to talk about his small group—whole families meet together every week. He explained that five or six families gather for dessert and conversation. When the teaching begins, the children go upstairs. I asked what the children do. He explained that a college student comes and plays with them. Another groan—more missed opportunities to nurture and form the generations together.

- **Assumption 2** manifests itself frequently through comments such as "We'd have to 'dumb it down' so the study wouldn't be over kids' heads." It's as if the small-group agenda simply must be a book study in the cognitive domain. That certainly has a valid place in congregational life, but it is not the only way—nor is it even the most important way—to conduct a small group.
- **Assumption 3** implies that a small group is the parents' date night. Do parents assume that an hour of Bible on Sunday morning and midweek kids' club is all that their children need to grow up as strong Christians?

In contrast, Julie Gorman writes in her book *Community that Is Christian*: "Groups that include the family may be one of the most promising arenas of outreach and growth in the future of small-group ministry.... IG groups can model what it means to nurture faith within the family."

### A Bit of History

Intergenerational learning first came on the scene by name in the 1960s and '70s, as Delia Halverson says, "before there was a felt need." Larry Richards realized the need ahead of his time and developed "Sunday School Plus" materials to equip parents to nurture their children at home. Parents weren't ready for that, so his materials languished in storage. This is also when the modern small-group movement really took hold through influences like Faith at Work and Lyman Coleman's Serendipity materials. (Small groups were a "felt need" then because we were relationally and spiritually starving as the culture shifted wildly through those decades. But we did not yet see the need or value of including our children in these groups.)

By the early 1980s, IG Sunday school classes were established with limited success. A few years later James White wrote a helpful volume, *Intergenerational Religious Education*, that increased awareness and provided theoretical guidance, but churches were in the midst of staffing age-grade specialists. Parents entrusted the spiritual growth of their children to these experts, so little progress was made in IG learning.

Yet intergenerational learning is as old as Scripture itself. In the Old Testament, learning took place in tribes or clans. In the New Testament it happened in households. Jesus himself exemplified IG values when he placed a child in the midst of his disciples and said, "Become like this child" (Matthew 18:1–3).

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

### The “Why” of IG Small Groups

Why have intergenerational groups? Because all of us, regardless of age, need them. We need to hear the voices of generations other than our own. Yes, there can be times for generation-specific experiences, but most of us sorely lack meaningful interaction with various generations—especially with widely scattered extended families in which IG interaction happens naturally.

We desperately need the insight and wisdom of generations above and below us. The older generation needs the creativity and imaginative faith of the young; the younger generation needs the stories of God’s faithfulness that the older has experienced.

### Overcoming Fallacious Assumptions

Let’s give some more perspective to our three assumptions from the beginning of this article:

- **Assumption 1:** The past 10–15 years has seen a virtual explosion of research and writing about the spiritual life of children, revealing that we have immeasurably underestimated the ability of children to connect meaningfully with God and to have spiritual insight. The process may look different than that of adults, but it is real and can inspire older generations.

And yes, children in a context in which they are fully engaged can focus and reflect for long periods of time. I’ve seen it happen over and over. Watch a young child in meaningful silence rather than empty silence. Watch a child reflect deeply when provided special space and materials that enable reflection. When we expect certain behaviors from children, they rise (or fall) to that expectation.

- **Assumption 2:** The power behind experiential learning is being recognized significantly in our churches. Contrast this with the more cognitive approach that many small groups embrace—book studies with discussion. Experiential learning has been gaining acceptance through simple mantras like “Tell me, I forget; Show me, I remember; Involve me, I understand.”

Experience is not always the better way to learn, but it is a helpful corrective to the excessive “right answer” syndrome that has dominated for so long. In order for intergenerational small groups to succeed, it is essential that active processes of learning be valued. Shared experience is the common denominator that makes IG small groups work.

- **Assumption 3:** Yes, parents need date nights. But they are poor substitutes for rich, intergenerational interaction among God’s people.

### So, How Do We Do an IG Small Group?

There is no one right way. Several types of models have been tried and found helpful—some keep the generations together for the whole experience; others divide at some point, providing meaningful, relevant activities even as children go to a different area for a time. Whatever the structure, an essential ingredient is that every person, regardless of age, is to be valued, respected, and seen as having a significant contribution to make.

Here are helpful components that contribute to effective intergenerational small groups:

- Regular simple shared meals or refreshments.
- Time for conversation.
- A focusing activity that introduces the theme, story, or lesson.
- A Bible presentation told or enacted.
- Individual reflection or response time, including options of art and journaling materials.
- Accountability or prayer time in IG clusters.
- Closing song or blessing.
- Occasional IG service projects, even short-term missions trip after the group is well established.
- Consider regular celebrations, perhaps quarterly, that are fun times just to enjoy being together.

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

A regular liturgy or ritual helps create continuity of purpose and aids children in becoming comfortable within IG gatherings. Consider developing a processional (because everyone enjoys a “parade”) to move from one space to another as a transition from the meal to the learning time. Create a sacred space by using candles or symbols to add meaning to the lesson and reflection time. Avoid filling the time with lots of activities that can lead to rushing through them. There is great value in a slow, gentle pace. It takes time, especially for children, to think and reflect in response to what God might be saying to them.

### Tips!

Here are things I’ve learned working with intergenerational small groups:

- Parents usually assume they are to teach the children. Instead, have co-learning be the goal—all generations learn from each other. Note: successful IG small groups require special training for the leaders.
- Help the IG group leader put parents at ease about their children’s behavior. Parents will receive little benefit from the group if they focus on trying to control their children. Experiment with strategies to share that responsibility.
- Sometimes the word *family* is interpreted as “parents with small children.” The term *household* may communicate more clearly the IG intent, as in “each intergenerational small group is made up of several households.”
- Avoid forcing interaction between generations, such as going around the group to answer questions. Let it happen naturally as comfort and trust are established.
- Be willing to adapt and adjust to what doesn’t work the first time. At one of our IG events, a single mom with four children wanted to stop coming because of the behavior of her children. That’s when we “grandparents” realized we needed to come alongside her and “adopt” a child for every gathering. It takes time for people to adjust to the idea and dynamic of an IG small group.

Intergenerational small groups—they can work! Is it easy to do? No. Is it “normal” in this culture? No. But it is biblical. It’s rewarding! It’s fulfilling! And it can result in *all* the people of your congregation being formed as a community of faith for the sake of the world.

—SCOTTIE MAY is Assistant Professor of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College and coauthor of [Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey](#) (Baker, 2010).

### Discuss:

1. Have you operated under any of the assumptions mentioned at the beginning of this article?
2. Do you agree that these assumptions are faulty? Or do they have merit?
3. Which of the tips mentioned above are most applicable to your church?



## Moving Beyond Entertainment

*A deeper look at the spiritual formation of children within a small-group setting*

By Trevor Lee

When our group first started meeting in our home, we had a handful of kids. So we sent them off to play in their rooms or the basement when the adults were ready to start their study time. You can probably guess how that turned out. Inevitably someone would get hurt, need to tell their mom something, or have such a good time that the adults could barely hear each other over the screaming.

After a few weeks of frustration, my wife thought of something that changed the way we looked at the presence of kids in the group—they became part of the group! That may sound obvious, but in my experience most small groups view children as a population to be managed so that the group can happen, rather than an integral part of the group that needs to be engaged and included.

### First Impressions

As we started really processing this way of looking at our kids, we realized some important things.

1. **Parents are entrusted with the responsibility of discipling their kids.** Too often parents outsource the spiritual lives of their children to churches and VBS, but this is not God's way. Churches and their programs can be helpful in spiritual training, but ultimately God wants the parents to be teaching their children what it means to follow him. We needed to take this call from God seriously with our children, as did the other parents in our group. This challenged us to think about how we were discipling our kids all the time, and we realized that our small group needed to be an important part of that.
2. **By being a part of the small group, we were accepting some responsibility for each other, and that needed to include the kids.** In any small group there is some level of accountability and mutual edification in faith. The only way for a group not to extend this perspective to the kids is if they are not seen as members of the group. Without meaning to, we can communicate to our kids that Bible study, prayer, and a life of faith are only for adults.
3. **Including kids in the fabric of a small group is a part of obeying Jesus.** He commanded his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. A natural extension of that command is that we must make disciples of all generations. Not taking the discipleship of kids seriously means disobeying Jesus. Finding a way to make intergenerational small groups meaningful for everyone is not only essential for the faith of the children, it is an important part of our obedience to Jesus.

### Important Questions

After committing to involving the kids in our group, we started brainstorming what it would look like. We agreed that the parents would have primary responsibility for what happened with the kids, and that the other group members would be encouraged to be involved, too. Rather than telling you exactly what we chose to do with kids, I want to walk you through some questions that will help you to do what makes most sense in your context.

1. **What do you want the children to learn about following Jesus?** Children will learn just as much, if not more, from what you do and how you do it than they will from the actual content of teaching. If you want them to know the Bible is important, make sure you are actually reading from it and even memorizing parts of it. If you want them to see serving others as a part of faith, schedule regular times to serve together as a group. If you think evangelism is an important part of being a Christian, consider hosting a monthly dinner and invite families who are not a part of your small group. Whatever you do, do it with purpose.

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

To help you clarify what this would look like, sit down with the other members of your small group and make a list of the *essentials* of being a Christian. Then work from that list in thinking how you will teach your children and model a life of faith for them.

2. **What can kids and adults do together effectively?** You know the kids in your group, and you know what can be expected of them. You also know the adults in your group and what can be expected of them! If you have a time for musical worship, that is something most kids enjoy. A basic Bible lesson and discussion can be beneficial for both adults and children, but a deep theological discussion would be more difficult. If you are going to address more difficult topics like sexuality or violence, you'll probably want to do that without the kids. (Though it would be great to include older children in these discussions.) Prayer time is great for kids to participate in, but you need to discern both how long the kids can sit and how much fidgeting the adults can handle without being too distracted.

Here is the key to figuring out these issues for your group: instead of thinking about what the adults want to do and how the kids can fit into that, think about the kids as equal group members and consider what everyone can do together effectively. Ultimately you will choose to do some things that cater to kids and some things that work best for adults, but the more you involve everyone, the more effective your group will be.

3. **How will you manage the kids for the portions of your group time that are not together?** Inevitably there will be parts of your group life where it just doesn't work to have the kids and adults together. Part of valuing the kids as an important part of the group is being thoughtful about what they will do during those times. That said, you also have to consider what you can handle from a practical side. Ask your youth pastor if there are a couple students who would come and lead the kids in a craft time, supervised play, or whatever you'd like them to do. The group members could take turns leading a lesson time for the kids while the adults have their teaching and discussion time. You could even let the kids watch a video or movie. If you choose that option be thoughtful about what they watch and consider leading them in some discussion about it when it's over.

As you figure out how your intergenerational group will function, it is important that you include all the group members, not just the ones who have kids. This allows everyone to share their ideas, opinions, and concerns. It also helps all the group members to feel invested in the way the group functions. If one or two people make the decisions about how kids will be included and it isn't going well, other group members might get frustrated and disengage from the group. However, if they have been a part of shaping what is happening they will be more likely to stick with it and bring up their concerns.

Finally, as you seek to minister well to all the members of your group, hang in there. Not everything you try will work well. In fact, some things will completely bomb. So commit to each other that you will work through the kinks together and make the group the best it can be. I think you will be surprised how fulfilling it is to know that your group is moving toward Jesus together and that no one, including the kids, is being left behind.

—TREVOR LEE is a freelance author, pastor, and small-group leader in Colorado.

### Discuss:

1. Do you agree that children have a place in small groups? Why or why not?
2. Is it ever appropriate to "entertain" kids during a group time, or is it always a wasted opportunity?
3. What steps can your group take to avoid "managing" children through entertainment?



## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS



## Investing in One Another's Children

*Exploring one of the more valuable aspects of intergenerational small groups*

By Carolyn Taketa

It was Friday night—time for our small group to meet. We were tired from a long work week and did not feel like attending the meeting. Then our children said, “But we have to go, it’s our group. We want to go.” So we went and were glad we did. When I later shared this with the group, every family confessed that the same conversation had happened occasionally in their homes, as well. I wondered: what made the kids so committed (even more than the adults) to the group?

Before we explore the positive impact on children truly becoming part of a small group, let’s take a step back and consider why such groups are becoming increasingly popular, relevant, and beneficial in today’s culture.

### Making a Case for Intergenerational Small Groups

The African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” is a good description of life together in intergenerational small groups. The focus of these groups is to nurture intergenerational community with whole households building relationships with other households and providing mutual support as they seek to raise children with biblical values. In these groups, children participate in the group’s social activities, service projects, and attend group meetings.

Intergenerational small groups are becoming increasingly popular in part because people: 1) are isolated from extended family, 2) have busy lifestyles and want activities they can do with their kids, 3) are unable to find cost-effective, quality childcare, and 4) value the support that cross-family communities provide.

Given our transient culture, most people do not live close to grandparents or other relatives who can provide support systems for families. Moreover, the social circle of the “neighborhood block”—where the nearest parent would supervise all the kids playing together—has largely disappeared. Families live more private and isolated lives than ever before, and there are few social venues where we know each other’s kids and participate in raising them. This puts a substantial strain on parents, especially single parents, as the only significant adults in a child’s life.

In intergenerational small groups, members choose to influence and reinforce the godly values that the parents are implementing. Imagine the wonderful impact on a child of being loved and cared for by multiple adults who are all committed to loving God and one another. This creates a spiritual and emotional safety net for the kids, allowing them to explore issues of faith, share experiences, and learn from a variety of voices all grounded in the same truth of the gospel.

### The Benefits for Children

The extent to which group members can minister to and be a positive influence on other member’s children varies depending on group dynamics, individual parent’s situations, ages of the children, and amount of time groups spend together.

Here are the positive influences that we have observed from our intergenerational small groups, as well as some practical guidelines:

- **Kids want to go to church and be involved in church activities.** As kids get older, they are more likely to resist going to church unless they have friends there. This is especially true in bigger churches where Sunday school classes and youth groups are quite large and can be intimidating to navigate alone. Having friends from a small group helps kids feel connected, comfortable, and open to learning at church.

And when adult small-group members volunteer in children or youth ministries, kids from the group feel more comfortable and choose to participate because of their special relationship with that adult. Being known by other adults at church fosters a sense of belonging for kids, especially in larger churches.



## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

- **Kids have a variety of spiritual role models and experience the value of community.** This is especially true for single parents, which is a growing population in our society. One single mom shared that her adolescent son had a tough time after his father left, but now that a few of the men in the family's small group are spending time investing in her son, he is doing much better. She was so thankful for how God was using the men in the group to help her and her son heal from their past.

A group can share experiences that reveal the wider range of spiritual gifts and personalities. This helps kids understand and value differences in the body of Christ and help them figure out how God has uniquely wired them. Adults can also speak into the children's lives by noticing and affirming the ways God is growing individual kids.

- **Other parents reinforce spiritual and moral values in the home.** Parents seeking to raise children with countercultural biblical values are often swimming upstream in our current media-saturated waters. It is helpful for parents to have a support system to discuss, affirm, and reinforce the choices they have made. Though members may not agree on all the specific parenting rules, it is helpful for kids to know that other parents have similar principles and guidelines about morality that are different from what the world offers.
- **Kids form positive sibling-type relationships with one another.** When children of varying ages spend time building relationships, the older kids grow in maturity by watching out for younger ones, and the younger ones benefit from the life wisdom that older kids have. The kids learn empathy and compassion as they discuss school, friendships, parents, God, sports, or whatever else is on their minds. For example, when a child in our group was having difficult social issues with kids in her school, she looked forward to going to her small group where she felt accepted, valued, and loved.

For kids who do not have siblings, the group provides sibling-type experiences that teach them many of the same lessons as natural siblings. And parents appreciate the extended family experience that the group provides for the whole family.

- **Households pray for one another.** When tough stuff happens in our households, the small group is the first place we turn to for prayer and support, especially when it concerns our children. Having a group of people interceding with God on your family's behalf is a powerful bond. As children become aware of important concerns in each family's life and pray about them, they learn an important way to care for one another and their faith is strengthened as they see God respond.

### Practical Guidelines for Healthy Intergenerational Groups

- **Establish clear communications about group expectations.** To avoid misunderstandings or resentment later, discuss and spell out clearly from the start (and along the way) what kind of small group you wish to build. For example, is it okay if meetings are noisy and disrupted by children at times? What portions of the meetings will kids participate in? How will hosting and child-care be shared? What ground rules will we expect kids to respect (e.g., no playing in the parents' bedroom, no eating upstairs)?
- **Agree on basic parenting principles but honor different parenting styles.** Intergenerational small groups will have difficulty gelling if there are very divergent parenting philosophies, or if people are judgmental and corrective about each other's parenting choices. Agreement on basic moral principles and a non-judgmental, humble, and honoring attitude toward each other's parenting styles will go a long way to developing a healthy group. For example, if the kids will be watching a particular movie, ask for permission from other parents to make sure it's okay.
- **Ask for and give each other permission to influence, teach, and correct the kids.** Every parent appreciates their child being encouraged and affirmed by another adult. However, discipline and correction might be a different story. Talk openly about how and in what circumstances it would be appropriate for the adults to correct or discipline a child in the group. One group shared that they had reached a new level of trust when one parent thanked another for gently disciplining their child because it showed that they cared enough to bother.

Commit to working through conflicts between children and teens without taking sides. Instead, act in fair, objective, and relationship-honoring ways. Mediate and help kids resolve conflicts with grace, truth, kindness, and forgiveness.

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

- **Spend lots of time together outside of meetings.** More than anything else, the amount of time you spend together will determine the depth of your relationships with one another. Shared experiences are so powerful because they help build trust and give opportunities to cross-influence one another in different contexts. Serving, recreational activities, play-dates, or taking a vacation together will all help bond the group closer.
- **Celebrate special milestone such as birthdays, baptisms, or graduations.** Intergenerational small groups deepen relationships when they attend some of the significant events in a child's life. Make time to join in each other's celebrations, whether it's a ball game, a part in a play, the spelling bee, dance recital, or whatever the special event may be.

Caution: Do not expect or obligate group members to attend every function, which could become very burdensome. Rather, let the group know of selected special events and issue open invitations with no obligation to attend.

- **Look for opportunities to serve one another.** Groups will grow closer when families are interdependent and serve one another. One family was recently in a bind when both parents had to be out of town for work. They asked another family in the group to take care of the three young children overnight—not an easy task. When the parent returned the following morning to pick them up, he learned that the oldest child had become sick and vomited while the youngest had wet the guest bed. The parents expressed amazement and gratitude that this family had cleaned up the messes and taken care of their kids as they would have their own children. What a picture of community!

Our children belong not only to us, but to the greater Body of Christ. To trust each other with our children is a powerful testament to God's work in our groups. Though intergenerational small groups can be messy, chaotic and complicated, they are well worth the effort.

When we welcome each other into our households, we experience intergenerational community that benefits everyone—especially our children.

—CAROLYN TAKETA is Small Groups Director at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, CA.



## The Importance of a Childcare Covenant

*Learn this necessary step for creating appropriate boundaries.*

By Seth Widner

Ben and Alexis recently set up an appointment with me to discuss the dynamics of their small group. As we sat down together, they immediately began to vent their frustrations. Their group was experiencing stress from high numbers of children. When they told me they had eight adults and 17 children, I understood their perspective. They explained that the children often dominated group gatherings with wild behavior. The other adults refused to host, so Ben and Alexis's home became the weekly playground for the children. They told me several stories involving little feet, holes in sheet rock, and carpet stains. Ben and Alex were becoming burned out and were struggling to continue hosting their group gatherings. They were dancing around the fact that they wanted to throw in the white flag and call it quits.

To be honest, this information shocked me. Ben and Alexis had begun their small-group ministry with great intentions.

About two years earlier, Ben and Alexis contacted me with an interest in being group leaders. We met for lunch at a local restaurant, and I quickly became excited about their potential. In the realm of small-group leadership, they looked like home runs. So I asked, "What type of small group does God want you to lead?" Their faces instantly lit up with joy as they began to share their passion for parents and children. Ben and Alexis absolutely loved the family unit. This passion came from their current experience in raising their own children, and they hoped to lead a small group of parents with young children—something specifically designed to bless both parents and children.

Now, after two years of ministry, I was meeting with a much different couple. Ben and Alexis no longer expressed an interest to lead this style of small group. Their passion for helping parents and children was a distant memory, a thing of the past. What was the source of their frustration? Could their group's stress have been avoided?

I believe the root cause for their stress came from a lack of appropriate boundaries. This could have been avoided by establishing a simple childcare covenant.

### What Is A Childcare Covenant?

A childcare covenant is a simple plan for children during the context of a group meeting. The covenant establishes expectations and healthy boundaries from the beginning stages of a group's life. As a wise man once said, "Failing to plan is planning to fail."

Creating a childcare covenant is the responsibility of the small-group leader or his/her coach. Although there are 101 ways to create a childcare covenant, I recommend following these principles:

1. Get input from every parent.
2. Formulate a simple plan that everyone agrees to keep.
3. Put the covenant on paper and have everyone sign it.
4. Follow through consistently.
5. Remind the group of their covenant often.

### Why Is a Covenant Needed?

Two words explain why a covenant is needed: people matter. Every small group is made up of people, and a small-group leader is responsible for the care of the group members, both young and old. Children bring a powerful dynamic to the life of a small group. Typically they are either the greatest joy or the greatest stress to group gatherings. The small group leader will decide which of these will take place within the life of their group.

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

A childcare covenant will help strengthen the health of the group, individual parents, and their children. It creates a win-win situation through several factors:

- **Strengthening a group's health.** Every small group needs structure. Structure provides a safe place and helps nurture trust among group members. Chaos is never a good formula for success, especially in the realm of small groups. Proverbs 29:15 says “a child left to himself disgraces his mother.” The last thing a group needs is children running around without a plan. Because without a plan, children get bored. And without supervision, children will become ongoing disruptions for the adults, rather than blessings. A childcare covenant allows everyone to understand the plan to care for the children and play an active role in helping out when needed. Each group member is given ownership in the life of the group. Together, the group becomes the loving community needed to raise godly children.
- **Strengthening parents.** A childcare covenant also strengthens each parent. Parents need to know that their children are safe. A parent will not commit to a group that doesn't care for their children, which means establishing a childcare covenant is essential in gaining a parent's trust. When a parent sees that a group genuinely cares for their child, the parent will believe the group cares for them, too. This will help the adults carry on meaningful conversations because the parents won't have to worry if their children are safe.

Parents also gain ongoing support and opportunities to learn from one another. Parenting is one of the hardest responsibilities in life and there is no such thing as a perfect parent. A childcare covenant helps assure parents that the group will love them and support their parental role. Parents will also gain insight and biblical tips along the way. Proverbs 27:17 says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” Together, parents will find strength in raising their children in God's ways.

- **Strengthening children.** Children also benefit from a childcare covenant. They gain a safe place and can learn Christ's ways through community. Children can make friends with one another and with the other adults. Through these friendships, children can come to understand the ways of Christ. They can visually see how a disciple lives. Deuteronomy 11:18–19 says: “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” Through a small-group community, children will gain even more opportunities to learn and practice biblical truth.

If you are a small-group leader, you will benefit from establishing a childcare covenant. Your group will benefit. Ben and Alexis learned their lesson the hard way, but I hope this article prevents you from experiencing such high levels of stress. Why? Because people matter—both you and those under your care.

*Note: Check the “Resources” section of this download to see a sample Childcare Covenant that you can adapt and use in your group.*

—SETH WIDNER is Family Pastor of The Journey Church in Fernandia Beach, Florida. Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.



## When Children Behave Badly

*Important tips and principles for disciplining children in a small group*

By Rachel Gilmore

On its good nights, the small group resembled an engaging extended family party—ten couples of varying ages filling the church with animated discussion, laughter, friendly debates, prayer, and the exuberant sound of children of all ages playing together. On its not so good nights, the small group resembled a reform school filled with overworked, overly stressed parents whose bickering offspring had run amuck through multiple children’s classrooms, leaving a trail of tears and toys in their wake.

For Little Village, as this group became known, the issue of discipline threatened to break up the happy “family” whose full intergenerational roster numbered almost 50 members.

### R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Respect is the number one issue for intergenerational small groups to address when it comes to discipline, and it starts with the small-group leaders. Leaders need to take the bull by the horns and be upfront and honest with their group members from the very beginning, facilitating a conversation among parents about how and when discipline will take place.

**Common ground.** Scott Smith, MA/LCPC of Chicago Christian Counseling Center, has some good advice: “Have the adults talk about it first. What is acceptable behavior? How much discipline can another parent (or a babysitter) have over someone else’s child? What are acceptable boundaries? Verbal or physical reprimands? Time outs? Being asked to leave the group? You need to establish the ground rules.”

“Your group needs to have shared standards for big issues that may arise,” adds veteran Christian educator Karen Maurer. “Those would probably include things like damage to the house or church, bullying of other children, and mistreatment of animals (if meeting in someone’s home). Kids respond to authority. If they don’t know where the limits are, they’ll keep going.”

These limits, boundaries and ground rules can be formally established in the small-group covenant that is discussed and/or signed by all group members at the initial meeting. For any new members who come along later, the leaders should be sure to make them aware of the discipline guidelines that the group has agreed to follow.

**Talk it up.** Once the parents in the group decide on boundaries and limits, they need to share that information with their children. If possible, this sharing should be done in a group setting with all parents and children present so it is obvious that all households are on the same page. In addition, parents should remind children before each meeting what behavior is okay and what is not.

“You can’t over-communicate enough,” says Smith, who is the elder overseeing small-group ministry at his church. “Group members need to make it clear to their children: ‘This is who is in charge. These are the rules. This is what’s acceptable.’”

Kristi Laney, small-group leader at Village Christian Church in Minooka, IL, says: “I know in my home, I’ve had to remind other kids of the rules, ask them to share, help clean up, or ask them to stop doing something. But if the behavior is to a certain level, I will direct them to the parent. I think in certain situations it can be difficult because you don’t want to offend the other parent if their child is doing something wrong, and you don’t want it to affect a relationship.”

### We Are Family

Which brings up a very good point. Small groups often begin to feel like family, especially intergenerational small groups where parents and children are mixing and mingling with other households. This relationship building is a blessing, yet the road is paved with potential pot holes because people are—well, people. And



## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

oftentimes the informality that develops in family-like friendships can lead to not following formal procedures very closely, which means the leaders need to watch for (and try to prevent) accidents waiting to happen.

“The old saying ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ is a good one, and it’s an advantage of groups where parents and children are present together because they’ll have the opportunity to learn from each other,” says Maurer. “Not only is your group benefitting through its formal fellowship and study, but also from the parent-to-parent support and informal parenting education that’s going to happen as families get to know each other well.”

Lisa Parker, a member of Laney’s small group at Village Christian Church, would agree. When those small-group bonds begin to feel like family ties, parents will often jump right in to correct any child’s behavior, not just their own. However, Parker offers a bit of advice when offender’s parent is standing right there in the room. “You may want to point out to the parent in a respectful way why the current actions may not be safe. Sometimes the parent may just not notice what’s going on until it’s pointed out,” she explains. Giving the parent a chance to correct things leads to fewer toes being stepped on and fewer tempers fraying while giving the message that families support each other and help each other out.

“We are called by God to come alongside each other,” Smith shares. “We all have a responsibility to help other parents communicate to their kids what is okay. If there’s an issue, address it. Don’t let it fester. Address it in a timely and loving manner.”

### All My Brothers, Sisters, and Me

But sometimes discipline is not the issue at all. Something may be going on with the child in terms of developmental delays or medical conditions—issues that may not even have been professionally addressed yet. Group members need to tread carefully along this road, walking alongside the parents and using Ephesians 4:14–16 as a guide.

**Speak the truth in love.** “I am a strong advocate of ‘I’ messages,” Maurer says. “It’s inhumane to have a public conversation with the parents if it really appears that there is something more serious going on with a child’s behavior. The group leader can take the parent(s) aside and say something like, ‘It looks to me like you’re at your wit’s end with George. You tell him something and he ignores it. You tell him again, and he ignores it again. Do you need help?’ Then you have the possibility of a redemptive ‘village’ where all the residents come together to help raise this child and support the parents in their challenges.” That help may include praying for or with the parents, seeking further advice from the church’s pastoral staff, and/or working with the parents to find appropriate medical treatment or counseling.

“It’s certainly good,” Smith adds, “to know up front whatever special issues are present in the group.” Parents of special needs children should be open with group leaders about how their family handles social interaction and discipline, and group leaders should communicate that to the other families so that both children and adults can be welcoming and inclusive to those with different needs.

**Confronting a brother.** For situations that have moved beyond the small-group leaders’ diplomacy skills and counseling abilities, Smith relies on Matthew 18:15–16 as a guiding principle.

So when a discipline situation has become a discipline problem and the leader speaking privately to the parent(s) has not resolved things, the next step is to go to the church governing board and/or staff and ask for them to meet with the parents. “One of the worst things you can do is let it go,” says Smith. “It feels like that may be the easier route, but it will lead to bigger problems.”

Newton’s Third Law of Motion says that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. While Newton was a physicist, his principle certainly applies to group dynamics in intergenerational settings. There have to be natural and logical consequences established for every potential discipline situation, and that applies to the adult reactions, as well. Groups would do well to establish those ground rules early and stick to them, allowing their members to grow up into Christ and build their groups up in love.

—RACHEL GILMORE is author of [The Complete Leader’s Guide to Christian Retreats](#) and [Church Programs and Celebrations for All Generations](#).

### Discuss:

1. Have you ever had a negative experience with children in your small group? Was it handled well?
2. What kinds of boundaries seem appropriate to you when it comes to a child’s behavior?
3. What steps does your group need to take in order to set appropriate boundaries and move forward?





## A Tale of Two Intergenerational Small Groups

*What I learned when one worked and the other did not*  
By Rick Lowry

I have led two intergenerational small groups. One was a wonderful experience; the other was a disaster. First let's look at the successful one, and why I think it worked.

### A Positive Experience

The intergenerational group that my wife and I lead every other Wednesday night has been one of the richest experiences of my 40 years of small-group participation. Even though our ages run from early 30's to late 60's, a rich, deep fellowship marks the group meetings and our interaction throughout the week.

This broad age span was not intentional; the group came together a few years ago based on a combination of available meeting nights and friendship connections. But we've come to appreciate our distinctions and view them as group strengths. The group works well for several reasons.

- **Age differences are appreciated.** We view our age differences as a way to draw strength from each other. To begin with, older folks offer wisdom; younger folks offer strong backs!

During the first year of the group, there were occasional awkward moments. The younger folks found themselves wondering who exactly this "John Wayne" was that was the star in some retiree's favorite movie. Or, when the subject of popular music came up, most of the older folks couldn't really identify their favorite rap artist. But over time the group members came to realize that it was fun to listen and learn about each other's cultures. And with the listening came understanding and mutual respect.

That being said, the group activities and schedule have to be chosen with everyone in mind. The upper-age members of our group are in bed early and tend to talk about what they saw on the morning show; the younger set tends to talk about Conan O'Brien's jokes last night. It can be challenging to choose activities that take in account the various schedules and rhythms.

- **We serve together.** One element of our group life that strengthens group unity is our service and outreach projects outside the group meeting. These activities are chosen with the various ages in mind. As we serve together, not only do we help advance the cause of Christ, but also we grow stronger in our relationships with each other. Just last week we partnered with a help agency in the inner city to serve a meal for underserved people in our community who were attending a job-training seminar. The younger people in our group moved tables and carried heavy dishes. The older folks helped serve the meal and enjoyed conversation with the seminar attendees.

When we take a turn cleaning our church's worship center, there's something for everyone to do. Some clean windows and doors, others operate heavy vacuum cleaners. We have fun doing the task together and even more fun when we go out for dessert at the pie place down the street afterward—here's a hint: all generations like pie!

- **Young at heart, old at heart.** The biggest reason this group is a success is the mindset of the individuals in the group. Every member is resolved to make strengths out of our differences. For example, our youngest couple just adopted a baby from Russia, their first child. They love drawing from the wisdom of the parents and grandparents who have been though this already. On the other hand, the oldest couple in our group could best be described as "68 on the outside but 25 on the inside." And so they are always open to trying new things and jumping in with the "young people." (I love it that they think of me as one of those!)
- **This is family.** Our intergenerational group functions as family. In the past, people tended to stay in the same geographic area, living close to family. Children were raised and influenced not just by mom and dad, but also by grandparents, aunts and uncles, or cousins. In the way we currently speak of

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

community, the family used to be people's small group. But today many natural families are spread out—either by miles or by dysfunctional family relationships.

That's why I'm thankful we experience these dynamics in our small group. For all of us, our small group is in a very real sense a family. We step into each other's lives where our physical families cannot.

### A Challenging Experience

My other intergenerational small-group experience was the one I fondly recall as “The Group from Hell.” In four decades of group leadership I have never struggled like I did with this group.

This was an all-men's discipling group, which I started with a goal of being accountable to each other for a deeper walk with Christ. At this point in my life, I had led many meaningful men's discipling groups, but this one was a whole different animal.

In the case of the group my wife and I lead, the age variance just happened. In the case of this group, I intentionally chose multiple ages and life stages: two men in their 30's, two in their 40's, and two in their 50's. This choice turned out to be a source of conflict with this particular group of men.

Many of the elements that made this group dysfunctional were the same as any other dysfunctional small group, regardless of age. There was a lack of commitment to attendance at group meetings. Individuals insisted on their own agenda for the group instead of what had been agreed upon at the beginning. The men spent no time with each other outside the meeting—in fact, the personal relationships between the group members were strained. Spiritual immaturity in individual lives carried over in to the meetings. There was a stubborn refusal to be vulnerable in any way. One guy always managed to work conservative politics into any discussion. Another man could work creationism into any discussion. Another group member never said anything at all.

I spent more than three years trying to make this group work, but never made any headway. (Other than all of that, this was a magnificent group, the memory of which I will always treasure.)

### Lessons Learned

The biggest lesson I learned from the negative group experience was this: commitment to the intergenerational idea is essential. The members of the group need to be completely committed to unselfish interchange without letting age get in the way of community. They have to be open to listening and learning from each other, and to finding ways to make age different an asset rather than a liability.

These guys just weren't dealing with the same life issues, and they tended to focus on their own perceived needs rather than listening to the other guys' hurts and joys. Our positive group has worked hard to understand the strength that can come from age diversity. In this men's group, the age factor only magnified the problems that already existed.

So, my takeaway lesson from these two mixed-age groups is that the greatest factor in intergenerational small-group success is the mindset of the group members. If they are resolved to see age differences as growth opportunities, their small group can thrive.

—RICK LOWRY is the Small Groups Pastor at Crossroads Christian Church in Newburgh, IN. Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.

### Discuss:

1. Have you had positive or negative experiences in small groups with different generations?
2. Do small groups with multiple generations of adults pose special challenges, or are they like any other group?
3. What would need to happen to increase the generational participation and impact in our group?



## Three Kinds of Mentoring

*Because different types of relationships require different types of skills.*

By Fred Smith

Mentoring is back in favor again, like a wonderful old story that hasn't been told for so long it sounds new. Mentoring is an updated version of one of the oldest and best methods of learning. In times before academic degrees were mandatory for many careers, mentoring was the accepted system for training people for everything from manual skills to professions, such as medicine and law.

Today there are several types of mentoring. I will discuss three: role model, lifestyle, and skills-art mentoring.

### Role Model

Role models personify who we would like to become. My wife, Mary Alice, had three women in her life who laid out the path she wanted to walk. The first was her high school teacher, Miss Brown, who was stately, dignified—totally ladylike. Mary Alice saw in her what she felt a southern lady should be. Even today Mary Alice will refer to her as the perfect lady.

Next was her Bible teacher, Mrs. Keen, who taught a group of young mothers to understand the Scripture. Her cup overflowed with love and grace from the Lord. Mary Alice would say of her, "She is what a Christian should be."

Then there was Miss Gordon—a tiny, immaculate, white-haired woman in her eighties. She was raised in culture and wealth but spent a great deal of her time reaching prisoners. She personified the quiet power of victory. When she passed away, it was a short step from here to heaven.

Mary Alice found in these three women role models who mentored her adult life and vectored her lifestyle. They influenced her not by what they had but by who they were.

Observation and identification are the important elements in role-model mentoring. Often the role model is not conscious of his or her effect on another person. Sometimes there is little personal contact between the two. For example, a role model might be a character from the Bible. Some say, "I'm like Peter," or "I resonate with Paul." In other words, role-model mentoring is largely unintentional on the mentor's part.

### Lifestyle Mentoring

Another form of mentoring defines the principles of living. I recently heard a young man say, "My grandfather was everything to me. He loved me, and he taught me how to live." What a blessing.

As we look at Scripture for lifestyle mentoring, we immediately think of the relationship between Paul and Timothy. We don't know how much technical skill as a missionary Paul gave Timothy, but we do know Paul was an excellent sponsor. We know he was a father in the faith. He let Timothy observe him at work. Paul promoted him to the churches. In the broad sense, we could call Paul a lifestyle mentor to Timothy.

This type of mentoring is a kind of parenting without the typical parental responsibilities. The real responsibility falls on the young person to absorb and to observe correctly.

The responsibility of the lifestyle mentor is to be open and real and to consistently personify who he is so that the young person receives a clear signal. The mentor must provide a comfortable atmosphere in which the student feels free to ask any question he or she needs answered.

A good mentor never ridicules a question. He may choose not to answer it, but he is careful never to ridicule, for questions are the pump that makes the answers flow.

## EFFECTIVE INTERGENERATIONAL SMALL GROUPS

### Skills-Art Mentoring

Skills-art mentoring is a one-on-one relation between a mentor and mentee for the specific and definable development of a skill or an art.

One of my favorite mentoring stories is of the young pianist who came to Leonard Bernstein and asked to be mentored by him. Bernstein said, "Tell me what you want to do, and I will tell you whether or not you're doing it." Bernstein had a deep understanding of mentoring. The young man initiated the contact, he had a specific request, and he made the request of an authority. Bernstein essentially said to the young man, "You're responsible for your playing and your practice. The one thing you can't do is hear yourself as a great pianist hears you. That I can do and will do for you."

In a church, skills-art mentoring might be used to prepare a young person for a particular ministry either inside or outside the church.

Effective mentoring has no set formula. It's a living relationship and progresses in fits and starts. Even so, identifying which type of mentoring someone expects from you is the beginning of success.

—FRED SMITH; adapted from *The Pastor's Soul, Vol. 5: Leading with Integrity*, © 1999 by the author and Christianity Today International, published by Bethany House.

### Discuss:

1. Have you been involved in any of these types of mentoring? If so, what happened?
2. Which type of mentoring seems best suited for small groups?
3. What steps can I take to engage in mentoring in our small group?



## **Sample: Childcare Covenant**

*Adapt this form as needed to set appropriate boundaries for children in your group.*

The purpose of this covenant is for the safety of our children. As a group, we will strive to maintain an age-appropriate environment that is free from child hazards. During our group gathering time, we will support each parent in his/her role as the primary spiritual leader in their child's life. We understand each individual parent is ultimately responsible for his/her child.

### **Our Group Childcare Covenant:**

1. We will express Christ's love, truth, and grace to every child within our group.
2. We will support each parent in their role as the primary spiritual leader for their children.
3. We will be living examples of Jesus Christ and will be above reproach in the presence of each child.
4. We will provide our children their needed safety through childcare during our group discussion/Bible study/prayer time.
5. We are committed to teaching each child to respect the Host's Home.
6. If the Host Home is damaged, each parent will take responsibility for their child's actions. The Host(s) will be reimbursed for any expenses. If a parent cannot afford the expenses, the group will commit to raising the money together.
7. We will seek to strengthen parent-child relationships when the opportunity arises.

### **Group Signatures:**

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—Source: Seth Widner; copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.



### Further Exploration

Websites and books to support and equip intergenerational small groups in your church

[SmallGroups.com](http://SmallGroups.com). Small-groups training resources from Christianity Today International.

1. [Small-Group Host](#): Orientation Guide
2. [Small-Group Apprentice](#): Orientation Guide
3. [Family Friendly Small Groups](#): Practical Ministry Skills

[Familymin.org](http://Familymin.org) The website for the National Association of Family Ministries, which exists to network, resource, and equip people involved in family ministries.

[LeadershipJournal.net](http://LeadershipJournal.net). This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[TodaysChildrensMinistry.com](http://TodaysChildrensMinistry.com). This website offers great tips and resources for ministering to children both at church and at home.

**Family-Integrated Church** by *J. Mark Fox*. The story of a church that is surviving and thriving without age-segregated programs. (Salem Communications, 2006; ISBN 978-1600343148)

**I'm a Leader...Now What?** by *Michael Mack*. Practical advice on how to guide and maintain an effective small group (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720769).

**Making Small Groups Work** by *Henry Cloud and John Townsend*. This book provides small-group leaders with valuable guidance and information on how they can help their groups to grow spiritually, emotionally, and relationally (Zondervan; ISBN 978-0310255123).

**The Family-Friendly Church** by *Ben Freudenberg*. Discover how key churches are revolutionizing family ministry by discipling parents to lead their children, bringing families together at church, and equipping families for a home-based, church-supported ministry. (Group Publishing, 1998; ISBN 978-0764420481)

**Uniting Church and Home** by *Eric Wallace*. A blueprint for rebuilding church community. (Solutions for Integrating Church, 1999; ISBN 978-0966731101)

**Why Didn't You Warn Me?** by *Pat J. Sikora*. This focused guide trains the novice or experienced small-group leader to deal effectively with the obstacles of group life (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).