

Why Children Are the Most Important People in the Church



By Damon DeLillo

Back in the day, there was a famous preacher story that circulated amongst what were then known as “Christian Education Directors”—our modern day family pastors. It was said that D.L. Moody had come back from a tent revival meeting where he reported that 2 1/2 people were saved. Whoever he was talking to replied, “You mean, two adults and one child?” D.L. Moody responded, “No, two children and one adult. **When you save a child, you save a life—a whole life.”**

I came to know Jesus when I was 6-years-old at a Vacation Bible School. Over the years, I’ve found out that I’m not alone. I’m just one of the many people who decided to follow Jesus as a child and one of the many people who came to know Christ at a Vacation Bible School. **Nearly 80% of people in our churches today decided to follow Jesus before age 18. 50% of them decided to follow Jesus before age 12.** In fact, it becomes exponentially rarer and exponentially harder for a person to decide to follow Christ after age 18.

This shouldn’t really surprise us. In a statement that He must have known would end up on the wall of virtually every children’s ministry in the world, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus wasn’t just commenting on what adults need to do to enter the Kingdom of Heaven or even insight into what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about; Jesus was telling us something fundamental about childhood.

There is a season in a person’s life when they are most open to learning what it means to trust God.

It’s a season—sometime between 4-14—when people are more moldable than they will ever be in their lifetime. It’s when people are forming their understanding of the world, of relationships, of love, of God. It’s a season when people are impressionable. We should be intentional about ensuring that they get the right impression.

What is rooted in the heart of a child is almost impossible to uproot in the life of an adult.

I don't think this season is by accident. When God said, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven", I think He really did mean *everything*. It is during this season we need to focus our efforts on helping people place their trust in Jesus.

Many people call this the 4-14 Window. What we do during this window may be the most important thing the church does. However, in many churches, what is happening in Children's Ministry between ages 4 and 14 is woefully under supported by and invisible to the rest of the church. This is nothing new. Nearly 60 years ago, Henrietta Mears said,

When you look at most churches—their programming, their staff, and their budgets—it appears that children must first become prodigals, then we will go about putting together elaborate programs and events to save them.

Being in ministry we know that this is not an either/or proposition. But think about this for a moment. Think about all of the money, volunteers and resources we put behind outreach events for adults. What if we reversed this? What could you do in your community if the worship department gave you the Christmas Pageant Budget? What if all of those countless volunteer hours spent in rehearsals beginning in July (Christmas in July?) were spent praying for children and families, calling and visiting families and their children, and equipping people to become better small group leaders and Sunday school teachers for all of the families that will show up in the fall? What if the adult Sunday school class that has been meeting for the last ten years, disbanded and took all of that knowledge and wisdom they acquired and committed to investing in a small group of kids every week for an entire year? Isn't that the kind of small group leader or Sunday school teacher we all want for our kids?

Unsaved adults will always be among us and they will need environments designed to reach them, but a person is a child only for a short time. And in this short time, the entire course of a life can be altered.

How many adult problems would be solved if every preschooler who entered our churches left knowing they have a Heavenly Father who loves them? Or what if every elementary child left knowing they can place their trust in Jesus for every area of their lives? Or what if every High School student left knowing their place in God's story and having made a lifetime commitment to serving Christ. What if every college ministry developed that calling to life service? What if everything we did for children focused on winning them to Christ?

God intends that we should win people in the days of their youth while their hearts are young and sensitive. But we are apt to let the springtime pass and then with great effort create a religious fervor by our own efforts and win men to Christ. We work hard, spend thousands of dollars and at the best get disappointingly small returns. We have waited too long. That which we should do is to work with God in His seasons.

Evangelism of Youth, Albert Gage, 1922

Jesus put the child in the midst of His ministry and therefore we should put the child in the midst of the church. Not only do I believe that God blesses this, but if we were really honest this would be the most strategic use of our resources and it would bear the most fruit for the Kingdom of God in the future.

We are shaping the future of the church in the children's ministries of today.

What would the next generation look like if a church invested in its youngest members? Would we need as many Christmas Pageants and Easter events? Maybe with enough resources we could do VBS every Sunday!

Damon DeLillo is the Creative Director at Gospel Light and Director of Family Ministries at Mission Church, Ventura, CA.