

Blogs by Mark Entzminger

Basic Ingredients for a Healthy Children's Ministry

How to Develop Leaders, Disciple Kids, and Grow Your Ministry

BLOGS BY MARK ENTZMINGER



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introduction

What Does a Healthy Kids' Ministry Look Like?

Today kids' ministry leaders face some significant challenges when it comes to reaching children and families and helping them grow as Spirit-filled disciples. In my role, I have the opportunity to interact with kids' ministry leaders across the country. Every week, I hear questions like . . .

- What can we do on Sunday to help kids apply what they're learning throughout the week?
- As a kids' minister, how can I communicate that what I'm doing is just as important, critical, and valuable as other pastors?
- How do I lead volunteers well?
- How can I do more ministry with fewer resources?
- How can I find the balance between helping kids maintain their innocence without completely ignoring the important topics of today?

While there's no quick fix to solving all of these problems, I believe there is a way we can shift our focus to find a solution—building *healthy* ministries.

In the spring of 2015, we launched a new online community for kids' ministry leaders and volunteers, the blog <u>AG Kids Blog</u>. Our goal was to help kids' ministry leaders overcome challenges and build the kind of ministry that will create a significant impact in their church and community.

OUR DESIRE: Healthy Leaders, Healthy Disciples, Healthy Ministries

The blog was created to equip and empower kids ministry leaders based on three primary areas: cultivate healthy disciples, develop as healthy leaders, and grow healthy ministries. Here's just a brief definition for the three key aspects:

Healthy Leaders

If you want to cultivate healthy disciples and grow healthy ministries, you need to become a healthy leader. Therefore, it's important to learn about personal development, team management, staff relationships, vision casting, and helping other leaders grow. Sometimes that means giving you permission to take care of yourself and your family first. Other times it means providing you with resources to help kids grow, learn, and develop.

Healthy Disciples

Cultivating healthy disciples focuses on the spiritual formation and Christian education of children and asks the question, "How do we lead children toward becoming lifelong Spirit-empowered disciples?"

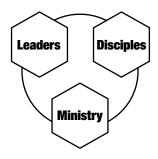
We believe that helping children grow as healthy disciples is best described through key elements contained within the acronym **DEEP**. We want kids to **DISCOVER** God's heart through His Word and the Holy Spirit, **EXPERIENCE** individualized outcomes through participatory learning, **EXPAND** their thought processes to become critical thinkers who own their faith, by leaders who **PASTOR** kids relationally to allow the Holy Spirit to disciple.

Kids should not see the Bible as individual stories, but they should *discover* the heart of their Heavenly Father through each encounter with His Word. As kids are involved in well-crafted *experiences*, learning can become personal. We should work to help kids *expand* their understanding of Scripture by embracing God as the hero in every story; the Bible is ultimately about Him and how He interacts with His creation. As leaders take the time to know each child, they are able to *pastor* the child through life's ups and downs and help facilitate opportunities for the Holy Spirit to transform the child's heart.

Healthy Ministry

One danger facing the church today is to focus more on creating an experience that entertains children while missing the immense amount of discipleship potential within children. A healthy ministry will not be satisfied with a room full of spectators. Discipleship requires so much more.

We believe that the next generation of kids' ministry will move from observation to participation. As a kids' ministry leader, one of the best things you can do is look for ways to make the transition toward allowing children to fully participate and engaged in ministry. Create environments where spiritual knowledge and formation becomes a part of the everyday life of a child, not just a one- or two-hour experience.



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We believe each of these three areas is equally important for achieving our goals as kids' ministry leaders. You can't cultivate healthy disciples if you're not developing as a healthy leader. You can't grow a healthy ministry if the individual kids in your ministry aren't growing spiritually. You won't grow as a healthy leader without an intentional focus on evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of your ministry.

What is "Health"?

That's a great question and one that we spend a lot of time discussing. Health is not merely size, nor is it measurable simply by observing obedient children. However, there are some key evidences of a healthy church that are described in Acts 2:42–47. These have been summarized by Alton Garrison as Connect, Grow, Serve, Go, and Worship. A great deal has been written about this topic in the books listed below. If you have not read them, they're a great foundation to build on.

The Acts 2 Church
A Spirit-Empowered Church
A Spirit-Empowered Life

In the pages that follow, I will outline some practical ways you can begin developing a healthy kids' ministry by investing in each of these three areas.

Are you ready to transform your kids' ministry so that the kids you're reaching know and experience the transformative power of the Holy Spirit's activity in their life? Then they will begin to experience the abundant life God has for them.

Let's get started!

chapter one

Healthy Leaders: Growing as a Healthy Leader

Busyness is one of the greatest temptations we face as ministry leaders. There are always more things we can do, events we can attend, and families we could reach than we have time for. At the same time, some might feel an innate pressure to work even harder because of the eternal implications our work has in the Kingdom.

There are two things we need if we want to grow and develop into the kind of leader God wants us to become—margin and balance.

MARGIN: A Surprising Secret for Healthy Kids' Ministry Leaders

When the Sabbath was introduced, it was for our benefit. That practice creates margin. God designed us to intentionally slow down, clear our minds, and rest. Unfortunately, margin seems to be in short supply for many kids' ministry leaders. It seems like there's always more things to do than hours in the day.

One of the most valuable things you can do if you want to embrace the idea of being a healthy kids' ministry leader is to *slow down*.

While it might seem unnatural at first, here are two reasons we should slow down:

1. Slowing down increases creativity. Slowing down your pace can speed up your creativity. It's hard to have our best thinking when we're running at 100 miles per hour. Scott Belsky, founder of Behance and 99u, said:

"The secret behind many of the greatest dishes is patience and pacing. When you cook something slowly, at lower heat for a longer time, the flavors and textures can yield culinary masterpieces. The process of our own creations isn't much different."²

Remember taking notes on paper in school? Inside the center part of the page was where the work took place, but the top, bottom, and sides were bonus areas on the page. This space allowed you to doodle and be creative.

Ministry is the same way. There needs to be bumpers around our work that allow the creativity to flow.

2. Slowing down allows us to identify ministry needs we might miss. One of the things that my friend Heath Adamson always says is that part of being a healthy disciple is being intentional about "walking slowly through crowds as Jesus did." Often when we're so consumed with the next project or task, we miss ministry opportunities that might be right in front of us.

Life can be incredibly hectic and stressful. If we want to continue to grow, it is important to take some time to be still intentionally.

As we consider how to create more margin in our lives, here's a simple formula for rest to consider:

One hour a day One day a month One week a year

Right now you're probably thinking, "That's impossible. There's no way I can do that with my current schedule." Just try it.

Take some time right now to look at your calendar for the next six months. Intentionally set aside time one hour a day plus one day a month for the rest of the year. If it's possible to add a week, do it. If not, make sure it's on your calendar for next year.

For me, my time for creativity and reflection happens when I run in the mornings. It requires that I get up before the sun on most days, but that time is so valuable: no technology, no interruptions, just me, my thoughts, my Savior, and some pavement.

Margin is not something that just happens. You have to fight for it. This simple formula can help you take steps toward creating more margin in your life so you can become the type of leader God desires.

BALANCE: Practical Ways to Balance Work, Life, and Ministry

There's no denying that kids' ministry can be consuming. There are always more programs or ministry events or gatherings we can create. However, if we're not careful, there's a real possibility that our vocational ministry (whether paid or volunteer) can have a negative impact on our ability to effectively minister and lead our families to live Spirit-filled lives.

Here are three practical ways we can protect ourselves from overworking and find a healthy balance for work, life, and ministry:

1. **Define your priorities.** We should be keenly aware of what our priorities are and how they rank. What are the things within each area of your work, life, and ministry that are non-negotiables?

For example, you realize that you can't pour into others when you're on empty. Therefore, your own spiritual life should be a priority.

2. Develop systems around your priorities. The reason most leaders struggle to find balance is because they don't take time on the front end to protect from crossing boundaries. If you set your own spiritual life as a priority, then develop a system to protect it. For example, set aside one hour a day, one day a month, and one week a year when you focus on your own spiritual growth. Put it on your calendar.

3. Don't be afraid to ask the tough questions.

Part of improving as a leader is being willing to make changes based on feedback from others around you. That might mean asking your spouse, "What's it like being married to me as a children's pastor?" Or ask your pastor, "What's it like to have me as a children's pastor?" If you truly want to find balance in your life, it might require receiving tough feedback from others.

When multiple important things pull for our attention, we have to make tough choices. There is real value in taking time to create space in our lives, clarifying what is most important, developing systems to implement those values, and getting feedback from others on how we are doing in our efforts to balance our priorities. Margin and balance are essential for becoming a healthy leader and are essential for developing a healthy kids' ministry.

chapter two

Healthy Disciples: The Key to Healthy Discipleship and How to Measure It

Discipleship can be difficult to define for any ministry, especially kids' ministry. What should you look for? How do you know if a kid is being challenged by the Holy Spirit and growing as a follower of Christ? As kids' ministry leaders, we recognize that if we want to build healthy ministries, we must develop healthy disciples.

At the Assemblies of God, we believe that the most effective ministries are built on a foundation of outcomes-based discipleship. Here's a definition of outcomes-based discipleship:

> Outcomes-based discipleship is an approach that builds from age and stage, layer upon layer, from cradle to grave.

Put simply, we are passionate about shepherding the hearts of children, not only while they are under the care of our ministry but also twenty years from now. So what are the implications of this concept for our ministry?

Three Key Aspects of Healthy, Outcomes-Based Discipleship

- 1. Age and Stage. By implementing an outcomes-based approach to discipleship, you can identify specific, age-appropriate outcomes to expect as part of the process of a person becoming a disciple. This helps you determine not only the discipleship that is age appropriate for social development but also for the stage of that person's relationship with Christ.
- 2. Layer upon Layer. An outcomes-based approach breaks down the silos that are created with different age-based ministries by beginning with the end in mind. Discipleship is not isolated. By focusing on the big picture, all the ministries within the church work together to build upon one another.
- 3. Cradle to Grave. Outcomes-based discipleship establishes a foundation of lifelong discipleship that helps to secure the faith of the next generation. Our goal is not only to look for an outcome on a week-by-week basis, but also for our children to maintain faith through every season of life. We want them to develop discipleship habits that are applicable at every stage in life.

How to Measure Healthy Discipleship

Outcomes-based discipleship is beginning with the end in mind. Each Sunday School lesson, Bible verse memorized, and high five from a volunteer is an integral part of this lifelong intentional approach. How do you know if you're truly accomplishing your goal to develop Spirit-filled disciples and move kids deeper into their relationship with God? The best way to measure whether we're building a ministry on outcomes-based discipleship is to measure both micro- and macro-outcomes.

Micro-Outcomes

Micro-outcomes are those short-term indicators that show kids in your ministry are engaging with the Holy Spirit and growing as disciples. You can determine if outcomes-based discipleship is occurring in your children's ministry by asking the following questions:

- 1. Are kids memorizing Scripture?
- 2. Are kids sharing their faith?
- 3. Are kids exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit?
- 4. How do kids respond when things don't go their way?

Macro-Outcomes

Macro-outcomes are the longer-term indicators that show if kids in your ministry are growing spiritually over time. While macro-outcomes are harder to measure, they help us develop a streamlined discipleship strategy throughout our churches, connecting kids' ministry to youth ministry to young adult ministry and on down the line.

In Alton Garrison's book, *A Spirit-Empowered Church*, he describes four key indicators that capture the core of these outcomes:

- 1. A Spirit-empowered disciple loves the Lord.
- $2. \ \ A \ Spirit-empowered \ disciple \ loves \ the \ Word.$
- 3. A Spirit-empowered disciple loves people.
- 4. A Spirit-empowered disciple loves His [God's] mission.³

You can determine if this happening by answering questions like these:

- 1. Are kids more hungry for Scripture today than they were a year ago?
- 2. Are kids more interested in making connections with the Holy Spirit in their lives?
- 3. Are kids asking questions about how to apply new things they're learning?

Building your ministry around a strategy of outcomes-based discipleship is an important part of developing a healthy ministry. If your ministry has adopted an outcomes-based discipleship strategy, you are not only focused on a child's social and spiritual development from week to week and grade level to grade level, but are also concerned that discipleship becomes an integral part of that child's life, one that will last far beyond childhood.

chapter three

Healthy Ministry: Biblical Truth in Action

We are privileged in children's ministry to be some of the first people who introduce the Bible to children. What an honor! With that honor we also have the responsibility to make sure we not only teach how each story fits into the greater picture of how God so loves the world, but also help kids grasp how to apply it in their lives.

Helping Kids Understand Their Place in God's Bigger Story

Teaching children that Scripture is more than just a series of stories with a moral is one of our greatest responsibilities in children's ministry. In every Bible story the ultimate hero is God himself. He is the miracle worker. He is the One who came to save the world.

If we aren't careful, kids will get the idea that the story of Daniel is just about Daniel's bravery or that the story of Queen Esther is just about making good use of a position of influence or that the story of Joseph is just about sticking with it through the hard times until you've made it big.

So how can we help children understand that in each story in the Bible—and in their own lives today—God is the ultimate hero? Here are four ways:

- Share how the lesson you're teaching fits into the bigger picture of the Bible. Provide context by letting them know if the story occurred before or after Christ's birth. If it's an Old Testament story, show them how it ultimately leads to the coming of Christ. If it's a New Testament story, explain how the event fits into spreading the gospel around the world. Help them understand how this lesson applies to their lives today.
- Equip parents to have everyday conversations.
 Provide parents with examples, ideas, conversation starters, and discussion prompts. When you educate and equip parents to talk about God and His Word with their kids, you enable an ongoing conversation about Scripture and give children the chance to think about how it applies to their life throughout the week.
- Discuss ways the Bible has affected your life.

 Talk with kids about how you have personally learned about your role in God's story from lessons in the Bible. Then you open up an opportunity for them to start thinking about how it might apply to them.
- Ask questions that allow kids to process biblical truth. Don't simply ask them for the moral of the story. Regularly ask kids, "What does this say about God?" and "What does this mean for you?" Give them the opportunity to process verbally.

But effective ministry requires more than our approach to teaching: it also requires us to find a way for kids to apply what they've learned in their lives. It's critical for kids' ministries to make a transition from a culture of observation to participation.

Moving from Observation to Participation

Building a ministry that's based on participation rather than observation is one of the most effective ways to engage kids and lead them toward becoming Spirit-empowered disciples. As children's ministry leaders, learning how to translate that idea into practical steps is critical in developing this kind of participation strategy in our ministry.

If you want to create the kind of ministry that actively engages every child in the group, here are three things to keep in mind as you build your kids' ministry experiences:

- Create an environment where every child has the opportunity to connect with God individually. As you think through your opportunities, set aside times for kids to connect with God in a personal and individual way. Teach them how to pray and give them opportunities to do so. Leading a group of children in prayer is different from leading a time when children can pray and respond.
- Enable kids to express what God said to them. When you give kids the chance to express what they learned and how God spoke to them, it allows them to internalize the experience. Whether it's through verbal discussion or asking them to create something, utilize simple ways to keep a topic alive, but in a way that allows them to actively think through how the lesson applies to them.
- Encourage kids to minister to others around them. One of the greatest ways you can create

an environment in which kids become active participants in ministry is to provide them with opportunities to engage and minister to others. It might be allowing kids to pray for one another or helping them encourage a particular kid who is going through a difficult time.

Each of these ideas is an opportunity for you to transition your ministry from observation to participation. As you think through your programming each week, ask:

- How can every kid have an opportunity to connect with God individually?
- What's one way kids can express what God spoke to them during the service?
- How can every kid minister to others?

When you start thinking through your ministry experience with these kinds of questions, you'll begin to see the kind of differences a participation-based kids' ministry can create in the individual lives of every kid in your ministry.

chapter four

Are You Ready to Build a Healthy Kids' Ministry?

One of the greatest disciplines children's ministers can develop is to learn how to be strategic in every aspect of ministry. Unfortunately, that's a lot easier said than done. It's easy to get so caught up in "doing ministry" that we forget to take time to evaluate our efforts and improve our strategy for reaching families and changing lives.

When it comes to being strategic about ministry, there are hundreds of different questions you can ask. The kids' ministry leaders who are the most successful in leading healthy ministries consistently ask themselves three questions:

1. What is our strategy for discipleship? There is a difference between knowing your strategy and making sure your curriculum and leaders are working to support this strategy. If there are any elements in your ministry that are not aligning with

this strategy, take some time to develop a plan to bring them into alignment. If you do not have a discipleship strategy, take some time to develop one.

- 2. What is our strategy for leadership development for volunteers? A healthy and sustainable kids' ministry relies more on well-equipped laity than it does on the children's pastor. A healthy children's ministry has an intentional strategy for equipping and empowering volunteers to lead the ministry and build relationships with kids.
- 3. What is our strategy for measuring ministry effectiveness? The final step in any strategy is to define the outcomes you're going to use to measure success. You can't manage what you don't measure. While some ministry results are intangible, if kids in your ministry are growing to become Spiritempowered disciples, the Bible tells us their lives will reflect that change. Every healthy ministry has a way to measure the tangible discipleship outcomes.

Building a healthy ministry doesn't happen by accident. It takes time, energy, and effort. It requires you to ask the difficult questions. As we look to build the kind of children's ministry that will produce healthy disciples, may we take the time to step back and really be strategic about our ministries.

BONUS

Seven Characteristics of a Healthy Kids' Ministry

If you're in children's ministry, you know the importance of healthy role models, community, and giving children a sense of security. A recent post by Portland Leadership⁴ revealed some new scientific evidence regarding the growing void of community for America's children.

According to the study, a lack of connectedness has led to a deterioration in mental and behavioral health of children in the United States. This crisis is resulting in high and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, thoughts of suicide, and other serious mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. And in large part, these alarming problems are due to one major problem: a lack of connectedness.

So how can children's ministries help to meet the needs of a generation of kids who are losing close and deep connectedness to others? Here are seven characteristics of a kids' ministry that overcomes these challenges:

- 1. It treats children as ends in themselves. Children receive attention and focus. They're not just with a sitter while parents attend classes and services. Kids are invested in and taught the truths of the gospel.
- 2. It is warm and nurturing. A healthy kids' ministry is a place that children want to be. Every child is welcomed and feels like he or she belongs.
- **3.** It establishes clear limits and expectations. Children need boundaries at home, at school, and at

- church. The kids in your ministry need to know what behavior is expected from them. This kind of clarity breeds trust and a feeling of safety.
- **4. It is multigenerational.** A healthy kids' ministry gives children the opportunity to be mentored by several generations of volunteers. Not only should your ministry be staffed by people with their own young kids, but you should also look for teens and senior adults to get involved.
- 5. It has a long-term focus. Your healthy kids' ministry invests in the kids in your ministry not only because every child needs to hear the gospel and be loved on, but also because these kids are the future of the church. A healthy kids' ministry has direction and goals that not only reflect this year, but also much farther down the road.
- 6. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to follow God. The kids in your ministry should be clear on the goals your ministry has for each child. They should be continually taught who God is, why Jesus came, and why we should follow Him.
- 7. It teaches kids that everyone has value and is equally loved in God's eyes. A healthy kids' ministry communicates the value of each child apart from that child's behavior. Children should know that they are made in the image of God. They are loved and valued.

The bottom line is that a healthy kids' ministry can make all the difference in the life of a child. Without an intentional effort to connect kids to the life-changing community taking place in your ministry, children will be a generation that looks for connections outside the place God intended them to find true community.

Personal Questions to Evaluate Your Healthy Leadership

Effective leaders constantly evaluate their own progress and consider how they can improve. Finding balance in looking back and looking forward can be challenging, but a healthy leader recognizes the importance of learning from the past without dwelling on it. We can celebrate past milestones while recognizing the need to grow and improve continually. We can only grow if we know what changes we need to make.

It's also important for kids' ministry leaders to reflect on their health and ways they can improve. That requires self-evaluation. By examining where you've been and where you are, you can make the necessary changes and improvements to move to where you want to be.

Here are nine questions ministry leaders (especially kids' ministry leaders) should ask to evaluate how they have grown:

- 1. How have you grown in your relationship with Christ? What is different today from a year ago? You should be able to identify a marked change.
- 2. In what ways have you invested in your family? Can you articulate ways you have invested in your spouse, children, or extended family?
- 3. In what ways have you grown in other areas of your life (intellectual, social, emotional, physical)? Are you attending to the whole person?
- **4.** In what ways are you serving the leadership of your church better? Have you been making decisions in your ministry based on the overall vision that the leadership team has crafted for the church?

- 5. In what ways are you serving your coworkers in your church? Are you an encouragement? How do you display servant leadership on a daily basis?
- **6.** In what ways are you sharpening your skill to help kids grow and learn? How are you developing personally as a leader to maximize your ability to help kids in your ministry learn and grow spiritually?
- **7. Do you pray for your leader and teammates?** Are you genuinely concerned about their hearts?
- 8. Are you willing to let go of acknowledgment of yourself? What if people had no idea that you had anything to do with the great success of your ministry? How would you feel?
- 9. Do you foster an atmosphere of safety among your teammates? Do you encourage a familial atmosphere rather than an atmosphere of competition?

Resources to Help You Build a Healthy Kids' Ministry

Here's something every children's ministry leader should believe: You can take your ministry to the next level with creativity and stewardship.

If you're looking for ways to build a healthier kids' ministry, here are a few of my favorite resources:

Talk Now and Later

by Brian Dollar

This book will give insight and answers to questions about how to influence kids for Christ. Written to parents, but applicable for ministry leaders, you will gain help for challenging conversations with children

Hardwired to Connect

The Commission on Children at Risk

This book takes a scientific approach to building a healthy ministry. The authors introduce a new public policy and social science term—authoritative communities—to describe the ten essential traits across social institutions that produce better outcomes for children.

Dreaming of More for the Next Generation

by Michelle Anthony

This resource provides a fresh approach to spiritual formation in the lives of kids and their families. Michelle Anthony shares stories that will inspire you and provide the tools you need to partner with parents to equip them as spiritual leaders in their homes, motivate children to step out of their comfort zones and into a lifetime of faith, and create intentional space for the kids in your care to meet Jesus.

Notes

- 1. http://www.workincolour.com.au/wic-blog/why-slowing-down-can-speed-up-your-creativity-1 (accessed 5/13/16)
- 2. http://99u.com/articles/16793/why-our-most-extraordinary-work-is-built-slowly (accessed 5/13/16)
- 3. Alton Garrison, *A Spirit-Empowered Church* (Springfield, MO: Influence Resources, 2015).
- $4.\ http://portlandleadership.org/pdf/Hardwired-to-Connect.$ pdf (accessed 5/13/16)

About the Author

Ark Entzminger has had a passion for reaching the next generation for as long as he can remember. From his time as a church bus captain in his teen years, to his time at Central Bible College in Springfield, Missouri, he's always been concerned that kids all over the world get a a chance to experience an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. After years of dedication to helping churches disciple children in their communities, he's now recognized as a leading voice in KidMin. He serves the Assemblies of God as senior director of Children's Ministries where he leads teams that focus their energies on equipping local churches to reach and disciple children and families. Mark and his wife, Christie, have two sons, Colby and Cadyn.

For more information about this book and other valuable resources visit MyHealthyChurch.com.



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