

Child Care and the Church



Our Call

As people of faith, we are called to teach children through scripture, our tradition as Methodists, the Social Principles, the ritual of baptism, and our concern for families. In responding to the call set before us, we will provide environments for children to be nurtured in the faith and to grow as children of God.

Scripture tells us to teach children the words of God (Deuteronomy 4:10; 6:7) and not to prevent them from discovering Jesus (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). We can also help children to grow as Jesus grew, “strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God” (Luke 2:40b).

John Wesley set the example for us as Methodists as he began health clinics and schools for the children to learn to read and encouraged the pastors to meet with the children regularly. His call to meet the needs of people where they were stands as a marker for us today. Using our buildings that otherwise might sit empty six days a week to meet the physical, mental, and emotional needs of children and their families clearly meets Mr. Wesley’s expectations.

Our Social Principles (§ 162C) state, “Once considered the property of their parents, children are now acknowledged to be full human beings in their own right, but beings to whom adults and society in general have special obligations. . . .” This Social Principle calls us to take responsibility for meeting the needs of children, including education and protection. Additionally, it calls us to meet the needs of not just our children but all children.

Our service of infant baptism in The United Methodist Church recognizes the sacredness of each person from birth and our responsibility to nurture each child in the faith. In proclaiming that sacredness and recognizing each child as a child of God, we in the church carry a commitment to help enable people to live life in the fullness that Jesus proclaimed.

We promise “We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness that they may grow in their service to others . . .” (The United Methodist Hymnal, page 40). In recognition of this promise and in response to the sacredness of all children as set forth in scripture, through the teachings of John Wesley, and in our Social Principles, our vision for child care must include a vision of services available to all families on an equitable basis. Through the particular ministry of child care, we extend the nurturing ministry of the church and proclaim justice to children, families, and communities.

The church has important responsibilities in initiating, encouraging, and participating in the highest quality of child care for children and families, not only in the local community but also nationwide.

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Therefore, we recommend the following:

1. See child care as planned ministry.

Each congregation of The United Methodist Church that houses or supports any child-care program must intentionally assess its understanding of discipleship as it relates to weekday ministry. Child care is a valid expression of the Christian faith. However, programs in local churches too often exist without much thought to intentional ministry. Concerns often focus on budgeting and facility use instead of the ministry of the programs. When this happens, misunderstandings arise between the child-care program and the congregation, and missed opportunities occur for witnessing and mirroring the Christian faith. Each child-care program may encompass one or all of the following expressions of ministry: nurture, outreach, and/or witness. A particular congregation may choose any avenue of ministry, but it is important that each congregation be intentional, involving thought and prayer. What are the congregation's gifts for ministry with children? What is the mission of child care? How is intentional ministry a part of the daily operation of the program?

Congregations must determine how the child-care program embraces the church's mission.

a. Nurture includes Christian education, stewardship, and worship. In a program that focuses on nurture, spiritual development through Christian education is central. An intentional part of the curriculum should be the selection of stories (biblical and secular) and methods, and the integration of "God talk" and Christian values into daily conversations and interactions. When celebrations follow the church year, and when themes are based on Christian concepts, our faith traditions are an intentional part of the curriculum. Also included is stewardship. In our child-care programs, we reflect our commitment to being God's stewards in the ways we use and allocate our physical resources. We also reflect an understanding of the precarious balance of the world in an ecological sense. When children are cared for, they learn to care for others and for their world.

b. Outreach includes the areas of advocacy, safety, health, welfare, and equity, and how well they are addressed in our communities. Embracing outreach as a part of a weekday ministry program follows our traditional roots of caring for the needs of the community. As a congregation responds to the needs of people in the community through weekday ministry, the community and the congregation discover many blessings. Such a program addresses safety issues, social justice issues, equity issues, and health issues. Specialty child care that addresses community issues might include care for infants, ill children, children of families at risk, children with special needs, children who are survivors of abuse, children with language

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barriers, migrant or refugee children, school-age children, and young adolescents. Each congregation should determine the unmet needs of their surrounding community. When possible, congregations should work collaboratively with other community agencies and groups to assure that needs are being met without duplication of efforts and in support of each other. When unable to meet the needs of a community, congregations must be outspoken advocates for needs of children in their community.

c. Witness includes the areas of evangelism, membership care, and spiritual formation. In embracing witness as our particular expression of ministry, we proclaim God active in our lives. As Jesus told us to proclaim the good news, so we must through our child-care ministries. Through these ministries, we can minister to the spiritual needs of children and their families. A witness to our faith speaks clearly through the actions of weekday ministry boards, through the caring love of the staff, through the use of developmentally appropriate practices, through gentle and caring words, through the curriculum, through the environment of the facilities, and through the attitude of the congregation.

Every congregation of The United Methodist Church needs to define its ministry through child care and include a statement of this ministry through weekday programs as part of employee handbooks, parent handbooks, community statements, and church reports.

2. Uphold the quality of child care in the Church.

Any time a child enters a child-care program housed in a church, expectations are raised regarding quality of the program, behavior of the child-care staff and church staff, and adherence to the Christian doctrines of love and justice. Whether a congregation sees itself as actually sponsoring the program or as merely a landlord, since the program is in the church, families have different expectations than if they are taking their child to a commercial child-care facility. A church cannot divorce itself, either morally or legally, from what takes place in its building through child-care programs.

a. Program Reviews: For this reason, annual review of the child-care program should take place. Concern should be given to the curriculum, the involvement of the congregation with the program, pastoral availability to families and staff involved in child care, safe and clean buildings and equipment, and the highest quality in staff and staff support. The process for the program review must be jointly determined by the child-care staff, church personnel, and informed, interested laity. A plan must be in place.

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b. Licensing: The purpose of licensing standards is to protect children. Safety, health, space, and staff requirements provide a foundation for establishing and maintaining good programs for children. The regulations of basic health and safety conditions in a building/program that serves children are the appropriate responsibility of the state and do not interfere with the free exercise of religion. United Methodists have been meeting such standards for years in other areas of the life of the church, such as camping. A congregation is responsible to provide the best care for children when they gather in a church building. Regarding licensing procedures, congregations should seek to at least meet, if not surpass, the standards set in their community. Even if a program is license-exempt by the state, an effort should be made to meet licensing requirements for safety and for integrity. Congregations should also seek to be actively informed about such licensing procedures and requirements and should work to reform such regulations when they do not mandate standards that serve the best interests of children.

c. Self-Study: Through a self-study process, every child-care facility can look for ways to evaluate the care provided. Churches should follow some process of self-study for their child-care programs on a regular basis. Such studies involve both the child-care providers and the congregation and allow them to continuously assess the effectiveness of the ministry they are providing. These self-studies are available through some annual conferences, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the United Methodist Association of Preschools—Florida.

d. Personnel: As congregations seek to support child-care programs, salary, benefits, and support of the staff of these programs should be of concern and subject to review and discussion to insure the best for the children and families involved. Congregations must assure that children are served through the best caregivers. Congregations have a responsibility to advocate for higher pay and benefits for child-care workers. These professional caregivers should maintain excellence and integrity in the important job they do, and they should be appropriately compensated for it. With increased concern around issues of child abuse, congregations need to assure that all child-care providers have been adequately screened for child abuse and neglect in accordance with laws of local jurisdiction, especially in the area of sexual misconduct. Appropriate screening protects the children, the child-care providers, and the congregation. It is important to meet any government regulations and the Safe Sanctuaries policies of your local church regarding the screening of child-care workers as appropriate. The personnel issue also includes a concern for the education and training of child-care workers. A yearly plan for continuing education should be part of the congregation's support for child-care providers. Many child-care providers have extensive training and education in the field. They are good sources for training of those

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who work with children in other areas of the church; including child-care workers for Sunday services, Sunday school teachers, and vacation Bible school teachers. For those who are hired without proper training and education, the congregations should sponsor and encourage attendance at continuing education events.

3. Be advocates for quality child care.

Going beyond the congregation, United Methodists should be diligent advocates for child care nationwide. The following suggestions are for individuals and groups within congregations who seek to better the place of children in American society:

- a. Become informed about child-care conditions existing today and the issues involved in the design of an adequate public policy for child care. Address the issues through eliciting a response of commitment from the policy makers.
- b. Use the appropriate councils and agencies of the church to monitor public policy at federal, state, and local levels of government.
- c. Become involved not only in church conferences and meetings but in the larger arena of child care through such organizations as the Children's Defense Fund and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- d. Call upon staff at the General Board of Church and Society in Washington, DC, and within each annual conference. They are charged with particular responsibility for the church's involvement in public policy processes in order to monitor, serve as an advocate for, raise issues concerning, and bring the voice of the church to bear on child-care policy development.
- e. Call upon the staff of the General Board of Discipleship and the United Methodist Publishing House to express arising needs as they relate to program support, needed curriculum, and policies regarding church and child-care center relationships.
- f. Call upon the General Board of Global Ministries to assist churches in responding to child-care needs in their communities with appropriate programs and resources.
- g. Call upon the General Board of Discipleship in consultation with the General Council on Finance and Administration to make available to local congregations resources that address legal aspects and procedures to follow in establishing child-care facilities and/or programs.

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