The Good Practice Guide for Parent and Toddler Groups

Building Relationships – Strengthening Community
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Care for the Family, The Mothers’ Union and The Salvation Army are all committed to supporting families, and that is why they have worked collaboratively to produce this resource. They want to support you in the valuable job you’re doing, to provide practical guidelines about how to run a successful group and to promote the important contribution that parent and toddler groups make to local communities.

Care for the Family aims to promote strong family life and to help those hurting because of family breakdown.

The Mothers’ Union exists to share Christ’s love by encouraging, strengthening and supporting marriage and family life.

The Salvation Army is an international Christian church working in 109 countries worldwide. As a registered charity, The Salvation Army demonstrates its Christian principles through social welfare provision and is one of the largest, most diverse providers of social welfare in the world.
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Parent and toddler groups can be the only adult company that many parents and carers have during the week. Because of this, the group has a great impact on their lives; probably more than most group leaders can imagine!

That’s why I’m so pleased that Care for the Family, The Mothers’ Union and The Salvation Army have worked together to produce this resource for parent and toddler groups. By doing so, they are affirming group leaders and teams across the country.

These groups provide great places for parents and carers to meet and make friends. They are places where children make friends, learn and interact together too, which can’t be a bad thing! And these friendships often carry on outside the group, as families visit each other’s homes – so much better than mums sitting at home feeling isolated. Such friendships can last a lifetime.

Not only do parent and toddler groups offer friendship, but they can be life-saving for families in crisis. The number of people who are helped by parent and toddler groups is endless – not only the children and parents, but also their wider families and those they meet during their day-to-day lives.

So as you carry out your valuable role, do take the support that these three organisations are offering here. I’m thrilled to be asked to endorse The Good Practice Guide for Parent and Toddler Groups, and I do so with the prayer that even more parents, carers and children will ultimately benefit from its wisdom.

Diane Louise Jordan
TV and Radio presenter
There you sit, quaking in your shoes, waiting in the studio of BBC 2’s Newsnight programme. You’re going to be interviewed by Jeremy Paxman or one of those other interviewers they grace with that terrifying adjective ‘incisive’.

You’re being interviewed because you are going to start a parent and toddler group – or perhaps you’re already running one but you want to make it even better. And this ‘incisive’ interviewer is going to fix you with his penetrating stare and his raised eyebrow and ask: “What’s so special about parent and toddler groups?”

Here are some great responses:

🔥 Parent and toddler groups provide a safe and happy environment for children to play, learn and interact.

🔥 They provide a welcoming place for all parents and carers to make friends and feel supported.

🔥 Groups can be the basis for developing long-lasting relationships for young families looking for friendship and support.

🔥 They can offer a lifeline to families in crisis, support for parents having a tough time or just dealing with the ongoing demands of children.

🔥 Groups can be a starting point to go forward, maybe branching out into parenting groups and other supportive courses. They offer a surrogate, or extended, family to the families that attend.

🔥 Ultimately, parent and toddler groups make a great contribution to the life of a community.

Care for the Family, The Mothers’ Union and The Salvation Army are all committed to supporting families, and that is why they have worked collaboratively to produce this resource. They want to support you in the valuable job you’re doing, to provide practical guidelines about how to run a successful group and to promote the important contribution that parent and toddler groups make to local communities.

“Parent and toddler group isn’t just a morning session to me, it’s a lifestyle. The families that come to my group are important to me because they are part of the community in which I live. We go out for meals, watch videos; I invite them to parenting groups and church. I really want to help build my community, and parent and toddler is a natural way of meeting families.”

Cathy, group leader
It’s a typical morning at parent and toddler group and the happy chatter of busy children can be heard around the craft table, as they make friends with each other and with the team. The children are cutting and colouring animals to fit into a giant ark.

Josh is keen to pass on his news: “I’ve come with Grandad today because Mummy has gone to Tesco to get our new baby!”

The parents, carers and team members around the table join with Josh in his excitement, and exchange a knowing smile with his grandad. “My daughter’s due to have her third next month,” says a grandmother who has brought ‘the other two’ to the group. The two grandparents start to discuss their role as part-time carers for their children’s children.

As they help their children to cut out the animals, Kate and Emma are making friends with a new mother who has come to the group for the first time.

“I first came here so Sarah could learn to mix with other children,” Kate explains. “And it was a way for us to meet new people when we moved to the area. Many of my close friends now are the people I’ve met through the group.”

“I came here for my sake!” laughs Emma. “I wanted to get out of the house and see other adults – life with a three- and one-year-old can sometimes be tedious. Now, William loves the range of activities he can do – and all in 90 minutes.” She smiles, and adds: “For me, having a cup of tea made for me and eating ‘nice’ biscuits is such a treat.”

Elsewhere in the room, while their children play happily with the train set, Elizabeth and Pauline swap notes about the lifeline offered by the group.

“I like coming here as much as Thomas – it keeps him happy, so it keeps me happy!” says Elizabeth. “I’ve found the help and support from this group has helped me through some tough times.”

“Parent and toddler has been a lifeline to me,” admits Pauline, encouraged to speak up by hearing that someone else has been through tough times too. “I suffered from postnatal depression and it was actually Joanne, the group leader, who encouraged me to seek help. Then she helped some more, by babysitting and sometimes even cooking us a meal.”

Joanne, passing behind the women as they talk, smiles to hear Pauline opening up to another mother. A sign of a good recovery, she thinks, as she goes into the kitchen, where another team member is pouring the children’s drinks in preparation for story time. Joanne has heard so many painful stories from parents and carers, and it makes her happy every time she sees them overcoming their difficulties.

Take Nadia, for example – such a bright and intelligent woman, yet obviously weighed down by some hidden problem. She didn’t want to join in much; she even refused to join the rota of parents who helped clear away the toys.
It was only after a year, when she said she wouldn’t be coming any more, that Joanne found out a little of her story. She had been going through a crisis in her marriage and felt she just wanted to attend, but not take on any responsibility. “But I’m so grateful for the support,” she said, “and now I’m happier and I feel able to give something back. I want to share something of what I’ve received from you.” She intended to get involved in a group closer to her home and offer to help there, even when her son no longer attended.

The refreshments are ready, so Joanne gathers children, parents and carers together. Juice and biscuits are handed out to the seated children, and Joanne opens the book.

“Our story today,” she begins, “is all about a man called Noah...”

“I went along to my parent and toddler group looking for a place to find companionship and for my children to meet other children. I ended up joining a parenting group and going along to the church with the people who went to my group. I really got more than I bargained for. It was great – my life is completely different now.”

Claire
As leader, you will probably be the one who carries the vision for the group and makes decisions about the day-to-day running. Your role is to maintain standards and to oversee the team, the session and the future of the group. You will be keen to make your group an excellent one with a good reputation.

Ideally, a regular, reliable team is an important part of a parent and toddler group. Therefore, try to find people from all age groups and walks of life, who share your vision. Allow them to use their gifts for the benefit of the group, whether through craft activities or excellent listening skills. Some will have faced difficulties in life that will enable them to empathise with a group member, such as bereavement, infertility or postnatal depression.

I do feel the weight of responsibility sometimes. But I’m so delighted by the people I meet, and by the impact we have on people. I really think it’s worth it. My team means so much to me.

Jackie, group leader

**Invest in your team**

Meet socially outside the group setting; have at least an annual social outing. Talk together as you work, and build up their confidence with heaps of praise. Support them and allow them to support you, too.

Welcome feedback from your team; encourage them to pass on their ideas and concerns, and take seriously what they say. Be aware that they may be having difficult issues to deal with in their own lives, so listen sympathetically if they want to talk, and remember to keep asking how things are progressing.

If you have few team members and feel slightly overwhelmed, a rota of parents and carers might be a good way of ensuring everyone takes a turn in doing a particular job. Asking them to participate in this way makes parents and carers feel they are essential parts of the group. And who knows, one of them may become a valued member of your team in the future.

**Support for you**

You should also try to find someone outside the group to support you so that you don’t become overwhelmed with the responsibility of group leader. This might be a family member, close friend or, if your group is affiliated to a church, the minister or leader.

Some parent and toddler groups have a management group which shares the decision-making and care for the team. The management group should give clear guidelines and information to the team, supporting them at all times.
Know your boundaries
Don’t take on burdens that are not yours. If a member of your group needs further support, you are not responsible for providing it. But you can point them in the right direction. If your group is part of a church, you will probably have links locally to a vast array of skills, life experiences and projects that you can draw on. Further help is available from the organisations listed on pages 24-27.

Parents and carers are responsible for their children at all times. You are, however, responsible for anything that is in the best interest of the whole group. So, for example, if you have an ongoing problem of one parent telling off other people’s children, take the parent aside and explain that everyone is responsible for their own, not other people’s children. If one child is hurting another and their parent does nothing about it, it is legitimate for you to step in and talk with the passive parent. Explain that it is in the best interest of the group for them to intervene in their child’s behaviour.

Do your best!
There are a huge variety of parent and toddler groups across the country, but your group is unique. Whatever its size and however long it has been running, you are aiming to do the best you can. Always be on the lookout for new ways forward, but don’t be put off if you can’t achieve everything that is recommended in this resource – for example, if you don’t have the money to buy so much equipment. You will be valued for who you are by the people who come to your group. And you are providing a valuable service to the community.

Remember!

- Gather together a good team with a variety of skills
- Invest in your team
- Find someone to support you
- Know your boundaries
- Be on the lookout for new ways forward
- Make use of resources

We have great fun together. We often combine cleaning toys and then going out together; we have a great time. It’d be even better if we didn’t have to clean the toys!

Chris, team member
**Creating a successful parent and toddler group**

**Give a genuine welcome**
At the heart of a good group are people who draw others back time and time again. Always make sure everyone is given a genuine welcome, so that they will feel secure and more likely to return for a second visit.

Make your point of registration friendly and informal. Give out an introductory leaflet or letter (see page 31 for details). If you have several members on your team, one member should welcome and another should take each new person through to show them the fire exits, toilets and changing facilities, and introduce them to others.

Aim to introduce them to one or two of your most friendly group members who will include them in conversations and activities. It can be difficult for newcomers to remember more than a couple of names on their first visit.

If possible, have a comfortable chair for pregnant mums so they do not have to sit on a tiny children’s chair for the whole session.

**Extend your warmth beyond the first session**
However friendly you are on that first meeting, you will need to keep it up! It will take a few sessions for a newcomer to feel at home. Aim to remember the child’s name and something about the parent/carer.

Some will come purely so that their child can play with other children, but others are hoping for much more than that. They may be looking for friendship, advice, or time with other adults. Your group can be a place where they find sincere people who have a true concern for them.

**Nurture all who come to your group**
Cherish the parents, carers and children in your group by letting them know they are special. You are providing security and love for the children, as well as the opportunity to play and develop social skills.

You can provide encouragement for parents who may be experiencing a time of low self esteem. Parents and carers will feel that they are an essential part of the group if they are encouraged to help in its smooth running. Encourage them to befriend newcomers; ask them to assist with craft activities or to help in tidying away equipment. Always remember to

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“One mother came who was married to an overseas student. She barely spoke our language and we didn’t speak hers, but we got along very well. She was tearful when the family returned home. She said she would really miss us. The group had meant so much to her when she was in a strange country with only her children for company.”

Lynn
thank them for any contribution they have made and involve them by means of consultation. Listen to their suggestions regarding the running of the group.

**Offer a listening ear**

If a parent or carer is experiencing difficult circumstances, you (or someone in your team) may be the person they need to talk to. Don’t undervalue the impact of listening, and remember that listening is not giving advice or making judgements. By stepping in too quickly with advice you can stop people opening up any further. Listening attentively and giving people your time can, in many cases, be as much as people need.

Some people may require more than a listening ear, so attempt to find more help for them. Don’t try to do it yourself! If your group is affiliated to a church, the church may be able to offer resources for counselling, help and care. Details of other organisations which provide further help can be found on pages 24-27.

**Be the place where real friendships are made**

Ultimately, the parent and toddler group is a place where real friendships can begin; some just for the short term and others more lasting. It’s a two-way thing! Not only will parents and carers find friendship, but the team will discover new friends too! Consider it a privilege to serve those who come through your doors.

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**Remember!**

- Give a genuine welcome
- Extend your warmth beyond the first session
- Nurture all who come to your group
- Offer a listening ear
- Be the place where real friendships are made

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“I come to parent and toddler because the people that run it are fun. They seem interested in me.”

Nick
All parent and toddler groups are unique and you will find the right structure to suit yours. The following programme is a sample of a typical session which, if you wish, can be adapted to meet the needs of the parents/carers in your group.

The average time a group runs is two hours, but the time limit is up to you as team leader.

Welcome and registration
An important occasion – see page 10 ‘Creating a successful parent and toddler group’.

Unstructured beginning
Have available toys such as the train set, cars and story area so children can play freely while their parents/carers chat with each other and with team members. Do not have sit and ride toys available at this stage.

Craft table
A craft table can operate throughout the morning, allowing the parents/carers and children to come and go. It provides a good place for parents/carers to chat to a team member while helping their child with the activity.

Your activity could tie in with the story you tell or mark significant dates in the calendar. For example:

Make decorations which you can use on the Christmas tree at the parent and toddler Christmas party; tell the story of the nativity at story time.

Make cards for Mothering Sunday and Fathers Day – but be sensitive as not all children live with both parents.

Make animal faces out of paper plates and tell the story of Noah’s Ark at story time.

Decorate biscuits to eat on children’s birthdays.

Story time
Encourage parents to listen to the story along with the children; this will help the children to understand that story time is not a time to talk. Serve drinks and biscuits to the children while they are sitting down.

Happy birthday
If a child in your group is celebrating his/her birthday, sing Happy Birthday at the end of the story. You could have special biscuits, an artificial cake with candles, or a birthday board (a notice board with a list of the children’s birthdays for that week, with birthday cards on and a ‘happy birthday’ banner across the top).

Free play for the children; tea/coffee for parents/carers
While the children play freely, serve hot drinks with biscuits to parents/carers. Ensure the children are safe from the hot drinks.

Sit and ride toys
As it nears the end of the session, it is a good time for children to play on the sit and ride toys, thus enabling them to let off steam before they go home. A safe area for the babies, which must always be available, is particularly important at this time.
Song time and notices
Ask parents/carers to join in with their children, and sit everyone in a circle. Ask different children for their favourite song, and sing three or four of these before finishing with one song; many groups finish with the same song each week to mark the end of the session.

If you are a Christian group, include a faith-based song or prayer during the song time.

Link the song and the craft activity, where possible. For example, if your activity was making animal faces, you could sing ‘Who built the ark? – Noah, Noah’. For details of further resources, see page 26 or contact your own organisation.

The end of song time is a good opportunity to hand out notices for the following week or future events.

Remember!
• Welcome and registration for all visitors
• Unstructured beginning to the session
• Have an ongoing craft table with a structured activity
• Tell a story and give the children a drink
• Sing Happy Birthday when appropriate
• More play time and drinks for the adults
• Time to sit and ride
• Song time and give out notices

During story time I was reading The Three Little Pigs: ‘... and so the pig went up to the man with the wheelbarrow full of straw and asked if he could have some straw to build his house...’.

‘Don’t be silly!’ shouted Isaac. ‘Pigs can’t talk!’

Lynn
Parent and toddler groups: basic procedures

Before the meeting

**Registration form**
New parents/carers joining your group should fill in a registration form. You will find a sample form on page 32. You may wish to use the contact details supplied to produce an address list for the parents/carers involved in the group.

Data protection declaration: A statement should be made on the form about how the information supplied on it will be stored and used and who will have access to it. The person completing the form must be asked to give their written consent for the information to be used in the ways indicated. The information supplied must not be used for any purpose other than those stipulated. For further advice, contact your organisation.

Please note: Salvation Army groups are required to use the official Salvation Army Data Protection Notice on all registration forms.

**Weekly attendance record**
In addition to the registration form you need to keep a weekly attendance record. This allows you to keep track of every team member, visitor, parent/carer and child that is on the premises during each session. This is necessary if you have to evacuate the premises in the event of a fire.

**Medical conditions/allergy record**
It is essential (and can be life-saving) to maintain a record of children’s medical conditions (eg asthma, epilepsy), and allergies. It is also important to record special dietary requirements. For example, some children may have a milk or nut allergy; others may be vegetarians and therefore unable to eat certain biscuits. These details should be given on the registration form, and a further note made in the daily register when the children arrive. Of course, parents/carers are responsible for what their children eat and drink, but it is helpful for the whole team to be aware of the needs.

**Accident book**
If a child or parent has an accident while at the group, it must be recorded in an accident book. The details needed are the time, the type of injury, the first aid administered and whether or not a visit to the doctor or hospital was necessary. The parent/carer should sign to show that what you have recorded is acceptable to them. Keep the accident book in a place where any member of your team can find it easily.

Your organisation may have its own official accident book; if not, you can order one from your local branch of WHSmith (see page 26).

I really love it when people say we are the best group in the town. We’ve got a waiting list to prove it’s true! Jennie
Incident book
Keeping a record of other incidents, such as two children persistently fighting, or a child damaging property, is also advisable.

Money matters
If you are running a Salvation Army or Mothers’ Union group, seek advice from your organisation about how to deal with financial matters, and their approach to charging parents. If your group is an independent one, work out the costs involved and decide how you are going to meet them. For example, you may decide to apply for local grants. Decide what your charging policy will be; some groups leave a bowl out for donations, others have a fixed charge.

If you open a bank account and keep records of the money coming in and out, you should have two signatories. If you have a Management Committee, keep them informed as to how the money is used.

If a parent or carer genuinely can’t pay, don’t penalise them. What you do if someone won’t pay is at your discretion. You could explain to them what the fee covers (such as room hire, refreshments, insurance, purchase of good quality toys). Explain that the fee is not for profit; any money left over will be ploughed back into making the group even better. If someone still refuses to pay, it is legitimate to consider refusing them a place in the group.

Insurance
Your group must have insurance cover in case an adult or child is hurt. Check with your own organisation about the nature of the cover automatically provided for groups running under their auspices, and assess whether this cover is appropriate.

If you are running an independent group, check whether the building in which you meet has its own insurance – it is likely that you will be covered if you meet in church premises, for example. If not, there are insurance policies available for parent and toddler groups which can also cover theft. Keep an inventory of what you have and what it costs to replace the items listed.

If you are planning trips away from the premises, the leader should take positive steps to promote safety and ensure proper precautions are taken to prevent accidents. Particular thought should be given to additional insurance and child protection procedures.

Child protection/health and safety
These vital subjects have been given their own sections on pages 17-21.

On the day
Open up and prepare
Keys may need to be collected from and returned to the owner or caretaker of your premises; ensure you know whose responsibility this is each week. Arrive in good time to set out the toys and check room safety.

Team numbers
Make sure there are enough team members to cover all necessary jobs – including making the refreshments.
Register
It is essential to keep track of all parents/carers and children who are on the premises at any group meeting. A nominated team member should be available to take the register, and if anyone leaves during the session, this also should be noted in the register. In the event of a fire, the nominated person can then reliably inform the fire service of any people left in the building.

Number limit
There are no fixed rules about how many adults or children can attend. The number will be determined by the number of volunteers available to assist, the size of the space available, and how many children you judge can play safely with the toys that you provide. Take advice from your local Fire Officer if you are in doubt. In areas of high demand, group leaders sometimes enrol parents/carers in advance, and start a waiting list. Experience has shown that usual attendance is around 70% of those that enrol.

The group leader is responsible for deciding the maximum number that can be safely accommodated, and for (tactfully!) turning away anyone who arrives after that maximum number has been reached.

Remember!
- Prepare a registration form
- Keep a record of medical conditions, allergies etc
- Use an accident book and incident book
- Manage your money
- Put in place relevant insurance
- Open up and prepare the room
- Have enough people on the team
- Keep a register
- Decide and implement number limit
It is vital that all parent and toddler groups have an up-to-date child protection policy in place. The notes on this page do not constitute a child protection policy but serve to emphasise the need to have one.

Everyone concerned in any activity that involves children (irrespective of whether their parents or carers are present) must adhere to an up-to-date child protection policy. All team members need to receive training in child protection issues, have a copy of the policy, and agree to implement it. Child protection policies should be reviewed annually.

This is for the safety and protection of the children – and for your own protection as a team.

Written information should be given to parents and carers, telling them about the policy and the specific measures taken to ensure the safety of the children. A copy of the child protection policy should be displayed clearly while your group is in session.

If you are running an independent group and have no child protection policy, several agencies offer free advice. The Churches Child Protection Advisory Service offers outline policies which can be adapted to meet the needs of specific activities. See page 25 for contact details.

All policies will include guidelines about the selection process of volunteers who will come into direct contact with children. An important part of this process is to ensure that they do not have a record of child abuse, or other serious criminal offence, which would make it inappropriate for them to work in this environment.

Applications for these checks have to be submitted to the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), the government agency set up to administer the scheme, through a registered body. The result of each check is called a ‘disclosure’. Your child protection policy will include details of how to assess each voluntary role in order to determine which should be subject to these checks.

Other important issues which child protection policies should cover include:

- Arrangements for ongoing support structures for volunteers.
- Practical procedures for keeping children safe.
- Definitions of the different types of abuse.
- Information about signs and symptoms of abuse.

Having a child protection policy in operation will help to safeguard the most vulnerable in society – the under fives, too small to protect themselves.

David Pearson, Executive Director, The Churches Child Protection Advisory Service
Instructions about what to do if abuse is suspected or reported, including the name of the person to contact if specialist advice is needed.

Children with special needs.

Sometimes urgent and immediate action is required. In that case, those present should do what they can to protect the child, and should themselves contact the area Social Services Child Protection Team or the Police Child Protection Team. As soon as possible afterwards they should inform the person named in their policy as their contact in regard to concerns relating to child protection issues.

At parent and toddler groups, parents/carers are the primary care-givers for their children while at the group. It is important that they understand this. Nappy changes and supervising children’s visits to the toilet should be undertaken by the child’s own parent or carer.

The taking and use of photographs in your group needs to comply with the Data Protection Act. Parent and toddler groups must have written permission from the parents/carers of the children (even if there are 35 children in one photograph) to say that they are happy with the photographs being used. In the agreement letter you should set out where and when the photographs will be used – for example in a newsletter, on a website, on a flyer advertising your group.

Because parents/carers are the primary carers, parent and toddler groups are not required by law to have any involvement with Social Services, but it is helpful to maintain a good relationship with them and keep them informed of your group’s activities.

Remember!

- Adhere to an up-to-date child protection policy
- Protect the children in your care – as well as yourself and your team
- Team members should be trained in child protection issues
- Review your policy annually
- Provide parents/carers with written information about your policy
- Display the policy while the group is in session
- Obtain permission before taking or using photographs
- It is ESSENTIAL that these safeguards are put in place
Fire safety
Invite your local Fire Officer to visit the place where your group meets. This might be the manager of the building you use for your group. S/he will be up to date with fire safety regulations, and will be able to give instruction about fire exits and how to practice a fire drill. The Fire Officer will also check the fire extinguishers in the building are of the correct type and in good working order. All fire extinguishers must be regularly maintained.

Make sure parents know who on your team is responsible in the event of an emergency. This would usually be the group leader and in their absence, their deputy.

On page 27 you will find spaces to write details of your local emergency telephone numbers. Make it a priority to fill them in.

First aid
A well-stocked first aid box is essential and should be accessible but out of the reach of children. As a guide, a basic box should include the following items, and should be restocked regularly:

- A leaflet giving general guidance on first aid (e.g. Health Service Executive leaflet Basic Advice on First Aid at Work).
- 20 individually-wrapped sterile adhesive dressings (assorted sizes).
- 2 sterile eye pads.
- 4 individually-wrapped sterile triangular bandages.
- 6 safety pins.
- 6 12cm x 12cm individually-wrapped sterile unmedicated wound dressings.
- 2 18cm x 18cm individually-wrapped sterile unmedicated wound dressings.
- 1 pair disposable gloves.

You should not keep tablets or medicines in the first aid box.

At least one qualified first aider must be available at each session. Contact St John Ambulance for details of first aid courses in your area (see page 26 for details).

Keep at hand a list of telephone numbers of local doctors and hospitals. You should be within reach of a telephone in case of emergency. If you are in a building that has a phone system you may have to dial 9 for an outside line (9-999 in emergency). If a telephone is not available, make sure someone has a mobile phone, or knows where to find the nearest public phone.

Venue safety and security
Check the room you use before each session, making sure previous users have left nothing unsafe behind.

Find a secure place for buggies and prams. Leaving them in the entrance halls compromises security and blocks the exit in the event of emergency. You may need to invest in some bicycle locks if you are unable to shut them away.

Doors should never be dead-locked in case of an emergency.

Safety covers should be plugged into all sockets. If you have heaters, use fire guards; if you have stairs, use stair-gates. If there is no door between the kitchen and meeting room, use a stair-gate to prevent children gaining access.

The parent and toddler group was a life-saver. It was the only real outlet I had to meet with other people in the same position as me. I made some good friends there. Anne
Hygiene
All toilets and nappy changing areas need to be checked for cleanliness. All cleaning products must be kept in a locked cupboard.

If there is not a facility to dispose of nappies safely, ask parents and carers to take them home for disposal. Ideally, disposable nappies should be burned, or put into two bags and tied securely, before disposing of them.

Equipment and toys
When buying toys, ensure they all carry the relevant symbols of safety and quality. Look for one or more of the following symbols:

- CE mark
- Lion Mark
- BATR mark

Consider how the equipment you buy will fit into the space available. The layout of the equipment is important and careful consideration should be given to:

- Having a safe area for babies.
- Adequate storage.
- The importance of children being visible at all times (such as the use of transparent playhouses).

Care should be taken that fingers are not trapped when children are using sit and ride toys.

Toys should be regularly checked, maintained and cleaned. Broken toys should be disposed of immediately.

Discourage gifts of second-hand toys and check the safety of toys children bring in from home.

Toys provided should be appropriate to the different age groups and varying stages of child development. Your local Early Learning Centre should give 10 per cent discount to parent and toddler group leaders; proof of charitable status is required. See page 27 for details.

The following list of suggested toys and equipment will encourage physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Don’t be discouraged by the length of the list; start with a small number of good quality items.

For babies under 12 months:
- Baby chairs
- Rattles
- Soft toys
- Mobiles
- Musical instruments eg bells, shakers, tambourines

For toddlers aged 12 - 24 months:
- Books
- Paper and colouring pencils
- Building blocks
- Toy buggies
- Wheelie toys
- Sit and ride toys
- Protective sheets for painting and play dough area
- Painting overalls
- Finger paints (non-toxic)
- Climbing frame with safety mat
- Cushions/beanbags for reading corner/puzzle area
- Wooden jigsaw puzzles

We had a great time when a fire-fighter came to do a fire safety talk. He came in his uniform – the children loved it. It was great for the carers too!

Linda, team member
For children aged 2-3 years:

- Construction toys eg Sticklebricks, Duplo
- Dolls’ house, garage
- Wheelie toys and bikes
- Playhouse
- Glue stick for craft activities

Remember!

- Put fire safety precautions in place
- Fill in local emergency numbers
- Keep an up-to-date first aid box
- Have a qualified first-aider at all sessions
- Be near a telephone
- Check safety of the room before all sessions
- Keep buggies secure and away from entrance
- Maintain cleanliness and lock up cleaning equipment
- Use stairgates and fireguards
- Dispose of nappies with care
- Buy toys with safety symbols
- Clean and check toys regularly
- Provide a safe area for babies
- Keep children in sight at all times
**Be inclusive**

Many groups have now moved away from the name ‘Mothers and Toddlers’, but the name ‘Parent and Toddler’ is still not a totally inclusive title. State clearly in all your literature that everyone is welcome – mums, dads, grandparents and carers. All adult carers are in a parental role when they are at the group. However, if you are running an ‘exclusive’ group – a group for single mums under eighteen, for example – clearly state this.

Mention in your literature that the group is also for babies, and is appropriate for children up to school age (although usually children leave at three years to go to playgroup or nursery school).

If you are a faith-based group you should make that clear, but explain that you extend a welcome to people from different religious backgrounds and ethnic groups. Ensure people with disabilities know they are welcome. But do make it clear if wheelchair access is not available in the building you use. Any concerns you have about accessibility should be referred to the owner of the premises you use.

Some groups choose to call themselves by a different name (such as Stepping Stones, Sparklers, Busy Bees, Tiddlers). These names are chosen in an attempt to emphasise that the group is not exclusively for parents and toddlers, and also to engage children and build in an identity to the group.

**Group charter**

On page 30 you will find a photocopiable sheet entitled The Parent and Toddler Group Charter. This sets out the aims of a group, and shows that you endeavour for excellence in all that you do. Display a copy on the wall of your venue – this declared intention will motivate you and your team to offer the best service you can at all times.

**Welcome letter**

Prepare a welcome letter or introductory leaflet. Make it friendly and informative, keeping in mind that it is for new members on their first visit, so it should cover all the basic information they need to know. Include, for example:

- The days and times of opening.
- Any changes in meeting times during school holidays.
- Contact name and telephone number of group leader.
- Health and safety issues such as areas allocated for pushchairs.
- An explanation of how parents/carers can pass on comments or complaints to you and the team. Let them know “this is your group and we welcome your input”.

**Parental agreement**

As part of your welcome letter, or as a separate leaflet, set out parents'/carers' responsibilities. Your letter could read, for example:

It is important that every member of the group feels relaxed, supported, safe and secure – and has fun – while they are here. May we remind you that when you register each week you are agreeing to follow a few simple ground rules that will help us enjoy our time together:

- Your child’s safety, the way s/he relates to and plays with other children, are
your responsibility. So if s/he’s about to throw a brick – intervene!

If another parent expresses concern about an action of yours or your child’s, listen graciously. Explore each other’s point of view, even if you don’t agree, or feel you have been misunderstood. Stay friends!

Appreciate the team members who are here to organise and facilitate the group, but who are also part of our group family.

Look after, and encourage your children to look after, the room, the equipment and each other, and take care with drinks, buggies and belongings.

Above all – have fun and enjoy being together!

See page 31 for a sample combined welcome letter and agreement; you could adapt this to suit your group.

**Newsletter**
You might like to produce an occasional newsletter which could provide more ‘ongoing’ information and which could be distributed via doctors’ surgeries, playgroups and libraries. In addition to the essential standard information included in the welcome letter, it could include details of:

- Parenting courses or other activities that you run or can recommend.
- Fund-raising events, summer outings and Christmas parties.
- Where and when the group meets, what it costs and who can come, written in the languages spoken in the area.

**Get recommendations**
You could arrange to meet with local Health Visitors or the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) in order to get recommendations. People more readily choose services when they are recommended by people they respect. This could be a more effective way to advertise your group than handing out leaflets.

**Remember!**

- Make sure EVERYONE knows they are welcome
- State clearly if you run an ‘exclusive’ group
- Display the Parent and Toddler Group Charter
- Write a welcome letter
- Prepare a parental agreement
- Produce a newsletter
- Get recommendations

‘Not surprisingly, I was in a minority as the only dad. I actually felt very special. The children loved having a man around.’

Dave
Through your parent and toddler group, you are already helping many of your group members more than you will know. You may be inspired to take your support one step further – such as offering parenting groups or other activities, or locating sources of help for families with particular needs.

All three organisations that have produced The Good Practice Guide for Parent and Toddler Groups have resources and support networks offering further help.

**Care for the Family**
Garth House, Leon Avenue, Taffs Well, Cardiff
CF15 7YY
Tel: 029 2081 0800
Fax: 029 2081 4089
Email: Playtime@cff.org.uk
Web: www.careforthefamily.org.uk
Registered charity no: 1066905

Care for the Family produces a free email newsletter for leaders of parent and toddler groups, providing encouragement and an opportunity to share ideas and inspiration. Other activities include family-building breaks for helping parents and their children to grow closer, special networks for single parent families and those who have suffered the loss of a child.

**The Mothers’ Union**
24 Tufton Street
London
SW1P 3RB
Tel: 020 7222 5533
Fax: 020 7222 1591
Email: mu@themothersunion.org
Web: www.themothersunion.org
Registered charity no: 240531

The Mothers’ Union promotes the well-being of families worldwide through the provision of practical projects established by volunteers within local communities. In the UK and Ireland, the MU facilitates a national network of parenting groups, provides a range of support for families and produces resources on issues important to parents. To register for a free copy of the MU’s email newsletter, visit our website.

**The Salvation Army**
Adult and Family Ministries Unit
101 Newington Causeway
London
SE1 6BN
Tel: 020 7367 4956
Fax: 020 7367 4711
Email: afm@salvationarmy.org.uk
Web: www.salvationarmy.org.uk
Registered charity no: 214779

The Salvation Army provides a number of specialised services including Family Tracing, Marriage Guidance, Residential Family Centres for families at risk and Community Homes offering professional child care. Many Salvation Army Corps (Churches) have a community outreach programme giving practical support and assistance to families, plus a wide range of activities across the age spectrum. Arrangements can be made for infants to be dedicated (christened).
Useful contacts and resources

Child protection

Criminal Records Bureau
PO Box 110
Liverpool
L3 6ZZ
Information line: 0870 90 90 811
Registration application line: 0870 90 90 822
Application line: 0870 90 90 844
Minicom: 0870 90 90 344
Web: www.disclosure.gov.uk

NSPCC
Weston House
42 Curtain Road
London
EC2A 3NH
Tel: 020 7825 2500
Fax: 020 7825 2525
Email: infounit@nspcc.org.uk
Web: www.nspcc.org.uk

Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS)
PO Box 133
Swanley
Kent
BR8 7UQ
Tel: 0845 120 4550
Fax: 0845 120 4552
Helpline: 0845 120 4551
Email: info@ccpas.co.uk
Web: www.childprotection.info

Produces Guidance for Churches, a comprehensive guide to child protection issues which includes model policies, sample forms and contracts and helpful best practice guidelines. CCPAS review and comment on draft child protection policies, offer training throughout the UK and operate a 24 hour seven day helpline.
Described as ‘the flexible resource for preschool children and carers’, the Tiddlywinks books offer a user-friendly, fun introduction to Bible stories.

Family Caring Trust
8 Ashtree Enterprise Park
Newry
Co Down
Northern Ireland
BT34 1BY
Tel: 028 3026 4174
Fax: 028 3026 9077
Email: office@familycaring.co.uk
Web: www.familycaring.co.uk
Produces a seven-session course for parents of children up to the age of six, aiming to enable parents to become more confident and learn new skills.

Positive Parenting Publications
2a South Street
Gosport
Hants
PO12 1ES
Tel: 023 9252 8787
Fax: 023 9250 1111
Email: info@parenting.org.uk
Web: www.parenting.org.uk
Produces a five-week course designed to build parents’ confidence.
NSPCC
(address as page 25)
Produces a course for parents of children aged 2-7, enabling parents to find positive ways of managing children's behaviour.

One Parent Families
255 Kentish Town Road
London
NW5 2LX
Tel: 020 7428 5400
Fax: 020 7482 4851
Email: info@oneparentfamilies.org.uk
Web: www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk
Membership of this supportive organisation is free of charge for single parents.

Parentline Plus
520 Highgate Studios
53-76 Highgate Road
Kentish Town
London
NW5 1TL
Helpline: 0808 800 2222
Email: centraloffice@parentlineplus.org.uk
Web: www.parentlineplus.org.uk
Provides freephone helpline and parenting courses via the Parent Network Service. Also includes the National Stepfamily Association.

Contact-A-Family
209-211 City Road
London
EC1V 1JN
Helpline: 0808 808 3555
Tel: 020 7608 8700
Fax: 020 7608 8701
Email: info@cafamily.org.uk
Web: www.cafamily.org.uk
Brings together families whose children have disabilities.

REGIONAL ADDRESSES
You may find it helpful to record your own local phone numbers

Police:
____________________________________

Fire Station:
____________________________________

Accident and Emergency:
____________________________________

Early Learning Centre:
HQ: 01793 831300
Local number:
Sample handouts and forms

These can be photocopied/adapted for your own use
The Parent and Toddler Group Charter

We aim to:

Welcome Everyone
Give a warm welcome to everyone, whatever their age, relationship to the child, culture, religious background, colour, gender or disability.

Be Excellent
Show excellence in all that is done in our group, from making the coffee to comforting a person in distress. At all times we try to maintain our high standards.

Provide a Safe and Happy Environment
Offer a safe and happy environment for the team to work with parents, carers and children.

Care for our Team
Value, encourage and care for every member of the team.

Offer Friendship
Offer true friendship to everyone who comes to our group and to create an environment where friendships can be made among our group members.

Involve Parents and Carers
Encourage parents and carers to assist and participate so that they will feel they are an essential part of the group.
Dear Fiona

We’re really pleased you’ve joined St John’s parent and toddler group!

I’m Jenny Smith, your group leader, and together with the rest of the team I would like to welcome you. We’ll do all we can to help you feel part of our happy group.

For your information, we are open on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9.30am and 11.30am. Please note that we run our group during school term time only.

We like to keep the entrance hall free for everyone’s safety. Please leave your prams, buggies or other large items in the room on the right hand side of the hall when you arrive. There is an additional fire exit at the end of the hall: this is only for use in emergency, so please do not leave by that exit.

It is important that every member of the group feels relaxed, supported, safe and secure – and has fun – while they are here. For that reason we have a maximum number limit of 50 adults and children; as group leader I am responsible for ensuring that we do not go over the maximum. For the same reason, may we remind you that when you register each week you are agreeing to follow a few simple ground rules that will help us enjoy our time together:

• Your child’s safety, the way s/he relates to and plays with other children, are your responsibility. So if s/he’s about to throw a brick – intervene!

• If another parent expresses concern about an action of yours or your child’s, listen graciously. Explore each other’s point of view, even if you don’t agree, or feel you have been misunderstood. Stay friends!

• Appreciate the team members who are here to organise and facilitate the group, but who are also part of our group family.

• Look after, and encourage your children to look after, the room, the equipment and each other, and take care with drinks, buggies and belongings.

We do value your comments on the group, and would also like to know if you have any concerns or suggestions about how we can do things differently. Please let me – or any of the team members – have your feedback. This is your group and we always welcome your input.

We also welcome any questions you have about St John’s Church – our parent and toddler group is run by members of the church. From time to time we run parenting courses and discussion evenings. You are very welcome to join us.

Above all – have fun and enjoy being together!

Jenny Smith
Group leader

PS If you need to speak to me outside group hours, feel free to call me on ...
# Sample registration form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/carer name:</td>
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<td>Child’s name:</td>
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<td>Child’s age:</td>
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<td>Child’s date of birth:</td>
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<td>Postcode:</td>
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<td>Contact telephone number:</td>
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<td>Registration date:</td>
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<td>Medical conditions (eg allergies, asthma)</td>
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<td>Special needs:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signature of parent/carer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Data protection declaration:** A statement should be made on the form about how the information supplied on it will be stored and used and who will have access to it. The person completing the form must be asked to give their written consent for the information to be used in the ways indicated. The information supplied must not be used for any purpose other than those stipulated. For further advice, contact your organisation.

**Please note:** Salvation Army groups are required to use the official Salvation Army Data Protection Notice on all registration forms.
# Sample weekly attendance record

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team member</th>
<th>Visitor</th>
<th>Parent/carer</th>
<th>Child</th>
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Notes
The Good Practice Guide has been produced for parent and toddler group leaders and teams.

It includes information about setting up and running parenting groups, covering issues such as:

- Basic procedures for running a successful group
- Putting into place a child protection policy
- Finding new ways of communicating with the group
- The range of equipment needed for children
- Creating a safe and secure venue
- How to plan a group session
- Where to find further support for families

It will help parent and toddler group leaders and team members to:

- Support each other in their work
- Affirm the members of their group
- Create a welcoming environment
- Provide the opportunity to make real friendships
- Offer a happy learning place for children
- Make a difference in their community
- Be as excellent as they possibly can be

Parent and toddler groups can be the only adult company that many parents and carers have during the week. Because of this, the group has a great impact on their lives; probably more than most group leaders can imagine! **Diane Louise Jordan**