Child's play and a God for all days

Article

In 1994 Hilary Welch was inspired by the children's work she saw when visiting America. Now she has imported those dynamic ideas and found that children in British churches can also benefit from mid-week home groups. Here she tells the exciting story of the past few years.

by
Hilary Welch

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In the beginning

I worship at an Anglican evangelical church in South Birmingham. The church has well established home groups for adults, and good children's work—Sunday groups and annual holiday clubs—but, until last year, no Bible-based mid-week teaching for children. The seed for the formation of home groups for children was sown in 1994 when I visited a Vineyard church in America and saw children praying for each other in a very natural and caring way. The seed germinated and I asked God if this was something he wanted to see happening in my own church in Birmingham. However, the root didn't appear until January 1998, when I was inspired and challenged by Irene Smale's seminar on children's cell groups at the Kingsway Conference in Eastbourne. At the same time several children were asking why it was that adults went to home groups but they didn't. It seemed that the time had come for some real growth!

Getting started

I approached a small group of people who seemed to share the vision and, after praying together, we found that four of us were committed to the task of setting up two groups, with a fifth person willing to step in when needed. We decided that we should begin with junior-aged children (7–11 years) and meet in two rooms of one house.

Our children come from our cluster of three sister churches. We wrote to all the children in this age-group, asking them if they would like to join a group to study the Bible together and to pray for each other. The letter ended with a consent form for their parents/guardians to sign. About 20 children responded positively to our letter. The shoot had appeared! The first meeting of the home groups took place.

Structures and formats

As this was a new venture we were unsure of what format the hour should take (we had agreed that we should meet for one hour early on a Friday evening). To help us feel secure we began by using ***Storykeepers***—the 1998 Scripture Union holiday club material. We used clips of the video and some of the material to discuss the stories of Jesus and their relevance to the children in their own lives. We watched the video and had a quiz as a large group of about 16 children and then split into two smaller groups for discussion and activities.

This format proved a good start to the venture. The children were certainly enjoying themselves and we felt confident with the way things were progressing. The parents were appreciative. The fruit was forming!

As we got to know each other better we all realized that we were trying to cram too much into the hour. The children needed more time to talk—to each other and to us. Our structured approach had worked at the conception of the group but now there was a need to provide a more flexible approach to accommodate the children's needs. As the children relaxed, they began to trust each other not to laugh and ridicule their ideas, comments and prayers. They wanted to discuss issues that were important to them, problems they were having, achievements they wanted to celebrate, prayer requests they wanted to share. Although they came from a variety of backgrounds, they valued each other's contributions and we leaders were thrilled to see them encouraging and helping each other to find Bible references, complete tasks and pray for each other.

Resources

Our themes began to reflect the change of emphasis. We tried to find materials that would reflect the issues that the children wanted to talk about—relationships with God, with each other, with family, with friends. We wanted to assure the children of their value to God, and how important they are to him as witnesses to those around them. This was difficult. Many of the printed resources were for children's groups that met in large buildings and included lots of noisy games. They nearly all provided too much material for our needs and yet there were some

excellent ideas that we wanted to use. By profession I am a primary school teacher and so is one of my co-leaders. That made us confident to use material from a variety of sources and to mix and match them. This is an area which may need to be developed in the future; resources could be written especially for such groups.

A typical meeting

At present what happens during the hour is roughly the same. We find that this format appeals to the children and they feel confident in this setting. We all start together—somewhat squashed!—for an icebreaker. When all the children have arrived we may have a singalong to a CD track and share news such as a birthday, a holiday etc. Then we split into our groups for a drink and biscuit, followed by Bible study and its application to our own situation, creative prayer and then we often reconvene into one group for a quiz based on the theme of the evening.

Recently the older children have been looking at positive and negative peer pressure. These children are about to begin a new era of their lives. They will be attending secondary schools where they will be under pressure to conform to certain behaviours that may be harmful to them or others around them. We wanted to give them strategies to cope before they were faced with difficult decisions to make. The children have been pleased to discuss these matters in a safe environment.

Serving the wider church

Part of the vision for this work was to see the children offering something in service to the wider church and this was recently realized when they were asked by the clergy to lead a meditation for the church during Holy Week. At the rehearsals the children were anxious that no one should be left out and that all should do their best. There was much cheering and clapping which delighted the leaders as we saw them encouraging each other. However, we had to explain that such applause would not be appropriate on the evening of the meditation!

An international venture

The prayers and concerns of the children are not just for themselves. They have identified with children all over the world, especially those in areas where there is suffering. An inflatable globe has helped us to pray knowledgeably. This is one way we have been able to pray creatively. Of course there are many other ways, and the leaders have been encouraged that the children pray for their own and others' concerns.

During the last few weeks we have been using the wonders of technology to keep in touch, by e-mail, with children of a missionary family with whom we have links. The children take it in turn to write messages to them and the immediacy of the answers motivates them to reply.

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Young evangelists

We want to encourage the children to witness to their friends. All the children who come to the home groups already attend one of the three churches. These are not 'open' groups. So once a month we arrange a social event so that the children can invite their non-Christian friends to spend time together in a fun-filled evening—swimming, a treasure hunt, a picnic in the park. We hope these children will start to attend church or join the 'open' club that the parish runs. Recently we had a sleepover at the church which was great fun and enjoyed by all. Spending time together in this way forges friendships and encourages opportunities for working together.

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Moving on

When the children leave us in the summer after their 11th birthday, they join support groups which have been set up by the youth worker. We are pleased that there is a transition at this stage and hope that, by starting to involve children and young people in groups at an early age, they will find it easy to join adult home groups in the fullness of time. We have not yet discussed the possibility of younger children (under 7) having their own groups.

The home groups are not in competition with Sunday teaching—we hope that they complement it. We are thrilled with what God has done so far and look forward to what he will do in the future.

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This has been a challenging and rewarding time for the leaders of the groups. We have learnt a lot by working with children in this way and are so pleased that we have had the privilege to be involved in this exciting new initiative.

Hilary Welch