

Discipling Babies and Toddlers

by [Emily Snider](#)

When I interviewed for my first position as a children's minister, twenty years ago, I asked the pastor, "Does the nursery have to be my responsibility? Can't we find someone else to do that area?" In my limited experience and understanding, I viewed the church nursery as a burden; having to constantly find volunteers to "babysit." I thought it would take my time and energy away from the more important task of discipling elementary children.

Thankfully, my pastor said, "No, it's your responsibility."

As I grew in my position as children's minister, my understanding of discipleship grew as well. I learned that true discipleship goes beyond teaching a Bible lesson. It's making a commitment to model Christ and teach biblical truths. It's building relationships that last even after they leave your ministry. Discipleship is a life-long process, and it starts when life begins. Paul wrote to Timothy,

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from who you learned it, and how **from infancy** you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:14-15) [emphasis added].

Discipling infants and toddlers looks different from discipleship at other stages, but it is possible and just as, if not more, important.

A baby cries to communicate a need, whether it is hunger, discomfort, separation anxiety, etc. When we meet that need, they learn to trust the caregiver. By meeting a baby's needs, we are nurturing their trust in the church and building a foundation for their faith in the Lord.

Three ways we can meet the needs of infants in our church are:

1. Comfort – Infants start to experience separation anxiety around 6–9 months of age, and can peak around 10–18 months. Unfortunately, this is when most parents feel comfortable leaving their child in someone else's care. One way to avoid this is to encourage parents to utilize the nursery before six months of age to establish relationships and routines. Make the nursery a calm and

welcoming place. Greet families with a smile, have soft music playing, and distract children with fun toys.

2. Care – A lot of ministry in the nursery is simply caring for infants through feeding them, changing them, and holding them. While you meet these basic needs, say a prayer or speak blessings over the children.
 3. Consistency – When children know what to expect, it builds their trust and hope. Consistent adults and routines will help to establish expectations, even at a young age. This is the foundation of faith! As children grow, they will experience different needs and expectations. As they become toddlers, they are developing autonomy, which strengthens their free will. They are learning what they are capable of. Discipleship of toddlers can happen during imaginative play and through encouragement.
- Play – Teaching Bible truths doesn't have to happen at a table. Teach as you go through guided play. Use toys to act out a Bible story, confirm the biblical point with your instructions. As kids play, remind them of Bible truths by repeating the main point or verses of Scripture.
 - Praise – As children develop autonomy, they are pushing the boundaries and learning what is appropriate behavior. Use positive reinforcement to encourage Christ-like behavior.
 - Partnership – Effective discipleship is done through partnering the home and the church. Provide resources for parents to continue the conversations at home. Build relationships through celebrating major milestones in a child's life, such as baby dedication, first birthday, etc.
- Many people look at the church nursery as babysitting, as I once did. It's our responsibility to educate them and change the culture in our church. Change the verbiage that is used when referring to your church nursery. Be clear that it is ministry and discipleship, not "childcare." Share photos and testimonies of what God is doing in your nursery ministry. Find key people who will champion this important ministry. It takes time and consistency to change a culture and build an effective ministry, but the results are eternal.