

Will They Stay or Will They Go?

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The answer may depend on how visitors experience your church the first 8 minutes after they part their cars. The church is one of the few places where parents leave their kids in the care of total strangers. For many, this experience is an anxious one.

According to Tom Clegg of Church Growth Institute, "When visitors walk through the door, they will decide in 3 to 8 minutes whether they will return." Often, your Sunday school or nursery is where first time visitors take Clegg's 8 minute test. The clock is ticking and the pressure is on. Read on to discover how to answer first-time visitors' questions so your church makes a great impression.

Where do I park?

Assist first-time visitors by placing locator signs inside and outside your building. Signs should identify which entry doors are closest to the children's area and nurseries. Use these ideas for signs:

- ♥ Large letters on the building
- ♥ Portable metal or foam-core signs staked into the ground
- ♥ Static signs on entry doors
- ♥ Plywood cutouts of kids holding balloons marking the way

Bold, neat signs must clearly identify the children's areas, specific classrooms, the sanctuary and adult Sunday school area.

The Extra Mile:

Reserve visitor parking close to the children's area and the main entrance.

Where Do I Go?

Put a greeting team in your children's education area. For many first-time visitors, walking into your building for the first time is overwhelming. Train your greeters to shake hands, welcome visitors, answer any questions, and direct visitors to the appropriate area. Greeters create an immediate personal connection.

The Extra Mile:

Paint a "RIBBON TRAIL" on the wall that leads from the front door to your Youth Ministry room.

Will My Child Be Safe?

Use a central information booth to tell parents what their children will do while in your care. Always keep the information booth staffed with well-trained volunteers. Explain your child protection policy, and provide parents with a secure method for retrieving their kids. Provide brochures about your children's ministry and contact information. If your church is small, set up your information booth with a portable cart and a clipboard. This important touch will inspire confidence in parents.

At check-in, have teachers and volunteers greet visiting children and parents, and then share a bit about what kids will be doing in class.

The Extra Mile:

Personally guide the children to the appropriate area and assist the parents in finding the sanctuary.

Will Anyone Talk to Me?

Provide first-time visitors with a special ribbon or sticker. This signals your group that they have a visitor and encourages the children to greet them with a friendly welcome.

The Extra Mile:

Give the regular attending children the opportunity to be of service by handing out the ribbons and greeting the new children.

Will Anyone Assist My Child?

Assure parents that their children will be well cared for by assigning an adult "connector" to their children. The connector introduces visiting children to other kids and to the classroom activities and routines. Connectors help kids and their parents feel safe, secure, and valued. They also help kids overcome the anxiety they feel when they enter a room full of children and adults they don't know. For infants and toddlers, the connectors serve as personal contacts for parents so they can find out how their child adjusted to the new surroundings.

The Extra Mile:

Have kids in each classroom serve as first-time visitor ambassadors. As an ambassador, these kids invite visitors in class, and introduce visitors to new friends.

What's That Smell?

Sights, sounds, and yes, smells are key to making your children's ministry to making your children's ministry a place to remember - for all the RIGHT reasons. Take a walking tour of the rooms you use for your ministry. What do you smell? If there is odor - parents will think twice about leaving their children in your care. Make certain the nursery and children's areas are properly disinfected and tidied. Decorate areas so they are bright, cheerful and inviting.

The Extra Mile:

Empty trash cans after each class rather than just at the end of the day. Have a volunteer regularly check the bathrooms to see that they are well stocked and clean. Also, visit other churches and classrooms to get decorating ideas.

What Happened to My Child?

Explain your checkout procedure to parents and provide them with written instructions when they check in. If you normally release older kids without a parent pick-up, stay with new kids in the classroom until their parents arrive.

The Extra Mile:

Send off visitors with the same friendliness you offered when they arrived. Most churches do a good job of welcoming guests, but they don't give the same personal contact as guests depart.

Who Is In Charge?

Many churches provide a reception area where first-time visitors can meet the pastor or children's ministry director. Create an area where first-time visitors can connect with children's ministry leaders, ask questions, and get additional information.

The Extra Mile:

Serve coffee or doughnuts, and offer parents tours of the classrooms and facilities.

Will Anyone Even Know We Were Here?

Follow-up is important. It shows visitors that you are grateful for their presence and you hope they will come back. It also gives you an incredible opportunity to get feedback and invite them to return the following week. Consider providing feedback survey with a self-addressed stamped envelope for visitors to respond with comments about their visit.

The Extra Mile:

Have connectors send a personal note to the child they were responsible for, or create a welcome card that the kids in the classroom have signed to send.

What Does It Feel Like?

As a simple exercise, re-sensitize yourself to how it feels to be a first-time visitor by attending a church where no one knows you. Make notes on what the church does and doesn't do well. Test the results against what you see happening at your church and what you hear in the follow-up with your visitors.

The Extra Mile:

Find three or four people in your community who are willing to be "secret" visitors to your church. Provide them with a checklist and have them give feedback about their experiences.