

Ministry Mythbusters

MYTH: “Great leaders in Children’s Ministry burn out because they don’t get to sit in church”

Finding and keeping Children’s Ministry Leaders is a challenge across the whole church spectrum. Little churches find it hard, and mega churches find it hard.

The barriers to longevity and sustainability in children’s ministry are common garden variety factors. There’s no rocket science to this. We hear the same set of difficulties everywhere. And in a few places some innovative mould breakers who have beaten the odds and survived the system.

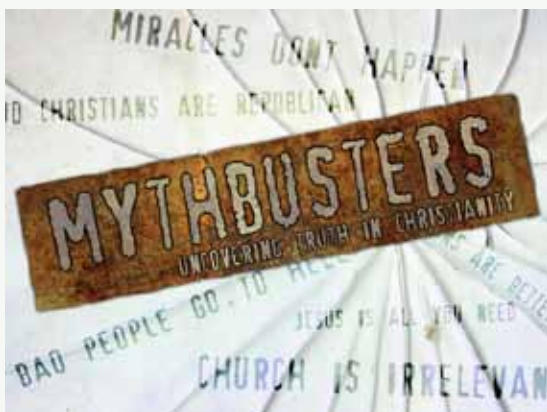
The common barriers are:

Isolation

Frustration

Disintegration

Disempowerment



MYTHBUSTERS

My kids and I all wish we could be on the Mythbusters team. We wish we could dismantle our car and stick it back together with duct tape. Or blow up our BBQ gas bottle and rocket it into the sky.

But I also wish that I could have my own ministry mythbusters show. The number one myth that I would want to bust, would be the one about how many sermons you need to listen to in a year to keep following Jesus.

Not because I’ve got it in for sermons – I’ve even been known to preach a few! – but because of the interplay between the mythology of sermon-listening and the circumstances of children’s ministry leaders.

Many churches find it difficult to find consistent leaders for their children’s ministry. There is a growing recognition that a week to week roster makes life hard for everyone. Many volunteers are genuinely trying to give 4 or 6 weeks, or even a term at a time, but the bottom line comes back, that they miss being in church.

At first this comes out as – “I need to hear a sermon” – but when we dig a little deeper in our mythbusting, it turns out that the faithful souls who roll up their sleeves for children’s ministry are also the kind of disciples who go home and listen to the podcast of the sermon while they are doing the ironing.

As helpful as the sermon is in provoking thoughtful discipleship, this substance is quite accessible in more forms than just the hour on Sunday. There are podcasts, many pastors have wonderful blogs, articles and audio ministries abound. And reading the Bible, pure and simply seeking the Life-giving word is pretty darn satisfying, don’t you find?

Leadership

The Real Need-Factors

With great teaching available in lots of forms everywhere, what is it that drives children's ministry leaders away from the place where they are gifted for service, and to bear fruit?

What causes a kids ministry leader to hang up their playdough cutters and lock their nerf ball in the cupboard, and head back into church?

Firstly it is isolation: In Children's ministry outer-space, you don't just miss out on the sermon, **you miss out on the COFFEE!** Now that is serious. And not just in a "this is Melbourne - we are all coffee-tragics" kind of way. We all know that the best **pastoral care and discipleship** in the church occurs over coffee. So if you are missing out on the coffee, because you are packing up after the morning's activities, you are missing out on pastoral care – both giving and receiving, and on being discipled, and connected into the community.

This issue is often masked in many of our churches because those who are volunteering in children's ministry are seen as the rusted on reliables who have been around forever. Of course, we assume that they are connected into the community. Their spouse is the secretary, their oldest son leads the youth group, they keep the casserole bank full – surely they are connected. Not so! Run a few observations and tests yourself and see if you turn out to be a mythbuster too.

Here are 5 things a church community can do, to extend the sustainability of their children's ministry leaders, and the build the stability and vitality of their children's ministry.

Nurturing the children is a whole church responsibility. Not all are teachers/leaders, but all are responsible (just as all are responsible for the care of the frail, but not all are gifted). So encourage every person to do what they can.

- Take a cup of **coffee** to the kids ministry area straight after the service and give it to a leader. Let them drink it while you put the textas away, and ask them **'How did it go today?'**
- **CONNECT WITH, not COLLECT FROM:** Another variation is to actually move a tea and coffee station proximal to the children's ministry area. Encourage parents to connect with their children and the leaders there, rather than simply collecting their children from the leaders.
- **Listen to a leader.** Just let them share what's going on. Chances are, you do actually care what happens in the ministries of your church – this is an opportunity to show it.
- **Muster the muscle power** and turn up to move the tables and stack the chairs and carry the boxes. When I began my first children's pastor role, I lost 3 stone in the first year. There is always an upperbody workout on offer in children's ministry.

MYTH: Ministry = Leadership

MYTHBUSTERS

The practical responses I have suggested here to build your children's ministry in resilience and stability, vitality and longevity carry the capacity to bust another myth. The Myth that ministry = leadership.

Most people interpret an invitation to be involved in children's ministry as a call to teach or lead. Ministry to human beings takes many many forms: care is ministry, service is ministry, feeding is ministry, challenge is ministry...

Develop an ethos of team that scoops in those who bring coffees and carry boxes. This is ministry.

Wonderful things happen in our faith when we discover that packing up textas was a collaboration with the Spirit – a holy conspiracy with God to bless and serve another.

In this revelation our eyes are further opened in our daily work through the week – also the place of God's action, the Spirit's stirrings. Jesus walks past our desk more often, or picks up a tea towel, or paces with us along the station platform.

*God of all, who is all and in all,
May we become a community that knows
the power of God in the day to day, in
the humble hours made holy, and let our
holy hour be made humble, as we give
ourselves in imitation of the Christ, who
emptied himself for our sake. Amen*

Be Time sensitive and accountable.

This is not just a worship leader or preacher action. Sensitivities and habits around time are cultural phenomena. As a community work towards a culture of time that reflects awareness of what is happening across you whole site, and affirms the presence and action of God everywhere. Imagine a service that has gone 30 minutes longer than expected, increasing the time in kids club by 50%. It is disempowering and invalidating for a children's ministry leader to hear – "The service kept going because the Holy Spirit showed up and was really moving..."

What this says to a children's ministry leader who has been managing on stretched resources for the past half an hour is "God shows up for real among the grown ups... but not here in what you do." You might as well slap them in the face and say 'God is not in your ministry'. A bit harsh? Let's be careful about what we say and do in our culture of time, in particular our narratives of what is 'spiritual' and 'godly' in that frame work.

Think of it this way: Your children's ministry leaders are likely to be servant hearted disciples of Jesus, who genuinely desire to be where Jesus is and a part of what he is doing. They want to be part of the God-inspired and directed action. If we whittle away their sense that ministry with children is part of what Jesus is up to, and we promote a sense that Jesus is somewhere else, working on something else, we can't blame these devoted followers for abandoning their children's program nets and going where we say Jesus is.

In fact this happens frequently. Ever heard of someone moving on from leading Sunday school to do Youth ministry where they can get serious?

The risk in minimizing the action of God in our children's ministry in terms of the sustainability of the leader's ministry is significant. Even more perilous though, is the compromise it brings in communicating with our children, that God is everywhere, inviting all people to participate in the Kingdom.