

Getting and Keeping Children's Ministry Volunteers

By Debbie Kolacki of

PRC– Practical Resources for Churches

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Introduction

These days many Sunday schools are suffering from a lack of enough teachers and leaders. Difficulty in getting volunteers is related to the decreasing attendance and participation we see in many churches and Sunday schools these days, but it isn't a reason for despair. There are things you can do to get more people involved in your children's ministry and ways to support them once they are there.

Start with prayer

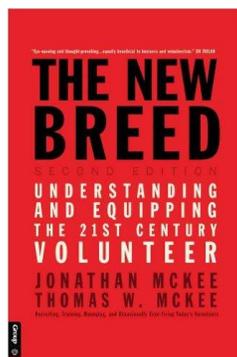
Pray regularly for God's help as you identify and call volunteers. Ask others to pray for you and your ministry. In Matthew 9:36-38, we read this about Jesus: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'"

Don't do it alone

In a book called [*The New Breed*](#), author Thomas W. McKee explains his father's secret to success in getting people involved in ministry:

Dad didn't do it alone. In fact, he wasn't even the common thread among all those people. Instead, he'd established a recruiting task force that met once a month with a list of vacancies. With church directories open, they brainstormed possible people to fill the positions... They looked for people who were a good fit for the need. This team served as my father's support group... Dad's own list of contacts was small. But with his team, the list expanded beyond who Dad knew to who everyone around the table knew. (36)

Is there a Nominating Committee or a Board of Education already in place that you can brainstorm with? Even just one other person can make a world of difference!



Inviting people to join your children's ministry

The words we use when we are asking people to get involved in children's ministry are important. The term "recruiting" has connotations of military service or duty. Inviting someone to participate in children's ministry is better defined as "calling" someone to join in ministry. Jesus didn't recruit; he called followers. Rather than saying we are recruiting volunteers, let's say that we are calling children's ministers.

Teaching is a spiritual gift

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...
Ephesians 4:11-12

We need to remember that teaching is a spiritual gift and not something that anyone can or should do. Perhaps your church might want to offer a spiritual gifts survey to help identify potential teachers. These are available in printed form or online.

The United Methodist Church's website has a page called [Exploring Your Spiritual Gifts](#) with information about spiritual gifts and an online spiritual gifts assessment. The Lutheran Church ELCA also has an [online spiritual gifts assessment tool](#).

Issuing an invitation

Make it personal

Don't rely on general announcements during worship or in the church newsletter. Make your invitations personal. I can't emphasize this enough. Ellen E. Larson, the author of [Recruiting: Help and Hope for Finding Volunteers](#), describes the response of Christian educators and leaders when they were asked how they got started teaching Sunday school:

Fewer than ten percent of the attendees had responded to an announcement or request for teachers without a personal invitation. Over 90 percent said they taught their first Sunday school class because someone asked them to teach...The method that works, the "bottom line," is the individual, personal approach—asking people.

Acknowledge and affirm

Acknowledge and affirm the person's gifts when inviting them to join your children's ministry by saying something like this: "We think you would make a great Sunday school teacher; it's obvious you have a wonderful way of relating to children."

Emphasize the importance

Emphasize the importance of the ministry and the calling--it's not something just anyone can do.

Have a positive and clear vision

Present your children's ministry program in a positive light, as something the person will want to be a part of. Of course, this is dependent on the quality of your children's ministry; if it is vibrant and exciting, then people will be drawn to it. Clearly communicate the vision for children's ministry in your church.

Ministry position description

Have sample job description/ministry responsibilities available and let the person you're inviting know how the church will support them, such as providing resources and training.

Be flexible and creative

Be flexible and creative. Be open to those who can't be there every week or who don't feel comfortable being in a teaching or leadership position. Ask the person what they would like to do in your children's ministry and be open to new ideas! Perhaps there are people who would be happy to prepare crafts or snacks or pray for children.

Use a team approach

As much as possible, use a team teaching approach, pairing up new volunteers with experienced ones. Retired teachers can also serve as mentors.

The seven deadly sins of inviting volunteers

In an article on the [Volunteer Power website](#) by Thomas W. McKee, seven deadly sins of inviting volunteers are listed. Some of these were already mentioned but some of the others are worth looking at.

The third sin is to recruit only volunteers who make long-term commitments.

"Volunteers are more willing to say yes to a short-term commitment with an end-date in sight."

The fourth sin is assuming that "no" means never. McKee writes: "Sometimes the 'no' means, 'not now.' Sometimes it means that the prospect volunteer feels that he/she would rather do something else. When the answer is 'no,' I often ask if there are any positions in our organization that they would love to do, but were never asked."

The fifth sin is to fall into the B.I.C. trap. As McKee says:

We often fall into the trap of following the BIC syndrome. Because we are in desperate need for a volunteer and need them quickly, we plead our case to anyone who "fogs a mirror" and at the last minute I get someone to be a "Butt In the Chair." Most times the chair is better empty than filled with the wrong person who does nothing or is high maintenance.

Writing a ministry description/covenant

A ministry description lets people know what's expected of them and is a good measurement to evaluate people and then provide positive feedback and helpful suggestions for improvement.

- One page should be sufficient.
- Ask those who are currently or were previously in children's ministry for advice and feedback in creating the descriptions.
- Include five parts to your ministry description:
- Ministry title - What is the position called?
- Responsibilities - What will the person be expected to do? What training is required?
- Accountability - Who does the person answer to? What sort of evaluations will there be?
- Term of service - How long is the person being asked to serve in this role?
- Acknowledgement - A place for the person and children's ministry leader to sign.

Equipping those in children's ministry

The Initial Orientation

- Have a written Children's Ministry Handbook.
- Go over your child abuse prevention policy.
- Give a tour including where supplies and other teachers' resources are kept.
- Provide a student list with information about them as well as their families.
- Provide a Sunday school/children's ministry calendar.
- Distribute curriculum and go over how it is used.
- Make sure that any questions the person has are answered.

Staying Connected

- Set up regular times when you will check in with individuals. This can be done through face to face conversations, hand written notes, phone calls or e-mails.

- Have regular group meetings and allow volunteers to ask questions and share information. Promote a team spirit.

Training/Teacher Enrichment

- Ask people for suggested topics for training workshops.
- Be flexible in scheduling training. You may want to offer a workshop at more than one time. Do short training segments at regular teachers' meetings. Provide food and child-care if necessary. Consider doing a training session during the regular Sunday school hour using volunteers to cover classes just for that day.
- Have people take ownership of training sessions by asking them to prepare something to present at the session.
- Make self-directed training available through printed, audio and video resources or using online resources. [*Takeout Training for Teachers*](#) offers articles in both writing and on a reproducible audio CD so busy teachers can learn while they drive or do other activities.
- Reproduce and distribute articles of interest or send links to them by email.
- Keep teachers informed of training opportunities offered by your denomination or non-denominational organizations. PRC - Practical Resources for Churches offers free webinars for those in children's ministry and also offers an online course for Sunday school teachers.

Opportunities for Spiritual Growth

Encourage your volunteers to grow spiritually. Keep them informed about Bible studies and other opportunities going on in your church as well as retreats, etc. offered in your area by other organizations. If your church has worship at the same time as Sunday school, make sure your teachers have opportunities to attend worship.

Children's ministry handbook

A person new to your children's ministry will feel more secure and organized if you have a handbook which gives them the information they need to know about your organization.

- This would include the ministry descriptions we just talked about.
- It would also include a vision or mission statement about your children's ministry program. What are you trying to accomplish and why? Are there learning goals for different age levels?
- You'll also want to have information about people and programs. You should have a list of leaders and teachers with contact information as well as a list of those willing to substitute in Sunday school. Information about your programs

would include what curriculum you use as well as the dates and times of your programs.

- You'll also want to include a list of available supplies and where they're located as well as how teachers can request supplies. You should have lists of what equipment and resources are available, such as TVs , DVD players, DVDs, etc. and whether these need to be reserved in advance.
- Policies and procedures should be listed in your handbook and include such things as such as check-in and dismissal procedures, discipline guidelines, and well-child policies.
- Have a list of all forms that will be needed, such as attendance sheets and visitor forms.

Affirming and thanking

It's important to make sure that those involved in children's ministry in your church know they are appreciated.

Dedication Service

Having a dedication service at the start of the programming year emphasizes that working with children is a ministry and helps those involved to see that what they are doing is something that God has called them to do. A dedication service should include all people involved in your children's ministry, not just teachers. Your denomination's Book of Worship may have a dedication service and they can also be found online.



Prayer

Pray for your volunteers regularly; consider having a prayer partner for each volunteer and each class.

Encouragement

Ask your pastor and other church leaders to let volunteers know their efforts are appreciated. This can be done individually, at worship services, at church meetings, or at other church events.

Positive Publicity

- Publicize your children's ministry and the wonderful people involved in it by letting the congregation know what's going on in your programs. Some ways of doing this include:
- Having articles in your church newsletter, bulletin and on the website; include photos, comments from children and teachers, etc.

- Involving children in the worship service through skits, sharing a song, using sign language to a simple Bible verse, etc.
- Using church bulletin boards to share information as well as post artwork and writings of your children.

Appreciation Meals/Events

Plan a special themed meal or event to honor your teachers. Get together a team of parents and volunteers from outside your ministry to help you put it together or honor your teachers as special guests at a regular scheduled church meal held by the congregation.

Thank You Gifts

The [*Do-It-Yourself Children's Ministry Handbook*](#) offers a number of good ideas for thanking your volunteers through notes and cards as well as special treats. Personalized gifts include those made using photos of students or a t-shirt with the signatures or handprints of students. [Christian Tools of Affirmation](#) is a company that sells items to thank volunteers. Also consider making a donation to your church or another charity in the name of those who are in children's ministry.

Recognition Service

A recognition service during the worship hour is a wonderful way to acknowledge your volunteers at the end of the teaching year. You can find samples of these online.

A place of joy and love?

Think about your Sunday school and other children's ministry programs. What kind of atmosphere do they have? If there's a positive atmosphere where adults and children are having fun and celebrating the love God has for us and the love we have for each other, that's the kind of place that people will want to be. If, on the other hand, if there is a spirit of negativity and complaining, you can't expect to attract people to your ministry.

A Sunday school or other children's ministry program should be a supportive community where Christians not only minister to children, but to each other. It can serve as a small group in the church, where people grow spiritually together as they work to build a loving and happy place for children to learn about God.





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