Choosing The "Right" Children's Ministry Curriculum
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The search for the "right" curriculum involves so many "working parts." I'll list a few of them (in case you aren't aware of them):

1. **The children's ministry (CM) vision** - This vision should complement or focus the overall church vision, and yet focus it to the children, their parents, and the community needs. Does the curriculum compliment, satisfy, and support the vision?

2. **Bible knowledge vs. discipleship** - In today's world, we must focus on discipleship, rather than simply passing on Bible knowledge. There are so many studies that prove that "church" is becoming unimportant to the youth of tomorrow. That means that the children of today must be "connected" to God, Jesus, and "significant others" more than ever before! A great book on this subject is *"Relational Children's Ministry: Turning Kid-Influencers Into Lifelong Disciple Makers"* by Dan Lovaglia. This book will definitely have an effect on your curriculum choice as well as on your program design and CM team training!

3. **Teacher-friendly** - You need to choose a curriculum that provides your CM team with enough supporting items to let them "fly." This means craft ideas, story ideas, visuals, background information, etc. I've seen "free" curriculum" that is so empty of teacher support that it is just plain "wrong" to use! This area will be the area that increases the cost of the curriculum. Make sure you don't waste the things you're given, but don't look for the "cheap" version either.

4. **Parent / home support** - In today's world, the parents are "hungry" for help in raising their own kids spiritually. If the curriculum only gives a simple coloring page as a "take-home," then it is not enough. Parents would like something that continues the lesson during the week with family activity suggestions or discussion ideas around the dinner table. This is a critical component of a "good" curriculum.

5. **Setting** - Is your CM a large group / small group setting, or a age-based classroom setting? This will determine which "line" of curriculum you choose.

Those are five things that make a "good" curriculum for you. What might be a "good" curriculum for you may not be a "good" curriculum for the church down the street.

> **NOTE:** Remember that the <u>MOST IMPORTANT</u> factor in choosing a curriculum is the people who are in the classroom, using the curriculum! We can't just "buy" ministry! The children's lives are impacted by the people in the classroom, NOT the curriculum! A passionate person whose spiritual life is vibrant and growing, and who loves and understands children can lead children to God with the daily newspaper! We shouldn't spend thousands of dollars on curriculum, and devote no attention on training, empowering, and inspiring our children's ministry team members!
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> We can no longer "lecture" or "preach" at the children. People who do this believe they are doing the right thing, but in reality, they are working against the very thing that the CM is about: developing disciples!

If the focus is on making connections with the children, and becoming a significant person in their lives, then the curriculum takes a "back seat" to greeting them, remembering their names, chatting with them, asking them how their dog is, helping them deal with bullies at school, dealing with parents who argue, worrying about terrorism, etc. The "lesson" in the curriculum is simply a platform onto which all of these personal conversations can "rest."

Searching for a "good" curriculum is not too difficult. The publishers are all online, and most of them permit you to download a sample. I would suggest that you create a review team who will help you with this challenge. That team can view the samples through the "lens" of the five things that I listed above.

Reviewing Curriculum

As you review the various curriculum sources, you might involve some of your CM leaders in the process. This will help them "own" the curriculum when it is finally established. The most effective way to let others assist with evaluating curriculum is to provide them with some basic "boundaries" or "criteria" of effective curriculum first. Here are some possible "boundaries" or "criteria" for a "good" curriculum:

- A clear lesson objective - to be used in evaluating the success of the lesson
- A variety of lesson presentation options to include audio, visual, tactile and experiential techniques
- A variety of lesson activity options from which to choose
- Interactive discussion challenges to use in engaging the children in the lesson
- Lesson-related visuals (maps, pictures, etc.)
- Age-based practical lesson application challenges
- Parent communication tools to involve the parents in the application / follow up of the lesson at home

Downloadable Curriculum

If you choose an electronic (downloadable) curriculum, be careful to discuss the new challenges that come along with that choice:

- Who downloads the curriculum?
- How do teachers communicate their specific choices from the lesson options to the person who downloads or copies the lessons?
- Who actually makes the copies of the lessons?
- Are the copies made in color, or in black and white? (Color enhances interest for kids and parents)
- How are the lesson copies distributed to the teachers / classrooms?
- If more copies are made at the time of the service, who does it, and how is that communicated?

These are new "wrinkles" of a downloaded curriculum that we don't necessarily have to face with a printed and shipped curriculum!

Age – Based Classroom Curriculum Pros and Cons

Age-based CM is probably what most of us experienced as children. This is considered the "traditional" setting for most churches. It used to be called "Sunday School" (this term is being used less and less by today's "progressive" churches.).

Benefits of Age-Based Classrooms:

- Age-appropriate teaching strategies, furniture, schedules, terminology, lessons, etc.
- Age-appropriate grouping of children for discussions, interactions, activities, etc.
- Higher possibility for developing relationships between children and CM team members (because the children attend the same class each week).
- Smaller class or groups – this is something that some children, parents, and team members like.

Age-Based Curriculum Options

1. David C. Cook's "Heart Shaper" curriculum – https://shop.davidccook.org/collections/heartshaper
2. David C. Cook's "Route 52" curriculum - https://shop.davidccook.org/collections/route-52-kids-sunday-school-lessons
3. Gospel Light Publishing – https://www.gospellight.com/
4. Group Publishing's "Hands On Bible Curriculum" – https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/childrens-ministry/sunday-school/hands-on-bible-curriculum.do
5. Group Publishing's "Dig In" curriculum - https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/childrens-ministry/sunday-school/dig-in.do
6. David C. Cook "Bible In Life" curriculum – https://shop.davidccook.org/collections/bible-in-life/Age_Kids
7. David C. Cook "Rio" curriculum – https://shop.davidccook.org/collections/rio
8. "DiscipleLand" – http://www.discipleland.com/
9. Lifeway Publishing - https://www.lifeway.com/en/shop/ministries/kids
10. The Gospel Project by Lifeway - https://www.lifeway.com/en/shop/the-gospel-project/kids?intcmp=LifewayKids-MTX-Image-TGP-20151001

Large Group / Small Group Curriculum Options

The "trend" toward large group CM in today's churches is due primarily to the growing challenge of not enough people to serve in CM! This format is not "trendy" because it is "better"! A large group, multiple-aged program can be "run" by 50% fewer people than an age-based programming! The large group experience typically includes a time of worship (with kids or adult worship leaders), a lesson presentation (skit, puppet show, or video presentation), and then small group discussions. The small group discussions may or may not involve age-based groupings. The small groups may meet in the same large room or meet in other rooms (if there are enough team members to provide 2 adults in every group).

Although, it is "easier" to provide a large group program, many churches discover that this setting isn't as effective in developing relationships between children or between children and the team members.

Large Group Curriculum Options

1. David C. Cook's "Tru" curriculum - https://shop.davidccook.org/collections/tru/Age_Kids
2. DiscipleLand's "Summit" curriculum - http://www.discipleland.com/SUMMIT-Large-Group-Small-Group-Curriculum
3. Group Publishing's curriculum - https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/childrens-ministry/sunday-school.do
4. Group Publishing's "Kids Own" curriculum - https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/childrens-ministry/sunday-school/kidsown-worship.do
5. Think Orange's "252 Basics" curriculum - http://www.thinkorange.com/252basics
6. Hillsong Kids curriculum - https://hillsong.com/kids/
7. SKITuations - https://christianskitsource.com/