Designing Summer Programs For Children's Ministry
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The Challenge

"Summer" is disappearing in a growing number of school districts across the country. Year-round school is changing the way parents and children view summer and forcing local churches and publishers to rethink "summer" programs.

Instead of a 2 or 3-month block of time filled with warm days and trips to the beach, we now must consider how to schedule ministry events around rotating blocks of "off-track" time that range from 15 to 25 days throughout the year. To make things more difficult, children's ministry (CM) directors may face up to 5 "tracks" of year-round schedules in their community. This means that they may be forced to repeat a "summer" program up to 5 times to offer the program to all the families in the community.

In counties where the traditional school schedule still exists, "summer" still lasts from June until September; but with growing populations overcrowding school facilities, it is only a matter of time before all counties adopt the year-round school schedule.

The differences between a "summer" program offered in a year-round community and a program offered in a traditional school schedule are the timing and staffing. Typically, summer programs are staffed by volunteers who do not serve on the CM team that runs the Sunday or mid-week programs. This is done to protect the regular team members from feeling overused and becoming exhausted. Summer programs require new volunteers, leaders, and a unique curriculum. Many of the volunteers for summer programs may be parents of the children who will participate in the program. This adds a new complication to team development.

The ultimate challenge in a year-round "summer" program is in staffing. If parents are used as part of the ministry team, they will only serve while their children are "off track" or involved in the program. If you decide to repeat the program or offer it when other "tracks" are "off," you'll have to recruit parents from those "tracks" as well. This creates a training and scheduling nightmare! It is possible, with God's help, to do this, but it requires a "scheduler" among your leadership team who oversees the recruiting, training, communicating with, and rotation of all the volunteers who run your "summer" off-track program.

The Needs

We shouldn't offer a summer program simply because other churches offer a similar program, or because it is "traditional" to do so. Programs must be a direct response to the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 19, 20), and an expression of a clear vision given by God.

In most cases, it is the parents who bring their children to the summer program to give their children a fun experience, as well as to give themselves a break from the day-to-day responsibilities of parenting. In some cases, the children will ask their parents to enroll them in the summer program because "it looks fun." Whether it is the parents' or the children's decision, the basic needs are the same. The parents are expecting the program to be safe, enjoyable for their children, and spiritually based. The children are mostly interested in having fun.

Security Needs

There is no higher children's "need" than spiritual needs. Nothing is more important than leading a child to a saving, personal relationship with Jesus. But, in today's world, we must realize that parents are not going to enroll their children in spiritually-based programs that are unsafe.

Parents expect summer programs to be safe for their children. The security needs of their children are viewed as critically important. If a program is not safe for their children, the parents won't enroll them in the program; regardless of the "fun factor," or the spiritual emphasis!

Typically, summer programs involve some traveling to "off campus" sites (the beach, the mountains, etc.). There might be visits to local amusement parks, businesses, or parks. These "off campus" adventures add a "wrinkle" to the security challenges. Off campus travel also increases the need for lower adult/child ratio. This means that the need to recruit, screen, and train adult volunteers is increased. For the sake of this article, I will assume that there will be off campus travel for the summer program.

Transportation is a critical consideration for parents. **In today's world, it is not wise to use carpools to transport children to off-campus ministry events.** Parents aren't comfortable with others transporting their children, and they probably won't enroll their children in those events! It is safer to contract with a bus leasing company to transport the children. The additional cost of leasing the bus will gladly be paid by the parents! The bus company carries its own insurance and trains its drivers to be safe.

Ways To Satisfy The Security Needs:

1. A publicized screening process for all volunteers
2. A publicized orientation/training process for all volunteers
3. A publicized emergency/CPR training process for all volunteers
4. A publicized adult/child ratio for the program (highlight changes for off-campus trips)
5. A publicized schedule for the program (highlight changes for off-campus trips)
6. Publicized info./maps to off-campus sites (phone numbers, contact names, directions, etc.)
7. A publicized list of adult volunteers and ministry leaders supervising the program
8. A "Scoop Sheet" for each day's events with maps, schedules, emergency cell numbers, clothing requirements, food considerations, special supplies needed, etc.
9. A check in/out system that protects the children from being abducted
10. A publicized communication system (via two-way radios or cell phones) while off-campus
11. Approved release forms for parent signatures:
    a. Emergency release (permission to give medical treatment)
    b. Event release (permission to attend event, be transported, and special needs or allergies)

Spiritual Needs

Even though a summer program gives parents a needed break from the daily responsibilities of parenting, parents are still critically interested in us addressing the spiritual needs of their children. Parents will choose to enroll their children in a church-based summer program instead of a city, non-spiritual program because of their desire to see their children experience life with a spiritual emphasis. Spiritual development of children is growing in importance as the world becomes more and more "ungodly."

Whether you design a summer program that is an on-campus program, or an off-campus program, you must still assure the parents that your "curriculum" includes a systematic spiritual emphasis. This emphasis can be "bought" from publishers in the form of a "VBS" type curriculum, or it can be designed "in house" by your own people. Regardless of its source, the curriculum you choose must match your children's ministry vision, your overall church vision, and your awareness of the Great Commission.

Spiritual growth doesn't come through a printed page. Yes, the scriptures are "…inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, reproof, and for training in righteousness." (2 Tim. 3: 16), but children need more than a printed page. They need the "human touch" of a significant adult mentor who lives out the scriptures in real life. Children have a God-given ability to create heroes. Their heroes may be rock stars, television stars, sports stars, or "ministry stars." Jesus' style of ministry was heavily based on interactions, conversations, meals, trips, and experiences. He taught while He lived. He showed us how to teach others using a blend of the Word and real-life encounters. We can't simply buy a curriculum and expect the reading of it to develop the children, spiritually.

The true "curriculum" includes everything that is done with children (trips, crafts, lesson experiences, snacks) INCLUDING the interactions with the adult team members. An excellent "spiritually-based" summer program must be designed with multiple layers of spiritual influence for the children. Team members must be recruited according to their own spiritual maturity. They must be oriented and trained in engaging the children, spiritually, during the program through "guided conversation" techniques. The adult team members must be challenged to be actively involved in the children's lives during the program. They must be aware of the spiritual environment during every part of the program (even restroom breaks!).

The summer program may be limited to a short period of time. The typical summer program lasts for 5 to 10 days. It might be spread out over several weeks. This time factor must be "worked into" the orientation and training of your team members. They must realize the importance of remembering the children's names, prayer requests, and family situations. It is these critical factors that will propel them to the level of "significance" in the children's eyes. Once the adult team members have become "significant," the children will let them have greater influence on them, spiritually. If the team members fail to make those connections with the children, they will remain as "adults who don't care," and the spiritual impact in the children's lives will be greatly reduced.

Ways To Satisfy The Spiritual Needs:

1. Pray for God's guidance and blessing on your ministry to the children.
2. Recruit adult team members who are spiritually strong (have been a Christian for many years).
3. Clearly state the vision / goal of the program ("spiritually enjoyable," vs. just fun).
4. Train the adult team members in the basics of:
   a. Answering children's spiritual questions
   b. "Guided conversation" that is lesson-focused and spiritually rich (lesson-focused conversations while eating, riding in the bus, doing crafts, going to the rest room, while playing, etc.)
   c. Active listening skills (listening to the "heart" in a child's comment or answer to a question)
5. Choose a curriculum that has clear spiritual goals and objectives. Enhance that curriculum, if needed, to satisfy your children's ministry vision.
6. Train the adult team members in the use of the curriculum.
7. Train the adult team members to recognize the spiritual value of every experience (playing games, crafts, restroom trips, field trips, etc.).

8. Train the team members in how to touch the children appropriately and encourage them to use these appropriate touching approaches often.
9. Train the team members in positive, proactive discipline techniques.
10. Create a lesson enhancing parent guide that gives the parents an overview of the spiritual impact of each of the program's meetings, as well as a list of things to do at home to continue or apply the spiritual lessons during the week.
11. Create times of prayer during the program in which the children and team members share in prayer needs and pray together.
12. Create times of worship during the program in which the children and team members share in singing together.
13. Challenge the children to consider their own spiritual lives (relationships with Jesus) during each meeting of the program.
14. Design small and large group activities that are designed to get the children to talk about their own relationships with God.
15. Create a plan or process by which a child can dedicate him/herself to God. This plan must include involvement of the team members, communication with the program director, communication with the parents, and equipping of the parents to carry on the responsibility of "raising their child in the way he/she should go…"
16. Train the team members how to lead a child to Jesus and challenge them to be prepared to do so.

Physical Needs

To focus on spiritual or safety needs at the expense of the children's physical needs will result in unhappy, or disorderly children. Children's physical needs dominate their behavior. If a child's physical needs are met, they are peaceful and more open to significant adults addressing their spiritual needs. If a child's physical needs are not cared for, he/she becomes frustrated and closed to anything else.
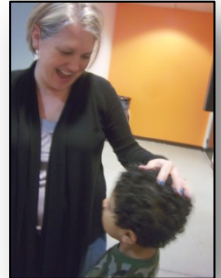
A summer program usually involves extended blocks of time with a variety of environments. The basic physical needs of children must be a consistent focus of your planning and preparation. Children's basic physical needs are: food, water, restroom facilities, play, rest/sleep, touch, conversation, and correct temperature. These needs must be met at regular intervals. These intervals are dictated by the age of the children, the weather, and the activity involved. Younger children require that their physical needs be met in shorter intervals from older children. For instance, preschool children need to eat and rest more frequently than 5th graders. In designing a summer program, you must become familiar with the age group's physical needs or consult age group "experts" during your planning.

Your adult team members must be trained in the specific care of the children's physical needs. You must also recruit your adult team members with the physical needs of your children in mind. If you only recruit female adult team members, you will experience a conflict in the restroom needs of your male children. If you only recruit "youthful" male adult team members, you may experience a conflict with the female children who don't want to play so aggressively. You should pray for God to lead adults to you who will create a well-balanced team who will care for the wide spectrum of physical needs that your age range of children bring to the program.

Ways To Satisfy The Physical Needs:

1. Pray for a well-balanced adult team
2. Become familiar with the physical needs of the children who will attend your program
3. Plan regular "intervals" to care for the physical needs of the children (restroom breaks, food, water, play, rest, touch, conversation, etc.) that is appropriate to their age.

4. Provide enough supplies to satisfy the physical needs of the children.
5. Recruit a well-balanced adult team (balance of age, gender, interests, etc.)
6. Train the adult team members in specific care of the physical needs of the children (overseeing snack time, location of water, appropriate restroom procedures, play times, appropriate touch, "guided conversation"), and expect them to watch for expressions of physical discomfort in the children.
7. Provide options for children who do not wish to participate in the scheduled activities, or who are ill.
8. Plan for emergencies (injuries, illness, lost children, fights, etc.) as you design procedures.
9. Train your adult team members in the handling of emergencies.

The Program

Apart from a summer program that fits within the year-round school schedule, you have many program options from which to choose. You have two categories of the location for the program: on-campus and off-campus. You may also choose to create a blended program that has some on and some off-campus activities. Another choice for the program's "setting" is whether it will be a one-time event, a weekly meeting over several weeks, or a multiple meeting program in successive days. What you do, where you go, and for how long you do it is up to you, and what God's plans for the program are.

You also need to decide on the purpose, or goal, of your program. Is your program evangelistic? Will you pray that God will use this program to reach out to new families in your community to spread the Good News of Jesus to them? Is your program a nurturing program for the families who already attend your ministry events? Is your program designed to minister to the children apart from their parents, or do you hope to minister to entire families? Will your program be operated by the children's ministry alone, or will you involve other ministries in the church as well?

Here are some questions and considerations that may help you design your summer program:

Program Considerations:

1. How does this program "fit" into your overall church vision, and your CM vision?
2. What has been done in past summers? What can you learn from those programs?
3. What specific needs "demand" that you have a summer program? How will this program be different from the regular Sunday program?
4. What has God been telling you about this program?
5. Will this program be a program that "fits into" a year-round school schedule? If so, do you plan to repeat it for other "off track" children or families?
6. Will this program be a one-time event, or will it spread out over several meetings throughout the summer? Will you repeat it again during the summer?
7. Based on the age group you are "targeting," what is the best time to offer the program (before, after, or during mealtimes, early morning, evening)?
8. How long will each program meeting last?
9. Will the program be an on-campus, off-campus, or a blend of both?
10. Will you utilize a transportation company to transport the children?
11. What forms will you need (emergency, event, check-in/out, etc.)?

12. At each program meeting, what will the children experience, and why? When it is all over, and the children are walking to their family cars, in their minds they'll think, "I'm so glad I came to this because now I… "(How you finish this thought will be your goal.)
13. How will you advertise your summer program?
14. How will you recruit enough qualified adults to run the program? How will you involve your senior pastor in this recruiting process?
15. How will you attract men to volunteer to help with the program?
16. How will you attract women to volunteer to help with the program?
17. What curriculum will you use for the program? Will you purchase it, or write it?
18. What topics, techniques, or procedures will be included in your team training?
19. If you use off-campus sites, how will you choose, find, or prepare those sites beforehand?
20. How will you incorporate and involve entire families in your program? How will you "send the lesson home" for support by the parents?
21. How will you "kick-off" your program (ceremony, involvement of family, media used)?
22. How will you "close" your program (ceremony, involvement of family, media used)?
23. How will you communicate with the parents before, during, and after the program?
24. How will you utilize, or involve, other church ministries in your program?
25. How will you evaluate the success or fruit of your program?
26. How will you document the program for future programs?