

CHILD-FRIENDLY CHURCH BUILDINGS

Large numbers of PCCs are wanting to attract into regular worship more young families, and are seriously asking questions about the content of Sunday services to make this possible. All-age worship is now often the largest congregation in many churches, in both country and town.

PCCs recognise that the culture of society has changed. When an older generation was young, children were expected to be 'seen and not heard'; this was reflected in the education system, often described as 'chalk and talk', where children sat in rows and were taught by a teacher, often without any real interaction with the pupils.

Today's educational methods are radically different, and children are encouraged to participate in the learning process through discussion; younger children are encouraged to move around a classroom in order to interact both with the teacher and the subject under consideration.

As a result, families expect churches also to provide this sort of environment when they come to worship together, and increasingly the content of worship recognises this by providing greater opportunities for child participation.

But we also need to ask questions about the building itself, in order to make it appropriately useable by families and younger children. The Diocesan Children's Council has offered a checklist of possible questions PCCs can ask when considering reordering, whether on a major or minor scale. Not every building will be able to be adapted in some of the suggested ways. The structure of the building itself may be an inhibiting factor, as may the lack of

finance, or the requirements of English Heritage. Some questions may not relate to your own particular situation. No PCC should feel itself a failure if it cannot answer all the questions positively; but nevertheless the checklist provides questions which can be asked by any PCC anxious to attract children and young families.

Approaches and Entrances

1. Is the approach and the entrance door safe and well lit, so that children attending events in winter (e.g. a choir practice) can be and feel safe as they approach and enter the church?
2. Can the door be opened by a child on his or her own?
3. Are the approach and doorway suitable for prams and buggies? (This is, in fact, the same question as that related to wheel-chair access, required by the Disability Discrimination Act.)

The Interior

1. Does the inside of the building convey to the visitor that this is a place for children as well as for adults?
2. Is it possible for a child, on entering, to discern that this is a place of worship, or a special place, or is this only clear to the adult? Are there specifically religious things that a child can see at child height near to the door, for example?

3. Is there a place in the church where prams and buggies can safely be put during a service?
4. Is there the possibility of providing a safe, uncluttered space where small children can be taken if they become restless?
5. Is there the possibility of providing a children's area with Christian artefacts (similar to a Godly Play focal shelf for example) where small children can engage in parallel play during or after a service?
6. Is there the possibility of providing a space where children (and parents) can sit on the floor for a specifically children's service, or where children can sit at the front so they can see during an ordinary Sunday service?
7. Can any rooms be provided off the church building (e.g. a vestry or a tower room) which might have glass panels in the door so that they may be used for withdrawal groups with an adult leader during a service?
8. If there is a toilet, or if there is to be a toilet, is it in such a place that a child can safely visit it alone?
9. If hot water is provided in the church for events, is there a place where the water boiler can be left, which safeguards wandering children?
10. Does the heating system require guards? (Hot water radiators are safe but wall-mounted gas fires need guards, and under pew electric pipes need to be made inaccessible.)
11. Can staircases (e.g. to bell towers) be rendered inaccessible to small children?
12. If the church is the only public building in the community, or if it is the only building available to the congregation, is it suitable for multi-purpose use? (Can it, for example, be used for an

after-school group, a holiday club, or a toddler service? Or, moving beyond the needs of children, can it be a meeting place for the elderly who cannot get out much or very far, but who would like to meet their neighbours from time to time.)

13. Is there a place from which a child can read aloud during a service and have a place to put the book or paper from which he or she is reading if the lectern is too high?

Outside

1. Are there dangerous grave stones?
2. Is there a safe place where children can be taken to do things outside?
3. Is there a safe place where toddlers can run about if a parent has to take them outside the church building during the course of a service?
4. Does the churchyard have gates that can be closed if children are playing there?
5. Are accesses to high levels (roofs) or cellars rendered inaccessible?