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### **Purpose**

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

(Matthew 28:19-20)



Jesus Christ has given the Great Commission to every Christian. We are all to “make disciples of all nations.” Christians gather together in the name of the Triune God to strengthen each other in their faith and to more effectively baptize and teach others. This mission of the church is embedded in the programs and activities that each Christian congregation carries out.

A congregation may be contemplating beginning an early childhood ministry to more effectively reach out with the Gospel message to the families in the congregation and community. A quality early childhood ministry can be an effective vehicle for bringing the Gospel message to families of the congregation to carry out the responsibility for the spiritual nurture of the children, their families, and the community.

Children are unique gifts from God. Each child has a spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, creative, and physical component. The first years of life are extremely important in a child’s total development. The development of self-concept begins in the earliest years. Their understanding of who they are begins in the earliest years. The young child begins to identify him/herself as a unique creation of his/her Savior God.

The child’s early development years coincide with the development of family values and traditions. Research conducted by the Barna Institute indicate that the family’s religious traditions are established by the time that the oldest child reaches the age of five. A congregation’s outreach ministry to families is, therefore, an integral part of its ministry to young children.

## **The Child in the Family**

It is no secret that family structures have changed dramatically over the years. At one time, the word “family” referred to a father, a mother, and one or more children. Today, “family” also means single-parent families, blended families, skip-generation families, childless couples, and single-unit families.

Our families have become increasingly transient. Families move from one part of the county to another and are often without benefit of living in close proximity to members of their extended family. As a result, many children cannot get to know grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. Parents may feel isolated without the nearby support of their extended family.

Families and society in general, are surrounding children with adult expectations, pressures, and concerns. Children are being hurried out of childhood by being urged to achieve more at an earlier age, by not being given adequate time to learn, by being used as adult confidants, and by being exposed to the bewilderments of social environments before mastering the skills with which to cope.

In his book, *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk*, David Elkind (2001) describes the variety of risks to which young children are exposed in their very early years of development. According to Elkind, if pushed to grow up too fast and too soon, children may experience permanent damage to their self-esteem, lose the positive attitude they need for learning and block their natural gifts and potential talents.

Parents sometimes find it difficult to provide the environment in which their children can grow and develop to the best of their potential. They often look to the church for help.

## **The Church’s Ministry to Young Children and Families**

The church reaches out to families as part of its natural ministry of outreach and nurture. The church reaches out with the message of God’s love, help, care, and forgiveness for all. Ministry to families with young children is an important part of the church’s overall gospel ministry.

Throughout its history, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has demonstrated concern for children. In its early history, elementary schools and Sunday schools were established. Lutheran high schools followed and, more recently, early childhood ministries (ECMs) have been established. Resource materials and support are available from the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools for congregations that choose to establish early childhood ministries.

As parents enroll their children in an early childhood ministry, the congregation can offer opportunities for worship, personal contact, and the invitation to become part of a Christian congregation that brings people into the arms of Jesus. Doors are opened to families with baptized and unbaptized children. The congregation gains the opportunity to present the message of salvation and to lead parents and children to receive the blessings of Christ through baptism. They can provide spiritual nurture opportunities so that each believer can grow in his/her faith.

### Foundational Beliefs in Planning for WELS ECMs

- The basis for effective ministry is a dynamic and helpful relationship among Christ, the servant, and those being served.
- The Word of God is applied faithfully and issues addressed honestly throughout the planning process.
- A Lutheran early childhood ministry is a significant and integral thrust of a congregation's ministry of outreach and nurture.
- A Lutheran early childhood ministry is operated so that a congregation is better able to carry out its mission.
- An effective Lutheran early childhood ministry has strong capable leaders.
- Early childhood personnel faithfully carry out their assigned responsibilities with great concern for the overall ministry of the congregation.

- A Lutheran early childhood ministry actively ministers to the family system of their students.
- God's grace and forgiveness provides Christian people with the highest motivation to strive for excellence,
- Excellence is the result of planned, continuous, and incremental efforts at improving programs and practices.

### Fishers of Men

An early childhood ministry gives you a pond in which to fish, but it does not guarantee that you will catch any fish.

Being "fishers of men and young children" requires careful planning and hard work to take advantage of the opportunities God gives us.

### Essential Characteristics of WELS ECMs

- The love of Jesus permeates the early childhood ministry's culture and establishes the bond among students, teachers, and parents.
- The authority of the Bible establishes the foundation upon which early childhood activities are rigorously pursued and upon which Christian character is fully developed.
- Children are cherished and their needs addressed because each is uniquely created and redeemed at great cost by their loving God.
- The whole child is educated in mind, body, and spirit.
- The home-school partnership is exceptionally strong because teachers understand that God gives children to parents and parents entrust children to the teachers.
- Teachers are highly qualified and motivated because their career is a calling in ministry.

- Safe, inviting, orderly classrooms and emphasis on the holistic development of the child are hallmarks of WELS early childhood ministries.
- Instruction, programs, activities, and opportunities for students are comparable to and often exceed what is available in other quality early care and education programs.

The congregation needs to think through and articulate the principles and practices that we believe to be appropriate and scriptural in early childhood education. This document presents general statements that can be beneficial to congregations in establishing and operating early childhood education programs. The portions of Scripture cited can provide a useful basis for discussion and be a wholesome guide to practice in our congregations.

## **E** Philosophy, Principles, and Guidelines for WELS ECMs

*(Revised, approved, and published by WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools, March 2014)*

Formal early childhood education has grown in importance in both church and society. The care and education of young children outside the home has become almost indispensable for our society. Early childhood education in the church reflects society's trends as well as the church's concern for the Christian nurturing of young children and their families.

Early childhood education is commonly defined as education for children between birth and age eight. While these principles and guidelines are applicable for the education of children birth through age eight, most WELS early childhood ministries focus on the education of children prior to the first grade level. Therefore, for purposes of this document, early childhood is defined as a ministry of education to children at home, in a Christian school, or in some other church agency, from birth through kindergarten.





## Philosophy

God specifically gives parents the primary responsibility for nurturing their children. Christian early childhood ministries provide for the Christian nurturing of young children, a vital aspect of the mission of the church. This unique ministry strives to meet the spiritual, social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of young children in a developmentally appropriate manner.

## Principles and Guidelines

### THINK ABOUT IT

God gives parents the primary responsibility for nurturing their children

### ✚ *Parents specifically have been given this responsibility.*

Scripture identifies the family as our first and most enduring relationship. It teaches that children are a “heritage from the Lord” (*Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.* Psalm 127:3) and that God gives parents the direction to “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* Ephesians 6:4). Christian early childhood ministries will encourage and assist parents in meeting their responsibilities toward their children and it will endeavor to emphasize the joys of taking these privileges to heart.

### ✚ *Christian early childhood ministries support parents in carrying out this responsibility.*

Christian early childhood programs are ministries to children and parents. They are carried out with an awareness of the family setting and are responsive to the needs of the family. From the time of the child’s birth, early childhood ministries work directly with parents in providing materials, activities, and training in the privilege of being their child’s most important teacher. When the parent enrolls the child in an agency of the congregation, this ministry includes the child directly as well as the parent. Parents are included in this training and instruction of the Lord by involving them meaningfully and appropriately in the activities of the ECM.

### THINK ABOUT IT

The Christian nurturing of young children and their families is a necessary aspect of the mission of the church.

### ✚ *The mission of the church is to make disciples.*

The church carries out its various forms of ministry for the sake of and by the command of Christ to “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19). This disciple making includes the two complementary tasks of reaching out to the unbeliever and nurturing the faith of the believer. Children are particularly included as Peter told the crowd on Pentecost, “*the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call*” (Acts 2:39). Thus, the Christian early childhood ministry of a congregation will include both outreach and nurture in its program and policies.

### ✚ *God has given the church the responsibility to assist parents in training the young.*

The Old Testament often describes how the community of believers, the church, instructed and trained children (*All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the LORD* 2 Chronicles 20:13; *And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.* Nehemiah 12:43). Our Lord gave a specific command to the church to nurture children in his words to Peter, “*Feed my lambs*” (John 21:15). The church has historically established agencies for the education of the young. Christian early childhood ministries are now a growing part of that rich tradition. The church meets this responsibility when its programs encourage and support parents in their God-give obligations and help children grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

### ✚ **Christian training is necessary for young children.**

By precept and example the Bible speaks to the necessity of Christian training for young children. The need for Christian training is found in the sinful nature of the child (*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* Psalm 51:5); the words of our Lord declare that the truths of Scripture can and must be taught to children (*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.* Mark 10:14); and the admonition of Proverbs to clearly and directly prescribe training (*Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.* Proverbs 22:6). The examples of Samuel (*The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up and he let none of his words fall to the ground.* 1 Samuel 3:19) and Timothy (*From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.* 2 Timothy 3:15) are to be emulated by families and congregations today. The WELS upholds its heritage and clear words of Scripture as it provides for the Christian education of young children. Attitudes, knowledge, and skills are developed at an early age which fosters growth as a child of God.

### ✚ **Christian early childhood ministry is a part of a congregation's ministry to families.**

The various agencies of Christian education (e.g. childcare, preschool, Sunday School, the Lutheran elementary school, and youth ministries) have a cooperative focus to support and reinforce the goals of Christian outreach and nurture, particularly as parents and teachers share these goals. Early childhood education should be one strand of the congregations' approach to Christian education. Under God's blessings this ministry will serve to nurture the home-church partnership by being a means to strengthen the relationship of the family with the Savior.

### THINK ABOUT IT

Christian early childhood ministries strive to meet spiritual, social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of young children in a developmentally appropriate manner.

### ✚ **Christian early childhood ministries need to be developmentally appropriate for young children. God created human life as developmental.**

Every human moves through developmental stages from childhood through adulthood. By that creation and by implication in the words of Scripture, Christian early childhood education should be appropriately structured for the developmental needs of young children. Characteristics of this type of program are:

- **Age appropriate**  
Child development research has shown that children progress through predictable stages of growth and maturation. A teacher who understands the stages of development can better prepare a learning environment and select materials and activities that foster that development.
- **Individually appropriate**  
God has determined an individual timetable of growth and development for each child. In addition, each child has unique characteristics, learning styles, and family experiences. Christian early childhood ministries and the teacher's relationship with the child need to reflect an understanding of and sensitivity for these individual differences. Learning in young children is the result of a complex interaction involving all aspects of the child's life-his thoughts; his experiences with materials, ideas, and people; adequate nutrition and rest; and the routines and discipline in his environment.



These factors and experiences should coincide with the child’s unfolding abilities while also challenging the child’s curiosities and understandings. Christian early childhood educators will seek to guide and teach each child to be and to do his best for God.

- **Socially/Culturally appropriate**  
God has placed children in different social and cultural environments. Christian teachers will want to understand and be aware of the social and cultural context in which the children live so that “by all possible means we might save some” (*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.* 1 Corinthians. 9:22). Learning experiences will be structured so that they are meaningful, relevant, and respectful of the children and their families.

✚ ***Christian early childhood ministries foster the development of the whole child.***

A developmentally appropriate program will recognize that young children are holistic learners. Motor skill learning, social learning, intellectual learning, emotional learning, and the learning of spiritual truths are interrelated. Useful learning activities in early childhood education are not compartmentalized by subjects: likewise, a scriptural viewpoint permeates all learning experiences.

A Christian early childhood education ministry is truly Christian when that program finds its integration and correlation in God’s messages of sin and grace. These programs should allow children to understand sin, to experience repentance and forgiveness, and to share with and care for others. Children will learn of Jesus their Savior, they will learn stories and teachings of Scripture, and they will experience the joy and privilege of sharing their Savior with others.

### ✦ *Young children learn through play.*

Early childhood programs involve children as active learners by providing them with play experiences that help them learn. Play enables children to pass through the stages of development by interacting with activities and materials that are concrete, real, and relevant to their young lives. Play as a child-initiated and child-directed activity is a vital component for establishing a foundation for learning. It is important that parents and teachers provide encouragement and facilitate quality play activities, model purposeful types of play, and appropriately participate in the child's play.

### ✦ *Christian early childhood ministries should provide an environment that is safe and secure, and that is arranged and equipped to meet the needs of the age group.*

The relative quality of the physical environment can help or hinder the learning process. Though a congregation may be exempt from the regulations that apply to public or for-profit programs, these regulations as well as the WELS Early Childhood Ministries Standards should be met or exceeded.

### ✦ *Christian early childhood educators will have both a solid foundation in God's Word and a thorough understanding of theory and practice of Christian early childhood education.*

Besides providing an appropriate curriculum and adequate facilities, the church has a responsibility for adequate teacher preparation for Christian early childhood education.

This preparation includes a solid foundation in God's Word and a thorough grounding in the theory and practice of Christian early childhood education. Teachers in Christian early childhood ministries should be synodically certified as preschool, kindergarten, or elementary school teachers; and they should be called by the congregation. The training of early childhood educators should include an understanding of developmentally appropriate instructional techniques, child development theory, and some specialized college-level training in early childhood education. Field experience at the appropriate level should

also be a part of this training. It is also important for teachers to be actively involved in a program of continuing early childhood education.

## Available Options

There are many different forms of early childhood ministries. They may be referred to as a childcare, 2K, 3K, 4K, preschool, pre-kindergarten, or an early learning center. The following descriptions are most frequently used to differentiate between the various early childhood options.

- **Childcare**  
Childcare programs typically provide full or part-time care for children from infants to five years of age for parents in the work force. These programs usually operate five days a week on a year-round schedule. Depending on the needs of the families they serve and the available staff, they are open an average of 10-12 hours per day. Lunch or snacks may be provided or the parents may be asked to bring food for their children.
- **Preschool, 2K, 3K 4K**  
Preschool programs are designed for two-, three-, and four-year old children. Sessions are 2 ½ to 3 hours per day and are conducted during the normal school term. A preschool typically operates two to five days per week depending upon the needs of the families, the available staff, and the available space.
- **Early Learning Center**  
Early childhood development centers combine both their childcare and preschool programs. Some children may attend for 2-3 hours while other children stay extended hours. In some cases, children attend kindergarten or preschool for a half day (or full day) and join this program for the remainder of the day. Many of these programs include infant and toddler care.



All of these programs want to have WELS certified early childhood educators as the director and lead teachers with additional staff as needed. There is a planned program of daily activities appropriate for the developmental level of the children. Tuition and fees are charged. They operate in accordance with standards that meet or exceed the standards for early childhood programs in the state in which they are located and the standards established by the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools. (cf. WELS Standards for Early Childhood Ministries)

- **Parents Day Out**

These programs often operate one day per week for children from infants through five-years-old depending upon the available staff and space. Normal operation is from three to five hours per session. There are opportunities for play, creativity, and socialization for the children while parents can carry out tasks such as shopping or keeping appointments without children. These programs are often staffed by volunteers. Fees are charged on an hourly or daily basis. It would be advisable to check the state guidelines regarding hours and other factors.

- **Parents and Children Together/Moms and Me**  
These programs are designed for parents and children to grow together. Opportunities for play and development of social skills are included as time for parents to meet as a support group. Session time can vary from 1 ½ to 3 hours. Volunteers may staff the program; however, it is advisable to engage a leader who is knowledgeable in child development. Fees may be charged to cover expenses.

Each program will give careful attention and planning to implement the congregation's mission of gospel outreach and nurture. The spiritual nurture of the children and the parents will be a feature of any early childhood program. Strategies to bring the families into the congregation's family of believers will be carefully planned and implemented. Jesus Christ remains the center of the curriculum and activities of all of these programs so that they are truly a part of the congregation's mission of gospel outreach and nurture.

- **Stand-Alone/with an LES**

A stand-alone early childhood ministry is one that exists in a congregation that does not have a Lutheran elementary school (LES). By contrast, there are also early childhood ministries that exist in a congregation that includes a Lutheran elementary school. In this case the early childhood ministry may function either within the LES program or independently.

- **Before and After School Program**

Before and After school programs exist to provide childcare outside the regular school hours. This program is often located within the school building or early childhood ministry facility. The program may serve children of many ages. Licensing requirements regarding ages of children served, staff/child ratio, facility requirements and other matters are set by individual states.



