

Portable Preschool

By Melanie Stone

A portable church is a church that rents a facility to set up and tear down each week. Many church plants start off as portable churches. A growing church is a church that reaches out to young families. Young families often have preschoolers, who are very active with short attention spans. Having one of them under your care can be a challenge, having multiple preschoolers can seem to be unmanageable. However, because of their amazing ability to learn by hands-on activities, a classroom set up for rotating small groups is an extremely efficient teaching method. The classroom also becomes more manageable by dividing the children into groups, rather than one large group, increasing the effectiveness of the teacher to child ratio.

The learning center classroom format requires a variety of hands-on activities, which means it requires a lot of stuff. For churches that are portable, one aim is to cut down on the amount of stuff our crews have to move in and out each week. The solution is not out of reach; our stuff just needs to be strategic and organized for the teachers who are using it. At the start of your church, you don't need to overdo the amount of stuff you have. Your purchases should be intentional for the purpose of the center classroom format, and it doesn't need to cost a lot of money.

Why Learning Centers?

There are five main reasons why learning centers are the most effective approach for teaching preschoolers.

1. Children learn best by doing

We retain 10% of what we hear, 20% of what we read, 50% of what we hear and see, and 90% of what we do. We want children to take an active role in the learning process. Learning centers provide hands-on learning activities which stimulate communication, curiosity, and growth.

2. Children have different learning styles

God made us with different personalities and talents. Children are not all made to learn the same. Only a small number of children learn best through listening. Some children learn best when sharing ideas in a group. Others learn best by direct hands-on experiences. Others learn best by experimenting. Through Learning Centers we can provide a variety of methods for more children to reach their potential for learning.

3. Children learn by repetition.

Each learning center repeats the same lesson focus. By the end of the class the student has heard the main theme over and over. Since each Learning Center presents the Lesson Focus in a different way, the child is also gaining a broader application of the central truth.

4. Student/ Teacher Ratio

Instead of one teacher for 30 preschoolers, we have one adult for every 8 to 10 children. The children have better interaction with the adults and with their friends. Also, because children have different personalities, having a variety of teachers will help each child to connect with someone. It's valuable to have a variety of people representing the genders, cultures, and ages.

5. Attention Span

Since young children have a short attention span, rotating them to another activity every ten minutes helps to capture and hold their interest.

How Learning Centers Work

For children to learn, there should be one lesson focus and one simple Bible verse. Each learning center is aimed to teach that lesson focus. The teacher of each small group is to make opportunity to repeat the lesson focus and the Bible verse during the time they share together with the children. The small groups are stationed around the room. There is a teacher assigned to each small group. The children rotate from group to group, so the teacher repeats the activity with each new set of children.

Lesson Planner

There is one Lead Teacher overseeing the classroom with enough Assistant Teachers to cover the number of learning centers that are rotating at one time. The lesson planner is usually designed with sets of rotating centers. For example, if the class size is approximately thirty children, the lesson planner could be designed to run three centers at a time, with one teacher for every ten children. If the centers run fifteen minutes each, it will take forty-five minutes for all the children to visit all three centers. Once those centers are completed, the teachers prepare for the next set of three centers. This way, the responsibility of activities is divided among the teachers, each teacher responsible for just two activities for the day, with a combined total of six centers, for example, covering an hour and a half of classroom time.

This method of teaching must be organized, but it also can be flexible. The lesson planner should fit the situation. If you have three teachers, then you can have three centers running at one time. If you have six teachers, then you can have six centers rotating at a time. The size of a group of preschoolers should not be more than ten in a group and should be made up of at least three children. I like to give a copy of the lesson planner to each teacher, with the lesson focus and Bible verse at the top of the planner with instructions for each center typed out. The Lead Teacher can either prepare the centers for the teachers or delegate the center preparation to the teacher ahead of time.

Learning Centers

If you have more than one set of rotating centers, the first set of centers should always include a center for the Bible story and a center for teaching the Bible verse. Other ideas for centers are the following: book center, art center, block center, music center, science center, home living center, dress up center, game center, puzzle center, and play dough center. In these centers, the children have an activity that is used to teach the lesson focus. For example, if the lesson is “obey your parents,” then the children can read a book on obedience, act out obedience as they play house, reenact the Bible story in a dress up center, or play a game like Simon Says. You can always come up with new ideas.

Register the children in groups

When a child comes into the room, give the child a nametag to identify which group the child will be in for the day. Because the development of a child can vary, try to group the children by age, maturity, or learning style. We’ve used laminated, colorful animal shapes with clips. We wrote their name on the nametag with a grease pencil so the nametags could be reused.

Assign a group leader

Choose a child to be the group leader for the day. Choose a way to distinguish the leader, perhaps a sticker, a flag, or other identification. Teach the children to line up behind the group leader when it is time to rotate the children. When the children are all ready, the Lead Teacher can give instruction or blow a whistle to cause the group leader to move their group to the next center.

Use a timer

Set your timer for ten to fifteen minutes. When the timer goes off, the leader gives the children two minutes to finish up and prepare to go to the next activity. If there is not enough time to complete an activity, the children stop what they are doing and finish the activity at home. If there is excess time, teachers can use the time to talk with the children.

Have a routine

The teachers are responsible for keeping the attention of their children in their group so the children stay in their center. The teachers are also to keep the noise down in their group so they don’t disturb the other children. The children who come regularly will learn the routine. Visitors will receive instruction on what to do, and learn by watching the other children.

Take home table

Assign an area where teachers can lay out take home items so that when it is time for dismissal, the child can grab all of their things at once. You can lay the items on a table in piles or use paper lunch bags to place the take home items with the child’s name on the bag. After each center is completed, teachers can move that groups’ take home activities to their pile or bag.

Learning Center Equipment

Since you are portable, think about transportation. Whether you have a road case on wheels or tubs on wheels, make sure the containers you use are easily moved.

I suggest organizing your learning center supplies in tubs that are labeled by center. This helps teachers with setting up and cleaning up. Also include a small container for cleaning supplies. If tables and chairs are not provided, try to find tables and chairs that are collapsible.



When purchasing equipment, keep in mind that you can find slightly used equipment at a much cheaper cost at consignment shops, consignment sales, garage sales, or online. You can also let your launch team know items you need, and they might have items they could donate. Also check what equipment you have access to through your leased facility, such as tables and chairs, before making unnecessary purchases.

Registration and Classroom Identification

Parents want to know that the church has taken precautions to assure the safety of their child, especially if the church is meeting in a public facility. Registration is one way a church protects the children as they are received and released to their parents/guardians. In a portable situation, registration can be set up with tables, pipe and drape, and banners. Signs on easels or banners can also be used to help identify the registration area. Visitors should fill out a connection card that asks about food restrictions or allergies. Visitors should also receive a brochure that informs parents/guardians about the children's ministry, including your healthy-child policy and procedures for registration. Some church plants start out with electronic registration.

We recommend that volunteers wear customized t-shirts with the church name printed on them. The t-shirts will identify adults in the children's ministry as those screened, trained, and approved by the church to work with children.

Free Resources Available at GrowChurches.com

Free resources are posted on GrowChurches.com including a sample children's ministry application sample policies, sample handbooks, and reproducible activities.