The consumer is king!
Why you can no longer do what you want in children’s ministry

Since the beginning of education there's been a assumption that children need teaching. That they're empty vessels, or at least not very full ones, that need filling up. Teaching was the giving of knowledge and learning was the accepting of it.

And the church followed this same path. That's why we had Sunday schools and teachers were sought after for programs.

But in the last decade, adults have worked out more about how children learn. They've moved away from that vessel-filling approach, to one of questioning and discovery. The teacher is no longer the custodian of knowledge but a guide on the journey. Children learn fewer facts and more strategies. They've become problem-solvers and innovators, starting with the knowledge they already have.

Where do your children's programs fit in with this? Are they based on the sharing of knowledge or the journey of children? If you want to have a vibrant children's ministry in 2017, you need to make sure your programs are moving with the times.

A world of information and choice

In the last 30 years the internet has transformed our understanding of knowledge. What once was locked in vaults and libraries is now a few clicks away.

There's so much information now that we have to sift, sort and filter it to form understanding. But the way we see information has changed too. It's no longer just words or figures. Information has a context, and is open to interpretation.

And thanks to some ideological influences in the last 50 years, those interpretations are no longer fixed. Here's why:

- **Individualism.** This way of thinking separates the self from society. Every person has the right to make their own sense of the world. Individualism opens once fixed ideas, like religious beliefs, up for personal interpretation.

- **Neo-liberalism.** This philosophy has shaped the economic world we live in today, with globalised market and the rise of competition.
Neo-liberalism has expanded the gap between rich and poor. It's replaced a sense of community with individual responsibility. It's a case of every man, woman and child for themselves.

- **Post-modernism.** In an age of questioning, this way of thinking believes there are no absolute truths in this world. That knowledge is the creation of it's authors, swayed by their own biases and opinions. Post-modernism promotes questioning and a quest for evidence.

Perhaps the decline of the church isn't so surprising when you consider these social changes. Faith is based on accepted truths. Religion is practiced in community, with the sacrifice of self for the care of others. If the church wants to be relevant in society today, it has to be willing to engage in discussions about knowledge. Particularly in it's ministry to children.

### 21st Century ministry to children

Generation Z doesn't use technology to enhance relationships like we do. It's just part of them. They've got a different understanding of privacy too. Thanks to growing up in a world of oversharing.

Churches will be relegated to the past if they don't move with the times. Children are capable thinkers, they can form their own theories and opinions. There needs to be less emphasis on the transmission of knowledge in children's programs. And more emphasis on the construction of it.

A post-modernist society provides an opportunity for the Christian perspective to be shared in new spaces. Children's programs will thrive when they acknowledge a diversity of ideas. There needs to be room for discussion and disagreement.

In 2017, make the focus of your programs relationships. Children's ministry is about walking beside not talking from the front. The most valuable people in your teams aren't the directors, but the young leaders. Those people who sit beside the children on the floor and get to know them. Who answer their questions, and share their own.

Model the Christian way of life authentically. Children will discern more about the faith from their observation of your actions, than from the words you speak. Their curiosity is genuine! Do your beliefs really make life better? Does believing in God give you a better grip on happiness and fulfillment?
Children's ministry needs to be about connecting with children and what they already know. The best programs will create a space where God can do his work, rather than trying to do it for Him.

Creating vibrant children's programs

So, the take homes so far are that churches need to see knowledge in the modern context. They need to be willing to have children question and compare the basics of the faith with other ways of thinking. Discussion, not teaching should be the basis of children programs.

To help you reach this point, here's seven changes every church needs to make to have a vibrant children's ministry in 2017:

1. Use the fun lens

Kids are kids after all. And in their busy lives, there's a lot less fun that we had at their age. For every part of your program ask yourself "what's fun about this" and look for ways to add more of it in.

2. Adopt a multi-modal approach

Look at how you can use every sense and every part of a child's body in your programs. Sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. Get them thinking and moving. Involve their eyes, ears, mouths, hands and feet. Up and down, inside and outside. The more you switch it around, the more engaged children will be.

3. Make relationships your priority

Good quality leaders who are well trained are a must in any children's programs. Every activity and event should focus on helping them build meaningful relationships with kids. Make time in your program for hanging out, rather than structuring every conversation into a discussion.

4. Share information in bite-sized chunks

Build your program content around concepts. Look at one concept from a few different angles, rather than sticking to the old 3-point sermon.
Help kids to build links between the concepts, to spot the relationships and influences. Use different sources of knowledge to support your ideas. Give the kids evidence that other people use these concepts too.

5. Tick all the boxes

The days of children's ministry being an informal kindness are gone. Your programs need to run professionally, not just from a good heart. Take care of your child protection responsibilities. Train your leaders well. Have good communication pathways with parents. Go above and beyond the requirements and set the standard for care.

6. Embrace diversity

Our world is divided by difference, yet united by similarities. Your children's ministry will thrive when you value different perspectives. When you can acknowledge your own biases and hold them in check.

7. Be unique

Successful children's ministry doesn't follow a formula. It offers something special in one location that resonates with the community around it. Shop around for ideas, but be willing to do your own thing too. Your community has unique needs and interests. Take the time to learn about them and design your programs accordingly.

Despite the adoption of individualism, people are crying out to be part of something bigger than themselves. People are desperate to be cared for and feel valued. And they're looking for truths that they can build their lives around.

Time will tell if the church can be that or whether something else will step into that gap. But if you want your children's ministry to thrive, you have to position yourself amongst the discussion.