

NOT JUST CHILD CARE

The *quick start* guide to building a world-class kids ministry

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TYLER HARRIS
MINISTRY SOLUTIONS

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Module One

WHY KIDS MINISTRY MATTERS

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Kids ministry is not where you put kids so adults can do church. ***It IS the church for kids***. Many small churches treat kids ministry as a childcare service, a necessary accommodation so adults can attend the "real" service. This thinking produces exactly the kind of kids ministry that drives families away: understaffed, under-resourced, under-valued, and spiritually shallow.

Families with children visit a church and within the first 15 minutes of dropping their kids off, they have already made a decision about whether they will come back. Before you preach a single word, the kids ministry has already won them or lost them.

Kids ministry is not a supplemental program. It is front-line discipleship and the front door of your church.

The Theological Foundation

Research consistently shows that the most formative spiritual years occur between ages 4 and 14. This is known as the ***4-14 Window***. A child who grows up with consistent leaders who love them and teach them truth has a dramatically higher likelihood of following Jesus into adulthood.

Excellence in kids ministry is not about budget or production quality. Excellence is about intentionality. Leaders must make the choice to do things on purpose. Here is what excellence looks like in a church under 200:

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

Matthew 19:14

Children bring families. Families are the building block of a growing church. A family that feels their children are loved, safe, and spiritually fed will not only stay. They will become your most passionate advocates and inviters.

The Strategic Reality

*Excellence is not expensive. It is intentional. The gap between a mediocre kids ministry and an excellent one is rarely about money... it is often about **leadership, systems, and culture.***

What does excellence look like at a church under 200?

- **Rooms** that are **clean, bright, and age-appropriate** even if they are small.
- **Check-in** that is **organized and efficient**, giving parents confidence.
- **Volunteers** who are **trained, consistent, and genuinely love kids.**
- **Teaching** that is **biblical, engaging, and developmentally appropriate.**
- **A leader** who is **spiritually mature, organized, and equipped for the role.**
- **Systems** that *do not fall apart when one volunteer calls out sick.*

Conclusion

The church that wins with kids wins with families. The church that wins with families wins the next generation. You are not running a supplemental program. You are building the front door of your church. Excellence in kids ministry is the most strategic discipleship investment the church can make.

Every Sunday, families are deciding whether they will return, and that decision is being shaped by what happens in your kids' check-in and kids' ministry rooms before the first song ever plays.

Think About It

What would it look like if your kids ministry operated with the excellence of a church 10x your size?

Ask and Discuss

- What is one thing families experience in your kids' ministry right now that builds trust?
- One thing that might erode it?
- How would you describe the current spiritual depth and quality of your kids ministry to a visiting family?

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Module Two

THE QUALIFIED LEADER

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More churches suffer from the wrong person in the kids ministry leader role than from any other single problem in kids ministry. In most small churches, the kids ministry leader is not selected...they are available. Someone raises their hand, shows up reliably, and by default becomes "the kids person."

No one asked whether they were qualified. No one defined what the role requires. And because they are nice and the kids seem to like them, the assumption is that everything is fine. But "nice" and "qualified" are not the same thing.

Calling & Character

Running a kids ministry requires a specific combination of calling, character, competence, and capacity. When any of those four are missing, the ministry suffers. Even a genuinely good person in the role cannot make up for it.

CALLING: A called leader has a genuine conviction that this is their assignment, not just someone who loves kids. Calling produces perseverance and sacrifice that competence alone cannot sustain.

CHARACTER: The leader must be above reproach in personal life, interactions with children and families, and relationships with volunteers and staff. Character includes spiritual maturity, emotional stability, and integrity.

COMPETENCE: Includes the ability to teach biblical content in developmentally appropriate ways, recruit and lead a volunteer team, manage systems, and build a safe environment.

CAPACITY: This is the most overlooked qualification. A kids ministry leader who can only give 6 hours per week cannot build an excellent ministry. At a church of 100-200, the role requires a minimum of 8-12 hours per week, including Sunday, prep, volunteer communication, curriculum review, and parent engagement.

Competence & Capacity

A kids ministry leader should NOT be in this role if they: cannot pass a background check, struggle with personal boundaries with children, refuse to submit to church authority, have no ability to delegate, show no organizational capacity, cannot receive feedback or correction, show no spiritual growth, or are primarily motivated by being needed rather than the mission.

When the wrong person is in the seat, love them enough to address it. A loving transition done with care is not a failure. It is an act of stewardship for the kids, the families, the team, and the leader themselves.

A leadership transition done with care and clarity is not a failure. It is an act of love. The greatest kindness you can show someone in the wrong seat is to help them find the right one.

THE 5-STEP PATH FORWARD:

ASSESS. Is this a **gap** that can be developed, or a fundamental mismatch? Use the four qualifications to identify what is missing.

DEFINE. Create a **written** job description with specific expectations, hours, and measurable outcomes.

COMMUNICATE. Have a **direct**, kind, documented conversation.

DEVELOP. If they have **calling** and character but lack systems, invest in their growth.

TRANSITION. If the **gap remains** after a genuine development window, a loving transition is the right next step.

Getting this right, or righting it, is the highest-leverage move you can make for your kids ministry.

The ministry is only as strong as the person leading it.

Right person in the right seat changes everything.

Development is always the first step when calling and character are present.



Module Three

SAFETY SECURITY & PROTECTION



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Before the curriculum. Before the environment. Before programming, there is safety. Safety is not a legal technicality. It is a theological statement: these children are made in the image of God, entrusted to us by their families, and ***we will guard them with excellence and intentionality.***

A church that provides an unsafe environment for children is not just negligent; it is a poor witness to the character of God. One safety failure can end a ministry, destroy a church's reputation, and cause lasting harm to a child and their family.

Non-Negotiable #1: Background Checks

Every adult who serves in any capacity in your kids' ministry must complete a background check before their first Sunday. No exceptions, not your best friend, not the elder who has been here since day one. Background checks should be renewed annually. Services like **MinistrySafe** or **Protect My Ministry** integrate with most church management software.

Background checks catch those who have been caught before. But they also deter those with wrong intentions from applying in the first place. Make the process visible and consistent.

Non-Negotiable #2: The Two-Adult Rule

There must NEVER be one adult alone with a child or group of children. Every room, at every time, must have at least two unrelated adults present. This protects children from abuse AND protects volunteers from false accusations. Many church insurance policies now require it.

When staffing is thin: use a floater who walks between rooms, use a window or open door so another adult has visual access, or temporarily combine age groups.

Non-Negotiable #3: Secure Check-In & Check-Out

A child should never leave your facility with anyone other than the authorized guardian who dropped them off. At minimum: a numbered matching tag system. At best: a digital check-in system (Planning Center, Breeze, or Subsplash) with printed security tags, allergy flags, and pickup authorization.

Also non-negotiable: mandatory reporting training for every volunteer, allergy and medical information in every room, a 30-90 day waiting period before new volunteers serve with children, and incident documentation forms in every room.

Safety Checklist

Use this checklist to audit your current safety posture. Every item should be a YES before you run a kids ministry service.

- All kids ministry volunteers have completed a background check.
- Background checks are renewed annually.
- Two unrelated adults are present in every room at all times.
- A secure check-in and check-out system is in place.
- Children are only released to authorized guardians.

More Safety Standards

Allergy and medical information collected at registration. Medical information accessible in every room. All volunteers trained on mandatory reporting. Incident report forms available in every room. Room doors have windows or are kept partially open. Emergency evacuation routes posted in every room. Emergency contact for every child on file. First aid kit available in the kids ministry area.

Safety is felt upon arrival, seen in the building, heard in the hallways, and read throughout policies. Safety comes before growth, safety comes before curriculum. When your space is safe, everything else becomes easier. Safety builds trust, and trust is the foundation of a good kids ministry program.

A church that prioritizes safety excellence doesn't just protect children, it positions itself for greater ministry impact and community influence. Safety is the price of admission and the foundation of family trust.

Think About It

Rate your current kids ministry safety posture from 1-10. Where are the biggest gaps?

Ask and Discuss

- Which of the safety non-negotiables does your ministry currently do well?
- Which needs immediate attention?
- What would it take to implement a digital check-in system at your church this month?
- How would having a fully documented safety protocol change the trust families have in your ministry?

*CHECK-IN,
ROOM &
CURRICULUM
SYSTEMS*

The check-in experience is the first impression your kids ministry makes every single Sunday. When check-in is confusing, slow, or manned by someone who doesn't know where things are, you've already started the morning on the wrong foot.

The goal of your check-in system is to make a family feel: welcomed, known, confident their child is safe, and able to walk into the service without anxiety.

Check-In System Options

It is possible to facilitate a check-in system with a Manual binder, child roster + handwritten tags. But it is more secure and scalable to invest in a digital system (Breeze, Planning Center, or Subsplash) with printed tags. Every new family will need help registering the first time, but after that, they will be able to utilize a self-check-in kiosk, which can be easily set up using an iPad.

The Weekly Room Schedule

A room that runs the same structure every week is easier to volunteer in, easier to sub in for, and easier to hand off to a new leader. The schedule IS the system.

Every room should run the same predictable structure every week. Predictability is not boring. It is the foundation of an effective learning environment.

0:00-0:10: Entry Activity (coloring, building, puzzles while others arrive)

0:10-0:20: Large Group Worship (age-appropriate songs with movement)

0:20-0:35: Bible Teaching (lesson, story, object lesson, or video)

0:35-0:50: Small Groups (age-grouped discussion and application)

0:50-1:00: Review, Memory Verse, Dismissal Prep

Choosing Curriculum

Curriculum is the backbone of your spiritual content. The wrong curriculum, or no curriculum at all, produces spiritual shallowness. What should you look for?

- Biblical accuracy with the gospel central.
- Developmental appropriateness by age group.
- Easy for volunteers to pick up and deliver.
- A multi-year scope and sequence.
- Parent engagement tools.

TOP CURRICULUM OPTIONS FOR SMALL CHURCHES:

Orange / 252 Kids: Industry-leading, church + family integration. Preschool through elementary. Strong parent engagement. Used by 9,000+ churches. Adaptable for small churches.

The Gospel Project (Lifeway): Christ-centered, gospel-narrative. Takes kids through the entire Bible on a 3-year scope. Strong theological depth.

Life.Church Open Network: Free, high-quality. Digital delivery. Strong video component. Great for budget-constrained ministries. (Newspring also offers a free curriculum.)

Wonder Ink / GO! Curriculum: Modern, flexible, digital-first. Good for smaller teams.

Remember: even the best curriculum falls flat in the hands of an undertrained volunteer.

The 5 Teaching Practices

PREPARE: Read the entire lesson before Sunday. Know the bottom line, story, key activity, and memory verse. Never teach cold.

ENGAGE: Know children's names. Kids who feel seen pay attention.

SIMPLIFY: State the main point simply and repeatedly. One thing that lands beats five things that don't.

MOVE: Kids learn through movement. Build in physical engagement.

APPLY: Specific, concrete application every time. Not "be kind" but "when someone is eating alone at lunch tomorrow, go sit with them."

Conclusion

The most impactful thing a kids ministry leader can do for teaching quality is provide lesson prep materials to volunteers 7 days in advance and hold them accountable to actually read them.

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The most common cry of every kids ministry leader in every church under 200 is: "***I don't have enough volunteers.***" The problem is rarely a shortage of willing people. The problem is a shortage of effective recruitment systems and a compelling volunteer culture.

People are not waiting for a generic ask from the pulpit. They are waiting to be personally invited into a ***specific role with a clear purpose*** and a leader who will set them up to succeed.

People don't volunteer for programs. People volunteer for missions when they believe what they're doing matters and they are valued for doing it.

The Volunteer Funnel

The 6-Stage Funnel:

AWARENESS — People know kids ministry exists and volunteers are needed. Use pulpit stories, social highlights, and parent testimonials.

INTEREST — A personal invitation to come shadow a Sunday. Low commitment, no obligation. Just come see.

TRIAL — A 4-week trial in a specific role. Clear expectations, regular check-ins.

ORIENTATION — Background check, training, policy review, vision cast.

PLACEMENT — Defined role, defined schedule, team lead support.

OWNERSHIP — They recruit others, develop younger volunteers, carry the mission.

Don't ***only*** recruit parents. Your best volunteers may be...

- **Empty nesters:** heavily underutilized. They bring more availability, life experience, and patience than any other group.
- **College students** and **young adults:** high energy and great with kids.
- **School teachers** and **education professionals**
- **People without kids:** often the most committed and least distracted.

Why Volunteers Leave

They feel unvalued → Personal appreciation, handwritten notes, verbal recognition from the lead pastor.

They feel undertrained → Adequate orientation and ongoing training builds confidence.

They feel alone → Team culture, group communication, social investment.

They feel burned out → Defined schedules (not every week), sub systems, clear boundaries on commitment.

They have no growth path → Leadership development pipeline, apprentice roles.

No one checked on them → Regular 1:1s from the kids ministry leader. People quit leaders before they quit ministries.

Retention Strategies

The single highest-impact retention tool is **personal appreciation**. A handwritten thank-you note costs 47 cents and five minutes, but it communicates more than a stage recognition ever will.

The best volunteer retention strategy is **a leader who genuinely cares about the people on their team**. Minister **TO** your volunteers, not just **THROUGH** them.

Conclusion

A ministry that communicates well, appreciates well, and trains well will never have a volunteer shortage. The gap is not people. It is a system for inviting, developing, and retaining them.

Every volunteer in your kids ministry is a discipleship investment. When they say yes to serving kids, you say yes to investing in them.

***PARENT
ENGAGEMENT &
COMMUNICATION***

Parents are the primary spiritual influencers in their children's lives, not the church, not the kids' pastor. Research consistently shows that parental faith, modeled and discussed at home, is the single greatest predictor of a child's adult faith.

This means the most strategic thing your kids ministry can do is not improve your Sunday experience. It is to equip and partner with parents to extend discipleship into the other 166 hours of the week.

The church gets one hour a week. The family gets one hundred and sixty-seven. Build your strategy accordingly.

The Parent Engagement Ladder

- **Level 1:** Unaware: They drop off kids and go to the service. No connection to the ministry.
- **Level 2:** Informed: They receive weekly communication about what was taught.
- **Level 3:** Engaged: They receive conversation starters and weekly questions for home.
- **Level 4:** Participating: They serve occasionally, attend family events.
- **Level 5:** Owning: They see themselves as the primary discipler of their child.

Parent Communication Tools

WEEKLY RECAP (Sunday afternoon): A brief text: what the lesson was, the memory verse, and one question to ask their child.

PARENT CUE APP (Orange): Daily cues, conversation prompts, and devotional activities for families throughout the week. One of the most powerful parent engagement tools available.

SOCIAL MEDIA: Post a weekly recap of what kids learned. Parents reshare. Creates cultural momentum.

MONTHLY FAMILY EVENTS: One low-barrier event per month: movie night, family game night, outdoor cookout. Builds relational capital.

MILESTONE MOMENTS: Celebrate baby dedications, first Bibles, baptisms publicly. Communicates that the church values the family's spiritual journey.

Communication Systems

TO **PARENTS**: Weekly recap Sunday afternoon, monthly events calendar, milestone celebrations.

TO **VOLUNTEERS**: Weekly lesson plan by Thursday, monthly encouragement, schedule confirmations.

TO **LEADERSHIP**: Weekly attendance numbers, monthly health update, quarterly ministry report.

Communication platform: Text (highest open rate), email, church app, social media.

Conclusion

A kids ministry that communicates well feels professional and trustworthy. Communication is your first ministry moment.

Think About It

At what level on the Parent Engagement Ladder is the average parent in your church right now?

Ask and Discuss

- What is one thing you could start sending to parents this Sunday that would immediately move them up the engagement ladder?
- How would your ministry culture change if parents saw themselves as partners in discipleship rather than drop-off customers?
- What communication system for volunteers would most immediately reduce Sunday morning chaos?

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YOUR 90- DAY LAUNCH PLAN

Everything in the previous modules is meaningless without execution. This final module gives you a 90-day roadmap to take what you have learned and build it into a real, functioning, excellent kids ministry at your church.

This plan is designed to be led by the kids ministry leader with clear accountability to Lead Pastor and Executive Director of Ministries. Work through these phases in sequence. Do not skip ahead.

Phase 1: Foundation (Days 1-30)

WEEK 1-2: ASSESSMENT

Audit current safety practices against the non-negotiables checklist. Verify background check status for every current volunteer. Review check-in procedures and identify gaps. Evaluate current curriculum. Assess volunteer count by room.

WEEK 3-4: DEFINE THE ROLE

Write a formal job description with clear expectations. Define volunteer position descriptions. Draft safety policy document. Create volunteer onboarding checklist.

Phase 2: Build Systems (Days 31-60)

WEEK 5-8: SYSTEMS

Set up volunteer communication platform. Create weekly lesson delivery template (send by Thursday). Set up parent communication cadence. Send first weekly parent recap. Create sub request process and identify 3-5 trained subs. Set up or upgrade check-in system with security matching. Refresh room environments. Select or confirm curriculum. Run first volunteer training session.

Phase 3: Build Culture (Days 61-90)

WEEK 9-12: CULTURE

Host first quarterly volunteer team gathering. Identify 1-2 potential apprentice leaders. Send first volunteer appreciation. Launch parent engagement initiative. Begin identifying families who could be good volunteer prospects. Conduct 90-day assessment. Confirm all recurring rhythms are in place. Present 90-day report to lead pastor.

A kids ministry that is safe, led well, staffed intentionally, and grounded in the gospel is the most powerful front door your church has. Build it like it matters. Because it does.

Think About It

The standard: if the kids ministry leader was in a car accident Saturday night, the ministry would still run Sunday morning. Everything that lives in your leader's head needs to be written down and accessible.

Ask and Discuss

- Which phase of the 90-day plan feels most urgent for your kids ministry right now?
- What is the single most important thing that needs to happen in the next 30 days?
- Who needs to be held accountable for executing this plan?
- What does that accountability look like?

Key Takeaways

- Execution is where everything else becomes real. Start with Phase 1 and don't skip ahead.
- Phase 1 is Foundation: safety audit, role definition, and job description.
- Phase 2 is Systems: check-in, communication, curriculum, and training.
- Phase 3 is Culture: appreciation, apprentice pipeline, parent engagement, recurring rhythms.
- The goal: a ministry that runs with or without you.

You've built something that matters.

You didn't complete this course because you had extra time. You did it because you care about the kids and families in your church. That matters. Now guard what you've built.

The system you've built won't maintain itself. Excellence will require intention. Here are some final tips for stewarding what you've built now that you've completed this course.

- **Monthly:** hold a team check-in. Don't let drift happen quietly.
- **Quarterly:** run a full audit of your safety, systems, and communication practices.
- **Annually:** reset your vision. Remind your team why kids ministry is the most strategic thing your church does.

The kids in your ministry right now are in the most formative spiritual window of their lives. What you build this year, or fail to build, will follow them into adulthood.

Final Charge

You are not running a babysitting program.
You are building the front door of the church.
You are discipling children in their most spiritually formative years.
You are winning families that will shape the future of Awaken.

Build it like it matters. Because it does.

Need more?

If this course stirred something in you I'd love to help you flesh out its content. Maybe you can see clearly what needs to change, but aren't sure how to get there...that's exactly what coaching is for.

Tyler Harris is available to work directly with small and mid-size churches to:

- Assess ministry health (in kids and/or other ministry departments)
- Develop the right leader for the role
- Build sustainable systems from scratch
- Navigate hard personnel conversations
- Create a 90-day implementation plan

Whether you need a **one-time consultation** or an **ongoing coaching relationship**, the investment is small compared to the cost of continuing without a clear path forward.

"You don't have to figure this out alone. The kids and families in your church are worth the investment." Tyler Harris

Take the Next Step

Ready to take the next step? Reach out directly:

Email: tyler@myawaken.org

Web: notjustchildcare.com

Facebook: facebook.com/tylerharris1990

Instagram: instagram.com/pastortylerharris

Initial consultations are free and available for churches under 500 in attendance. Sessions can be done remotely or on-site. Coaching engagements are customized to your church's specific needs, timeline, and budget.

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