

Playgroup Profile – Edge Church

EDGE Church Playgroup is a church run Playgroup in Doncaster East, currently maintaining a Tuesday group and a Wednesday group.

Each Monday a kind member of the congregation comes and packs away half the chairs from Sunday, puts barriers across to block off the other half and the stage, and gets out the small tables, chairs, and other furniture and large toys in preparation.

On Tuesday morning Eleanor (grandma), Jenny (grown up kids) and Judy (school kids) arrive at 9 to get out paint, play dough, boxes of toys and if fine set up the swings and sandpit outside. Anytime from 9:30 the children and their carers arrive. Our groups have mainly mothers bringing them, with a few grandmothers, and occasionally fathers. Nationalities are a fun mix. Encouraging the ones who battle English is part of the effort we must make. Numbers are limited to 18 families in order to comfortably fit playing children and babies (with prams), as well as to realistically try to meaningfully connect with each adult who comes, which is one of our goals. We are rapt to have two church mums in this group who also desire to reach out in love and friendship to the women who come.

All the children are expected to have morning tea together. A group singing, story and game time can happen either before or after morning tea at 10:40, depending on whether we are going outside, or going back to the inside toys. If it happens before morning tea we finish with a cute grace song before sending the children off to wash their hands and sit up.

We always start the group time with the same song (Everybody Clap), which works to get attention and bodies involved. Sometimes we sing one of the few “God loves me” songs we have introduced. As the playgroups have been running for many years we are very well resourced physically, except for toddler stories. When Dorothy came to run the Wednesday group last year, she introduced the “Top Tales” books which have been a great resource.

At 11:30 everyone heads off, and the team have a time of reflection and prayer.

The Wednesday group are cared for by Dorothy and Susan, whose children are all at school. They also love to have the few Christian mums in the group, some from EDGE Church and some from other churches. These women are really great at drawing the group together. The routine is slightly different because each group has its own flavour, reflecting the individuals leading and attending it. One of the strengths of this group is an enthusiasm for socialising and often they meet during school holidays at a play centre or park. Women from this group have also organised a few social dinners out on a Friday evening for the groups to mix, which have been really nice times to talk about deeper things such as difficulties and dreams.

I guess a challenge Dorothy brought to the leaders was to have a “roster free” playgroup. The two main reasons she raised were 1. It would be less stressful for us and the carers and 2. We contradict ourselves when we say carers must supervise their children then ask them to wash out paints in the kitchen where children aren’t allowed. I have to admit I was skeptical.

The first roster to go was the fruit roster. To do this we asked parents to bring each child’s morning tea in their own container ready to eat. A bonus was that Susan could be more involved in the carer’s lives instead of spending so much time cutting fruit and washing bowls. Each child also uses their own drink bottle. This just leaves us some coffee cups to wash.

The next roster to go was the washing paints up roster. We decided that we were happy to perform this service for the carers during the morning or at the end if things were busy.

The vacuuming roster was easy to discard as well when we asked the church cleaner to please wait until after playgroup to clean the area. All we do now is a quick spot vacuum if an area gets bad, and sweep under the tables.

The big one – the craft roster. Dorothy said she would be happy to organise the crafts for each term if we would meet for a “cutting night”. We have had several of these at the church or in her home, with 3-6 carers coming to help. This has divided up the work and been a really intimate time of relationship building, always with a super supper for us. (Cutting out burns fat, you know.) I believe she has found the Internet a fantastic resource, and is gradually collating files to build a two-year rotating plan. Sometimes when there is not much preparation, we just hand things around to be taken home by the willing and brought back the next week, or just done it among the leaders. The burden of this has been eased as we have incorporated more “free” crafts such as collage pasting, and had sensory play mornings and done things like just sponge shapes in yellow on a paper covered table on “Yellow Day”. We are gradually keeping less “junk” in the craft cupboard as we work out what we will actually use, too.

Morning tea for the adults is a voluntary affair, with sometimes a feast. To avoid a famine we put some Pura Longlife Milk cartons in the cupboard, and some rice crackers, corn chips and long life dips (Doritos at present). Then if none of us turn up with something, we can use our emergency stash.

Our “big event” is a Saturday morning for Dads to bring the kids to playgroup for an hour, before Mum, the camera and older siblings turn up for a BBQ lunch. We also learn some Christmas songs, which the children can perform at the Presentation Day in December. So far haven’t had many families participate, so we are still working on this one, as it’s a bit of a new concept for the unchurched families. To keep it very comfortable, we encourage them to bring their cameras, and maybe this year we will run an optional crèche for the little ones during the rest of the service, staffed by the leaders they are familiar with.

The challenge we are now trying to meet is to move into relationships which demonstrate genuine love and concern, not just polite interest. We have begun in a small way by phoning, visiting or sending a card to members who are away or struggling. The response from this is delighted appreciation, and well worth the effort. However it means a change of our commitment. Instead of just committing to 3 hours once a week, we need to be willing to put in another 30 minutes on another day just to make that call, write that card, or meet for coffee. Just as real friends do.

Judy Harris