

PROFILE ON 'LITTLE STARS'

It's like being at a party every time we meet and the gift we bring each other is love.

We greet each other, we catch up on news, we play, we talk, we laugh, we cry, we share, we eat and drink, we sing and then we say goodbye until next time.

Little Stars Playgroup is an outreach ministry of the Ringwood Church of Christ. A play environment is provided for small children, as well as a safe place for parents to meet and support each other in the challenging role of parenting. Grandparents and friends are also invited to come along and there is an open door policy- all are welcome.

Some of the activities that we enjoy are play dough, painting, cutting and pasting, sand and water play, construction with blocks, dramatic play, outside play with bikes, story reading, music and movement and, of course, morning tea. The creative and play environment is important for the small children and equally important for the adults as they join in and experience the activities as well. There is much chatter and laughing around the craft table. The chatter is an expression of caring for each other as we all learn about our week, and the adventures, struggles, successes, milestones reached, stresses and joys experienced since we last met. It is also the opportunity to experience learning from the small child's perspective. They learn to use scissors, glue, sticky tape, paintbrushes and pencils and it is so much fun to be able to help them with this learning!

Morning tea is an important time at playgroup. Whatever food is brought along is divided, much like the loaves and fishes, equally between all children. Of course, there is a grown ups plate to share too. Children have the opportunity to sit together and try new foods and learn about sharing. Adults have the opportunity to have a cuppa made for them and, while their children enjoy morning tea, they have a short time to chat and share while they enjoy a cuppa. Some still only get half a cup before they are interrupted, but it is such a gift to have a cuppa made for them, and have the opportunity to enjoy it while their children are sharing morning tea. The servanthood role that Jesus taught and we can model at this time is a real gift.

We share story time together and it is such a happy time. I love to see the small children running down to the room before me and sitting waiting expectantly for what is to come. I use a calendar and have weekly themes so that I keep each week a little different and fresh. The stories, activities and songs somehow relate to the theme. If small children or adults decide to vary the activities or request another story then I am happy to be flexible. After our stories we sing some songs and do some movement and this could include dancing, jumping, hopping, skipping and many other movements. We learn about being still, jumping high, creeping slowly, clapping behind, stamping our feet and clapping during this time. We sing action songs like 'Incy wincy spider', 'Teddy bear teddy bear turn around' or 'Hokey Pokey'. I invite people, children and adults, to

dress up and join in the theme of the week and it is such fun when we all look different. Some of the fun themes have been astronauts, scarecrows, and pirates. We are going to be having fun with circus soon and we will dress up as clowns and do juggling and balancing activities.

We end our time together with two special songs that are familiar so that we all know it is time to go home now. We sing 'If you're happy and you know it' and I vary the actions during this time to reflect on the theme if possible. We include actions that the children may be doing at this time like jumping, squatting, hopping and use their names and include them to make it their time too. After a settling down time and two slow breaths we sing 'Time to go home' and we now are calm and ready to go, at least that's the theory!

What I have experienced at Playgroup is the growth in caring of playgroupers for each other and also for me. People care for each other and find creative ways to help in the day-to-day challenge of parenting small children, maintaining and growing self-esteem and worth as a person, learning, sharing and experiencing new things.

The play environment is important but what is vital is the love we share. Some of the things that playgroupers have been supported in as they struggled with have been domestic violence, separation and divorce, illness, death of loved ones, financial problems, being a single parent, difficulties with pregnancies and miscarriage, relation-

ship issues, parenting of children with special needs and challenging behaviours, isolation and loneliness, self esteem issues, and families having to relocate from other places and also having to move away to new locations. All of these things are included in the day to day challenges that young families struggle with and playgroup provides a safe place to unburden and share these challenges. It is also a place to share the joys and the triumphs.

What is modeled at playgroup is the love that Jesus shared. Playgroupers experience Jesus love through each other. God is very present and His love is tangible. Many playgroupers have told me that they have felt His love whilst being part of the playgroup experience. Whilst we are not about preaching, we are about sharing God's love and introducing God to some people, reacquainting Him with others and helping to maintain some other people's relationship with Him.

It is all about Love...God's Love.

Wendy Airey
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