AN ANNUAL STRATEGY FOR CREATING ENGAGING CHILDREN'S MINISTRY ENVIRONMENTS

We all want to teach kids about Jesus more effectively, but let's be honest — it's not always easy. It's challenging enough to teach adults, but to teach kids whose brains are in different stages of development than our own is a challenge most of us were never really trained to do.

When we think about how to teach kids effectively, we probably jump immediately to thinking about our sermons or lessons. The truth is, **the process of learning should begin the moment kids walk through our doors.** That's why we need to get strategic about the structure of our environment as a whole — the room design, props, graphics, snacks, crafts, and everything else!

It's a lot to do and think about, but if this idea still feels a little overwhelming, don't stress — we're going to share how we've structured all of this in Grow Kids Curriculum. **But don't worry if you've never used Grow Kids in your ministry before. You can still steal our strategy!** Take the ideas you find helpful, ignore the parts that don't quite fit your context, and combine them with the unique language, vision, and strategy of your church.

Now, let's talk about our weekly environments strategy for children's ministry! We'll start with the big picture and then get more specific as we go.

1. PLAN FOR THE YEAR

Before you can plan your weekly environment themes for the year, you'll need to plan what you're teaching for the year! That's because your **weekly environment should always complement what you're teaching — not dictate or compete with it.** So if you haven't already, take a look at this article about planning your annual teaching strategy. When you've got a plan for your teaching nailed down, come back!

…Are you back now?

Okay, cool! Let's keep going.

Now that you know what you're teaching all year long, you here's how to put a strategy around your weekly environments: **determine an engaging theme for each teaching series that complements what you want kids to learn.** Then create an environment around it!

Having distinct monthly themes isn't just for fun. (But yeah, they are pretty fun.) These monthly themes help kids learn in a lot of different ways! When you have a monthly theme that ties all of your teaching, activities, visuals, and experiences together and complement the Bible stories you're sharing, **here's how it can make your teaching more effective …**

- A new theme for each teaching series signals to kids it's time for a new topic, which **reengages their attention.**
- The right theme makes the stories and ideas from Scripture **more understandable and relatable** to a kid born in the 21st century!
- A good theme **helps you get more creative** with the types of object lessons, activities, visuals, characters, and whatever else you like to use to help capture and keep a kid's attention.
- And yes, a monthly theme really is fun! Fun isn't something to be afraid of. **When kids are having fun, they learn better.** So make your themes fun!

So what might a year of themes look like? The themes you choose for your teaching shouldn't be random pairings of ideas (like video games and Noah's ark, or emojis and the Gospels) without a good explanation. Instead, the themes you choose should directly complement your teaching in a way that makes the stories come alive and the principles take root. You might try …

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- A **nature** theme to go with your series on Creation.
- A **rocket ship** theme to talk about "launching" your faith to new heights.
- An **underwater** theme to symbolize going deeper in your faith.
- A **party** theme to go with a series about praise and worship.

If you typically start a new teaching series every month, that means **you'll need a total of 12 fun monthly themes each year.** And when you're deciding on your themes for the year, it's probably a good idea to find a balance between …

- **Keeping your themes new and fresh** so kids don't get bored by seeing the same themes over and over again.
- **Reusing decorations and supplies** so you're not filling your storage room with stuff you'll never use again!

To learn more about how to do this well, check out this article about planning your annual ministry calendar. There's a video walkthrough in there for you too!

2. PLAN FOR THE MONTH

Once you know your theme for the month, you can start building the rest of your environment — things kids will experience from the time your program begins until they go home.

When building a monthly theme, here are a few elements you should consider tying into that theme:

- **ROOM DESIGN & DECOR:** Whether you're decorating the walls of your classroom, a bulletin board, or a whole stage, decorating is a big deal in children's ministry! If you're using Grow Kids Curriculum in your ministry, you know we provide a handy little Environment Guide for every teaching series that's packed with tons of images and links to do-it-yourself decorations, Amazon products, and more, to help your room decor really bring your theme to life.
- **PROPS:** From object lessons and visuals that help kids better understand the Bible story, to silly costumes and things to make kids laugh, your props can tie into your monthly theme too!
- **CRAFTS:** Sometimes a craft can be just for fun, sometimes it can help kids remember a Bible story, and sometimes it can help them turn what they've learned into an action step. No matter what kind of crafts you're planning, consider how your monthly theme can influence what kids will be making.
- **SNACKS:** Sure, you can always get away with the classic Goldfish or generic-branded-Oreos Sunday school snacks … or … you could have a little more fun with your snacks! Whether it's animal-shaped cookies for your lesson on Noah's ark, popsicles for your tropical-themed Christmas series, or fish-shaped fruit sliced or cookies for a lesson about Jesus feeding the 5,000, try having a little more themed-up fun with your snacks once in a while!
- **GIVEAWAYS:** Once in a while (maybe at the start or end of a teaching series) you may want to give every kid a little something fun to take home. Whether it's a sticker, temporary tattoo, fidget toy, or party favor, this is another way to reinforce your monthly theme, instead of just handing out something random!
- **MUSIC:** From worship music, to your background playlists, to silly songs you cover or parody for kids, your monthly theme can help inform the songs you choose too.
- **GRAPHICS & VIDEOS:** And lastly, your graphics and videos can help reinforce your monthly theme too! When all of your images and videos stay in line with your monthly theme, it helps create a more immersive experience for kids.

None of these things are as important as the Bible stories and truths you're teaching kids, of course! So it's important to keep all of this in perspective. If you're looking to create a more fun, themed monthly experience, this checklist will help you find new ways to integrate your theme into your weekly environment. But

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even if you never plan a single on-theme craft, prop, or giveaway, you can still create a weekly environment for kids that makes a big impact. Let's talk about how.

3. PLAN FOR THE WEEK

If we're going to create effective and meaningful weekly environments for kids each week, we can't just talk about your physical environment, decorations, and fun stuff. **We've got to talk about the physical, emotional, and relational environment you're creating each week too.** The environments we create each week are so important, they can actually make or break whether or not kids receive the message we're trying to share with them.

We've talked a lot already about the decorations, music, and physical space that goes into creating a weekly environment, but it's so much bigger than that. It's about creating **environments that help everyone feel welcome** in your church, and that **reinforce what you're teaching.**

For kids, it means focusing on **having fun** through age-appropriate games and play, **using all of their senses,** and **prioritizing safety** so kids are free to learn and grow. So each week, think about what kind of environment you're creating, beyond just the decorations.

- Is your environment physically safe?
- Is it emotionally safe?
- Is it fun?
- Is it loving?
- Is it inclusive of kids with disabilities?
- Is it welcoming to kids of diverse backgrounds, family structures, cultures, and experiences?
- In short, **is your weekly environment a place kids love to be?**

We hope so! Because kids struggle to learn when they feel uncomfortable, scared, unsafe, or bored. (And let's be honest — we're grown-ups, and we probably struggle with that too.) But **when kids feel safe and loved, they are more free to learn!** So be strategic about the environments you're creating for kids. They might just be the key to helping them know Jesus better.

This is a lot to think about and plan for, we know — but if your strategy around creating compelling weekly environments will ultimately help kids get to know Jesus better, then it's so worth it!

In case you missed it, check out this article about planning an entire year of ministry. It'll show you how this weekly environments strategy could look on your annual calendar, alongside an annual strategy for your:

- Teaching
- Discipleship
- Events
- Volunteers
- Families

We've said this before, but we've got to say it again! These ideas we've talked about are nice … but **these *ideas* only become a *strategy* when you put them on your calendar and turn them into actions.**

When you have an annual plan to turn your ideas and goals into a strategy, you'll make a much bigger impact.

And hey, if you're using Grow Kids Curriculum, we've already done some of this work for you. For every month of curriculum, we provide a monthly theme that complements the teaching content and includes everything you need to theme your program in our Environment Guides — decor ideas, editable graphics, music suggestions, games, funny characters and sketches, take-homes, coloring pages, and more.

But whether you use Grow Curriculum or not, **we hope you'll** steal our strategy! We developed it over lots of years of ministry, with input from lots of church leaders and lots of trial and error. Take it, tweak it, and make it your own. We really hope it helps you be just a little more awesome at what you do this year!

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For even more resources like this one, try a free trial of Grow Curriculum and Annual Strategy for your children's or youth ministry. It's everything you need for a more strategic year of discipleship, teaching, environments, events, volunteers, and families!

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