

youthESource Middle School Event

A Pre-Christmas Party for Preschoolers

by E. Steven Sonnenberg

This activity is divided into three phases. The first phase is the planning session, the second is the party and the third is the evaluation.

The Planning Session

Approximately a month before the party gather a group of interested middle school youth, a few from senior high (if possible), the middle school sponsors and several parents of preschool-age children. This group will plan the party for the preschoolers. The parents will serve as consultants to offer ideas of what might or might not work.

The planning group must decide:

- The beginning and ending time, location and date of the party.
- Activities to be offered for the children.
- Food to be served.
- Any costs that will be assessed.
- How to recruit middle school youth to help.
- How to publicize the party.
- A detailed plan of who will do what by when.

It is a good idea to recruit several high school youth and adults to help with the party.

The invitations to the party need to be distributed at least two weeks ahead of time. They could be mailed to the preschoolers and should include the starting and ending time, a list of the planned activities and a description of the snacks, as well as the cost. Each invitation could be signed by one of the middle school youth. (Have a different person sign each invitation in order to include as many of the youth as possible.) Remind the children to wear play clothes and request that the parents respond by a certain date.

Additional methods of publicizing include: 1) phone the parents of preschoolers in your church, 2) advertise in the church bulletin and 3) display a poster in an appropriate place such as the church nursery or preschool Sunday school classroom.

Don't forget to open your planning session with a prayer for guidance in your planning task.

The Party

Following is an example of a four-and-a-half-hour Preschoolers Pre-Christmas Party. It is scheduled for the Saturday before Christmas to provide some time for the parents to do last minute Christmas shopping. The party time is from 9:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and the place is at the church. (Optional locations could be someone's home, the community room at a shopping center or a convenient neighborhood community center.)

On the day of the party the youth group members should arrive about an hour early in order to decorate and set up. (Be sure to bring decorations from home.) When the preschoolers arrive, ask their parents to fill out a fact sheet which requests: 1) child's name, 2) parent's name, phone number and address, 3) the name of the stores where the parents expect to shop, 4) the name and phone number of someone who could be contacted in an emergency and 5) special information such as foods or activities from which the child should be restricted.

The arriving children should have their names taped or pinned with safety pins to their backs and be taken to one of the activities set up for them. This could be an area of toys which the youth have rounded up from home or the church nursery, or a book center, or a "Cheerio stringing" activity.

To string Cheerios, thread a piece of string or yarn through a "yarn needle," one which is quite large and has a blunt end. (It can be purchased at a needle craft store.) A few fruit loops will add color to the Cheerio chain. One of the best parts of making the chain is being able to eat the Cheerios as you go. Neither encourage nor discourage this, just let it happen.

The children will "warm up" at their own pace. The tricks are to have plenty of young people so each child will get attention and to have a variety of activities for the children to explore.

Following is a selection of activities which might be considered for your party. There is no best activity or best sequence. If you have quite a few children and lots of young people, you might have several activities going at the same time.

Activity A—Bakers Clay Christmas Ornaments

Make a batch of "clay" by mixing one cup of flour with one cup of salt and a small amount of water to form clay consistency. You can color the clay with food coloring. Let the children work with the clay to form objects that remind them of Christmas.

When children have finished the ornaments, put their initials and dates on them and make a hole near the top in order for a string to be placed through it. Then bake the ornaments at 200 degrees until hard. (It should take about 40 to 60 minutes.) Check every five minutes so as to not over-bake. When the ornaments have finished baking remove them from the oven, let them cool and place a piece of yarn through the hole so that the child can hang it on the Christmas tree if you have one or take it home.

Activity B—Making Tissue Wrapping Paper

Lay sheets of white or colored tissue paper on a table. Make paint pads by saturating pieces of thin styrofoam or folded paper towels with tempera paints or water colors. The children can then put their fingers on the paint pads and make finger print designs on the tissue paper. After it is dry, the paper can be used to wrap Christmas gifts such as the bakers clay ornaments. Some of the older children might be encouraged to form Christmas objects with their "finger prints."

Activity C—Christmas Cards

Fold construction paper in half. Color salt ahead of time by rolling colored chalk in it. Have the children sprinkle or brush glue on the construction paper, then sprinkle the colored salt on the glue to form a Christmas card. An alternative to this is to have the children press Christmas cookie cutters on the paint pads used in the finger print activity described earlier and to place the cutters on the folded construction paper to make Christmas designs.

Activity D—Decorations

Have the youth pre-cut Christmas paper and ribbons into small pieces about an inch or so in size. Make the shapes in a variety of patterns. Again, brush glue onto a pre-shaped piece of construction paper. For instance, the construction paper could look like a Christmas tree, a wreath, a star or a bow, Let the children decorate the construction paper by gluing the small pieces of paper and ribbon on it. Put the child's name on the decoration and hang it somewhere in the room,

Activity E—Wet Chalk Design

Soak chalk in water for approximately eight minutes, then use it like a crayon to draw or color decorations on a piece of paper which has the outline of a Christmas tree. This could be a large drawing which would let all the children work together to color it. The "chalk tree" could be hung in the church narthex to help the members see what the preschool party was like.

Activity F—Finger Play

Teach the children a finger play activity. Have them repeat after you:

HERE IS A TREE, WITH LOTS OF BRANCHES (Put arms out to the side.)

WITH PRESENTS LYING DOWN BELOW (Bend down and point to the floor.)

BUT OUR BEST GIFT IS BABY JESUS, SENT FROM HEAVEN TO LOVE US SO. (Fold arms and pretend to be rock a baby.)

Activity G—God's Story

Take a few moments to dramatize the Christmas story of the birth of the baby Jesus. Set up the creche from a nativity scene. Take the figurines of the scene from a box or bag one at a time and tell the story of Jesus' birth. The figurines could be puppets who tell "their own story" to the children. After each figurine "talks" ask one of the children to put it in the scene. After one of the youth has told the story, let the children hold the pieces and tell the story again and again.

Activity H—Snack Christmas Pizza

Cut bread into Christmas shapes using cookie cutters. Some of the older preschoolers might be able to help with this part of the activity. Have some tomato sauce, shredded cheese, and sliced olives in small dishes for the children to use to decorate their pieces of bread. After spooning the sauce onto the bread have the children sprinkle on the cheese (this is the tinsel) and finish their design with the sliced olives. Toast in the oven for a few minutes. Unsweetened apple juice or milk would be good beverages. It would be a special treat to finish the snack with a ginger bread muffin with a cream cheese and honey frosting. Put a candle in each muffin and sing happy birthday to Jesus. Another option would be to have Christmas cookies for the children to decorate and eat.

Activities I, J, K, etc.—Your Favorite Childhood Things

These are the other activities of your own. Consider renting a Walt Disney movie or video which might be entertaining to preschoolers. How about having several books to read? Sing Christmas carols, have lots of Christmas paper and let the children wrap and unwrap blocks of wood or small boxes. Play games such as "Ring Around the Rosey," "Hide and Seek," decorate a tree with the Cheerio chains, bakers clay decorations, collage decorations or other unbreakable ornaments brought from home.

It might be fun to have a few small gifts wrapped and presented to each child before he or she goes home. One good idea is a set of Christmas stickers. Or how about an unbreakable ornament to hang on their tree at home? Be sure to send the bakers clay ornament Christmas card, wrapping paper (if it was not used to wrap the clay ornament) and their collage decoration home with each child.

Evaluation

Be sure to leave time and make plans for cleaning up after the party. After cleanup, organize your group of middle school and high school youth into a circle. Begin the evaluation with a prayer thanking God for the gift of His Son and the opportunity to praise Him through this party for His children.

Begin the evaluation by asking each person to tell what they discovered or re-discovered about preschoolers that they liked. On a large sheet of paper or chalkboard, draw a line from the left to the right about half way up. Divide the line into segments which represent the times of the party.

9:00 a.m. 10:00 a.m. 11:00 a.m. Noon 1:00 p.m. 1:30 p.m.

Place a plus at the upper half of the page and a minus at the lower half. Ask each person to think through the day and focus on something that was really a plus and one thing that was a minus. Each person should go to the paper and make a mark along the line in the plus area at the time of the day by placing the mark to show the sense of how positive the experience was.

The higher the mark, the more positive the experience. Have each person place his or her initials beside the mark. They should do the same thing with their minus experience. Place a mark as far below the line as is necessary to indicate how minus the experience was. Be sure to initial that mark too. After everyone has placed their marks on the paper, ask them to take turns telling what the plus and minus event was.

Conclude the evaluation session by looking at the minus events one more time and talk about what went wrong as well as what would have to be done to avoid a reoccurrence. Close the day with a prayer or a Christmas carol.

Counselor Notes

- Sometimes middle school youth themselves need a little supervision, thus it helps to have a few high school youth present to help out.
- Remember that preschoolers have short attention spans.

- It is all right if the children cry when mom or dad leave. They usually get over it soon.
- It is a good idea to have a rocking chair available for cuddling and rocking.
- Consult with preschool teachers, librarians, parents of preschoolers or Sunday school teachers for advice on programming or activities.
- Don't forget to "child proof" the room.

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