



Playgroup and belonging

Belonging... why do we want to foster a sense of belonging in our playgroups?

There are lots of good reasons. On the surface, we simply hope that people will keep turning up, that the groups will keep functioning,

On a slightly deeper level we might have aspirations for people to form a common identity through playgroup and see themselves and their family as belonging to our church. We also hope that our churches recognise that families who belong to our playgroups do belong to the church, because belonging to a church isn't defined by attending a particular service of worship.

We may champion a sense of belonging within our group because we know that, as the group develops a common identity, the members will instinctively seek to care for one another, to share in life together beyond the formal group gatherings and the quality of relationships and pastoral care will deepen.

These are noble reasons to engender a strong sense of belonging in our playgroups, but to this point, none

of these motivations go beyond the expressions of altruism shared by many secular groups.

In Christian playgroups the value of belonging has a stronger meaning, a theological meaning.

There are two kinds of belonging

Humans are especially comfortable with the first kind of belonging which is based on being like each other. It's the kind of belonging that pairs of socks, hockey clubs and the mean girls' group at school have: a strong sense of belonging, based on likeness and conformity. But at its heart this kind of belonging also requires us to define those who don't belong. It's a kind of belonging that rejects and excludes others. Sadly there are a few churches that create belonging in this way ... "We belong because we all believe the same thing; we have all experienced the same ritual; we are not like those other people."

Another kind of belonging

But there is another kind of belonging – and perhaps it's not so comfortable, but it is a truer, stronger and more

basic kind of belonging. It's a more trustworthy kind of belonging.

It's the belonging that depends on an understanding of the world grounded in a loving and sovereign God. This kind of belonging recognises that it is not on the basis of likeness, or human conventions that our belonging rests.

No. This belonging, recognising the loving sovereignty of God, gives up any claims to creating rules and exclusions, and subscribes to a bigger story. This big story tells us that all that we are, and all that we see, belongs – not to us, but fundamentally belongs to God. So we belong. We all belong. We belong here. We belong with one another.

These are powerful words, strong messages to establish in our playgroup.

When we affirm belonging in our groups we are doing more than simply being friendly. We are living a theological truth. We live the gospel reality of the kingdom of God. The earth – the cosmos – is God's, thoroughly and unchallengeable. Jesus has shown us how completely God is committed to this world – committed

continued over page >>>

Playgroup and belonging

in love and committed in blood to the whole world, to all that belongs to God.

It's the kind of belonging that says, "You can come however you are. If you don't want to talk to anyone, that's okay. You don't have to prove your worth by being a good conversationalist, or a perfect parent, or by agreeing with everything we say. You belong here. You matter just by being here. If you don't speak the common language, if you aren't a parent, if you only have your kids every second week, if you can't bake, if you hate God, if you are angry or hurting or shallow or ridiculous or out of control or odd, you belong; we all belong. We belong together, to God."

Belonging, not possessing

This kind of belonging affirms that we belong to one another, but we don't own each other.

That's an important lesson in parenting. Our children belong with us, and we belong with them – we belong together – but our children don't belong to us in the sense that they are possessions. Our children are human beings, free but dependent just as adults are.

It's an important lesson in leadership too. We must be careful in our churches, communities and playgroups not to think of those who attend as being 'ours'. This idea of belonging together with one another protects us from seeing people as statistics ('we have 20 people in our group') and protects us from the exhaustion of trying to serve without mutuality. Belonging means that everyone is integral, everyone has a gift to bring, no one is taking a free ride, and no one is holding all the cards.

How can you remind your playgroup, your leadership, your church community, of this value of belonging, of belonging with one another?

Children in our midst remind us that belonging shouldn't be conditional on ability or contribution or competency or sameness or fitting in. Children in our midst remind us of the kingdom of God. After all, the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as them.

**We belong. We belong here.
We belong together, to God.**

*By Beth Barnett, VCCE Learning
and Theological engagement
(beth.barnett@vcce.org.au)*