

ELIZABETH DAVIES

## Quality time

New mothers can often be shocked by the sudden isolation that responsibility for a baby can bring. Childcare is a round-the-clock task, that can dramatically curtail a once busy social life. Parishes providing parent-and-toddler groups can offer an invaluable lifeline

**M**ichelle arrived in Bournemouth 15 years ago, with no friends or family other than her husband. She was studying childcare at the time and part of her work experience included helping to run a parent-and-toddler group. With the help of other parents, and with the support of her parish priest, Michelle went on to set up a parent-and-toddler group in her parish. Today, that group includes nearly 40 adults and more than 40 children.

The initial vision for Michelle's parish group was to offer young families a chance to come together to make new friends and to feel a sense of community, nurture and support. In fact, the group has also become a doorway through which people come back to practising their faith.

Michelle's experience is echoed by other toddler-group leaders. Anthony has been involved with a parish toddler group in Bury for the last three years. It is known to be a friendly, welcoming group – open to Catholics (whether or not they are practising) and those of other faiths or none – and the numbers have grown steadily. The group offers a friendly form of evangelisation, he says, with some parents returning to Mass with their children and others discovering Mass as a way to find out more about the Church.

A study by the Children's Workforce Development Council published in August 2009 found that 55 per cent of churches in England have parent and toddler groups and

that 52 per cent of children aged under four access one of these groups through their local church. These statistics, plus a growing appreciation of the importance of early-years interventions, have led to the development of an inter-church alliance, 1277 – Make Them Count, which aims to raise awareness of the importance of church-based parent-and-toddler groups, especially among Churches.

Echoing the axiom of Francis Xavier ("Give me a child until he is seven ...") the group have identified the average 1,277 days between birth and the first day of nursery school as ripe for greater attention and investment.

Gone are the days when parent-and-toddler groups were just opportunities for lonely mothers to meet up and their toddlers to blow off steam.

Earlier this year, the Marriage and Family Life Project Office at the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales invited Kathryn Petrik, an intern from the University of Notre Dame, to research the experience of toddler groups in the Catholic community in England and Wales. During her internship, Petrik canvassed leaders and explored the case for parish parent and toddler groups. She also visited a number of these groups in the London area and made a short film to promote her research findings.

Perhaps more importantly, she identified some areas where the groups can be stewarded more effectively. The practices that surfaced during her research illustrate three main benefits of toddler groups as perceived by parish-based volunteers: support for parents, grandparents and carers; strengthening of the home-parish-school relationship; and a safe learning environment.

It is clear that regular meetings with a group of one's peers where the adults have the chance to meet, chat, share, socialise, re-energise and reassure one another is a great support. The early years in family life can be a very lonely time. These groups show the caring face of the parish.

Home-parish bonding can be reinforced when the parish priest drops in to the group regularly and gets to know people. Friendships with committed parishioners can lead participants to a greater interest and confidence in exploring matters of faith.

The parish can help by ensuring that the accommodation is clean and safe – and by offering support with fundraising and/or provision of basic resources such as educational toys and equipment at low or no cost. (Freecycle – [uk.freecycle.org](http://uk.freecycle.org) – is another useful source of materials, matching people who have things they want to get rid of with people who can use those items.)

Overtly religious activities such as Mothers'

Prayers and Godly Play feature in some parent-and-toddler groups alongside activities such as craft work, drawing, singing, large play areas, baby areas, sensory areas, role play, reading and the sharing of refreshments.

A number of groups engage in charitable activity, raising funds for welfare projects overseas and at home. A well-planned and structured routine helps a toddler group to run smoothly as well as to provide a secure environment. Sharing out responsibility fosters a culture of volunteering and increases parental self-confidence.

Petrik found that the selection of volunteer leaders is just as critical as the support of the parish priest. Committed and actively practising Catholics who have a good work ethic, social skills and who are willing to be involved for the long haul are ideal candidates. Also critical for successful groups is the need for clear aims, a vision statement and a structure worked out in collaboration with those who are attending. Groups are recommended to liaise with local councils, safeguarding advisers and local colleges who might have student placements to offer.

Group leaders identified a need for practical assistance, for example, for help with setting up and clearing out the hall, the heavy work that parish volunteers might be willing to take responsibility for.

They suggested that it is sometimes good to have visitors speaking about health, schooling, children's liturgy, keep-fit activities with children, parenting support and relationship coaching.

A new mother described to Petrik the pain of losing touch with her young, single friends because she can no longer spend free afternoons or late nights out with them. Although she is sleep-deprived and physically weary, the new mother has found tremendous consolation and encouragement in the new friendships she has formed through her parent-and-toddler group. She described the group as the best event of her week.

■ Elizabeth Davies is Marriage and Family Life Project Officer at the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Visit [www.passingonthefait.org.uk/Toddlers.html](http://www.passingonthefait.org.uk/Toddlers.html) for more information about Kathryn Petrik's internship project.