

children's





MINISTRY

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Children’s Ministry in the 21st Century: The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas
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FOREWORD

Welcome to *Children's Ministry in the 21st Century: The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas*.

The fact that you picked up this book in the first place says a lot about you. You're committed to children, and you're committed to God. You obviously care about pursuing the most effective, trend-sensitive, need-meeting children's ministry possible—or you wouldn't be reading this book. You care about making the gospel relevant to kids and connecting with them in ways that are culturally relevant—ways they'll understand and hear so God can invade their lives.

Everything around us is changing. Culture. Kids. Families. Ministry methods. How can we keep up?

You've most likely heard the tongue-in-cheek use of the verse "We shall not all sleep for we shall be changed" in the nursery. It's highly likely that verse could be used throughout our entire children's ministries! Change. We're moving at what seems like the speed of light at times, and it affects our ministry today and tomorrow.

That's what this book is about. We asked top children's ministers to dive into the information you need, to flesh it out with their years of experience, and to guide us as we move into the 21st century. So, in the next pages of this book, you'll hear from experts such as Pat Verbal, Craig Jutila, Jim Wideman, Rick Chromey, and more. The people whose words and ideas appear in this book are wise students of kids, their culture, and making the gospel relevant for today.

We believe that God passionately loves children and has a special place in his heart for them. We believe that children are the church of today and deserve every attention and effort that's possible in order to share with them the love of God. We believe kids can have a thriving, wonderful relationship with Jesus and that they need Jesus' friends like you to help them.

That's why we've packed this book with 10 essays and dozens of practical ideas. You'll find tools, tips, activities, events, programs, creative ideas, and more after each essay that'll help you apply what you've just learned.

Our prayer is that as you use this book, you'll connect with kids in a way you never have before. Our hope is that the ideas and concepts in this book will teach you the secret kid-speak you need to impact this generation for Christ. May God bless you as you reach out to the most precious people on earth—kids!

Christine Yount Jones


Group's Children's Ministry Champion

USING THIS RESOURCE

We've compiled this book to be your encyclopedia for the new face of children's ministry in the 21st century.

We've highlighted eight specific trends in culture and ministry, such as technology, emerging family ministries, and the postmodern church, which are crucial for leaders of children to understand and apply. And we'll help you do both.

Each chapter has two parts. The first section of each chapter includes essays from experts in children's ministry to help you understand each new trend and how it affects your children and ministry. The second section, called "Try This," provides practical activities for applying what you've discovered—great answers to the question, "So what can I do about this in my ministry?"

The "Try This" sections will give you fresh ideas for events, games, small groups, worship, discussion starters, object lessons, the arts, outreach, and on and on. You'll see the "OK to copy" icon  on pages where you'll distribute copies either to individual students or to groups.

Through this volume, you'll see your children's spiritual lives in a new light and understand who they really are with a fresh perspective. And you'll gain valuable, practical, and innovative ideas that will inspire your students to develop a life-transforming relationship with the Messiah and King.

Our prayer is that this tool will encourage you and strengthen your ministry as you serve God by loving children. May God work through you and your ministry in ways you can't yet even imagine!

The background is a dense, hand-drawn illustration in black ink on a light grey background. It depicts a cityscape with numerous skyscrapers, some with smokestacks emitting clouds. A winding road with cars and a bridge with more cars are visible. Various flying objects, including a robot, an airplane, a helicopter, and a rocket, are scattered throughout. Abstract shapes like yarn balls, hearts, and stars are interspersed with the city elements. The overall style is whimsical and detailed.

CHAPTER

1

Not of This World



THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’

BY RICK CHROMEY

We live in a world of unbelievable change.

A decade now seems like a century.

Remember 1995? Back when the web was a spider’s home. Back when mail was paper and phones had cords. Back when Spam came in a can.

In 1994 Netscape permitted broad Internet access and the whole world went “e.” Snail mail morphed into e-mail. Cell phones replaced land lines and became microcomputers and televisions. Digital downloads, blogs, iPods, and satellite television reinvented communication and entertainment industries. Wi-Fi (wireless) created instant global connectivity.

We’ve become a culture of infinite connections via the Web. From MySpace to Amazon to Google to Wikipedia, we connect and commune through text-messaging, blogs, and chats. The technological ABCs abound. CD-R. DVD. GPS. AVI. MPEG. JPEG. MP3. In a cordless, wireless culture the frontier is cyberspace, and every human institution (politics, entertainment, education, commerce, church) is impacted.

In the words of best-selling author Thomas Friedman, the “world is flat.” The rise of Web technology, wireless communications, and virtual reality has changed cultural rules, demolished hierarchical authority, and eliminated walls of class or creed. Have modem, will travel. The greatest indicator of poverty or ignorance or cultural relevance is Web connectivity (aka the “digital divide”).

Either you're online or you're not.

Consequently, children's ministries that blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s are facing new paradigms. What worked five years ago now fails to attract or educate. Many churches (and their children's ministries) are disconnected, unplugged, or offline from their own neighborhoods, families, and cultural context.

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? (THE RISE OF NEW CULTURAL LANGUAGES)

We reside in a *postmodern* world.

For over five centuries, our culture operated within modern frames. Technological innovation—namely the printing press and the mechanized clock—shattered the chains of the Dark Ages. Modernity, via new structures and communication tools, emerged through the Renaissance and Reformation, Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution.

In a modern world, the church reflected this machine/word culture. The Bible was printed in chapter and verse. Denominations emerged (different strokes for different folks). Print and words reigned through sermon, hymn, and lesson. The church (like culture) mechanized its message via principles and purposes, sequence and science.

Modern children's ministries operated within calendar seasons, word formats, and passive learning models. Children memorized a book (the Bible). They learned in age-graded classrooms and within authoritative systems. From Sunday school to children's church, kids were taught "belief in a box." Church was a place, an answer, or a destination. Faith was a frame.

But that world is fading—fast!

Three technological advances in the 20th century have introduced a global, postmodern, post-Christian cultural shift: television, cellular phones, and the Internet. Television launched a culture of image, experience, and virtual reality. Cell and Web technology shaped new communication formats with instant, global, and relational consequence.

As a result, children's ministries of the 21st century will reinvent themselves around relationships, images, and experiences that are 24/7/365, where faith is a personal, dynamic journey. The Word will be image. Flesh and blood. Experiential. In a high-tech culture, people value a high-touch connection.

Can you hear me now? Technology releases new cultural tones and dialects. We're talking but kids don't understand. A cultural language—or how we interact or operate within social frameworks—is intricately tied to technology.

Modern (1500–1990)	VS. Postmodern (1990–)
<p>Printing Press, Mechanized Clock</p> <p><i>“I think, therefore I am.”</i> -Rene Descartes</p> <p><i>“Here I stand.”</i> -Martin Luther</p>	<p>Television, Cell Phone, Internet</p> <p><i>“Can we all get along?”</i> -Rodney King</p> <p><i>“I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”</i> -Bono, U2</p>
<p>Mechanized System Science Class/Creed Industry Logic</p>	<p>Relational Community Connection Tolerance Global</p>
<p>Passive Lecture/Sermon Hierarchical “In the Box” Destination Religious</p>	<p>Experiential Authentic Participatory Extreme Journey Spiritual</p>
<p>Word Literacy Print Audio Mono-task Foundational</p>	<p>Experiential Digital Instant/Live Visual Multi-task Fluid Imaginative</p>

In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, the church was born. Ironically, its greatest issue was communication. These largely illiterate Jews faced a multilingual audience. According to Scripture, the apostles were gifted by the Holy Spirit to speak the people's language (including unique dialects). This miracle was not of man, but of the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, children's ministries must recognize that human purpose, program, or power will fail. Only the Holy Spirit enables us to speak culturally relevant messages and to live our faith in a dark, carnal world.

Fortunately our culture is hungry for God.

And children are the most receptive to spirituality.

S-P-I-R-I-T

Astronauts are "sailors" (*naut*) of the "stars" (*astro*). However, God calls his leaders to different worlds. Leonard Sweet suggests that postmodern Christians are "pneumanauts," or "sailors" (*naut*) of the "Spirit" (*pneuma*). We're in the world, yet not of it. We fearlessly soar above it.

The emerging postmodern culture spells "S-P-I-R-I-T," and children's ministries in the 21st century must learn to sail this new frontier.

Sensory

Postmodern culture welcomes experiences and defines truth through life. Moderns tapped eyes and ears, but postmoderns have rediscovered smell, taste, and touch. The modern church reduced Jesus to a book, creed, or idea. The postmodern church will literally "re-incarnate" Jesus as "flesh."

Need a metaphor? Most children's ministries resemble a McDonald's drive-through. Kids line up, order, and exit. It's a fast-food faith. But what if we operated more like a Rainforest Cafe? Life's jungle creates a sensory sanctuary. Can you help kids taste God? smell Jesus? touch the Spirit?

Pluralistic

Postmodern culture is tolerant. It's a "whatever" world. Truth is relative to personal experience. Where moderns lived in a black and white or gray culture, postmoderns question the colors altogether. They see "blight" or "whack" instead. To a modern, the Outback Steakhouse

motto, “No rules. Just right.” is an oxymoron. To a postmodern, it makes perfect sense.

Children’s ministries will face increasing pressure to communicate Jesus as “*the way, the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6, emphasis added) to a post-Christian culture. Consequently, we must honor faith’s journey, including its doubts, discouragements, and dryness. Celebrate milestones. Create conversations. Carve memories. Console hardships.

Faith is an *Amazing Race* where, like passengers on Southwest Airlines, believers are “now free to move about” the kingdom. Tolerance doesn’t mean endorsement but divine empathy.

Image-Driven

Our culture thinks with its eyes.

Nike? A *swoosh* symbol. McDonald’s? Golden arches. Television single-handedly morphed a word world into an image culture. iPods aren’t a nifty fad. They’re the wave of the future: personalized, portable television.

In John 1:1, the Greek word for *Word* is *logos*. Moderns love the word. Postmoderns long for “logo.” They like to brand (tattoos). They don’t seek a “red letter” Bible but desire metaphor, story, and “eye-deas.”

Here’s a question: How does your children’s ministry brand itself? What mark do you leave on kids? What do your children “see” at church—on the walls, the PowerPoint, the handouts? Is your image tarnished? worn? irrelevant?

Reality

Reality television is no fad.

To a modern, reality is scientific and logical. Pictures don’t lie. Truth is graspable. Life’s problems have answers. But postmoderns feel otherwise. Technology creates alternative, virtual realities. What’s “real”? What’s “true”? Who knows? Consequently, postmodern culture thrives on authentic “get real” moments. It’s “life unscripted” (Fox Reality channel) or the “real thing” (Coca-Cola).

Either you’re “real” to your children, or you’re a spiritual hologram. Do they know your insecurities, pain, or troubles (and vice versa)? *Fear Factor* is a top show among elementary boys. What’s the “fear factor” of your children’s ministry? In a video game culture, kids want to be “in the game.”

So keep it real.

International

We live in global community.

A tsunami sparks worldwide philanthropy. A terror plot has international implications. The world is getting smaller. The modern operated within local contexts. Until television, news traveled by ear or print. Today we make instantaneous global connections. Tech support is a call to Singapore. Even my small Kentucky town boasts Chinese, Mexican, and Italian restaurants.

In global culture, tomorrow's children's ministries must refocus on the Great Go-Mission (Matthew 28:18-20). Every child is a missionary. Imagine the opportunity a mouse and modem afford. Download Google Earth and see the world.

Tech-Reliant

Today's children have grown within a tech-friendly climate. They're natives to a high-tech birthright (most born since 1960). Postmoderns find comfort in technology, not fear. They discover perfect pitch with cords.

Megatrends author John Naisbitt predicted that a high-tech culture creates high-touch opportunity. The two most accessed Internet categories are porn and dating. In a plastic world, intimacy is a driving need. Technology creates relational hunger.

Unfortunately, few children's ministries help families navigate technological landmines. Are we preparing for tomorrow's tech advances? Human engineering, bioterror, and identity theft will continue to flourish. Most transactions (loans, food, entertainment) will happen in cyberspace. Tomorrow's universities will be online, as modern seat-based, time-based institutions become increasingly irrelevant.

THE CULTURAL SWAMP: "IN IT? OF IT? WITH IT?"

In a postmodern world, cultural change is fluid. The trends that once took years to come and go rise and fall in weeks and days. Culture tends toward the extreme. Sexuality, violence, and profanity mark the television landscape. The Internet is flooded with pornography, gambling, and danger.

In this polluted cultural swamp, children grow.

Also troublesome is that for the first time since A.D. 325—when

Constantine charted a Christian empire—we're now living in a post-Christian world. Christianity's influence—politically, educationally, philosophically—is largely questioned, ridiculed, or dismissed.

Historically, the church responds to cultural sewage through *isolation*, choosing separation or a subculture that parallels secular society. *Christian* education. *Christian* entertainment. *Christian* business. Separation from the world insulates and provides understandable security.

Conversely, some Christian families adopt cultural *immersion*. Such Christian homes allow questionable television shows, music, and books (not to mention behavior). These homes present problems for children's ministries who attract children deeply stained by cultural pollutants. When Bobby launches the "F" word at home, his parents smirk, but at church his flowery language offends.

It's a "kagoy" world. A culture where "kids are getting older younger." Many parents culturally baptize their children through questionable fashion, entertainment, or behavioral choices (alcohol, violence, or even sexual activity). Other well-meaning parents immerse preteen kids in activities—beauty pageants, talent contests, or sports—that pressure, push, and pull them into adult venues, values, and even vices.

Consequently, neither isolation nor immersion is ultimately healthy.

So what's the solution to this cultural swamp?

A positive approach is to *inoculate* children against offensive content. An inoculation actually injects the virus into the system to build immunity. Similarly, children's ministries (and parents) can immunize kids against cultural toxins.

Postmodern culture encourages experiential truth and embraces relativism. In a whatever, wherever world, children will need a Christ-centered compass that always points them home. Nevertheless, small doses of alternative truth, questionable behavior, and even inappropriate language—within proper age and family contexts—can ultimately build immunity (discernment and right decisions) against later adoption of these same cultural pollutants.

For example, children *will* hear offensive language. The isolationist would cover Junior's ears. The immersionist would look away. Those choosing inoculation would frame the language within context to develop teachable moments. A preschooler flaunting his "middle finger" is different than a fifth-grader doing the same. The question isn't what happened, but why.

Children's ministries can only inoculate to a point. Most immunization is family-based. We cannot alter family values unless granted permission.

Inoculation is healthy, but there is a higher path.

Jesus called his disciples—through his own example—to live *incarnationally* within culture. *Incarnational* means sensing pain and stepping into tragedy to enact change. It's being light or salt. It's John 3:16. Every evil is an expression of emptiness and envy (James 4:1-3). Profanity, violence, sensuality, abuse, and addiction are simply bandages. Inoculation builds immunity, but incarnational living leads to victory. Immunity prevents cultural stains, but incarnational living loves the stained.

Grace is the word.

Children, especially those who are culturally stained, are open to incarnational strategies that evoke grace, relationship, worth, and security. A children's ministry that empathizes with hurt children, builds bridges, loves unconditionally, and lifts kids to better life decisions (in speech, purity, behavior, values) is one that ultimately rescues and redeems.

Incarnational children's ministry will be criticized, especially from isolationists. "We don't want bad language at church!" "That's devil's music!" "That movie isn't a good one." But grace isn't nice, fair, or even rational (something isolationist critics fail to recognize).

Does that mean anything goes?

Absolutely not.

A positive children's ministry that leads incarnationally won't license profanity or inappropriate activity. However, it will empathize and encourage better behavior (and enact logical consequences for *continuous* misbehavior). A child who repeatedly hits others cannot be tolerated or trusted within a classroom. Likewise kids who constantly use profanity or suggestive gestures—despite admonishment—must face the consequence (including suspension from activities).

Incarnational children's ministry partners with families to teach improved parenting skill and strategy. It *feels* with a family to understand why children act up or out. It inoculates families against wider cultural toxins through biblical teaching. Ultimately, it lives *grace*. Wild forgiveness. Outrageous love. Unlimited favor.



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