



10

ATTRIBUTES OF AN
Unshakeable
KIDS MINISTRY

Table of Contents



Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has turned ‘normal’ on its head. It has closed businesses, cancelled schools and scattered churches. Many of us feel as though our worlds, and our ministries, have been picked up by the ankles and shaken. As we have scrambled to find our feet, we’ve had to look for new ways to do ministry, and we wonder how long this will last. You may be filled with uncertainty about the future. You may not know how to move forward with any measure of confidence. Maybe you are questioning whether you should scrap everything you’ve ever done and initiate a complete reset on your kids ministry strategy. You’re not alone. These are common reactions in this time of stress and uncertainty. During times like these, we need to encourage one another and lift each other up. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:7, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment.” While we cannot control the circumstances, we can choose to respond in faith, not fear.

The truth is, we do need to re-evaluate our strategies in light of a changing not-so-normal normal. We do need to question what we should continue to do and what we need to do differently. But we need to be careful not to do so out of timidity. Let’s take care not to throw out the things that make our ministries strong. We need to consciously purpose to build our ministries on unshakable ideas that will help them remain strong no matter what circumstance comes.

We have identified 10 attributes to help you build your kids ministry on an unshakable foundation that will hold strong no matter what circumstances arise, so you can lead with confidence, even in uncertain times.

Partnering With You,

Chuck Peters

Director of Operations, Lifeway Kids



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS **FAMILY FOCUSED**

Unshakable kids ministries understand that children's ministry isn't only about engaging kids, it is about partnering with families. To build strong ministries we need to actively equip parents and caregivers to have spiritual conversations with their own kids at home. To do this well, we need to invest in building relationships at the family level. We need a strategic plan to support and encourage parents in a way that meets them wherever they are and sets them up for success.

Parents need to know that we are on their team and that we will be there for them as they lead their own families. This can be as simple as sending someone an encouraging text message, or making yourself available to meet someone for coffee and care for their concerns, but it also means coaching caregivers by identifying clear expectations for parental discipleship from scripture and providing them with resources to have spiritual conversations with their children as they walk, drive, and eat; when they tuck their kids in for bed at night and when they have coffee and cocoa together on a Saturday mornings.

We need to thoughtfully and intentionally provide a variety of resources to families to help make these conversations easier and more effective. That might mean providing digital downloads of bible story videos, or providing printable discussion guides and activity pages. It could mean setting parents up with apps that coordinate with your curriculum. It could also mean providing simple conversation starters or prayer prompts. Whether you accomplish this through a printed piece of paper delivered to a physical mailbox, or a pixel-based digital file delivered via email or download, the end goal is the same: to make it easy for parents to talk with their kids about God and His Word, and to apply what it says to our lives in practical, applicable ways. Ultimately, connecting the whole family in a deeper relationship with Jesus.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS MISSIONALLY MINDED

Maybe you've heard it said "Lead with the why." Or "Begin with the end in mind." To have an unshakable kids ministry, it is critical that everything we do, whether in-person or online, classroom curriculum or family experience, event or programming, flows from a clearly defined source. Many, if not most, kidmin leaders would attest that helping kids connect with God through genuine gospel heart transformation is our ministry's end goal. But, how is that reflected and lived out in our ministry decisions? If we want to ensure that our ministry can survive inevitable bumps in the road, we need to clearly define the why of our ministry then allow that 'why' to be a filter through which all our ministry decisions are made.

Think of it this way, your "why" is both your destination and the track for getting there. An unshakable kids ministry needs a track to run on but not just any track. It must be the right track to lead you to the destination you've chosen. As such, it is important to lay your track with kingdom expanding guidelines. One part of the track is ensuring that your volunteers understand and agree with your purpose (destination) and that they are able to clearly articulate that goal within their circles of influence.

Another part of this track would be that God's Word isn't merely for listening to and learning about, it's for living out in faith. It doesn't stop with "come and hear," "come and see," "come and get." It moves us to "go and tell," "go and show," "go and give." As such, how you teach kids the Bible should be in a line strategically chosen to help kids progress towards true heart transformation by the gospel. And hearts that are truly transformed by the gospel live on-mission among their families and friends and in their communities. An unshakable kids ministry prioritizes kingdom-expanding values and leads volunteers, kids, and their families to be missionally-minded.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS NOT LIMITED BY LOCATION

If the crisis of 2020 showed us anything, it's that ministry is not bound to a facility. Nearly overnight many of us were forced to find new ways to connect with preschoolers, kids, and their families since we could no longer meet face-to-face in our regular rooms in our regular facilities. As we adapted to these ministry implications, we realized (or maybe just reminded) that ministry could happen both wherever and whenever it needed to. We adopted a CFA, (no, not Chick-Fil-A), but a “church from anywhere,” approach to ministry.

This flexibility is a key trait of an unshakable kids ministry. It provides us the ability to be both proactive and reactive in order to serve our communities. We must seek to be versatile enough to meet kids and their families where they are, going to them when appropriate and always with them along their journey. Maybe you have a regular Sunday schedule in a classroom on your campus. Or maybe your strategy includes some form of virtual meetings through a video platform, providing resource/activity bags to be picked up and used at home, or resourcing families and even kids to lead Bible studies in their homes and neighborhoods. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges with this CFA approach to ministry is finding ways to adapt classroom curriculum activities to be used in social distancing, virtual, or family context. As of today, maybe your ministry now includes all or a combination of these strategies. Each of these examples and many more flow from a posture of not being locked into one location or way of doing ministry.

Be encouraged. Resist feeling constricted to the way things always have been. Be proactive. As you look ahead, consider new ways and places in which your ministry can take place. And sometimes you will need to be reactive. As circumstances change, pray, find out where your kids and their families are, pray some more, then create or modify your strategy to serve them that considers an unbounded ministry.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS DRIVEN BY LONG-TERM VISION

Unshakable ministries are not easily derailed by short term setbacks, because they function from a long-term perspective. They operate with an overall awareness that their motivation is to instill children with a resilient lifelong faith that endures over the long haul. The goal is not to merely generate well-behaved kids in the short term through behavior modification, but to train them up to be spiritually mature adults through genuine heart transformation. This long-lens view of kids ministry provides a firm foundation for operating a wise content strategy with a solid study plan. Sticking with a proven and trustworthy pathway to spiritual growth, rather than constantly chasing after whatever is new, instills confidence in leaders and parents. It is characterized by a clear, compelling and unwavering purpose.

Unshakable leaders with long-term strategies understand that it is counterproductive to constantly reinvent their ministries every few weeks. An unshakable plan relies on a consistent and well-rounded scope and sequence. It does not pick, choose and repeat the same few favorite stories. It introduces kids to a broader counsel of scripture. It is age appropriate. It intentionally teaches spiritual principles in a way that builds concept on concept, and precept on precept. It intentionally teaches kids the big picture of God's plan and presence in history.

As unshakable leaders we must keep our focus on our long-term purpose, not on whatever is new and shiny or on whatever stormy circumstances may be swirling around us at the moment. Our distractions and reactions can be stabilized and tempered and we can function in confidence when we remember that we are working out a long-term plan that is worthy and worthwhile.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS ROOTED IN RELATIONSHIP

Strong relationships are an essential aspect of an unshakable ministry. We need to work to intentionally establish and invest in relationships between leaders, kids, and families, building deep and lasting connections with one another, our church and The Lord. As goal-oriented people it can be easy to lose sight of the reality that ministry is really about cultivating and nurturing strong and healthy relationships. Our ultimate goal is not to fill young brains with information about God, but to connect kids' hearts to God in personal relationship through Jesus.

Although what we teach is extremely important, most of our kids won't remember most of the words we say. They will, however, forever remember the people who they connect with in relationship. Leaders need to do more than say the right words. They need to be encouraged to "walk the talk," living out their faith and sharing their own stories as an example and a testimony.

We need to connect kids in personal relationship to The Lord because relationship outlasts religion. We minister from a posture that prioritizes people, not programs. We need to connect leaders with kids because discipleship happens in the context of relationships. When we prioritize relationships our leaders take a genuine interest in the kids and families they serve. Leaders are more likely to commit to being consistently present and actively engaged over the long haul. In a ministry that's rooted in relationship, conversations are more apt to go beyond the lesson plan on the page, and make application of God's Word personal and practical. Leaders know every child's name and care about their lives and interests. Likewise, leaders know parents/caregivers and see kids ministry as a partnership with them.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS KID-ENGAGING

We often mistake kid-engaging with silly, over-the-top performance on the part of kidmin leaders and volunteers. And while there is a place for that type of behavior, there is more to a kid-engaging ministry than trying to get kids to laugh. Think about your own childhood and who engaged you in learning. For me it was the unassuming Fred Rogers in *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. It was also the kind, stately Mrs. Wadsworth at my church. Neither were flashy but both were engaging and relevant.

Why were a professional TV personality and a volunteer church teacher both engaging? Because both connected with me relationally. I never met Mr. Rogers, but he had a way of reaching through that black and white TV screen and connecting with his audience. He could do that because he was genuine and understood how kids learn, think, and feel. Mrs. Wadsworth engaged me by the way she listened and spoke and cared.

Kid-engaging ministry not only connects adults with kids, but it also helps kids connect with one another. So, how do we do both? First, we create a climate that encourages kids to be kids and to learn in the ways God has created them to learn. Not all children learn in the same way, so we use a variety of methods to engage all the kids. That includes the *I'm-the-center-of-attention* kids, as well as the *hello-don't-forget-I'm-here kids*.

For example, sometimes we need to be silly and over-the-top. Other times we need to be calm and down-to-earth. Sometimes we need to employ exciting, loud(ish), entertaining teaching methods. Other times we need to speak softly and drive home a Biblical truth slowly and methodically. Sometimes we need to use professional video and quality music. Other times we need to create a reflective learning environment. Sometimes kids need to have fun. Other times they need to ponder and rest in God's love.

So, how can our ministries be kid-engaging? By establishing genuine, authentic relationships with kids. And, by employing a variety of approaches that take into account the uniqueness of each child.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS AGE AWARE

The first time I went to Brazil on a mission trip, I knew a tiny amount of Spanish and no Portuguese. I tried unsuccessfully to communicate with a few Spanish words and a lot of hand gestures. Nevertheless, the only effective way I was able to converse with people who spoke Portuguese exclusively was through an interpreter. Similarly we sometimes try to communicate with children the same way we would converse with teenagers or adults, speaking in our native adult language rather than in kid-speak. The results can leave kids confused or even frustrated. Sometimes, kids may just choose to ignore us.

Word choice and sentence structure are not the only ways we can be age-aware and communicate effectively. We also need to understand how children learn and the general characteristics of each age grouping of kids. In other words, we need to teach biblical concepts in a way that concrete-thinking children can comprehend. Preteens may be able to grasp some simple abstract truths, while younger kids do not have the ability or experience to do so. We also need to use teaching methods and employ music and videos that are age-specific.

Lifeway's Levels of Biblical Learning® is a framework that can help ensure we teach age-suitable biblical concepts. Using a precept-upon-precept construct, the Levels of Biblical Learning is organized around the 10 concept areas of God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Bible, Salvation, Creation, Church, People, Family, and Community & World. Within each category are specific biblical truths that are presented through eight different age ranges, from infancy through high school. The truths build on one another as a child grows, and reflect levels of understanding that follow how God designed children to learn. Learn more at www.Lifeway.com/lobl

Age-aware kids ministry does not imply that each child will understand every word we speak or sing and every concept we try to convey. Part of teaching is explaining new terms and ideas. When our ministry is age-aware we employ teaching methods, music, and video that are age-specific. Ultimately we communicate the gospel with kids differently, depending on their age-level.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS BUILT ON TRUSTWORTHY TEACHING

“I’m not a teacher; I just want to help”

How many times have we heard this from potential kidmin volunteers? It’s an honest sentiment based on a faulty assumption. Truthfully, the moment we as adults walk into a room with kids at church, we become a teacher. As an automatic authority figure, we immediately begin teaching kids something. What we teach them is a choice we make.

Not all teaching bears equal weight. We are always teaching *implicitly* through relationships by our actions and attitudes. Whether or not that teaching is trustworthy depends on the level of trust we earn with the kids we teach. We earn that trust when we follow through on our promises. If we say we’ll play a game after telling a Bible story, then we need to play a game. We also build trust when we allow children to suffer pre-determined consequences of inappropriate behavior. And, kids learn to trust us when we meet their physical needs, such as hunger or thirst.

We also teach *explicitly* with our words. The trustworthiness of that teaching depends on the content. Everything we teach in the context of kids ministry needs to be biblically based. The main point, the activities, the songs, the games, and the crafts—they all need to be designed to intentionally teach kids Bible truth. When we do teach biblical truth, we need to be careful that what we are teaching is actually from the Bible and not misconceptions of what we may think the Bible says.

Our ultimate goal in trustworthy teaching is to teach kids the Bible in a way that points kids to Jesus. After all, the entire Bible is God’s story of redemption which is ultimately found in the person of Jesus Christ. That is why a balanced study plan that covers ALL the Bible, not just our favorite stories, is imperative. Biblically based, trustworthy teaching that focuses on Jesus naturally leads to practical life application. Our goal is not to create Bible-trivia-whiz kids, but to help kids contextualize what they learn and connect it to their everyday lives.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS VOLUNTEER HONORING

In many cases, the stability of our ministry is directly related to the strength of our team. A volunteer team is strong when volunteers feel honored as integral parts of the team. Two of the most critical ways to honor volunteers is by equipping and encouraging them. As such, we would be wise to invest significant effort and energy into an intentional strategy for equipping and encouraging our volunteers.

EQUIP VOLUNTEERS: We must strive for the success of each team member and not feel threatened by them. For a volunteer to succeed, we must do all we are able to equip her for the challenges she may face. We should seek to provide thorough and complete resources and curriculum which align with our overall ministry strategy. Then we must train leaders to use resources to get the most out of them. Help them understand how to draw out key features of each resource and adapt resources to our specific ministry context/environment, when needed. Equipped leaders are kept leaders. They will likely be more willing to continue to serve within your ministry because they will have the necessary tools and know you want them to succeed. Also when we have a thoughtful plan for equipping volunteers, we will find that onboarding new volunteers is easier as well. Equipped leaders are a powerful asset to your ministry.

ENCOURAGE VOLUNTEERS: The Bible commands us to be encouragers of one another (see Hebrews 3:13). But encouragement doesn't often happen by accident. We must be intentionally, and even systematically, strategic. In our hearts, we know we value and appreciate those on our team, but does that appreciation move from our heart to our hands? Be an encourager. Build rhythms into your ministry calendar for celebrating volunteers, maybe at an annual leader training meeting. But also make it a habit to regularly, perhaps weekly, look for ways to individually say "thank you" to those on your team. This could be a personal email or text message, a handwritten note or card, or a phone call. This effort must be sincere, and when it is, these somewhat simple acts will deepen relationships. As relationships deepen, your team is strengthened. An encouraged team member will feel valued which is vital to an unshakeable ministry.

When volunteers are equipped and encouraged, they will be released to embrace their own calling within the ministry. Their service will be able to move from obligation to passion. When team members are serving from their passion, they will "own" their ministry, being more committed and reliable, and will follow your leadership in both celebrations and challenges.



DESIGN A KIDS MINISTRY THAT IS CHARACTERIZED BY CONFIDENCE

Unshakable ministries are led by unshakable leaders. People notice the way leaders respond to difficult and unexpected situations, and the responses of leaders have a deep and powerful impact on those they lead. I like to say it like this: whatever you have is contagious. Leaders who display negative, grumpy, hopeless, and generally sour demeanors infuse those attitudes into the culture of their group. The good news is that positive outlooks and attitudes are also contagious. No one wants to be around a negative grump, but confidence, hopefulness and positivity are attractive and will draw people. This is not to say that leaders should live in a false Pollyanna-like delusion that everything is always rainbows and butterflies. I am not suggesting that we function in ignorance of the very real challenges we face, but rather that we choose and exhibit a mature and godly response to those challenges.

James 1:2 calls for us to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds. Notice the acknowledgement of two things: 1) we **WILL** face trials (of many kinds!) and 2) we can **CHOOSE** our response. The chosen response is not made in ignorance of the difficulty faced, it is made in light of the understanding that James presents in verse three. Why should we respond to trials with confident expectation? ***Because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*** God is as present in times of difficulty as he is in moments of comfort. When must choose to walk in faith instead of fear. We must not be paralysed by the circumstances we face. The actions and attitudes we exhibit to the volunteers, kids and families we serve may be the loudest testimony we can ever share.

So, as a leader, determine to trust in the Lord with all your heart and not rely on your own (limited) understanding (Proverbs 3:5). Continue to take steps forward in faith believing that He will direct your path. Kids and families need leaders to lead, now more than ever. Remember what you know to be true. Process your own emotions and insecurities in a healthy way, and tell yourself the truth about who God is and of His unchanging character. Our God is all powerful, sovereign and good. Set your eyes on Him and do not be dismayed by the wind and the waves (Matthew 14). Unshakable ministries are led by unshakable leaders who are firmly established on the Rock.

SELF ASSESSMENT

How are you doing in these 10 key areas? Rate yourself on a scale of 1-10 (10 being highest) so you can assess where you are doing well, and where you might look to improve.

FAMILY FOCUSED	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
MISSIONALLY MINDED	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
NOT LIMITED BY LOCATION	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
DRIVEN BY LONG-TERM VISION	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
RELATIONALLY STRONG	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
KID-ENGAGING	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
AGE AWARE	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
TRUSTWORTHY TEACHING	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
VOLUNTEER HONORING	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
CHARACTERIZED BY CONFIDENCE	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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