



**THE QUESTION
NOBODY ASKS
— ABOUT OUR —
CHILDREN**

LARRY FOWLER

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THE QUESTION NOBODY ASKS ABOUT OUR CHILDREN

In nearly every church, someone asks the same question every week—usually on Monday morning. It will be asked for sure by the time Wednesday staff meeting is done. It doesn't matter if you are in a small church that doesn't have staff meetings, or a megachurch that has multiple meetings. Someone will ask *The Question*.

It doesn't matter the ethnicity of the church, or the social strata of the church, or the geographical setting; someone will ask it.

All kinds of pastors ask it. Senior pastors ask it. So do youth pastors, executive pastors and

children's pastors. Elder boards ask it. Everyone wants to know—almost weekly—the answer to one question:

"So – how many did we have?"

We may be talking about our church as a whole, or only about our group (like children's ministry, for example), but we want to know how many people came. We will track it, chart it, analyze it, promote it, celebrate it when it goes up and bemoan it when it goes down. We will attend seminars and conferences for the simple purpose of trying to reach more people. That single question, "How many did we have?" *will* drive our programs, our approaches and our strategies.

It's a good question.

In fact, it is a question we must ask if we are serious about pursuing the Great Commission. We can't pursue "preaching the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), making "disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19), or being witnesses "to the end of the earth" without asking it. It is worthy of being the focus of whole conferences, of annual strategies, of missional themes. Yes, it is a good question.

But it cannot be the only question we ask on Monday morning.

When we ask it by itself, our evaluation of ministry will be inadequate.

Suppose our children's ministry room is packed – or all the chairs in the worship center are full; our inclination is to assume that things are great. But if our assessment is inadequate, we will likely adopt wrong approaches. When we have wrong approaches, we will be disappointed with unacceptable results.

There is a Second Question we must ask on Monday morning. Few churches ask it; less track it. It also has an impact on ministry evaluation, approaches and results, but in particular, our ministry to children is dramatically affected. In fact, asking this Second Question will challenge our approach to curriculum, cause us to reassess our organization and pour fuel on the fire of parental involvement.

When it comes to impacting our children, it is simply the most ministry-changing question that we should ask, but we are not asking. It is:

How often do they come?

My ministry work right now involves speaking to, coaching and consulting with large churches. Sometimes my work is related to the ministry that I am a part of—Awana—and sometimes to the larger scope of children's and family ministry. The churches I work with usually have multiple services, and often multiple campuses. They are often younger congregations, aggressive in evangelism and focused on growth. They also rarely ask the Second Question.

As I have met with them, I have challenged them to examine how often children in their kid's ministry attend on weekends.

For a variety of reasons, children's ministry isn't analyzed either carefully or deeply in most of the churches. In reality, children's ministry is sometimes only a convenience to accommodate the primary focus of church leadership—the adults.

One children's pastor, up to his eyeballs in recruiting with five services to staff, told me his senior pastor had just told him, "I want

to go to eight services. I expect you to make children's ministry happen in each one." Oh, I felt his pain...

Sometimes the children's ministry "wing" of the church is itself so packed out and stressed by numbers that just fitting everyone in is all the staff can think about. Thinking about analyzing anything else is just too much.

But we must ask this Second Question. Why? Because of our limited exposure to any individual child.

You know, if you just do some simple math, there are 168 hours in a week; and we assume we get one of them.

That realization has prompted the popularity of the phrase, "Make Sunday the best hour of a child's week." But 1 in 168 is not much; it is also not reality. In reality, we don't get 1 in 168; we get 1 in 336—or even less. Extrapolated over a longer period of time, we find the average child in our church attends 25 hours a year—or less.

How does this impact the individual child?

I invite you to meet Zac.



MEET ZAC

Zac attends your church with his mom and stepdad.

They usually attend the 9:15 service.

Two weeks ago, he spent the weekend with his biological dad in another city.

Last week, his parents slept in and they came to the 10:45 service.

This week he had baseball tryouts.

So Josh, his small group leader, called his mom. She said, "He'll be sure to be there next week."

But Josh has only seen Zac twice in six weeks.

This is Zac's attendance pattern.

Now that you've met Zac, I have a question for you: "Do you believe Zac is the exception... or is he the norm?"

What do you say? When I have described Zac to my children's ministry friends, their response has been, without exception, "Zac is the norm."

Are they right? IS he the norm? As I have challenged them to look more closely at the frequency of attendance in their ministries, here is what I have heard in response:

Church A

Our children attend an average of 1.4 times a month. This first was the first church I asked, and their alarming answer prompted me to ask others.

Church B

The children's pastor, new on the staff, said, "I used to adopt the approach that I wanted to make Sunday morning the 'best hour of a child's week.' Now as I look at the numbers, I realize my approach has to change; now I need to try to make it the best hour of a child's month." The average child in his church attends once a month.

Church C

"In looking at our attendance records, 80% of our children attend less than 50% of the time. We have the vast majority of our children approximately 15-18 hours per year."

Church D

The family pastor analyzed one age group – first graders – and sent me these numbers:

Out of 154 unique check-ins...

100% attendance = 1

75% to 99% = 16

50% to 74% = 31

25% to 49% = 31

Less than 25% = 75

Church E

The children's director shared their results from the last quarter of 2013. We were looking for "regular attenders," and defined that as three times a month or more. Of 1,231 individual children who attended, only 52 met that definition. That is 4%!

Church F

Out of 654 kids (who came 3 times or more in the last six months of 2013), 362 kids come 25% or less of the time. That is, 55% of the kids come once per month or less; 158 kids come 26% - 49% of the time so 25% of the kids average between 1-2 times per month. Ninety-eight kids come 50% - 74% of the time; 15% of the kids come between 2-3 times per month and 34 kids come 75% or more of the time. Only 5% of the kids attend 3 times per month or more.

Church G

371 kids attended; only 8% attended at least 75% of the time; 76% came less than 50% of the time. When broken down by service, attendance was most erratic in Saturday evening services, with only one child coming regularly out of 110.

Other churches have reported similar numbers, some better, many not. One church reports that the average child attends 60% of the time; another large megachurch says 25% of their children are at the "regular" status - 3 times a month or more. As might be expected, smaller churches generally report higher frequency of attendance.

Back to Zac...

While their own numbers are alarming enough for each of these children's ministry leaders, the "norm" becomes more alarming when we examine what the stats mean for Zac:

- Zac loves to spend time with his friends, but none of them are at church. He doesn't come often enough to build friendships. In fact, Zac rarely sits next to children he knows when he is there. When Zac is 12 or 13 and being with friends becomes his highest priority, he will begin to resist going to church with his parents.
- Zac enjoys children's ministry because there's lots of energy and excitement - but he doesn't come often enough to learn much. The lessons don't "connect" for him because of his infrequent attendance pattern. He learns a few Bible stories but doesn't comprehend the Bible story.
- Zac likes Josh, but doesn't come often enough to really get to know him, or vice versa. Josh, though he is sincere in his ministry, has little opportunity to really impact Zac's life.

- He will be in school 60 times as much as he will be in church. Church is simply a minor player in Zac's life.
- Zac will spend as much time in media consumption in just two days as he spends in church in a whole year. In 2010, the Kaiser Foundation found that the average 8-10 year old has 7 hours and 51 minutes of media consumption time a day; if Zac is typical, he will match his annual time spent in church in just two days! The input from church is nothing more than a blip on the radar screen of his knowledge base.

Zac has no close friends at church. He learns just a little. He has no relationship with a spiritual mentor.

And here's the kicker:

Zac's parents are relying on this pattern for the spiritual training of their son.

Not only is the answer to the question "How often does Zac come?" disturbing, but it is doubly so when we understand that Zac's parents are less likely to do any spiritual training at home. In other words, the 15 hours a year of spiritual input—that is ALL that Zac gets.

Here's the ugly conclusion:

We will lose Zac.

**THE SURROUNDINGS
ARE FAMILIAR**

**BUT THE FACES
ARE NOT**

**THE ENVIRONMENT
IS EXCITING**

**BUT ZAC FEELS
ALONE**

**THE LESSONS ARE
ENGAGING**

**BUT ZAC DOESN'T
CONNECT**

FIVE DIFFERENCE-MAKERS FOR ZAC

What factors would make a difference in Zac's attendance pattern?

1. If Zac's parents would become committed to regular attendance. That by itself would improve the situation.
2. If Zac's parents would serve in children's ministry, they would then bring Zac on a regular basis. Their sense of obligation would result in regular attendance.
3. If Zac's best friends were at church. The single greatest factor beyond what parents do is a kid-to-kid relationship. Simply put, relationships trump programming.
4. If Zac felt personally connected to the adult leader(s). If he felt a teacher or small group leader really cared about his regular attendance, it would make a difference.

5. If Zac was motivated by incentives.
Yes, they work! More about this later.

So what do we do to build these difference-makers into our children's experience?

Finding solutions is not easy; there are the issues that we can do nothing about, like court-mandated visitation patterns in the lives of kids with divorced parents. There are factors like the ever-increasing scheduling of sports in our communities, or the job schedules of parents creating conflicts. Young parents seem to be less committed to regular attendance themselves, and the sheltered anonymity that is created by multiple services in large churches makes it very easy to say, "Oh yes, ____ church is my home" but only sporadically attend.

While the best and most biblical solution remains the active, intentional involvement of Zac's parents in his spiritual growth, the intent of this book (and particularly this section) is to increase effectiveness in what happens at the church. Regular participation in children's ministry is also vital, though it is secondary to what happens in the home.

In working with children's ministry leaders, I've realized 10 responses that can help increase influence of the church and of spiritual mentors in Zac's life: three for the church leadership to consider; four for children's ministry workers to do and three for parents.



THREE THINGS THE CHURCH CAN DO

1. Bury the Sunday-morning-only approach

A lot of churches put all of their eggs in the Sunday-morning basket (or maybe more accurately, all their efforts into weekends). Families are expected to attend one service; and children's ministry is simply repeated for each one.

For many young, growing churches, I get why this is the approach of choice: given facility limitations, staffing challenges, etc., it is almost impossible to program for more involvement on Sundays. However, we can't be satisfied to stay with this limited involvement, for the sake of the children; it simply doesn't provide enough hours to impact the discipleship of a child. We need to put the Sunday-morning-only approach in a casket and bury it.

How about churches that have a Sunday worship/small group approach to their ministry? In reality, this does little to resolve the dilemma for the Zacs in our churches. One only needs to ask the question, "What happens with kids while their parents are in small group?" The answer is nearly always something like, "We let them watch a video in the basement" or they just play. Rarely is there anything intentional or participatory for the children in small groups. So even in those churches, the numbers don't change much.

What does change the number of discipleship hours dramatically is an intentional weekday ministry for kids; in fact, the numbers are nearly turned upside down for weekday programming for children; the church that has 20% regular attendees on the weekend will often have 80% regular attendees on a weekday evening. Why such a dramatic difference?

- Because many of the weekend factors disappear: custody/visitation schedules in families affected by divorce, sports tournaments and family trips to visit relatives or mini-vacations.

- Because families are more likely to perceive children's ministry on a weekday evening as a discipleship tool for their child, rather than babysitting while they are in the church service. This different perception means they come regularly because they want to.

My ministry, Awana, enjoys dramatically different numbers in attendance frequency because of this factor. Some of our midweek ministries see attendance regularity at 90% or above. However, this point is not to argue for Awana, but rather to argue for midweek. It simply provides a completely different scenario that can dramatically increase the hours of spiritual instruction that a child can get in a year.

2. Return to an old strategy

One thing all my readers would agree with me is that not everything that is "traditional" is bad; however, I sense that among younger, growing churches, an "adult Sunday school" is considered old-school and as a result, they don't want to touch it.

Yet its impact on children's ministry is so significant that it can't be overlooked. Every single large church that has adult classes has a larger percentage of children attending regularly; in my limited experience, I find that the number usually increases to 20-30%. Smaller churches with a "Sunday school hour" have even higher numbers.

Why? Because parents develop a sense of community through the classes that encourage their own faithfulness. When they are encouraged to be present, then their children enjoy the benefit as well.

A huge factor in producing infrequent attendance is the anonymity that comes for the parents through multiple services and campuses. "Nobody will notice if we don't go this week" is a thought that occurs way too often. Then there are the parents who stay home and simply watch the online streaming of the service. That is certainly better than nothing, but watching online likely does very little for the children; they are probably playing (or sleeping) while the parents watch.

Adult groups on the weekend help to battle this anonymity. It happens better in the adult-class format than in the worship services. But if that is not an option, church leadership might consider trying section communities, a new strategy that Willow Creek Community Church uses. Their website describes it this way: "Willow has mid-sized groups called Section Communities where we "make big church small" by connecting people based on where they sit in our auditorium for weekend services." The creation of relationships through people simply sitting in the same section of the worship center will not only bless them, but it will also result in more regular attendance of the children.

3. Change your talk

Face it, church leader – you don't talk enough about the role of kid's ministry in intentional discipleship of the children in your church. You don't. You may say regularly, "We have a great children's ministry for your kids" and you may praise the children's workers, but it comes across as "We have a great buffet for you at this church, and children's ministry is one of

the sumptuous dishes that you can try.” You know buffets: you can eat what you want, but you can also not eat what you want. You need to instead speak of it as veggies—as in “You must eat your veggies.” Regular participation in children’s ministry is as vital to spiritual nutrition as veggies are to physical nutrition. If parents don’t make certain their children are regularly involved then there is no other likely outcome than a spiritually malnourished child.

Want a biblical picture that supports this? Think of the best example of a disciple in Scripture (I’m not talking about the 12 apostles). May I suggest Timothy?

Think about the spiritual mentors in his life: grandparent, (Lois) parent, (Eunice) and then spiritual mentor (Paul). That is a pretty powerful triangle!! When a child has all three of these kind of strong spiritual influencers in his or her life, the chances of spiritual health are pretty high. And the church’s role is to provide the “Paul,” the spiritual mentor outside of the family. It won’t happen unless the family attends regularly.

Pastor, you need to speak of regular attendance as essential – for the sake of the children, if for no other reason. If you don’t address it, you render most of the following techniques ineffective. If you *do* address the issue of attendance patterns, you are setting up families up to be an important part your church’s mission.



FOUR THINGS CHILDREN'S MINISTRY CAN DO

1. Track your numbers

Most children's ministries now have check-in procedures, and most are computerized. This means that tracking frequency of attendance is already possible—it's just that we don't typically do it. When I ask children's ministry leaders, "Why do you have check-in procedures?" their answer is almost always "child safety." I think that is an appropriate first reason to do it, but there are also unrealized benefits that are just waiting for us to tap into; and attendance analysis is certainly one.

Earlier in the book, I listed the stats from a number of churches that I work with. Only about one in five had previously done any detailed research on attendance frequency. Here's what tracking frequency of attendance will do:

- It will help you identify visitors. You are more likely to be doing this because this number—visitors—is connected to the first question we ask, “So—how many did we have?” If you are not identifying them and following up with them, now is time to start.
- It will give you real statistics to share with others. I’m not really interested in national research on this topic; I believe churches must analyze their own. After all, that is all that any of us can do something about, right? When one children’s director told her pastor, “We have only 5% of our children that attend regularly, and almost all of those are the children of the volunteer workers” —it caught his attention. Big time. It will also get the attention of the parents. Children’s ministry leader, you need that ammunition, so—track your own numbers!
- It will inform your teaching. Before they looked at their frequency-of-attendance numbers, most of the children’s leaders I work with taught as if the children were there every week. They would say, “Remember, kids, that last week we talked about...” They don’t say that any more,

because a majority of the kids weren’t there. Now they review frequently. They “loop back” more in their content coverage.

2. Inform the parents

I believe most parents don’t keep track of their own attendance pattern. One children’s director, upon examining her attendance lists, said, “This is really disappointing; one family, whom I considered a main family in our church, only brought their kids an average of once a month.” She went on to say that the parents consider themselves church regulars as well. But their kids’ attendance didn’t reveal that at all.

When parents aren’t informed, they don’t stop to think just how often they miss. Their intentions are to be regular, but life happens and absences occur more often than they are aware of.

Compare it to our public schools—they still track attendance; in fact, they insist upon regular attendance. My daughter and son-in-law will get a call within the day if one of their kids is late or absent from a single class period.

So why are we in the church so casual about attendance if we feel that what children learn there is so important?

Let's inform the parents about how often their children attend. Why not create family "reports" of attendance, by quarter, or at least annually? Your registration software can likely do it. If a parent gets irate, you then have a "teaching opportunity" for sure! Why not install a TV over the registration area, and flash numbers up there of the previous week: not total numbers, but percentage of children who are regular in attendance? Set some numeric goals, and keep your parents informed on your progress.

Why not institute a system of "we missed you" notifications? Maybe by postcard (kids love that because they never get "real" mail anymore), or maybe by text or email—but we let them know they are missed. It would be a huge undertaking, but could have a wonderful, positive effect. You've probably tried it before, and it has probably fizzled—but now you know the numbers. It is time to bring "we missed you" back.

3. Recruit and structure for relationships

What would cause Zac—or any other kid—to say to his parents on Sunday morning, "We can't sleep in today—we've GOTTA go to the 9:15 service?" There is one answer above all others: his relationships first with other kids, then with the adult workers.

While exciting programming can be a factor, the number one factor is interpersonal: how close they feel to others. It is more worker-focused in preschool, but by the time they are in kindergarten, children come into the church classroom looking for their friends. It is even more accentuated as they get into middle elementary. That means...

- Recruit for relationships, more than recruit for teaching: A volunteer who will simply love some kids and develop a deep friendship with them is of great value. A volunteer with such a heart will also look to develop friendships between the children.
- Structure for relationships. There will be sufficient time allowed, in small enough groups, for good relationship building.

Getting to know each other will be seen as a valid use of time.

- Plan and promote relationship-building events. Weekend camps can do wonders to build strong friendships. So can special service opportunities, or productions. One children's director told me after her kids had participated in a Christmas musical for the church that the greatest benefit was the building of relationships among the children. She said even the other staff members commented how "Now our kids know other kids within the church." Yes, it is a need of even pastors' children. Small-group outings need to be encouraged, and events like families with kids of the same age getting together for barbeques.

Do you get it? Kid-to-kid friendships are the number one factor, beyond parental commitment, in getting kids to be regular in attendance. So cultivate those.

4. Reinstitute incentives

In my experience, I've discovered that one mega-church stands out above others in attendance frequency: Fellowship Church

in Grapevine, Texas. Even though they have the factors that produce such dismally low numbers in other churches, like multiple services and campuses, they have attacked the problem with some success. And their weapon of choice is... (drum roll) ...buttons! They implement an award system called FCKids Leadership Buttons, and one way to earn buttons is through regular attendance. They report lots of excitement and motivation around the system, and it results in approximately 25% of their children being regular in the same service.

Incentives have always worked well in my ministry (Awana), too. We use them to encourage regular attendance, and we enjoy good results. Let's face it—incentives just work with kids; we use them in our home to reinforce positive behavior for things like potty training and brushing teeth. Incentives aid in establishing good habits of behavior so that when the child outgrows the incentive, the habit will be in place.

So let's reinstitute them in children's ministry to recognize faithful attendance! Use buttons like Fellowship Church, or use anything from low-tech wall charts to high-tech phone apps. Organize outings for those who meet a certain standard, or create privileged roles of service within your ministry. Try boys vs. girls contests or divide them up into teams and let the teams compete. Challenge the small groups to compete against one another for the best percentage.

Whatever incentive you choose, it can have a positive effect if your leadership creates and maintains excitement around it.

JAN

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
BASEBALL TRYOUTS						
11:30 SERVICE						
FAMILY VACAY						

THREE THINGS PARENTS MUST DO

1. Face their own attendance pattern

I believe most parents mean well; they intend to go to church each week, but then—you know how it is—things come up:

- The baby is sick and shouldn't expose other babies to the bug, so "we'll just stay home this week."
- We are going to take a long weekend and visit grandparents.
- Soccer tryouts are scheduled only for this Sunday so if we don't go our kids will miss out on the whole season.
- Mom is sick and it is an awful lot of work for Dad to get the kids dressed and to church on time so we'll just watch online.

You get the idea: by the time a few months goes by, the kids have missed a significant

number of Sundays. Because the parents make decisions week-to-week about attending, and they haven't tracked their own attendance pattern, they still think they are regular when they are not.

Parents need to see a report of their attendance pattern. They need to face their facts. Some parents might be offended and don't want to be confronted with their own attendance, but many will be motivated to make better choices, to increase their resolve, and to think creatively about getting around the obstacles.

Children's ministry workers can ask parents, "Would you like to see a report on your attendance?" By getting their buy-in first, the chances of a positive impact are increased.

2. Choose a service and stick with it.

Irregular or sporadic attendance is made even worse by service-hopping. We ministry leaders used to moan about people who church-hopped (we still do) but now we have a new issue: service-hopping.

It doesn't affect the adults so much, so it doesn't get as much attention. In fact, it is usually promoted, rather than discouraged, because we believe it results in more frequent attendance when people have a choice. That is likely true, but we fail to see its impact on children. When parents go to a different service, they are not thinking about the fact that they are putting their kids in with leaders they don't know, and other children they don't know. While the programming and lesson may all be the same, the faces are all different—and faces, to their child, are the most important thing.

Through their registration database, one of my children's ministry friends tracked one random child for a year; noting what lessons he heard, which service he attended, and what faces he saw. We'll call him Devin.

Devin attended once a month. However, he and his family attended three different services times. The impact was staggering. He only heard twelve lessons in a year—that was bad enough—but the startling revelation was in the

area of relationships; Devin saw only three kids more than once all year—every other face was a strange one. And he only saw those three twice each.

With this pattern, his parents don't realize that they are setting Devin up to inwardly hate to go to church because their service-hopping, on top of their sporadic attendance, provides no chance for him to develop relationships.

3. Create opportunities for church friendship

Parents must remember that the number one factor in their child wanting to go to church is friendship—with other kids. This means they must focus on providing ways for their children to build those friendships with other kids. Here are some practical ways parents can do that:

- Ask about the other children; learn the names of those in your child's group. Ask your child to introduce you to his or her friends. Ask, "Which other kids do you like most?" Remember the names.
- When you pray with your child, remember to pray for those children as well. Pray they will find church friends; it will help develop

in your own child an "others" mentality and may prompt them to reach out in friendship themselves.

- When you are registering your child for the service, or pick up your child afterward, connect with other parents. Take the initiative to introduce yourself, and learn the names of their kids. Those few minutes are precious opportunities for you to mine out relationship possibilities.
- Invite another family over for a barbeque or something. Or ask your child's small group leader if you could host a get-together for the group. If it's too much to do at your home, then volunteer to take the lead on setting it up at a park, or bowling alley, or wherever. Give your child a chance to build friendships that will enhance their church experience outside of the church setting.

All of these suggestions are fueled by asking the Second Question, "How often do they come?"

But what happens if Zac stops coming?

If we only ask “How many did we have?”, and Zac stops coming, there will be a Tommy who comes. There is no permanent empty chair that shouts Zac’s absence; Tommy will sit in it. And the “How many did we have?” number doesn’t change. No one will even notice that Zac isn’t there any more, maybe not even Josh.

You HAVE to ask the Second Question: “How often do they come?” Do it. This next week, ask both questions. It will transform your ministry.



LARRY FOWLER

Larry Fowler's latest role in his storied 30-year ministry career is as executive director of global networking for Awana. Larry travels the country connecting with churches and helping them build dynamic ministries to children, youth and families.

In 2012, the International Network of Children's Ministry gave Larry its Legacy Award for 30 years of service in children's ministry. In his ministry career, Larry has served as a missionary, speaker, author, teacher, pastor, and executive director of international ministries, program development and training.

Larry's most recent book, *Rock-Solid Children's Ministry*, debuted in January 2013. It explores seven biblical principles to help children's pastors and workers build a vibrant children's ministry.

Larry and his wife, Diane, have two grown children and 6 grandchildren. The Fowlers reside in Riverside, California.

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