



Eyre Peninsula Regional Children's Event

KSO

KUCA Sleepover

I am married to Margaret and we have 7 children aged between 17 and 1. One thing they have taught us is that learning how to be a good parent is an ongoing process. Even when you've got it reasonably right with the babies and little kids, you still have to learn how to be a parent to teenagers. It isn't always easy, or fun, but the effort has always been worth it!

We have chosen to live in rural and remote South Australia. Despite the difficulties of living far from the state capital, we have found a sense of community in remote areas that is different from what exists in the city. Our desire is to contribute to and become part of the communities in which we live, and to share our faith with the people there.

I'm studying towards a Doctor of Ministry because I think that country people deserve well educated and equipped professionals –too often the rural regions are seen as a place where professionals work for a few years to gain experience before returning to the bigger cities.

My particular interest is in working out what are the essential ingredients of highly effective children's ministry, and then creating ways to put them into practice in remote and rural settings. In the symposium I will tell something about the regional Christian children's camps we have been running.

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Introduction

Living in regional Australia is beautiful, but it has its challenges! Rural decline is no secret. Towns are getting smaller; there is less work, so many young people have to move away; income is often uncertain; drought has made things more difficult. In some places young people routinely leave home for boarding school at the beginning of high school (aged about 13) or at year 11 (aged 16).

One of the challenges for Christian children is isolation from other Christian children. Very often they experience kind and loving Christian community in their local congregation, but find very few interactions with Christ-followers of their own age. Many children find themselves attending worship where they are the only child, or Sunday School with the only their brothers and sisters in the class. For some, there is the experience of being the only Christian child they know. For others, there is a small group of children who lack role models in the young adolescent age group, because high scholars are at boarding school. Others are given 1960's style Sunday school, when every other aspect of their lives is third millennial.

My heart's desire is to improve these children's experience of life in the church. We haven't got the answer, but I want to tell you about something we are doing well, which seems to be effective. Maybe the model which has been so effective for us will be useful to other rural and regional children's ministries.

Theoretical Background to KSO

All over the world there are thriving children's ministry programs of all different kinds. My goal has been to try to identify the key components of highly effective children's ministry, and then work out how we can apply them in a rural, South Australian context.

I've made a list of (some of) the keys to highly effective children's ministry. They seem to divide themselves into foundational beliefs (the things upon which everything else is built); the nature of church (things that are not specific to a particular program, but part of who we are, or ought to be, as the church); and specific strategic action implemented in particular programs and events.

Foundational Beliefs:

- We believe that this is important ministry.
- We acknowledge that children can be faithful disciples of Jesus right now.
- We expect that Christ-following children can minister right now.
- We insist that ministry with children be safe and above reproach.

Nature of Church (i.e. this happens in every aspect of our life together):

- We develop gifted and well-educated adult leaders.

- We forge strong relationships between adult Christ-followers and children. We provide mentoring and ongoing care for children.
- We integrate children into the wider church.

Strategic Action (i.e. what we inject into each specific program):

- We provide age and culture appropriate teaching.
- We teach and preach the Gospel (rather than moral lessons).
- We use popular, contemporary music.
- We provide youthful role models (who themselves are being mentored).

We think all of these factors are important in highly effective children's ministry. They all have a place in our understanding of what we are doing through KSO, but the things we concentrate on, and bring to the front of our consciousness when we plan and implement KSO are these:

- junior leaders
- input through a range of media
- enabling adults to be better ministers to children
- cool music
- sharing the Gospel
- providing opportunities for children to respond.

You'll notice that I've used different words, but you'll find that the concepts are the same. So having set out what we aim most of all to achieve, I'll tell you about KSO.

The KSO Program

KSO, KUCA Sleepover, is a weekend camp for children aged 7-12, held on Eyre Peninsula. It first began when people working with children decided that driving children to and from the children's camp based in Adelaide each year wasn't the best use of our time and energy in children's ministry. Spending 12-16 hours driving to and from a 24 hour camp -where you'd probably spend 8 or 9 hours sleeping (or trying to)- didn't make that much sense. So Eyre Peninsula people began their own.

The original model was based on the Adelaide KUCA Camp Out as it was known at the time (now KCO). KSO took on the theme and program of the KUCA Camp Out, but this became unworkable as years went on. We couldn't manage the budget for high-profile performers, and recognised that Eyre Peninsula children needed something different from Adelaide kids. Our priority changed to being a more worship and discipleship focussed community. We have retained elements of the Synod's event, but only the ones that serve our purposes.

Each KSO has a particular theme. When we choose the theme we aim to connect with 12 year old boys. We have found that girls will come whatever the theme, but boys will be more choosy. After all, most girls think it's OK to be tom-boys, but boys universally reject even a hint of being effeminate.

So we go with a theme that is attractive to boys. When we develop the content focus of the camp, we make our decision on the basis of what the kids in our local

Some of the themes we've used in the past few years have included Stunned Mullets (about people encountering Jesus and being amazed by him), It's Cool to be Hot (about full-on discipleship), Contact Heaven (about Prayer), and G!*DEON'S BOOT CAMP (about discipleship).*

children's ministry program need. If we believe our kids need to learn about prayer, we focus KSO on prayer. If our kids need Bible literacy, that's what we include in KSO. Even though it's a regional camp, we plan the content based on what we think our local children need. If particular teaching is going to help strengthen our kids for their Christian journey, we trust that it will help kids in other towns too.

Children come to the camp in groups with a leader. We do not allow children to come as individuals. Because we believe strongly in forging strong relationships between adult Christ-followers and children, and in integrating children into the wider church we have the expectation that an adult from the home town/congregation comes with the children. We think of the program we run as a framework for children's ministry leaders over the region to hang their relationships with their kids upon. We aren't entirely inflexible in this...we do provide a spare leader to make a group from the few children who genuinely have to come without support from an adult in their church community, although this is always second-best, and the outcomes for these children are always inferior to the ones who come with a group and leader from their home base.

The early part of the camp is all participation in groups. We do this for two reasons. Firstly, this allows kids who arrive late (maybe due to sport or distance to travel) to avoid missing the first worship and teaching session. Secondly, and more importantly, we understand that children won't listen to you unless you have fun with them (Griffiths 2003, p. 48). We deliberately structure in a relational time for the children to get more comfortable

with the adult leaders who are with them, and for the adults to relax into their role. It also gives the camp team a chance to get to know some of the kids and adults as they arrive.

responsible, they fulfil bigger roles. One year our cook was a sixteen year old. Of course we made

KSO Timetable:

TIME	Saturday
10:00	Arrive, register and explore.
11:00	Band Rehearsal.
12:00	Lunch
12:30	Challenges, competitions and crafts in groups, with plenty of choice.
2:30	Worship, Bible and teaching session 1.
3:15	Small group time.
3:45	Have a snack.
4:00	Game.
5:30	Free time
5:45	Tea
6:45	Worship, Bible and teaching session 2.
7:30	Small group time.
8:00	Evening activity. Something fun and participatory. May be followed by a video or story.
9:15	Supper and bed; or beach walk and supper
10:15	All in bed
10:30	Lights out. (Leaders meeting and input.)
TIME	Sunday
06:30	Active exercise for early risers. (Optional)
07:00	Breakfast.
08:00	Small group devotions (including 'radio play').
09:00	Wide game
10:15	Morning tea.
10:45	Worship Service (including offering and Communion).
12:00	Handbooks, packing, clean dorms, etc.
12:30	Lunch
1:00	Final session together. Group Photo. Goodbyes and thankyou's.
1:30	Departure for home (as ready).

I use some of this time to work with the junior leaders as they arrive. We noticed that there was a critical gap in the modelling of what it is to be a Christian for many country kids. They could see that old people were often Christians, and they could see their parent's generation, and some of them knew that they wanted to be Christ-followers, but they couldn't see any paths to follow between where they were now and being an adult Christian. So we have deliberately built in models of what a teenaged Christian might be. Our camp is for 7-12 year olds, so we invite 13-17 year olds to be junior leaders. We have junior leaders carry out all sorts of roles on KSO. A lot of them are musical, so the band is a great place for them to start. We often need a lot of leaders in our games, so they can set them up and supervise checkpoints. Some years we have had kitchen hands, nannies (to allow our cook to have free hands from her baby), and roadies for the band. As they get older, and we help them to become more

sure that she had an adequate safety net, so that she would be Successful, and we did have to ban adults from the kitchen so that they wouldn't take over, but she had a very positive experience of taking responsibility and participating in a lifestyle of Christian service. Last year all the set up and pack of the sound system was supervised by a 15 year old (with adults working under him). There are all sorts of roles they can play. Our expectation of junior leaders is that they 1. make a statement of faith in Christ Jesus; 2. commit to being a good role model for the children; and 3. are prepared to clean toilets.

Our aim with the band is to have it comprised totally of 13-17 year olds. This isn't always possible, but we try. The other thing we have found is that it works best if we supply the core of the band (say, drums, guitar and keys) from our own youth, so there can be lots of practice beforehand, and add in extra instrumentalists (like trombone, more guitars, flute, hand drums, bass, whatever) at

camp. It's too far for young people to travel for rehearsals, and often they aren't skilled enough to sight read at the first rehearsal, so this strategy creates an opportunity for a wider group to be involved. When a junior leader applies to be part of the band we provide them with music by mail, so they can practice at home before they come. During the first hours of the camp the band has a rehearsal.

When I interview prospective junior leaders I always ask them if they are prepared to clean toilets. It gives them an idea that they are there to serve, rather than being coddled themselves, and it gives me an idea if they are really interested in the less glorious aspects of discipleship and service. We've only ever had one young person refuse to fulfil their promise in this area, and it was so easy to handle. She refused to clean toilets (as a 17 year old she thought she had seniority and therefore shouldn't have to do the lowly jobs) so I, as camp leader, simply insisted that she stand at the door to keep kids out (it was the girls' toilet block) while I cleaned the bathroom. She never said anything, but there was a distinct attitude turn around from her, and a few of the others took notice too.

The formal program begins with the first worship and teaching session. We use a blend of traditional and contemporary elements. We think knowing parts of the Bible by heart is valuable, so we teach memory verses, and we expect children to learn them. Since we do it in a fun way we have 100% success rate at camp's end, and about 40% recollection after 12 months. We tell Bible stories as the main input, in an entertaining way to fit the TV culture of the children. We use contemporary music extensively. As children participate in worship, the leader will sometimes explain what we are doing, and why we are doing it.

As I prepare and tell the stories I am critically conscious of one thing: I am a minister of the Gospel of Christ Jesus. Nothing but telling the Gospel is good enough for the children God has graciously allowed us to nurture. I prepare these stories with greater care than any sermon I ever preach. I want to make sure that my words are no hindrance to the Spirit of God reaching

deeply into the children's hearts. I ask where is the grace of God in this story? And then I seek to tell in such a way that the meaning is clear. Perhaps the best way to illustrate what I mean is to give some examples of what it is not.

One year, we didn't have any local 13-17 year olds who were Christians, so I went to the high school and recruited our band there. I rehearsed with them for six weeks before KSO, and at camp they sat in on the teaching sessions and we had small-group discussions as a band. I don't know what you think about having worship led by people who aren't Christ-followers themselves (and I'm not sure that it would be my first choice either), but it was a great opportunity for evangelism!

- I have heard some children's ministers say 'David prayed, so you ought to pray'. That's not the Gospel –that's works. In an already hard enough world, kids don't need another job put on them. Rather, David prayed, because he knew God as a friend who cared for him, and you can know God like that. Really!
- Or moralism. 'Only one of the ten leprous men came back and thanked Jesus, so make sure you are thankful, children.' What rubbish. The grace of God broke through, setting people free from illness and separation and prejudice. Be happy, because this is the work of Christ Jesus among us even today!
- Or behaviour modification. (This is the worst one I ever heard.) When the apostles arrived at the empty tomb they saw the cloth which had wrapped Jesus' head rolled up in a place by itself, 'so children, you must follow the Lord's example and always put your things away neatly'. No! Jesus has overcome sin and death, so believe and put your trust in him.

Children respond to the Gospel. Nothing less is worth preaching.

We follow the teaching time with small groups. We believe that it is critical that the kids process what they have been hearing and thinking with an adult who will be walking beside them back in their home setting. We provide a framework of questions to guide the conversation in small groups, but encourage

discussion to focus on the issues of the children. In small groups we offer a range of ways to process the teaching, such as talking, drawing, praying, activity, and writing, because children have different ways of learning and finding meaning. We encourage leaders to use the games and activities later on as further opportunities to help kids process the meaning they find in the teaching sessions. As there are many ways for children to respond to God, we encourage leaders to help the kids to respond in ways that are consistent with their own congregation's culture and theology of response. After all, they will be journeying with the children throughout the rest of the year. As we work ecumenically, this enables different denominations to express things in their own ways.

We are very focussed on the teaching input. As we prepare, we don't simply divide up the tasks and let people get on with it. Too often this process results in a very exciting and entertaining program which has, however, a disjointed message, or even worse, no message at all because everybody thought that someone else's part would bring out the gospel message but in the end no one's did. We deliberately aim for games and activities to connect to the teaching input. I am very hands-on during preparation, because I want to make sure that a consistent message is coming through, and that every part of the camp points the same way.

Later in the day we have what we call 'free time', but it isn't really 'free' time for the leaders. We write to leaders before the camp to try to develop their understanding of children's ministry, and they come knowing that this is not time for them to chill out with a book and a lime daiquiri. Rather, it is an unstructured time to spend having fun with the children of their group, and to find openings for them to share their lives and their faith with the kids. It's also a great time to listen to the kids. If adults won't listen to kids, kids won't listen to them (Griffiths 2003, p. 49), so we encourage leaders to forge the kind of relationships which will help the children to listen to them when they've got something important to say. Similarly, we encourage leaders to eat with their group, not for the purpose of discipline (what kid wants to be naughty when they're having an excellent time anyway?) but as an opportunity to foster their relationships.

In the evening we try to recognise the different ages of the kids. Following the worship and teaching session, and a time of fun recreation, we encourage kids to go to bed as they are ready. Some need to go to bed at 8:30, and we say that's OK. Others, say the 12 year olds, need to be tired out by the beach walk, and we encourage them to go! We think this honours all the children and treats them as individuals, much more so than insisting that they all go to

bed at the same time. We have never had a complaint from the older kids about going to bed, and I think it's because they know they've been up for an hour or so longer than the younger kids.

First thing in the morning we have exercises or a run on the beach. This is a good activity for the junior leaders to organise! It's optional, so it allows kids the right to choose when to get out of bed. It also gives the cooks time to get breakfast ready. After breakfast we have devotions in small groups making use of a radio play. This is one of the elements we inherited from KUCA Camp Out in Adelaide. They have a radio station, and everyone gathers around their radio to hear the radio play and do devotions. We can't have a radio station, but the radio play is effective, so we record it onto CD, and the groups go off and listen and read the Bible and think and talk. Groups have told me that the kids like to listen to the CD again in their cars on the way home, and that surprising conversations have happened as they have travelled.

We encourage adult leaders to resist the urge to start packing up and sweeping the dorms following the mid-morning worship time, so that they can spend time with their kids. (Have you ever noticed how some people spoil the whole last day of a camp by starting the clean-up too early?)

Besides, we've got junior leaders for sweeping dorms!) Again, the priorities of adult group leaders are to foster great relationships with their kids.

The camper handbook has

When our theme was Contact Heaven, the radio play was about a marvellous phone box that appeared in town one day, and all the children found they could use it to talk to God. But when two vandals destroyed the phone box they discovered that they could talk to God anywhere, any time.

become a valuable tool for communicating with parents and home congregations because it helps kids to remember what they did so that they can tell. The camper handbooks include:

- the program/running schedule (we find that this helps kids tell their parents about KSO)
- a couple of games to help people get to know each other (e.g. people bingo)
- memory verse words
- place for writing and drawing responses to the small group times
- a fun way of recording what they ate (to help kids tell their parents)

- words of the theme song of the camp
- Bible references and questions for small group devotions
- game scorecards (e.g. for sack-ball golf)
- autographs page.

It also serves as a reminder to the kids over a long time. Some children's ministry programs make use of the KSO theme for the following weeks, and the camper handbook enables leaders who were not at KSO to make connections with the KSO theme. We have also found that there are some kids who really love the paper games and play them out fully. (Other kids aren't interested and ignore them totally, but that's OK –kids are different!)

The last thing we do is have a final session. This was an improvement we made for the first time this year. Previously people drifted off after lunch, because they had quite long drives ahead of them. It always seemed like KSO fizzled out, and we wanted kids and leaders to go away enthused. We got to thank the team and the leaders. We got to say goodbye. We got to encourage kids to go on with the faith they had been growing in over KSO, and we got to invite them to come again next year. It was also a chance to recognise the kids who were turning 13, so couldn't come again as campers, and challenge them to set out upon a lifestyle of service and come back next year as a junior leader.

Part of KSO that we think is very important is teaching children's ministers and group leaders. Usually these are people gifted with availability and willingness to have a go, rather than with skills, knowledge and understanding appropriate to the ministry. One of our goals is to help each leader to become a little better at ministering to their group of children. We try a few things to do this:

- Before KSO we write to each leader, explaining our philosophy of ministry to children, detailing how KSO works, giving a few ideas about how children think and respond to God, and maybe enclosing an article or chapter on children's ministry for them to read.
- After the kids have gone to bed we have a short meeting to discuss how KSO is going, and a camp leader teaches a short session on children and ministry. We pray together.
- The organizing team try to mentor individual leaders during the camp, offering feedback, creative possibilities and teaching ministry micro-skills.

Not every leader is open to growing in this way. Ultimately, more effort goes to those who seem to want to learn. We have seen great advances made by some leaders.

I'm not enthusiastic about paper in children's ministry. Kids get to do more than enough with paper and pens at school, and my aim is for children's ministry to be better than school. (I especially loathe 'worksheets'...what kid wants to do more work?) But I got out-voted on the issue of handbooks for each kid, and I'm glad I did. These have become a valuable part of our ministry with kids.

Conclusion

In the ministry of KSO we focus on sharing the Gospel of Christ Jesus through a range of culturally appropriate activities and through worship in a cool, contemporary style. We aim to enable children to follow Christ right now, and provide role models for how they might do so in the coming years. We create opportunities for adults to grow in their role as leaders of children and try to teach and encourage them in their ministries.

What we have discovered is that KSO isn't effective for just one weekend. Most children's ministry programs involved spend two or three weeks beforehand preparing for the KSO theme, and up to seven or eight weeks following up the themes. This inserts an injection of excitement and creates a positive trajectory for children experiencing isolation for up to a quarter of the year.

While we haven't got everything right, and we certainly haven't solved all the difficulties of growing up as a Christ-follower in rural and regional Australia, we are achieving something.

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