

Engaging Kids in Table Community

Guidelines for families and children during Table Community (TC) gatherings

Vision

We gather as a Table Community to draw near to the risen Jesus – holding unwaveringly to the hope we profess, spurring one another on toward love and good deeds, and encouraging one another on the journey of discipleship (Hb. 10:22-25). We want to be filled, transformed, and overflowing with a love of God and neighbor. This includes the children in our midst!

Including Children

We believe that children are equal and important members of a Table Community, and that their participation is part of what makes our gathering so rich! It is amazing how often God speaks a word to the community through a child as well as the insight they bring into the character of God. They are vital members of our gatherings! We also want children to be present because they are like sponges, picking up on what they hear, see, and experience. Whether we are aware of it or not, children are constantly paying attention to what others say and how they act. For this reason, we want children to hear the community share where they've seen God at work in their lives, witness how people journey through the highs and lows of life, learn how to pray, hear God's word, and so much more. We become like the people we surround ourselves with – which is true for both adults and children!

The Goal

Gathering as the church is a special and holy space. Jesus promises He is present when we gather in His name (Mt.18:20). We want to help children understand this amazing reality. This means gathering as a TC is more than a playdate with our friends. Yes, we will have fun! But we also want to create an environment that is holy and special as well as hospitable to others. We are sensitive to the fact that children will be children; they are not predictable and not expected to be perfect. However, children should not become the main focus or voice in our gathering. This potentially harms the community's ability to engage with Jesus and one another.

Our hope and goal is for children to participate throughout TC gatherings. That being said, we understand and expect engaging children during a TC gathering to take time and intentionality. It does not happen automatically. Every child is different, which means some will be able to engage throughout a gathering from the get go, while others may need to incrementally work towards full engagement.

The following are guidelines and practicalities for all parents and children during TC:

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS & CHILDREN

The goal for children in a Table Community (TC) is to work towards full participation. This usually takes time and intentionality from parents to help their child(ren) fully engage. That being said, there are still moments of engagement for all children during the gathering. There are also expectations while children are away from the group.

[1] Moments of Engagement

There are **three** important moments of engagement for children during a TC gathering:

[1] *communion*, [2] *table conversation*, and [3] *worship (through song/prayer)*.

During all three moments of engagement **children should stay with their parent(s)**. If families have multiple children then it is important that both parents help their children participate, especially the younger ones. Also, **parents are expected** to help their child(ren) listen, remain quiet, and limit fidgeting during moments of engagement.

We believe every child, with the help of a parent, is able to participate in communion, table conversation, and worship. TC's should think of creative ways to involve the children because they are part of the community just as much as the adults! The following are possible ways to involve children during TC gatherings:

1. *Communion* – Children could help pass out the communion bread (after washing hands of course!) or pick up communion cups after dinner.
2. *Table Conversation* – Before group help prepare children to share where they've seen God in their lives the past week – whether they share one word or a story with the group! It's also really important to start training children to listen to others while they share. By learning how to listen to others, children could be encouraged to pray into what was shared. Children could also help the adults clean up after the meal.
3. *Worship* – Other than encouraging children to sing with the group, maybe there's opportunity for them to read a short passage from Scripture, or say a simple prayer. If there are songbooks, have a younger child pass out and collect songbooks.

[2] Moments Away from the Group

There are two primary moments where children may need to disengage from the group:

1. *Table Conversation* – some children will not be able to participate throughout the entire meal. If this is the case, we encourage parents to bring something for their child to play with while the group continues meeting around the table.
2. *Weekly Rhythm* – Some TC's may have a babysitter watch children (especially for toddlers) during the weekly rhythm, while others delegate someone from the group to help watch the children. It is important to note that while children are away from the main group they are still expected to play quietly and abide by the host house rules (ask hosts to clarify their house rules).