

Planning Your Children's Sabbath: Ideas for All Faiths



There are two kinds of Children's Sabbath celebrations. First, there are Children's Sabbath celebrations in your own place of worship, which typically takes place during the customary time for services, prayers, or other worship and often follows the customary order of worship but is enriched with a special Children's Sabbath focus.

The other kind of Children's Sabbath is a community-wide multifaith celebration that brings together many different places of worship. A community-wide, multifaith service is planned for a day and time that do not conflict with the customary times of worship, prayers, or services of other places of worship.

As a multifaith service bringing together many different religious traditions, this form of the Children's Sabbath service is flexible, creative and unique to your community and the leadership involved.

Both kinds of Children's Sabbath celebrations — one held within your own place of worship for your members and one held in the community for members of many places of worship — are terrific ways to participate in the Children's Sabbath movement. Decide what is best for you this year.

In this section you'll find:

- Steps for Planning a Children's Sabbath Celebration in Your Place of Worship
- Steps for Planning a Multifaith Children's Sabbath Celebration in Your Community

Steps for Planning a Children's Sabbath Celebration in Your Place of Worship

- ❑ **Begin with prayer.** The success of the Children's Sabbath — its ability to stir the hearts and minds and hands of people to nurture and protect children — ultimately relies on God's grace. Seek God's guidance for your Children's Sabbath, turn to God for the strength and commitment to plan it, pray for partners to help you in this venture, and thank God for the precious children God has entrusted to our care. Whatever your faith tradition, and whatever words you choose to pray, know that God is with you as you embark on planning a Children's Sabbath.
- ❑ **Secure support from appropriate religious leaders, staff, or committees.** In addition to obtaining approval for planning a Children's Sabbath, do some preliminary investigation into potential sources of financial support for your Children's Sabbath. Of course, you will have a better idea of your budget when you are further into the planning process. You may find that you can plan a Children's Sabbath with little additional expense.
- ❑ **Mark the date on the calendar for your place of worship.** During a place of worship's traditional worship and education time. If your place of worship has a conflict with this date, select another. The 2016 National Observance of Children's Sabbath weekend is October 21-23, although many congregations will plan celebrations for other weekends in October, and some will plan events throughout the month. Most Children's Sabbaths are held during a place of worship's traditional time of gathering for worship, prayers, and education. Keeping your celebration during the usual worship time promises greater participation and communicates that the Children's Sabbath is an integral part of your worship and faithful action. If you select a time other than the traditional time for your place of worship, be prepared to do lots of extra promotion to ensure a strong turnout.
- ❑ **Recruit a committee to plan the Children's Sabbath and activities leading up to or following it.** Involving a broad range of people brings a wealth of gifts and experiences, builds greater excitement and "ownership" of the Children's Sabbath throughout your faith community, and helps ensure that no single person gets overloaded. In addition to religious leaders and staff, consider involving religious education teachers, social action committee members, children and youths, and any interested members. Develop a meeting schedule that will allow sufficient planning time. Many committees find they need more frequent meetings in September and October as the Children's Sabbath draws near.
- ❑ **Identify leadership within the committee.** Designate a chairperson or co-chairs to guide the planning and ensure that goals are set, responsibilities assigned and fulfilled, and that the process moves forward effectively. You also may want to name a secretary who will keep notes of committee meetings and communicate decisions and other information to those involved. Be sure to involve or keep informed all who will be affected by Children's Sabbath activities, such as musicians, educational program teachers and volunteers, and secretaries. A treasurer could keep tabs on the budget allotted for the Children's Sabbath and also oversee in-kind contributions donated by the community. As the Children's Sabbath planning proceeds, the chairperson(s) should assign new tasks and responsibilities as they arise.
- ❑ **Focus your vision for the Children's Sabbath.** What do you hope will happen during and as a result of your Children's Sabbath? Do you want the Children's Sabbath to highlight and affirm the gift and gifts of children? To underscore the responsibility of adults to nurture and protect children? Do you hope to increase awareness about the serious needs of many children today? To broaden the congregation's concern for children to encompass those in the community? Do you want to energize and increase participation in existing congregational programs serving children as a result of the Children's Sabbath? Do you hope to build excitement and commitment for starting a new effort by your place of worship to help children?

To stimulate new, individual commitments to giving time or resources to help children? Clarifying your vision for the Children's Sabbath and its impact will help guide your planning for a successful experience.

- ❑ **Determine the format of your Children's Sabbath.** You may decide to start small and build your celebration in future years, or you may want to plan an ambitious celebration now. Choose the approach that is right for your congregation and will provide a successful, affirming experience upon which you can build year after year.

These are the major components to consider for your Children's Sabbath:

- **Service of worship/prayers:** This is the heart of most Children's Sabbath celebrations: lifting up — in prayer, sermon, and song — God's call to people of faith to nurture and protect children (See the downloadable worship and education resources for various faiths on CDF's website for ideas and resources). For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths.
 - **Educational programs:** Educational programs for children, youths, and adults help everyone learn more about the problems facing children, the faith-based call to respond, and ways to make a positive difference. Discussion guides for adults and children's lesson plans for a variety of faith traditions may be downloaded from the Children's Defense Fund website at www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths.
 - **Advocacy and hands-on outreach activities:** When people have been inspired and called in the service of worship and have learned more through the educational programs, they are eager to start making a difference for children immediately. Providing concrete outreach and advocacy activities on the Children's Sabbath, perhaps following the service of worship, helps people respond and put their faith into action (See downloadable section, Action Ideas. Also, check CDF's website, www.childrensdefense.org in early October for any new action alerts or other timely advocacy actions needed).
 - **Commitment to long-term responses to children's needs:** This is the goal of the *National Observance of Children's Sabbaths* movement. The Children's Sabbath is about more than one weekend a year; it is about inspiring new, long-term responses to the needs of children. Provide opportunities for individuals to find out about, and make commitments to, ongoing action through information tables, presentations, and sign-up sheets. The ongoing action could include participating in existing programs in your place of worship, volunteering with a community child-serving program or organization, or even joining a planning committee to develop a new program in your place of worship. (See downloadable section Action Ideas for ideas and resources.) For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths.
- ❑ **Involve children and youths.** The Children's Sabbath is an important time to highlight the gifts, contributions, and leadership of children and youths. However, the Children's Sabbath should not be completely turned over to children, with adults serving only as the advisors and "audience." The Children's Sabbath is meant to be an intergenerational event that demonstrates and celebrates how everyone — children, youths, parents, singles, and seniors — must respond faithfully to God's call to nurture and protect children. (Other occasions celebrated by many congregations, such as Youth Sundays or Children's Day, are more appropriate times to put the service entirely in the hands of children and youths.) Be sure to involve children and youths in the planning process as well as in carrying out parts of the Children's Sabbath. The various sections of this manual offer specific suggestions on how children and youths can participate in promoting the Children's Sabbath, leading the service of worship, and engaging in outreach and advocacy activities. Be sure to solicit young people's ideas and suggestions to supplement those found here.

- ❑ **Involve resource people.** After you have determined the basic format and activities for your Children's Sabbath, involve resource people from your place of worship and the community. These may include health care professionals, public education teachers and administrators, staff of after-school programs, child care providers, Head Start teachers, staff of organizations serving families in poverty, staff of community organizations serving children, elected officials, and representatives of advocacy organizations working on children's behalf. Secular organizations working for children are often eager to find ways to link with religious congregations and draw on the rich resources congregations can offer. Forging these connections will not only assist you in planning your Children's Sabbath weekend, but also should create partnerships for long-term projects that build on the Children's Sabbath.
- ❑ **Recruit volunteers to help prepare for and conduct Children's Sabbath activities.** Some who may not have been able to join the ongoing planning committee would welcome responsibility for a specific task in preparation for the Children's Sabbath or during the weekend itself. In addition to recruiting volunteers through personal contact, publicize opportunities through the announcement time during the service, in your place of worship's newsletter or bulletin, at meetings, and at gatherings. Tap seniors, children, youths, singles, parents — everyone! The Children's Sabbath is about the role each person can play to nurture and protect children.
- ❑ **Plan to build on the Children's Sabbath.** While you are planning the Children's Sabbath, keep your focus on the ultimate goal of stimulating new, long-term, congregational and individual commitments to help children year-round. Don't wait until after the Children's Sabbath weekend to think about where you hope it will lead. Instead, make the long-term result of the Children's Sabbath a focus on the planning process. Some Children's Sabbath committees have found it useful to designate a subcommittee for follow-up to begin working on this from the start. (See Action Ideas section available for download on CDF's website for ideas and resources.) As you plan long-term follow-up, make sure that you involve the necessary religious leaders, staff, and committees, as well as other interested individuals. Your resource people can also provide input about community needs and opportunities for partnerships. Be sure you have a meeting date on the calendar after the Children's Sabbath to convene members of the Children's Sabbath Planning Committee and any others, as appropriate, to move ahead on the follow-up plans.
- ❑ **Take care of “wrap-up” details.** After the Children's Sabbath, be sure to attend to details to wrap things up related to the weekend itself and to ensure that follow-up plans are being put into action. These may include evaluating the Children's Sabbath (what worked and what you would do differently next time); writing “thank you” notes to those involved in the leadership and planning and any others who made contributions; marking next year's Children's Sabbath on your place of worship's calendar; setting a date for the first planning committee meeting (even though the planning committee membership may change); and closing the books on the Children's Sabbath budget. Some places of worship gather the planning committee members for a special appreciation luncheon and awards or other tokens of appreciation. If videos or photographs were taken during the Children's Sabbath, you may want to arrange a time to display them to extend the Children's Sabbath experience. With appropriate permissions, post pictures, videos, and descriptions of your Children's Sabbath events on your place of worship's website, Facebook page, or other social media. Begin a scrapbook chronicling your place of worship's Children's Sabbath, and plan to add to it next year. *Most importantly, send a brief description of your Children's Sabbath weekend and follow-up plans to the Children's Defense Fund at sdaleyharris@childrensdefense.org. Also, feel free to send any suggestions for how CDF might improve our materials and other support for the Children's Sabbath. Copies of bulletins, sermons, and other materials are welcome. Mail them to CDF, Attn: Communications, 25 E Street N.W., Washington, DC, 20001.*
- ❑ **Put next year's Children's Sabbath weekend on the calendar.** The 2017 Children's Sabbath weekend will be October 20-22.

Steps for Planning a Multifaith Children's Sabbath Celebration in Your Community

The Children's Sabbath's power and inspiration comes, in large part, from the connections it makes across faith traditions, across our nation, and across generations. It is an extraordinary opportunity to recognize and celebrate our shared commitment to assuring justice and care for children and to affirm the unifying message of our religious traditions that call us to nurture and protect those who are young, poor, and vulnerable. Indeed, central to every great religious tradition is the mandate to protect these who are young, vulnerable, and poor with justice and compassion.

Since 1992, many communities have come together to proclaim and respond to that mandate through multifaith Children's Sabbath celebrations. These community-wide Children's Sabbaths stand as an important example of the promise and power of multifaith partnership for a common cause. If planned with care, sensitivity, and a commitment to inclusion, a multifaith Children's Sabbath can be a time of new understanding, of celebration, and most importantly, of uniting and strengthening your community to nurture and protect children with even greater justice and compassion.

Below you will find suggestions for planning the practical aspects of a multifaith Children's Sabbath. See Multifaith Children's Sabbath Worship Resources, available for download from CDF's website, for tips on planning the content and leadership of the service, a suggested outline for a multifaith service, and resources for a community-wide multifaith service from which you may select and may supplement with additional resources.

Organizing a community-wide multifaith service may sound like a daunting task, but it can be done successfully, and has been, with tremendous contributions to the communities. These are suggested ways to coordinate the event. Feel free to adapt this process to suit your needs.

- ❑ **Recruit a team.** Connect with two, three, four, or more people to help you get started. Then convene an advisory committee of eight to 15 members. Strive to build an advisory committee that represents the full range of religious bodies, races, and ethnicities of your community. Be sure to involve all of the faith groups you hope to include from the outset, so no one feels like an afterthought.
- ❑ **Prepare a game plan.** Develop an efficient agenda for the initial meeting of the advisory committee. A productive meeting will generate energy, enthusiasm, and continued commitment. Key items to determine include the date, site, range of events, and point people to assume responsibility for aspects of the event.
- ❑ **Build broad support and participation.** Begin to contact as many places of worship and community organizations as you can to get them on board. Be sure to invite congregations of all ethnic and racial groups. Network with ministerial, rabbinical, and interfaith associations, Islamic centers and associations of mosques, schools, social clubs, and organizations dealing with children, early childhood development, health care, juvenile justice, poverty, violence, hunger, homelessness, education, and parenting. Contact them by letter or email and include a response form for those who wish to participate. Follow up with a phone call. Make a quick reference list of those who respond affirmatively that you can add to later.

Even if places of worship have signed on as co-sponsors of a multifaith service, that doesn't necessarily mean that their members will attend, so work together to identify strategies that will be most successful with each place of worship, and with potential attendees overall.

Strategies for a particular place of worship include:

- Inviting a choir to perform by itself or as part of a combined choir with other places of worship, or a dance troupe, or a step group.
- Making the multifaith service a planned event of a group such as the youth group, women's group, or religious education program.
- Planning decorations that will feature the artwork of many children from each of the sponsoring places of worship, with the young artists standing on hand before the Children's Sabbath service to talk about their pictures to adults who come to view them.
- Posting a sign-up sheet for a ride in the congregation's van or in carpools.
- Posting a sign-up sheet or having a bulletin insert to fill out indicating whether a member plans to attend.
- Meeting at the place of worship before the service for an ice cream social or a simple meal like pizza or spaghetti and then traveling to the service together.
- Discussing in planning meetings how many attendees are needed from each place of worship for a desirable turnout, so each leader has a goal or sense of expectation.
- Having a light-hearted "competition" for each sponsoring place to be the "Children's Champion" by generating the greatest turnout from their members (you can weight the competition to account for the different sizes of congregations), with a "Children's Champion" plaque/statue/trophy to reside with that congregation until the next year.
- Sending out a congregation-wide email reminder the day before or the day of the community service.
- Sending notices home with the children who attend the education program, so they can encourage their families to attend.
- Talking it up during the announcement time in each place of worship for several weeks prior, and passionately conveying the urgency of the problems confronting our children; the moral imperative for people of faith to act, and the inspiration, joy, and excitement that the community service will provide in bringing together an array of others with shared concerns and common commitment.

Turnout strategies for the community at large, if your budget allows:

- Offering fun, family-friendly activities before or after the service, like face painting, simple crafts, or balloon animals. If it is outside, you could even consider something like a hay ride.
- Providing goods or services that many children and families really need, like a health check; school supplies; "dental health" goody bags donated by an area dentist with toothbrushes and toothpaste; help for eligible families to enroll in the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP); and a chance either to serve (as a volunteer, or by making a donation) or be served by community organizations and programs.
- Arranging for simple food for purchase that can stand in as the closest meal (lunch or dinner) for time-pressed families, or providing free coffee and tea (perhaps donated by a coffee shop in the community), juice, and water, or inexpensive, kid-popular treats like popsicles.

- Offering an inexpensive but appealing item for the first 100 people. Consider providing CDF buttons and bumper stickers, for sale on our website: https://secure.childrensdefense.org/site/Ecommerce?store_id=1101 (there are also several websites through which one can purchase items in quantity inexpensively, from pencils to stickers to Frisbees to small stuffed toys to hats to tee-shirts). Talk to managers of stores in the community to see what they would be willing to donate.
- Publicizing a chance to meet and greet a well-known person after the event. This could be an elected leader like the mayor, a popular musician or athlete from the area, or a radio or television personality. You might be surprised by who on your planning committee knows someone (or knows someone who knows someone) who could be a “draw.” While you won’t want to let the fun, festival-like offerings overshadow the goal of the Children’s Sabbath, which is to focus attention on the serious problems facing children, and to urge people of faith to respond, if planned carefully you can offer a combination of appealing fun that draws families in and an important message that sends them out to act faithfully and urgently to improve the lives of children.

- ❑ **Assign areas for coordination.** Areas to coordinate include site selection, administration and funding, worship planning, music, outreach/promotion/media, and activities to raise awareness and generate service and advocacy.
- ❑ **Choose a good day and time.** Schedule the multifaith service for a time that does not exclude any group’s participation. For example, scheduling a multifaith service on Saturday afternoon, during the Jewish Shabbat, would prevent some Jews from attending. Similarly, Sunday morning scheduling is likely to conflict with most church services. Sunday afternoon or evening is usually the best time for a multifaith event. Be aware, however, that you will need to do lots of outreach and promotion to generate strong attendance for a multifaith service, whenever it is scheduled. See the Promotion Ideas section downloadable from CDF’s website and the ideas listed above.
- ❑ **Find a suitable location.** Seek advice from people who have done similar events, and choose a site as early as possible. Feasible sites for multifaith activities include auditoriums, hospitals, convention centers, or public buildings, parks, and schools. Of course, religious places of worship are also good sites. If you use a place of worship, be sure the religious leader is involved in the planning, since he or she will know the logistics of the site.

Consider the following in selecting a site:

- *Size:* Make sure it is large enough to accommodate the crowd you expect, but not so large that when the congregation has arrived it looks half-empty and makes your turnout appear small.
- *Staging:* Will it accommodate choirs and a procession? Is there a good sound and lighting system? Sound and, depending on the time of the service, lighting are especially important to consider if the event will be outside — which also calls for contingency plans in the event of rain.
- *Location:* Is it centrally located and convenient for all segments of the community? If not, can you arrange for shuttle buses to transport groups from other areas of the community to encourage and enable them to attend?

- *Cost:* Try to find a site that will host the service without any charge.
- *Worship space:* Is it conducive to multifaith worship? Will it foster unity among persons who don't know each other? Consider temporary removal of symbols or objects that might cause others distress that can be easily removed. Also, consider the addition of banners and symbols or expressions of welcome that may make guests feel more at home.
- *Parking:* Is parking available or is public transportation nearby?
- *Accessibility:* Is it accessible to people with disabilities? Have a sign language interpreter for those who are deaf or hearing impaired.

Strategies for Successfully Planning Multifaith Children's Sabbath Engagement

The Children's Agenda in Rochester, NY, has successfully coordinated the participation of the many faith traditions in the Children's Sabbath weekend over the past several years. Last year, more than 90 different faith communities participated in the weekend — in multifaith events and in worship services, education programs, and activities in individual places of worship. They held a press conference with Baptist, Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, and Presbyterian leaders to focus attention on early childhood investments. Together with other segments of the community, the leaders and members of participating places of worship generated thousands of letters to elected officials urging investments in early childhood programs, met with legislators, testified at county legislative meetings, generated media coverage, and raised awareness in the community. Most importantly, this multifaith participation in the Children's Sabbath continues long past the designated weekend and realizes the full promise and intention of the Children's Sabbath which is to galvanize and sustain new, long-term engagement in faithful advocacy and other efforts for children. Here are eight strategies for success offered by Brigit Hurley, Policy Analyst for The Children's Agenda:

1. Determine that the goal of the weekend will be to celebrate children, to raise awareness about pressing issues facing your community's young people, and to take action to improve their lives. Don't get distracted, and don't let the media and the faith leaders themselves get distracted, by the interfaith nature of the effort. That is a means to the end.
2. Use CDF resources and add local data, issues theses, stories, etc. to illustrate why faith communities are concerned about how kids are doing in your town, city, county, etc.
3. Encourage faith leaders to tell stories about families and children from their own congregations to put a face on statistics.

4. Develop relationships with reporters from your local newspaper and TV stations so they understand what a Children's Sabbath is, and the annual, recurring nature of it. Notify them several weeks before the weekend and then remind them a few days before. Identify several faith leaders from different traditions who can speak knowledgeably with the media about the Sabbath and about children in your community.
5. Convene faith leaders throughout the year to learn about and take action on children's issues. Choose one issue or policy area to focus on for the whole year.
6. In this year-round work, combine CDF's data and advocacy resources with the faith leaders' roles as truth-tellers to become a persistent voice for change. Look for opportunities to identify "the moral edge of what's possible." Where can the religious community use its influence during a public conversation about issues impacting children to insist that right action is taken (e.g., testifying at hearings on a city or school district budget, meeting with state officials when a change in policy or practice will harm children)?
7. Bring local experts in to present to the group so leaders become knowledgeable about how children in your community are faring, and what is needed to improve their well-being.
8. Look for partners outside the religious community who share your concerns, and combine efforts. Is there a local advocacy organization, or a coalition of parents, who will participate in Children's Sabbath worship services or hold their own event during the same week to generate more attention toward the issues you are highlighting?