



## Action Ideas for the Children's Sabbaths Weekend and Throughout the Year

The actions that you plan for the Children's Sabbath weekend and for the year that follows are an essential part of the Children's Sabbath. As important as the worship experiences and educational sessions are, it is vital to plan actions that will help translate that prayer and inspiration, that awareness and information into new hands-on service and justice-seeking advocacy to protect children and assure that every child has an equitable, excellent education

that puts them on the path to a promising and productive future.

So, are you ready to plan? There are two kinds of action to plan for your Children's Sabbath: hands-on service and advocacy activities for the Children's Sabbath weekend itself, and actions that can be carried out throughout the year to come to make a lasting difference for children.

**The activities that you plan for the weekend of your Children's Sabbath are an essential way that participants can begin to seek justice and protect children today.** Activities on the weekend itself provide the immediate satisfaction of responding faithfully to the message in the service of worship and the learning in the educational programs. If people only learn about the crises facing children and families, they can feel hopeless, guilty, or helpless. That's when it becomes so easy to think, "I'll just take care of myself and look out for 'my own.'" By contrast, if people are provided with specific ways to help in response to these problems right away, they will feel hopeful, motivated, energized, and positive, and want to do even more. They will discover that they really can pursue justice and they really can protect children and help assure an equitable, excellent education for all children.

**The Children's Sabbath, of course, is not just a one-weekend event. The kind of widespread and lasting change that children need will not be accomplished in a single weekend, and so it is vital to plan year-round efforts to improve the lives of children. What might that look like? It could mean:**

- Reenergizing existing efforts in your place of worship that serve or seek justice for children;
- Inspiring individuals to make new commitments to volunteer, donate, advocate, or help children in need in some other way;
- Developing, as a congregation, a new program or other effort to improve the lives of children, lift children out of poverty, create more equitable and excellent educational opportunities for all children that put them on the path to a positive and productive future, and create communities of justice and compassion;
- Partnering with other congregations to develop a long-term effort to help children.

This section provides a range of resources to help you plan activities on the Children's Sabbath weekend and throughout the year to pursue justice and protect children. It includes:

- Tips for Planning Children's Sabbath Activities and Actions
- Actions to Learn More and Raise Awareness
- Actions to Reach Out and Serve Children and Families
- Actions to Seek Justice with and for Children

## Tips for Planning Children's Sabbath Activities and Actions

As you plan activities for the Children's Sabbath weekend and for the year to come, keep the following tips in mind:

**First, offer a range of activities focusing on raising awareness, hands-on service, and advocacy.**

Making a difference for children requires all three kinds of effort! It also enables people to choose activities based on their particular skills and interests. The action ideas below are organized in these three categories, so try to select one or more from each.

**Second, plan some activities that can be completed on the Children's Sabbath weekend** (such as assembling care packages for children going into foster care) and some that will lead people into long-term commitments (such as signing up volunteers to do outreach and enrollment for public children's health coverage programs or work with a mentoring or after-school program once a week).

**Third, plan activities that will engage all ages.** For example, if there is a table to write letters to elected officials, provide crayons and markers so that young children can draw pictures to enclose, or have them dictate their letters to an older child or adult.

**Fourth, use the Children's Sabbath to reinforce existing congregational programs that serve children,** particularly programs that promote justice and work to end poverty (for example, you could highlight accomplishments, recruit new people to help, or solicit donations) **while introducing new opportunities to serve children and families, seek justice, protect children, and lift up the next generation.**

**Finally, be sure you are prepared to guide people in the activities so that they understand the connection between the worship and the action.** You may want to provide a preview of the activities on a bulletin insert or during the announcement time in worship. During the activity period, it works best to have several people at each activity who are prepared to explain and guide participation.

**Please Note:** The kinds of activities that are appropriate and permissible at various points during the Children's Sabbaths weekend vary depending on the religious tradition of a place of worship. As you read through the suggested activities, you should select those that are appropriate for your tradition or modify the actions to make them so. Remember that the whole weekend, from Friday morning through Sunday night, is part of the *National Observance of Children's Sabbaths* celebration, so some activities that would not be appropriate immediately following your time of worship could be planned for another day or time during the weekend. Additionally, activities can and should be planned for the year to follow, so you can plan accordingly. You know what is best for your place of worship.

## **Actions to Learn More and Raise Awareness**

### *On the Children's Sabbath weekend...*

#### **Hold a Forum on Getting Children Ready to Learn and Succeed**

Invite a panel of speakers to address different facets of the topic, including early childhood learning (at home, in child care programs, in Head Start, and in after-school programs), strong schools, and the challenges to children's learning posed by poverty, violence, and lack of health care. Encourage each speaker to talk about the problems, solutions, and ways that people can help. Possible speakers include: teachers, school administrators, students, child care providers, Head Start teachers, parents (both those who work outside the home and in it), health care providers, and staff or volunteers from an after-school program, and legislators. In addition to hearing from professionals working in these areas, when possible and appropriate, arrange to hear from the real "experts": those who are personally affected by the issue (such as parents, grandparents and other relatives raising children, or youths.) Also, consider inviting legislators to serve as panelists or to respond to what the panelists present.

#### **Honor the People Who Help Our Children Learn**

Plan a celebration to recognize and support congregation members who are child care providers, Head Start teachers, and school staff. Also acknowledge the irreplaceable role that parents play as children's first and most important teachers. Perhaps have the children make, in advance, special buttons or ribbons to give to the honorees.

#### **Create a "Legacy Wall"**

In the room where the congregation gathers for socializing or activities on the Children's Sabbath, post a long sheet of mural paper on the wall, with the following quote from educator Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune written across the top in large letters: "I leave you love. I leave you hope. I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. I leave you a thirst for education. I leave you a respect for the use of power. I leave you faith. I leave you racial dignity. I leave you also a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow man. And I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people."

Underneath the quote, write "How will you give these gifts to children?" Leave crayons and markers nearby, and invite congregation members to write their responses to the question on the paper. Responses under "I leave you faith" might include praying for children and accompanying the youth group on a trip. Responses to "I leave you a thirst for education" might include reading to or with children and volunteering in a classroom. Responses to "I leave you a respect for the use of power" might include talking with young people about Congress and legislation when it comes up on the evening news, or planning a joint visit to a legislator's office, or conversations about how to deal peacefully and effectively with a school bully.

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### **Tour a Program Serving Children**

Take interested people on a tour of a child care program, Head Start site, public school, or after-school program. If your congregation houses a child care, Head Start, or after-school program, that is a good place to start. Arrange for an administrator, a teacher, a parent, and a child to talk to your group. It is best to plan the visit for a day that the program or school will be in session. Prepare questions to ask the speakers, such as the population they serve, their greatest needs and challenges, their successes, and what kind of support (donations, volunteers, advocacy) would help them serve children better.

### **Mark the Importance of Reading**

Involve all ages in making bookmarks. Supply stiff paper (cardstock or file folders) to be cut into strips for bookmarks, scissors, markers and crayons to write on the bookmarks, stickers or stars to decorate, clear adhesive paper to cover the bookmarks (alternatively, rent or borrow a laminating machine), hole-punch and yarn for attaching a tassel. Possible quotes for the bookmarks include: "Children are important at [name of your congregation]" and "Reading: A Path to Learning and Success."

### **Express Gratitude to Those Who Helped You Learn and Succeed**

Offer the opportunity for people of all ages to thank the individuals who have helped them learn and succeed. Provide an assortment of note cards, paper, envelopes, pens, crayons, and markers, and invite people to write a note of thanks to someone who helped them to learn and succeed. It could be someone in their life now, or a long-ago teacher or mentor. Encourage people to write someone even if they don't have their address—they can either do some detective work later to track down that teacher from years ago, or simply find that writing the note, is a valuable experience of gratitude even if it never gets mailed.

### ***Following the Children's Sabbath weekend...***

#### **Publicize and support activities sponsored by schools and early childhood programs.**

Let congregation members know about concerts, performances, fund-raisers, and other school, child care, and Head Start program activities and encourage their support and participation. This will build bridges and a sense of continuity for the children and youths, to bring together their congregational family and their school and weekday program experiences. Show that you care about what happens to your congregation's children during the week as well as on the weekend.

#### **Celebrate success.**

Recognize students' school accomplishments, for instance through notices on a bulletin board, notes in the congregational bulletin or newsletter, announcements at an appropriate time during the service, or a celebratory coffee hour or Oneg Shabbat.

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**Start a short-term book group or adult study class on *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* by Jonathan Kozol.** Use the book as a springboard for discussion about the challenges to children's preparedness to learn and succeed. As a group, ask yourselves how the children in the book have been affected by poverty, violence, lack of health care, and lack of positive early learning at home, in child care, or in Head Start. Ask yourselves what you can do as individuals or as a congregation about the problems identified. If the book group or class is interested in continuing, *Among School Children* by Tracy Kidder would be a good choice for the next book. (See the Resources listed in this section for other possibilities).

**Start a child advocacy library.** Designate a child advocacy resource shelf in your congregation's buildings (the library, educational rooms, social hall, office, or wherever works best). Stock it with copies of books, reports, and other resources from CDF and other child advocacy organizations and with resources related to children and justice from your faith tradition. Include brochures on your state's Child Health Insurance Program and other community resources that would be helpful to members of your congregation and community.

**Introduce a Child Advocacy Bulletin Board.** Choose a public gathering place for your bulletin board to share news about children in need and initiatives taken by the local, state, and federal government on economic justice and children's concerns. Contact your faith group's public policy office or other body providing legislative and justice information and post that on the bulletin board as well. Use the bulletin board to highlight ways that your congregation is already meeting the needs of children and to highlight opportunities for members and visitors to support those efforts, too. Update it regularly. For updated information on the state of children in America, visit [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).

**Link your place of worship's Web site to the Children's Defense Fund Web site --([www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)):** Find out the latest information on national and state child statistics, child welfare policies, and advocacy actions on all the various initiatives CDF is engaged in to ensure a successful passage to adulthood for all children.

**Send leaders and members to CDF trainings and institutes. These include:**

- Send a young person to participate in one of CDF's *Young Advocate Leadership Trainings (YALT®)* program. Held in early spring, the *Young Advocate Leadership Training* attracts hundreds of young adults who participate in a weekend-long training program where they develop knowledge and skills in child advocacy that can be implemented in their communities and on their college campuses.
- Send a team of a pastor and Christian educator or lay leader to attend The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry ([www.childrensdefense.org/Proctor](http://www.childrensdefense.org/Proctor)). Created to fill a gap in most seminary preparation for ministry, the Proctor Institute offers theological study, great preaching, and teaching to support ministers, seminarians, Christian educators, young adult leaders, and other faith-based child advocates as they explore the intersection of Christian faith and child advocacy. These five days of spiritual renewal, preaching, Bible study, networking, movement building workshops, and continuing education about children in need are not to be missed! The Proctor Institute is ecumenical, drawing participants from a wide range of churches. Young adult leaders (ages 18-25) are invited to register for the Joshua & Deborah Generation

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track within the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry. The Joshua & Deborah track affirms the important role that the newest generation of religious leaders has to play in the movement for children, and the importance of the Moses and Miriam and Joshua and Deborah generations learning from each other and discovering unique leadership styles and opportunities.

- **Connect with the Cradle to Prison Pipeline® Campaign**

(<http://www.childrensdefense.org/helping-americas-children/cradle-to-prison-pipeline-campaign>): Join this national call to action to stop the funneling of tens of thousands of youths, predominantly those who are poor and minority, down life paths that often lead to arrest, conviction, incarceration and, in some cases, death. Race and poverty are the major factors fueling the Pipeline. Other factors include: inadequate access to health care; gaps in early childhood development; disparate educational opportunities; intolerable abuse and neglect; unmet mental health needs; rampant substance abuse; and overburdened and ineffective juvenile justice systems. The urgent challenge for each of us and for our nation is to prevent this waste of our children's lives and our nation's capabilities. We created the Pipeline and we have the power, knowledge and will to dismantle it.

### Actions to Reach Out and Serve Children and Families

#### *On the Children's Sabbath weekend...*

**Host a Children's Sabbath Action Fair.** Invite programs, agencies, and organizations that serve children and families or work for justice to set up information tables in a central location. Have them present information about their work and ways that individuals can get involved on a one-time or ongoing basis by donating, advocating, or volunteering. Include both congregational programs and community-based organizations. Possibilities include schools, Head Start programs, child care centers, community health clinics, juvenile detention facilities, youth development or mentoring programs, agencies and programs providing services to families in poverty such as a food pantry, and child advocacy organizations. Encourage those staffing the tables to bring photographs or other visuals to depict their work and copies of newsletters or brochures. Urge them to be specific about volunteer and other needs. When possible, encourage them to offer a variety of options for ways people can support their work, including one-time help and ongoing commitments.

Have copies of the commitment form below at each table. When a congregation member decides on a new commitment, have them fill out the form. The top portion of the form should be left with the organization or program they are planning to support, so that those coordinating the congregations programs and community organization efforts know the support they may expect. The middle portion of the commitment form should be left with a designated representative of your place of worship. That way, your place of worship can follow up, support and celebrate individuals' commitment. Some places of worship have even celebrated these commitments at the Children's Sabbath the following year. Finally, the bottom third of the commitment form should be kept by the individuals to remind them of the new commitment they have made.

## Faith in Action Fair Commitment Form

Name:

Address:

City/State/Zip:

Phone:

Email:

Pledge of Commitment (time, goods, money):

*Give the completed top portion of this form to the organization to which you will be contributing time, goods, or money.*

Name:

Address:

City/State/Zip:

Phone:

Email:

Pledge of Commitment (time, goods, money):

*Give the completed middle portion of this form to your place of worship. We will be gathering all of the forms to support you in your commitment.*

My pledge of commitment:

Organization/Program/Group to which I am making the commitment:

How to contact them:

*Keep the bottom portion of this form as a reminder of your commitment.*

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### Fill a Gap

Contact a school, child care program, Head Start program, or after-school program and find out what needs they have that your congregation could fill. This may include collecting supplies such as art materials and books or donating computers. Publicize the needed items in advance of the Children's Sabbath, and then collect them on the Children's Sabbath weekend. If possible, display photographs of the children from the school or program. You also may want to invite staff, parents, and children from the selected program to participate in your Children's Sabbath.

### Arrange Fix-Up Fun

Arrange to fix up a school, child care center, or Head Start classroom. Find one that would welcome a fresh coat of paint, playground clean-up, or a new garden. Schedule the fix-up for the Children's Sabbath weekend, and let congregation members know in advance so that they can sign up and bring the needed tools, supplies, and a change of clothes. Be sure to take "before" and "after" pictures of the site, as well as lots of photos of members during the fixing up process. Display the photos the following week.

### Give the Gift of Reading

Collect quality children's books to distribute through schools, Head Start programs, child care programs, health clinics, and hospitals (books for babies could be given to new parents to encourage them to read to their child from the start). Before the Children's Sabbath, call the organization and ask if they would like to receive such a donation, and find out the age range of the children they serve. Then invite congregation members to bring in new books to donate on the Children's Sabbath. Encourage them to select books that feature illustrations depicting a range of races and ethnicities. If possible, have a small group deliver the books on the Children's Sabbath weekend as part of the activities.

### Set up a Reading Corner

One of the best ways to foster children's learning is to read to them and to encourage them to read. On the Children's Sabbath, set up a cozy reading corner where children can gather to have books read to them. Invite a range of people to be the readers, including parents, seniors, and youths. If possible, place the reading corner in or near the room where everyone gathers after the service, so that the children feel like part of the activity. Consider leaving the Reading Corner up for the long-term. Remind parents, through a poster or flyers to hand out, that reading to their children from the earliest ages on is vital to learning.

**Make a difference.** For some people, the satisfaction of making a difference comes in part from creating something with their own hands. In consultation with a program serving children in need, come up with a hands-on project that members of all ages can engage in that will help children in poverty. Examples of such a hands-on project that might be able to be completed at your place of worship include preparing food for a program serving children, youths, or families (e.g., baking cookies or making casseroles that could be frozen), assembling activity kits for the waiting room of a health clinic, making soft fleece blankets for children in foster care or juvenile detention, or writing a caring letter to youths in trouble.

**Nassau Presbyterian Church** in Princeton, N.J., celebrated its 2009 Children's Sabbath with worship services focused on children's needs, a month-long education series for adults, and an intergenerational afternoon of service and advocacy activities. One group went to a community child care program serving low-income children, and repainted its kitchen cabinets and planted flower bulbs on the grounds. This spring, long after the Children's Sabbath weekend, the children and their parents were greeted by the sight of blooming flowers as they approached the center each day.

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**Roll up your sleeves.** Ahead of time, arrange for a service project that people can engage in on the Children's Sabbath weekend (if appropriate for your religious tradition). Examples include planting bulbs in a neglected school yard serving primarily low-income students, painting a classroom in a Head Start center or low-income school, building book shelves in a youth development program, stocking shelves and packing bags at a food pantry, or sprucing up a common room at a homeless shelter or a juvenile detention center. Publicize the service project, date, and time in advance and have people register so that you can have the appropriate tools or other supplies and can make whatever transportation arrangements are needed.

**Host a health fair** to ensure all children who are eligible for Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) are enrolled. Before the Children's Sabbath, contact your state's CHIP or Medicaid office. Ask if a staff person or qualified volunteer could come to your Children's Sabbath to enroll any eligible families, or if a volunteer from the congregation could be trained to help with the enrollment process. Publicize the availability of CHIP and Medicaid enrollment assistance throughout the congregation and community, using posters, flyers, notices in community newspapers, and other channels. On the Children's Sabbath, provide a location in your congregation's building that will provide privacy and confidentiality to increase congregation and community members' comfort in making use of this service. Have your enrollment volunteer or staff and enrollment materials available, and be sure people know when and where to go. After the Children's Sabbath, make arrangements to provide the service again. Consider offering it on different days of the week and different times to be accessible to members of the community as well as the congregation. Share your experience with other congregations that may want to do the same, especially those that serve populations most likely to be uninsured (Black, Hispanic, and low-income). If you notice members of your congregation having difficulties enrolling in Medicaid or CHIP (for example, difficulty getting to an office to sign up), consider taking steps to overcome these barriers (for instance, asking for volunteers at the church to provide transportation).

### *Following the Children's Sabbath Weekend...*

**Adopt a school or another child-serving organization.** Identify an organization serving children and low-income families in your community or one nearby (if the need is greater there), and provide a range of assistance such as financial support, donation of goods, and professional expertise in fundraising, promotion, or management, in addition to other forms of volunteer service. Regularly publicize needs and opportunities for involvement so that many members can contribute in ways that best suit their time, gifts, and interests.

**Growing Food for Growing Children.** Emergency food pantries often distribute highly processed foods and have limited supplies of fresh produce. Unfortunately, fresh produce is also in short supply in many urban areas that have poorly stocked corner markets instead of supermarkets. As a congregation, come up with ways to provide fresh produce for children in poverty. Possibilities include partnering with schools serving primarily low-income children to create school-yard gardens, donating produce to emergency food pantries, planting a vegetable garden on the congregation's grounds and donating the harvest to families in need, and creating a farmers' market in the parking lot of a congregation situated in an urban area (your own or in partnership with another congregation) to make fresh produce at reasonable prices available to families who would otherwise have difficulty purchasing it.

## Action Ideas for the Children's Sabbaths Weekend and Throughout the Year

Host a Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® Program. The *CDF Freedom Schools* program provides summer and after-school enrichment through a model curriculum that supports children and families around five essential components: high quality academic enrichment, parent and family involvement, civic engagement and social action, intergenerational leadership development, and nutrition, health and mental health. In partnership with community-based organizations, faith institutions, schools, colleges and universities, the *CDF Freedom Schools* program boosts student motivation to read, generates more positive attitudes toward learning, and connects the needs of children and families to the resource of their communities.

### A Day in the CDF Freedom Schools® Program

As children enter a *CDF Freedom Schools* program site, they are greeted and served a **nutritious breakfast or snack** by caring adults. The children and young adults move on to *Harambee!*, a time of informal sharing when children and staff come together to celebrate themselves and each other.

In the classroom where servant leader interns facilitate classes of no more than 10 students, children are engaged in reading and theme-based, hands-on activities as outlined in the **Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC)**. Reading is a cornerstone of the program. Servant leader interns lead the children in reading excellent books throughout the summer or after-school. These books feature heroes, heroines, and settings that reflect the children's cultural images and encourage them to think about how they can make a difference in their own lives. Classroom activities related to the day's reading use a variety of teaching models, including cooperative learning, role playing, group discussions, read aloud, paired reading, creative writing, and visual arts. The range of activities ensures that children with diverse experiences, talents, and levels of confidence in reading and verbal expression are actively engaged.

During the summer program as the morning draws to a close, **Drop Everything And Read (D.E.A.R.)** time is announced and shared by everyone. To emphasize the importance and joy of reading, children and adults alike "Drop Everything And Read" silently for 15 minutes, choosing from a rich selection of reading material available from the *CDF Freedom Schools* program, site library. At lunchtime the feeling of family and community spirit continues as the children join adults to eat a **nutritious meal**. After lunch, children participate in *CDF Freedom Schools* program **afternoon activities**. These are well-planned music, dance or other culturally enriching activities that are related to the themes presented in the Integrated Reading Curriculum, including field trips that expand the children's horizons. The children also may engage in social action projects and rehearse for the summer finale that is performed for parents, friends, and members of the community.

Once the day has ended for the children, *CDF Freedom Schools* program staff will meet for the daily debrief to process the day's activities, discuss the day's successes and challenges, focus on site logistics and planning, and re-energize for the next day.

### What difference does participation in the *CDF Freedom Schools* program make?

- In New Orleans, 71 percent of Level 2 and 3 children reported they could do most things if they try, an increase of 30 percent.
- In Newark, N.J., 81 percent of parents attended parent-teacher conferences and 96 percent brought home materials for their child to read.
- In Rochester, N.Y., the number of children physically fighting decreased by 26 percent.
- Although children in New Orleans maintain relatively high levels of depression symptoms, the number children experiencing positive mental health indicators increased. The number of children stating 'I felt like I was just as good as other children' (26.2 percent) and 'I had a good time' (5.7 percent) increased. By the end of the program, 85.7 percent of the children reported they felt happy.
- In a Washington, D.C., site that serves homeless children, fewer children reported feeling like they couldn't pay attention and 100 percent of younger children reported feeling happy (a 21.4 percent increase).

October 14, 2011, is the application deadline for summer 2012 operation. To learn more about the *CDF Freedom Schools* program and the impact it has had on children, please visit [www.childrensdefensefund.org/freedomschools](http://www.childrensdefensefund.org/freedomschools).

**Start a tutoring program in your congregation, or arrange to connect volunteers from the congregation with an existing tutoring program in another congregation or the community.** If you start your own program, look for a particular need to fill. For example, are there students with learning disabilities or other special needs for whom you could provide qualified tutors? Are the tutoring needs greatest for younger children or teens in your schools? Could you set up a foreign language tutoring program to help children with French or Spanish classes, or are there many students who speak other languages that need extra help with English?

**Consider whether your congregation is able to provide a weekday child care program in your facilities.** Helping Churches Mind the Children: A Guide for Church-Housed Child Care Programs is a resource for Christian congregations. The Jewish Child Care Association is a resource for Jewish congregations. (see Resource section for contact and ordering information).

**Start or provide volunteers for a mentoring program, to provide one-on-one supportive friendships for children and youths.** Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America at (215) 665-7778 is a national organization that supports mentoring. Learning doesn't stop after school. Provide a rich, stimulating after-school program that helps young people continue learning and engage in productive activities. If your congregation can't sponsor its own program, partner with another congregation, or find ways to support an existing program. **Encourage congregation members to volunteer in the CDF Freedom Schools® program, classrooms**

of a school, child care program, Head Start, or after-school program, as an extra pair of hands for the teacher or for something more specific such as reading with the children. Learn more about CDF's *Freedom Schools* program at [www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/freedom-schools/participate/](http://www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/freedom-schools/participate/).

**Demonstrate a skill for students.** Connect congregation members with a school, child care program, Head Start class, or after-school program to teach or demonstrate a particular skill to the students on a one-time basis. This may be more realistic for some members than an on-going tutoring or volunteer commitment.

**Support struggling students.** Recognize that school troubles constitute a real crisis for many children and parents. Offer clergy counseling and support as needed to children who have been held back a grade, are rejected by colleges or vocational preparation programs, or are having a hard time dealing with other serious disappointments or crises.

**Facilitate involvement in Back-to-School Night.** Make sure that parents in your community can attend Back-to-School night to promote their involvement in their child's school. Talk to parents, teachers, and community groups to learn what hinders parents from attending, and provide what is needed. This may include child care for siblings, transportation to the school, or even a free or low-cost hot dinner before Back-to-School night to encourage parents to attend. Consider offering similar support during parent-teacher conference week.

**Sponsor vision and hearing screening or immunization clinics.** Good health—especially vision and hearing—is important for students' learning, and children must be up-to-date on their immunizations in order to enroll in school. However, millions of children in the U.S. do not have any form of health insurance, public or private. Offer a free "back to school" immunization clinic and vision and hearing screening for children in the community. Work with health professionals in your congregation to contact appropriate agencies for guidance. Publicize the clinic at community swimming pools and recreation programs, and anywhere else children and parents may be during the late summer.

**Provide free tax filing assistance to low-income working families.**

Before the Children's Sabbath, find out about Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites in your community or other places that are conducting outreach and enrollment efforts to help low-income families receive the benefits for which they are eligible. On the Children's Sabbath, sign up volunteers for these existing outreach projects. To find a nearby VITA site:

- Call the IRS at 1 (800) TAX-1040 or 1 (800) 849-1040.
- Visit The AARP's Web site (<http://www.aarp.org/money/taxaide>) or call their toll-free hotline for information: 1 (888) 227-7669.
- Visit the American Bar Association's Web site at <http://www.abanet.org/tax/sites.html>.
- Ahead of time, arrange for a trainer to come and train members as VITA volunteers to work at local VITA sites to assist eligible families in getting the Earned Income Tax Credits they are due.

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Bridge to Benefits ([www.bridgetobenefits.org](http://www.bridgetobenefits.org)) is a multi-state project by Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota to improve the well-being of families and individuals by linking them to public work support programs and tax credits.

To see if you or someone else may be eligible for public work support programs, users click a "start" button on the Web site home page to use the Eligibility Screening Tool. Bridge to Benefits will ask a few simple questions but will NOT ask for information that identifies the user. It's easy, confidential, and free!

**Arrange to have volunteer "pew parents"** who sit in a designated pew with children during the worship service so that an exhausted parent or caregiver can sit on their own on occasion and use that time for renewal. If children attend your place of worship unaccompanied by adults, this can also provide them with an important sense of connection. Publicize the availability of pew parents so that visitors and new members know they are available.

**Sponsor a parents night out** to give parents and other caregivers a chance to recharge their batteries. Publicize it to the community at large so that any stressed, short-handed parent can take advantage of the respite.

**Start a support group** for single parents or kinship care families (those headed by a grandparent or other relative). Publicize it to the community beyond just your congregation.

**Prepare care packages** of new clothes, personal toiletries, and/or a welcome gift for children placed into foster care homes. Contact the Division of Youth and Family Services to find out the best way to contribute this way.

**Provide internships, year-round and summer job opportunities, or job-shadowing experiences** and guidance for families and youths in need. Partner with other places of worship, community organizations, and area high schools to pool the opportunities and to identify those who might benefit from them. Publicize free family-friendly events offered by your place of worship or in the community. Make all feel welcome.

**Host "Families Care Days."** One of the best ways for children to learn compassion, generosity, responsibility, and other positive values is to see adults put them into practice and to do the same. One weekend a month (or quarterly), arrange an opportunity for all ages to work together to meet a need in the community. This may be preparing a meal in a community kitchen for people who are hungry, helping build a Habitat for Humanity house, cleaning up a playground, or painting over graffiti.

## Action Ideas for the Children's Sabbaths Weekend and Throughout the Year

**Partner with other places of worship and community organizations to combine resources, meet needs, and build connections.** Working through the appropriate staff and committees in your own place of worship, assess the interests, resources, needs, and partners available for a new or expanded effort to improve the lives of children:

- 1. Interest:** What is your congregation already doing to serve or advocate on behalf of children? How are their needs included and met through your place of worship? What past or current efforts have been most successful? Why do you think that is? What past or current efforts were not successful? Why do you think that is? What methods, programs, and events have been most successful in motivating and empowering members of your congregation to act on behalf of others?
- 2. Resources:** What resources are available in your congregation to meet the needs of children and families? What resources are already committed to children and social justice? What are potential resources that might be committed? In addition to financial resources, consider your physical resources—buildings, vans, playground, audiovisual, and the like. Think about your people resources. What kinds of skills, experience, contacts, time, and interests do your members have that could be contributed to an effort to help children and families?
- 3. Needs:** What are the needs of children and families in your community, state, and nation that your congregation might feel called to help meet? There are many resources to help you develop an understanding of urgent unmet needs your congregation might address. Those that touch members themselves are powerfully motivating. There are also needs that are evident through the media and others identified by community organizations. Conversation with community members is a vital way to learn what problems are pressing on others but about which your members might be unaware.
- 4. Partners:** Who in the community might become your partners in a new effort or join you to strengthen an existing effort? Concern for children is a powerful unifying force. Make the most of this opportunity to build relationships with other places of worship and with community organizations and leaders to improve the lives of children. Develop a list of effective organizations, agencies, and programs in the community that might welcome a partnership with your place of worship. Develop another list of other places of worship that might be good partners. Each partner might bring something different to the relationship—varied interests and resources, different reach into communities that would benefit from the new services or effort, unique perspectives on the problems and what is needed. Invest time in listening to and learning from each other, and developing a shared plan in which all feel ownership.

### Actions to Speak Up for Justice

*On the Children's Sabbath weekend...*

**Launch a Justice for Children letter-writing table that is available to congregation members every week or once a month.** Supply it with paper, pens, envelopes, and action alerts or other advocacy information from your faith group's Washington or public policy office or a children's concerns group like the Children's Defense Fund. In addition to writing or calling when legislation is coming up and their vote is important, remind members to contact legislators after the vote to congratulate them for their leadership on behalf of children or to express disappointment and urge better leadership the next time. Let them

## Action Ideas for the Children's Sabbaths Weekend and Throughout the Year

know that you are watching what they do and will hold them accountable. Review CDF's non-partisan voting record to see how your elected officials stood for children at [www.cdfactioncouncil.org](http://www.cdfactioncouncil.org). Tip: Set the table up in a location like the fellowship or social hall, library, or another gathering spot where it will be convenient to stop by. Provide informational materials and letter writing supplies that can be used right away or, if your tradition requires, taken home to be used at another time, as soon as permissible.

- **Be brief.** Address only one issue. A letter need not be longer than four or five sentences.
- **Be specific.** If you are writing about specific legislation, include its bill number or title.
- **Write your own letter,** adapting a sample letter as appropriate. Form letters do not receive the same attention as individually written letters.
- **Be positive and constructive.** Try to say something complimentary in the first paragraph. It is just as important to thank members of Congress for voting the right way as to criticize them for voting the wrong way.
- **Say in your own words** why the legislation matters to you and to children. Clearly state your reason for supporting or opposing the bill or issue you are writing about.
- **If you have a personal story about children in poverty, without health coverage, or in the pipeline to prison, consider sharing it.** These personal stories are the most effective way for your legislator to truly understand the issue and the impact it has on real lives.
- **If you have particular knowledge or expertise, describe it.** Relating the bill to local or state conditions is especially effective.
- **If you wish, feel free to include a copy of a report, a newsletter story, or a local survey to support your arguments.** Don't presume that the legislator is aware of such information, even if you think it is common knowledge.
- **Be sure to sign your name legibly and include your address and telephone number** so your representative or senator can respond.
- **If possible, fax the letter** (since postal mail may be delayed by screening procedures) or **send the letter electronically.** Your legislator will likely have a link on his or her website directing constituents to "contact us." To find the contact information for your legislator, visit [www.congressmerge.com](http://www.congressmerge.com).

### Tips on Writing Letters to Your Members of Congress

- **Be brief.** Address only one issue. A letter need not be longer than four or five sentences.
- **Be specific.** If you are writing about specific legislation, include its bill number or title.
- **Write your own letter,** adapting a sample letter as appropriate. Form letters do not receive the same attention as individually written letters.
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## Step-by-Step Sample Letter

(Please note: The examples written in the parentheses are meant as examples only. Please feel free to write your letter in your own words to reflect your concerns, experience, and perspective.)

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Or:

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_: or Dear Representative \_\_\_\_\_:

**1. Introduce yourself.** (My name is *Janet Doe* and I am a member of *Mytown Congregation* in *Mytown*. I appreciate your commitment to public service and desire to do the right thing.)

**2. Share your concern for children.** (I am writing out of concern for the children who are not receiving an equitable or excellent education. More than 80 percent of minority children in fourth, eighth, and 12th grade are reading and doing math below grade level, and more than 40 percent do not graduate from high school on time or at all.)

**3. Share your vision for children.** (As a person of faith, I believe providing an equitable, excellent education for every child is our moral obligation and the right thing to do. I believe every child needs and deserves ....)

**4. Talk about the solutions and urge action on them.** [*Visit the Children's Sabbath Action Page at [www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths](http://www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths) after October 1 for the latest information on legislation and needed action and an updated sample letter.*]

**5. Thank the Member of Congress and ask for a reply.** (Thank you for your attention to our community's children—especially the children who need stronger schools so they can learn and succeed and secure a productive, promising future. I look forward to your reply informing me of how you will address these concerns so that all children have an equitable and excellent education.)

Sincerely,

*Your name*

*Your address*

*Your telephone number*

### How to address your envelope:

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Or:

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

## Tips on Writing a Letter to the Editor

*(Adapted from Reclaiming Our Democracy: Healing the Break Between People and Government, by Sam Daley-Harris)*

- 1. Respond to a recent news story or editorial.** A good letter might begin, “Your article on the new poverty statistics (‘Poverty Remains High’ Oct. 4) was excellent. Readers might want to know that level of educational attainment is the best predictor of future income. The best poverty prevention strategy we know for our children today is ensuring that every child gets an equitable, excellent education. However, today too few children are reading or doing math on grade level....” You don’t have to agree with the article, editorial, or column. Say respectfully whether you think they got the story right or not, and assert your views.
- 2. Make your letter short.** Check your local paper for submission criteria; a letter should contain 100-200 words. Provide a few striking facts that might surprise an editor or a reader. (“More than 60 percent of all fourth, eighth, and 12th graders are not reading or doing math on grade level.”)
- 3. Use descriptive words that communicate your passion about the issue.** Don’t be dry. (“Imagine walking into a classroom of 20 hopeful, eager second grade students. In just two years, 12 of them will already be behind, and five won’t graduate from high school on time or at all. How can we squander such promise?”)
- 4. Offer a solution to the problem:** “The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act gives us the opportunity to make it right, by....”
- 5. Review:** Re-read your letter and check for any spelling or grammatical mistakes before you submit it. Include your address, day, and evening phone numbers; editors often verify the identity of the writer before they print the letter.

### *Following the Children’s Sabbath weekend....*

**Build relationships with elected leaders to help them be voices for children’s justice.** Plan a visit with others in your place of worship. If there is someone in your congregation or community who has met previously with their member of Congress, you may want to invite them to describe their experience and guide the group through its first visit. Make appointments to visit your members of Congress in their home district offices. (You don’t have to go to Washington, D.C., to meet with your elected officials, and in fact visits when they are home in their district can be more influential than being just one of the many groups of tourists who stop by for a photo-op while in the nation’s capital). Share with them your concerns about the problems facing children in your community and state. Talk about your values and priorities for how we protect children, especially those who are poorest and most vulnerable. Ask what leadership they will provide on the issues that concern you most. When key justice concerns arise, you’ll be ready to gather

## Resources for Faithful Child Advocates

those concerned members to visit your elected officials again and urge specific action. The box below provides tips for arranging an effective visit with your elected officials. Contact your faith group's Washington or public policy office, if it has one, for information on key concerns and legislative action alerts. The Children's Defense Fund also provides information and alerts. Visit [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org) and click on "Take Action."

**Invite your elected officials and other decision-makers and opinion-shapers (like the media) to visit programs sponsored by your congregation or programs in your community** that demonstrate the challenges children face, like a struggling school or a juvenile detention facility, as well as sites that show what works, like an after-school tutoring program or a school-to-work program. Put a human face on problems affecting children that otherwise might just be a statistic to them.

**Engage the congregation in school board concerns.** Host school board candidate forums, publicize elections, highlight important issues docketed for upcoming meetings, and communicate key decisions made. Encourage congregation members to consider running for the school board. Even if your congregation is affiliated with a parochial or other religious school, remind congregation members that it is important to ensure that the public school system is strengthened so that all children can get the best education possible.

**Convene a community coalition to strengthen schools.** Convene a community coalition to support and strengthen the schools in your area. Invite other congregations, social service agencies, health care providers, police, neighborhood groups, and voluntary organizations to join.

**Advocate for School Breakfasts.** Advocate for your public schools to take advantage of the federal School Breakfast program so children will get the sound nutritional start to their day that will help them learn best. More and more studies show that a good breakfast helps children learn more and behave better in school. Some schools are serving breakfast free to all children because the advantages are so great. Make sure your schools have a breakfast program and are taking steps to get children to participate. For more information about how you can advocate on this concern, contact the Food Research and Action Center at (202) 986-2200.

**Advocate for the Summer Food Program.** Make sure that your community offers the federal Summer Food program so that children who receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year don't go hungry during the summer. (Also see the information above on the *CDF Freedom Schools* program, which is structured around the Summer Food Program to ensure that children are fed in mind, body, and spirit throughout the summer.)

## Meeting with Your Legislators

**Before Your Visit.** Begin planning for your visit. Don't worry if you have butterflies in your stomach at the thought of meeting with your legislator for the first time. It would be unusual if you didn't. Know that the best way to communicate with your legislator is to make a personal visit. You probably will enjoy the experience—and the legislator will appreciate the time you spent communicating your views. So, take a deep breath and begin planning! First, decide on the issues you want to discuss.

**Make an appointment.** When making an appointment, explain what issue you would like to discuss. If the legislator is unavailable, the aide who deals with your issue often will be knowledgeable and influential in helping to form the lawmaker's views. Don't feel slighted if you end up meeting with the aide. He or she can be very influential and, if your meeting goes well, may also encourage your legislator to meet with you in person the next time.

**Do your homework.** Study the legislator's voting record on a number of issues, using CDF's nonpartisan Congressional Voting Record and other sources, so you can comment on something positive, if possible, and know if the particular issue is one on which the legislator tends to agree or disagree with you. If there is a bill that interests you, know its status and whether your legislator has taken a position on it.

**Remember the experts!** Parents, grandparents, service providers, educators, religious and business leaders, police officers, doctors and nurses, and others who witness children's needs on a daily basis are children's best advocates. They really are the experts when it comes to how bills and policies will affect children, and it's important that policy makers have a wide variety of people to call upon when they have questions about their work's impact on children. Children's advocacy groups often seek out these everyday experts to present the most compelling information during legislative visits. Talk about personal experiences you have had, if possible, to illustrate your point.

**Be prepared.** Before meeting with the legislator or aide, plan and organize your presentation, and practice what you are going to say. If you are going with other people to the meeting, get together beforehand to make sure that you all have the same purpose. Take along helpful information to back up your arguments: newspaper articles about the problems children face, statistics, or a fact sheet. (CDF can provide some of the information you need. Visit CDF's Web site at [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).)

### During Your Visit

**Make your message concise.** You may think your meeting is for 30 minutes and then arrive to find the legislator's schedule so tight that you get only five minutes. Know exactly what you want to say and be prepared to say it quickly, if circumstances demand that.

**Present solutions.** People often feel overwhelmed by problems they consider too massive and diverse for corrective action, so don't just talk about the problem. Share one or two concrete ideas for ways to improve the lives of children in your community. Tell your legislator what it will take to ensure that no child is left behind.

**Talk about what works.** Using success stories of real children and families who are being helped by Head Start, child care, job training, or health insurance will strengthen your argument and counter claims that all government programs are ineffective.

**Search for common ground.** Don't be exclusive or judgmental. Keeping in mind the wide range of viewpoints in Congress and in every community and state legislature, frame your messages carefully to include words and themes that will reach new audiences and persuade them to become new allies. Children's advocates care as much as anyone about efficiency, accountability, fiscal responsibility, and personal responsibility. Use themes like these to frame your message.

**Be honest.** It's fine to say you don't know the answer to a question and to promise to provide information later, by phone, fax, or e-mail. This also gives you another opportunity to contact the office.

### Following Your Visit

**Build a relationship.** The better your communication, the more seriously you will be taken, and the more willing the representative and his or her staff will be to rely upon you and your judgments.

**Follow up your visit with a letter thanking the legislator for the time spent listening to your concerns.** Enclose any documentation you had agreed to provide to bolster your position, and briefly restate your views.

**Provide additional information.** Send articles, write letters with further information, or offer assistance in thinking through solutions that could work in your community.

### Call periodically with updates.

**Invite them to speak.** Invite the representative or the staff person who handles children's issues to speak before your congregation or a community group in which you are involved.

**Invite them to a site visit.** Invite the legislator to visit a successful child-serving program with which you work, such as an after-school program, conflict resolution program, or Head Start class.

**Show broad support for your concerns.** If your legislator or aide disagrees or is noncommittal, don't threaten or argue after you have made your case, because it is counter-productive. A better strategy is to plan another visit with others to show more community support for your position, to put together a bunch of letters from constituents, or to think of another tactic such as a letter to the editor. Persistence often pays.

**Watch how your legislator votes and respond.** If the legislator votes with your position on the issue, recognize that vote with a written "thank you." Such recognition may influence his or her next vote on children's issues. It also lets your legislator know that you are watching closely. If the legislator votes against your position, write or call to express your disappointment, and urge reconsideration of the issue the next time it comes up for a vote.

## Suggestions for Making Your Congregation a Place of Learning and Success for Children

This year's Children's Sabbath looks at getting children ready to learn and succeed, with a particular focus on early childhood development, preschool programs, and education. It is important, however, that we also look "closer to home" to make sure that our congregations are also places that prepare children to learn and succeed through nurture and positive learning experiences. The following suggestions are starting points to ensure that your congregation is a learning environment. Look at your congregation's programs for children and youths—religious education programs as well as youth groups, retreats, and other activities—and consider these questions.

### **Understand Learning Differences**

- Does your congregation appropriately and supportively accommodate children with learning disabilities/dyslexia, cognitive, physical, and emotional disabilities?
- Has your staff—clergy, education staff, teachers, secretaries, congregation—been exposed to and had consciousness raised regarding variation in learning and responding?
- Does the staff lead the congregation in an environment that allows for inclusion of the diverse learner?
- Are teachers/staff members trained to provide experiences that help children with learning disabilities or other challenges to learn and succeed?
- Are religious education classes and services planned to encourage and incorporate a variety of learning methods?
- Are congregation members viewed as members of a support team for each other and are they open to providing the necessary supports to families and individuals with special needs?
- Are parents viewed as partners who can provide information about their children and as part of the leadership, planning, and support team guiding teachers?

### **Value Learning**

- Do the children have an opportunity to share their learning with their parents?
- Do the children have an opportunity to share their learning with the congregation? Are their artwork and other projects displayed where the congregation can see them?
- Does the religious education program take place at a time that many children can participate?
- Is there a recognition ceremony at the end of the year celebrating the children's participation in, and completion of, the education program?
- Does your congregation celebrate children's secular education accomplishments, such as making the honor roll, moving on to the next grade, going off to college, or completion of a vocational education program? (Don't overlook the accomplishments of children who are not on "the college track;" celebrate young people who are preparing to enter the work world, too.)
- Does your congregation offer clergy support and counseling for children and parents who are wrestling with academic problems and disappointments, such as having to repeat a grade or not being accepted into college or a work education program?

**Value Teaching**

- Are the religious education teachers and others working with children and youths publicly recognized and thanked by the congregation?
- Are new volunteers recruited each year to avoid “burning out” the same teachers year after year?
- If the children’s religious education program takes place during the service of worship, are the teachers remembered? (For instance, does someone bring them communion if appropriate in your tradition?)
- Do the teachers receive appropriate training, curriculum, and resources to help them do their job well?

