



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 for children that will create real, measurable change for children and truly bring a better tomorrow.

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.

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The activities that you plan for the weekend of your Children's Sabbath are an essential way that participants can begin to create change *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 create change; they can be a blessing and begin to lift up the next generation.

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, 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 create real change for children and bring hope and a better tomorrow. 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
- Resources to Help You Act 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 peace 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, end child poverty, seek justice, 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.

Actions for Children

Learn More and Raise Awareness

On the Children's Sabbath weekend...

Host a Forum on Lifting Up the Next Generation.

Invite a panel of speakers to address child poverty. Possible speakers include staff from organizations and agencies serving low-income persons, such as a job training center, WIC office, or emergency food and shelter services, and staff from mentoring programs or Head Start. Include a panelist who can talk about relevant initiatives in Congress and the state legislature. Ask the speakers to describe the problems (causes and effects) as well as the solutions and how people can help.

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.

Hold an educational event to discuss the intersection of faith and public policy. Often, members of places of worship are uncomfortable with public policy concerns being discussed in a place of worship—sometimes because of confusion about what “separation of church and state” really means. Instead of avoiding the misunderstood and sometimes controversial subject, arrange a time to really explore it. As a community or congregational forum, a short-term or one time class, or as a book group, engage participants in learning about and discussing how our faith informs our lives as citizens who vote, speak out, and seek justice in the public square. Many denominations, movements, and other faith groups have prepared excellent materials to guide such a discussion—find out what yours provides or explore the resources of groups like the Interfaith Alliance (www.interfaithalliance.org), including *Religion and Politics: A Guide for Houses of Worship*. Or

invite a speaker to address the topic. Book groups might want to tackle a book like Jim Wallis's *God's Politics*.

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.

Following the Children's Sabbath weekend...

Explore your place of worship's rituals related to birth, coming of age, and membership (such as baptism, infant dedication, namings, bar/bat mitzvah, and confirmation). In what ways does the faith community make a commitment to the child or young person in those rituals? How can your place of worship use these occasions to deepen members' understanding of the commitment to the child or young person that they are making and how can you help them discover ways to fulfill that commitment not only in spiritual nurture and support but in other aspects of that child's life? How can these rituals and life-cycle events nurture children's own understanding of the connection between faith, justice, and compassion? Suggests the Union of Reform Judaism, “*Encourage bar and bat mitzvah students to engage in tzedakah projects as a sign that they are ready to take responsibility for their observance of the mitzvot. Instead of bima flowers, consider decorating the bima with decorative food baskets, which can be donated later to a food pantry. Books can be used as centerpieces and then donated to a needy public school library or other organization. For further bar and bat mitzvah project suggestions*”

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.

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visit the [Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism's] Youth Mitzvah Projects site and the social action program bank.”

Host a parent education program to equip parents with conflict resolution and other parenting skills and support them in advocating for their children's healthy development and opportunities. **Meyers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina** hosts a Parenting Circle for parents of children in elementary school and younger. The week of their Children's Sabbath in 2007, parents were invited to discuss Wendy Mogel's *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*.

Start a child advocacy library. Designate a child advocacy resource shelf in your congregation's buildings (the library, educational room/s, 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.

Link your place of worship's website to the Children's Defense Fund website (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 one of CDF's Young Adult Leadership Trainings.** Held in early spring, the Young Advocate Leadership Training (*YALT*) program 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) 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 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.

- **Send a leader and member to CDF's multi-faith institute being planned for 2011.** This multi-faith gathering is intended to engage members of every religious tradition as we explore the unique perspectives and resources of each tradition and identify shared concerns and commitments as we work together for justice to improve the lives of our nation's children.

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.

Start a child advocacy book group. Host a book group in your place of worship or in partnership with other places of worship or community groups. Select a book or other resource on children's concerns and child advocacy. The resource section in this book has many suggested titles. Your faith tradition's website or publishing house may have additional resources. How you structure the book group can be tailored to suit the interests and availability of group members—for example, you could meet

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weekly and discuss one chapter of the resource, or monthly to discuss the entire resource.

Reach Out and Serve

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 community health clinics, juvenile detention facilities, youth development or mentoring programs, Head Start programs, programs and agencies 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 and 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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Organize a Diaper Drive and Baby Food Bonanza.

Invite members to contribute diapers and baby food to be donated to an organization serving low-income families.

Collect items children need. Before the Children's Sabbath, contact a program serving children in poverty, such as a Head Start program, health clinic, or youth development program. Find out what items are needed by the program or by the children they serve. For several weeks before the Children's Sabbath, publicize what items are needed and ask members to bring them on the Children's Sabbath. Collect them in a central location where members can see how many small contributions can add up to make a big difference. If possible, arrange for a representative of the program that will receive the donations to come speak to your place of worship.

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.

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 (African American, Latino, 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).

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“Food, Fun, and Physicals” That was how **Pratt United Methodist Church in Jackson, Mississippi**, billed the Health Fair for Children that they hosted from 9:00 until noon on Saturday of the 2007 Children's Sabbath weekend. The children were given health checks from registered nurses. They also participated in games and enjoyed a nutritious meal. Before leaving, they viewed a DVD on good dental practices and were given a package of materials for healthy dental care as well as other health-related gifts. The following day, the church celebrated a Children's Sabbath worship service with children and youths in leadership roles. The church plans to follow up the Children's Sabbath by monitoring the children's health with further health checks.

Following the Children's Sabbath Weekend...

Adopt a 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.

In Connecticut, “Covenant to Care for Children's Adopt a Social Worker (AASW) program matches individual religious congregations of any faith tradition with a child protective services social worker. The purpose of the match is to support that worker and to meet the unmet needs of abused, neglected, and severely impoverished children in the local community. Due to the increasing numbers of children living in these situations, many churches and synagogues are needed to help...Most of the needs identified by the adopted social worker can be met through the abundance in the homes of congregation members: the extra blankets and sheets, the outgrown snowsuit, the discarded juvenile furniture, the baby sweater knit by a caring grandmother. Through this partnership, we are building stronger connections between congregations and their communities,

reducing the negative consequences that poverty has on the nurturing children receive in their homes, and providing hope for families who experience the support they need from caring neighbors.” (www.covenanttocare.org) Imagine the satisfying difference your congregation could make if you forged a relationship with an organization or staff person serving children!

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.

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.

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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 fifteen minutes, choosing from a rich selection of reading material available from the *CDF Freedom Schools* 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* **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% of Level 2 and 3 children reported they could do most things if they try, an increase of 30%
- In Newark, NJ, 81% of parents attended parent-teacher conferences and 96% brought home materials for their child to read

- In Rochester, NY, the number of children physically fighting decreased by 26%
- 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%) and 'I had a good time' (5.7%) increased. By the end of the program, 85.7% 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% of younger children reported feeling happy (a 21.4% increase).

October 30, 2009 is the application deadline for summer 2010 operation. To learn more about the *CDF Freedom Schools* program and the impact it has had on children, please visit www.childrensdefensefund.org/freedomschools.

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 website (<http://www.aarp.org/money/taxaide>) or call their toll-free hotline for information: 1-888-227-7669
- Visit the American Bar Association's website 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. Call CDF at (202) 662-3542 for help arranging a trainer.

What difference can free tax filing assistance make to a low-income family?

Vivian, a single mother of three, earns \$35,000 as an office manager. Two years ago she went to a large tax preparer and paid \$182 to have her taxes completed and to receive a Refund Anticipation Loan (RAL). She also paid an additional \$99 in bank fees for the transfer—all to get her money in two days. If she had known that it takes Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites approximately 14 days to get her refund with direct deposit and electronic filing, she would not have visited a paid preparer. Last year, Vivian had an appointment at the free VITA site near her home, which saved her the \$281 she had paid in preparation and RAL fees the prior year. She plans to return to a VITA site again this year. She is saving the money from the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and free tax filing last year and this year to help her make a down payment on a house so that she can keep her children safe and secure.

Vivian's experiences getting her taxes done at a paid preparer are not unusual. Millions of low- to moderate-income families will claim billions of dollars in EITC refunds this tax season. A large percentage of these taxpayers will pay outrageous fees to have their taxes prepared and to receive their refund more quickly. According to data from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), recent success in promoting the EITC has been accompanied by losses to commercial tax preparers and Refund Anticipation Loan (RAL) lenders:

- More than 22 million taxpayers received the EITC in 2005, with an average benefit amount of \$1,894. This represents a \$41.8 billion investment in children, families and the communities in which they live, work and play.¹
- In California, about 2.4 million taxpayers received the EITC, representing a \$4.4 billion investment. Still, Californians lost roughly \$320 million to tax preparation fees, RALs and other commercial products.

Support for Working Families

For the most recent year for which data are available, the EITC lifted 4.4 million Americans above the poverty line, including 2.4 million children.² Its contribution to the well-being of lower-wage, working families is significant—giving working parents an opportunity to support their families and infusing money into the local economy.³ Without the crucial income supplement the EITC provides, it is estimated that the child poverty rate would be one-fourth higher.

For tax year 2008, the EITC federal tax credit is worth up to:

- \$4,824 for families with two or more children;
- \$2,917 for families with one child; and,
- \$438 for individuals between the ages of 25 and 64 with no children.

In addition, many EITC recipients are eligible for other credits such as the Child Tax Credit (CTC). The CTC is a federal tax credit for working families with children and incomes above \$8,500. It is worth up to \$1,000 for each child claimed in tax year 2008. Overall, it has been estimated that the CTC adds as much as 40 percent to the refunds of EITC-eligible tax filers' refunds.

(From *Halting the Loss of Billions of Dollars in Earned Income Tax Credit*, Children's Defense Fund, 2008.)

Bridge to Benefits (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 website 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!

¹ Children's Defense Fund, "Avoiding the Pitfalls of Refund Anticipation Loans," 2008.

² Children's Defense Fund, "Avoiding the Pitfalls of Refund Anticipation Loans," 2008.

³ Robert Greenstein, "The Earned Income Tax Credit: Boosting Employment, Aiding the Working Poor," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 17, 2005.

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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.

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

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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.

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 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.childrensdefense.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.



Tips on Writing Letters to Your Members of Congress

- **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.

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 more than 14 million poor children in our nation, most of who live in working families.)
- 3. Share your vision for children.** (As a person of faith, I believe providing ending child poverty 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 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 and the nine million children who are uninsured. I look forward to your reply informing me of how you will address these concerns so that all children have the health coverage they need and deserve.)

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

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

Encourage members to speak up on behalf of children in the local paper to influence many others. After they've written a letter to a member of Congress or other elected leader, members can take a little time and turn the letter into a Letter to the Editor or op-ed for the local paper. Encourage them to think about a current "hook," an article recently published in the paper that relates to the topic or a recent or upcoming event, to make it timely. Perhaps keep copies of recent papers on the letter-writing

table set up in the congregation's building. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr urged religious leaders to step into the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Now, we can take that newspaper and bring our moral voice and call for leadership that upholds a priority for children and the poor to the newspaper. See below for more tips on writing Letters to the Editor.



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

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 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 and click on "Action Center."

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 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.

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 member'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 the Children's Defense Fund Action Council® Nonpartisan Congressional Scorecard 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. Tell of 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

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the problems children face, statistics, or a fact sheet. (CDF can provide some of the information you need. Call the Religious Action Team at (202) 662-3579 or visit CDF's website at 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 email. 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.