Stepping forward together:
Guidelines for youth and children’s activities
Northern Ireland

Updated information for Youth and Children’s activities

A) Introduction

Youth and Children’s work and ministry has not stopped. We have been so encouraged by the creativity and resilience of youth and children’s leaders across the country during this time, thank you for all you have done and continue to do. Together we have focused on what we can do, reimagining and reshaping to respond to the restrictions before us at any given time.

We are on a new stage of the journey through this pandemic, on a road we have not travelled before, one that feels more hopeful and provides us with opportunities for in-person, face to face youth and children’s work. For some of you this is music to your ears, for others this will fill you with anxiety for a variety of very valid reasons. Whether you are raring to go or feeling cautious, we hope the guidelines below will help you as you think through the opportunities that each stage of easing restrictions provides to the work you do alongside and for young people and children.

As we look to the summer the guidelines below allow for holiday bible weeks and youth schemes to be planned.

Those groups registered with the Education Authority should seek to follow the relevant EA guidance (see https://www.youthonline.org.uk/restart/ ). One of the issues which we are facing at the moment is that there remains some inconsistency between EA guidance and church guidance. We are seeking an urgent meeting with the EA to address this and the wider governance issues which it raises.

Our youth and children’s work therefore falls under two categories:

(i) Church groups not registered with the Education Authority who should follow the guidance under section B.
(ii) Education Authority registered groups should follow the guidance which EA have circulated with the addition of some specific mitigations as set out below in Section C.

B) Groups not registered with the Education Authority

Until this point additional meetings on church premises have been limited to ‘worship,’ meaning that youth and children’s activities had to be orientated around Bible study and prayer. Other church meetings, which do not fall under the category of worship, may now resume, with the appropriate public health mitigations in place and the permission of the Church Council or the society Steward and minister.
All youth and children’s activities may now resume. The guidelines below will guide you through how to do this in ways that create opportunities for fun and relationship building and continue to keep everyone safe. (Please see the note below about creche which is still problematic).

Pastoral care

Home visits
Garden visits remain the best form of pastoral visitation. Up to 15 people (including children) from no more than three households can meet up outdoors in a private garden, but social distancing should be maintained.

Current regulations state that an ‘indoor gathering’ can consist of

(i) One household
(ii) Up to six people from no more than two households (with children aged 12 and under not counted in the total).
(iii) One household of 6 or more people and one other household up to a maximum of 10 people (not including children aged 12 or under)

Therefore, if there is a specific need, pastoral visitation in private homes is possible, but the emphasis still remains to visit outdoors unless it is not practicable.

Please contact in advance to see if it is appropriate to visit.

Indoor gatherings on church premises (excluding private homes)

When planning to meet indoors with young people and/or children the numbers are dictated by the space you have ensuring that each household or young person is spaced 2m apart. The government regulations state that the numbers are determined by risk assessment and that the organiser of any gathering must take all reasonable measure to limit the risk of transmission of the virus.

Risk assessments for indoor gatherings of 15 people or fewer do not require a risk assessment. However please be aware that in Executive’s Guidance states that a person responsible for any indoor gathering must, if requested to do so by a relevant person, be able to provide both a copy of the risk assessment (if required) and an account of the reasonable measures/mitigations taken.

Therefore, the mitigations which apply to worship, (ventilation, two metre social distancing, hand sanitiser, face coverings), which apply to worship apply to these meetings.

If you are confident that the children and young people will remain socially distant there is no need for parents to accompany them. (See details on arrangements for creche below). At this stage in the pandemic our young people and children are accustomed to social distancing, particularly if the space and programme are well laid out and planned for them to remain so. See below for ideas on how to do that.

Creche and Toddler groups

Preschool children must be the responsibility of a parent/guardian in the creche/Toddler group space and children should not share toys or craft materials.
Outdoor gatherings

Under government regulation, from 24th May the numbers permitted to gather for meetings/activities outdoors increased to a maximum of 500.

From a health and safety perspective, it is in fact preferable at present to hold activities outside rather than inside. So consideration should be given to groups meeting up outside for walks and socially distant chats and coffees, rather than meeting in church halls.

The Executive’s Guidance states that Risk Assessments are not required for outdoor gatherings of 30 people or fewer, however, as is the case with indoor gatherings, the organiser of any gathering must take all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of the coronavirus. A person responsible must, if requested to do so by a relevant person, be able to provide both a copy of the risk assessment and an account of the reasonable measures/mitigations taken.

When outdoor meetings/activities are being held:

- It is now possible to organise activities beyond the church premises and grounds, so walks and park meet ups etc., are now possible.

- For outdoor offsite trips please ensure that you are content with the safety measures that the facility has in place and that you have completed your own risk assessment to ensure all Methodist Church guidelines can be adhered to.

Regarding transport, the safest way to transport young people or children to an offsite venue is placing the responsibility on the household to drop off and collect. If this is problematic for the young people you work with use the Education Authority guidelines on transport to navigate this, while maintaining as much social distancing as possible and/or follow the below advice:

When people from different households need to use a vehicle at the same time, good ventilation (keeping car windows open) and facing away from each other may help to reduce the risk of transmission. It would be a useful precaution on such occasions if face coverings were worn to protect others.

- As long as social distancing is maintained face coverings are not mandatory

C) Youth Work for EA Registered Groups (Generic Youth Work)

From the 26th of April

Please follow the guidance which you will already have received from EA, which can be found here: https://www.youthonline.org.uk/restart/

The additional mitigations for EA Registered Youth work taking place on Methodist premises are:

- Face coverings must be worn by those 13 and over in Methodist premises throughout the duration of the activity and on entry and exit, unless exempt.
- 2 metre social distancing must be maintained at all times.
D) Additional Information for all

Before any youth or children’s activity should re-commence, it is crucial to follow the guidelines already produced by the Methodist Church in Ireland, alongside the government’s advice and any updated advice that comes from the office of the Secretary of Conference, for building health and safety, social distancing measures, contact logging and risk assessment.

Alongside your risk assessment*, please fill in the checklist that your minister can provide you with, before resuming an indoor activity and keep for your records. Your minister/society steward may wish to see a copy of the completed checklist. Below is a summary of the guidelines but it would be important that you read through all the material to fully understand what you need to do. You can find the guidance material, copies of the checklist and sample risk assessments here https://www.irishmethodist.org/covid-19

*Please note that a risk assessment is no longer required for indoor groups of 15 people or fewer and outdoor groups of 30 people or fewer.

Summary of Methodist Church in Ireland Guidelines

1. The Methodist Church in Ireland has adopted a 2-metre social distancing policy across all its activities, remembering that those from the same household can sit together.
2. Where activities are led from the front a 4-metre distance should be maintained between those leading and the participants.
3. Shared items and resources are a particular risk. Items such as bibles, books, toys, craft materials should not be shared or put away.
4. The use of face coverings is now mandatory during church activities. Current health and safety guidance from both governments states that children under 13 are not required to wear them. Please be aware that there are others who are also exempt. https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings

Those leading from the front are exempt from the recommendation and if not wearing a face covering, they should at all times continue to maintain at least 2 metre physical distancing from one another, and four metres physical distancing from the front row of the congregation/group.
5. Singing - The formal recommendation that face-coverings should be worn opens up the possibility of quiet singing. Choice of praise and singing in worship should continue to be governed by the principles of being softer, shorter and less frequent than under normal circumstances. Some may wish to be led using pre-recorded music and singing to further mitigate risk.
6. Toilets: Church toilets can be open. Keeping them well ventilated. Paper towels must be used and no hand dryers. You could make wipes available so that hard surfaces can be wiped down after use. Hand sanitiser and soap should be made available.
7. Contact tracing: A record should be kept of those who attend activities.
8. Cleaning: In addition to ‘normal’ cleaning, you may wish to wipe down surfaces with disinfectant spray after their use, remember this includes pews, chairs, lecterns, pulpit, sound desk, banisters and grab rails, door handles, microphones. The virus lives on hard surfaces for about 72 hours so if there is a gap between use of the building of more than three days cleaning with disinfectant is not necessary. However, if the building is to be used within 72 hours this additional cleaning is required. Those who are cleaning should wear disposable gloves, use disposable cloths, and wash their hands thoroughly when finished.
9. Informal catering should not take place on MCI premises. Individuals can bring their own refreshments, for use by them and their household, or small bags of food can be pre-prepared at home by a leader, taking account of all mitigations, and placed on seats. However, there should be no use of communal kitchens.

To help you in your planning:

Communication with volunteers, parents and young people

Consult with volunteers and parents, some may be ready to jump back in, some may not. It is important that each person/family has the freedom to walk the journey at their own pace. It is also important people feel safe, so clear communication with volunteers and parents about the steps that are being taken to ensure a safe environment, is vital.

Consult with young people and children to get a sense of what they have been missing to allow that to prioritise what you might do and to find out whether they are ready to come back to face to face activities.

Carry out a walk through with volunteers before resuming activities so that everyone knows their role and the safety measures that are in place.

Programme adapting

Consider hosting your activities outdoors over the summer months if the weather allows as this will provide the safest environment.

Take into consideration that you may not be able to accommodate all the children/young people who would usually participate in your programmes or all the programmes you would normally run in your indoor space. What will you provide/do for those who for whatever reason are unable to be in the building? You might want to consider a blended approach where you are online one week, in the building the next.

Minimise the number of people that children, young people and leaders come into contact with, in any given week by keeping groups small. You could have a number of small groups in one large space or in different rooms with leaders assigned to a group or lead your activities from the front. It is important that the groups and leaders stay as consistent as possible during the activities.

Avoid delivery of ‘split sessions’ where one age group meets followed immediately by another age group, in the same space, to allow time for cleaning between the different age band usage.

When considering children’s activities make your activities fun. Children’s activities in church are voluntary and with added rules and regulations an extra effort needs to be made to make it fun.
- Each child, (or children from each household) could have their own colourful mat to sit on with their name on it, or a hula hoop.
- Have a visual timetable to help the children know what to expect in this new environment and make your safety signage child friendly.
- Each child could have an activity bag that has their name on it, and they use each week with things they need to carry out the activities. (Great care needs to be taken when preparing these activity bags, one solution could be preparing them and leaving them in the church for 72hrs at least, before the children use them).
- Think through games that can be played from their sitting spot or in a large circle if you have the space. Avoid playing running around games indoors as physical exertion can increase the risk of transmitting the virus and should be minimised where possible.

- Think through other ways to use music that don’t involve singing - maybe you could listen to one of their favourite songs and they could do the actions where they are sitting (you will need to choose the songs that have less jumping up and down in them).

**Activities during Sunday worship** - consider reducing the time that children and young people are out of the Sunday Service for their own activities - plan the intergenerational section of worship bearing in mind that the whole family of the church is being led in worship.

Make reconnecting a priority - provide space in your programmes for relationship building, listening and allowing your young people and children space and time to reconnect with you and each other.

Consider adapting the type of activities you do to ensure a controlled environment can be maintained. If you are concerned that the children in your group will not remain socially distant you might want to consider a messy church style approach to children’s activities, for example, families are encouraged to leave the service with their children and each family is designated a table for the duration of the activity, with the content led from the front by the volunteers. This allows parents to help with craft etc.

**Practicalities**

Think through how you will keep the 2m distance between young people (you may want to be creative with chalk and tape or ask them to bring their own rug or deck chair).

Adhere to safeguarding ratios at all times. Consider that you may need extra leaders to ensure that all safety guidelines are able to be met. You may want to consider having an extra leader for the entrance to ensure hands are sanitised as they enter, and that social distancing is maintained as they arrive and for contact tracing logs.

Build in extra time for arrivals, hand sanitising and hand sanitising on departure and think through the areas of your church that could become a ‘bottleneck’ at these times.

Make sure arrangements for the use of toilets are made clear, such as only one child/young person or household permitted in the facilities at a time, a leader appointed to ensure hand sanitizing on entry and exit of toilets.

Put in place a protocol for the safe preparation or craft packs/materials and their distributions. For Example - Hands washed before preparing and if at all possible, leave resources untouched and in a sealed bag for 72 hours before they are to be used by children and young people. One person will be responsible for handing out the resources to each child, hands washed and with a face covering on.

Avoid shared surfaces, unless they can be wiped down between use and those who have touched them sanitize hands.

For indoors activities it is important to maximise the ventilation of fresh air from outside, through open windows and doors where appropriate.

If in any doubt of the best course of action, please consult your minister or circuit or contact IMYC at imyc@irishmethodist.org
Some useful resources:
(Check out IMYC’s website for a more extensive list of resources www.imycd.org)

Children and Family
Activity packs for children – useful ideas to create packs for use during intergenerational worship.

Intergenerational worship
There are some good ideas on this website that would need adapted for our context:
http://theconfidentkidmin.com – you will find a free guide to leading intergenerational worship – this is an American resource so remember to read it in the context of our guidelines.

http://www.allageworshipresources.org/

https://www.youthandchildrens.work/Resources/All-Age-Service-Plans - you need to subscribe to access these.

https://parentingforfaith.org/post/all-age-live?fbclid=IwAR2AsB7UTb-J8SfrdK4N8jKyhO9dmRW0uym9M3-pKyjUamEQJzWjk1KBKw0

Messy Church
https://www.messychurch.org.uk/suggestions-returning-safely-messy-church-together

Muddy Church: Resources and ideas for those looking for ways of connecting with their local community and God.
https://www.muddychurch.co.uk

Jesus and emotions: Help your family explore their emotions in the company of Jesus. Why do we feel the ways we do? How can we process difficult emotions? What does Jesus and the Bible have to teach us about emotional health? All of these topics are explored in fun, creative and accessible ways.
https://engageworship.org/store/product/jesus-emotions-a-creative-journal-for-families

Socially distant games – It is important to make sure that the Methodist church guidelines are used to interpret the games for our context, for example we say no shared resources that can’t be wiped down between each use.

https://youthgroupgames.com.au

https://www.youthscape.co.uk/services/youth-work-news/25-socially-distanced-games-for-your-youth-group

Grow Games app - this is a new games app that looks great and has a social distance category. Games for young people and children.
Premier Youth and children’s Work Magazine - this magazine is now digital only and there is new content weekly – useful current thinking and ready to use resources. This requires a subscription. 
www.youthandchildrens.work

Parenting for faith - resources and ideas to help you as a church to support families and children at this time or if you are a parent some really useful articles on navigating this time with your children and teenagers
https://parentingforfaith.org/topics/responding-coronavirus

Together with God – Resources and conversations on Faith, Family and Today’s Church. 
https://www.togetherwithgod.org.uk

Young people

Games
Some great ideas for socially distant games – remembering it is important to make sure that the Methodist church guidelines are used to interpret the game for our context.

Shaken – A resource by The Big House Ireland that is designed to help young people make good choices to live well when life shakes them. http://www.thebighouse.org.uk

Walk with me – helping young people step closer to Jesus - mentoring material and app that can be used one to one or in a small group. https://www.walkwithmejourneys.org

YouthScape - https://www.youthscape.co.uk/store
We love Youthscape resources – you can find resources around mental health, anxiety, bible study resources and helping young people express their faith through their creativity.

Alpha Youth – with some useful material on how to run this online
https://www.alpha.org/youth/

NUA film series - NUA is all about exploration: it’s a film series that encourages questions, acknowledges doubt, and offers an engaging perspective on the Christian faith.

https://nuafilmseries.org/nuastore/digital

NI Education Authority resources

https://www.youthonline.org.uk/ - The EA Youth Service providing resources for young people and youth workers enabling them to ‘Stay Connected, Stay Safe, Stay Well and Stay Engaged at this time.