

Wonderfully Made
By Mary Winter and Rachel Jones
Leader's Guide

For those of us involved with the day-to-day running of a toddler group, it can be a fairly exhausting business. By the time we've set up the hall with toys, arranged the craft and seen to the tea and coffee—all often with our own children in tow—there is not always much left in the tank once the doors open! Despite our best intentions, the weekly tasks necessary to run a toddler group often overtake our primary aim and heart's desire to share the gospel with those who come along.

Over the years, I've often found that our experiences as parents are actually a good springboard for talking about the gospel, but have faced the inevitable frustration of having good conversations cut short by crying or over-adventurous children! Toddler groups are a fantastic way to get to know the mums in your area, and for some it may be the only time they come anywhere near church. What a great opportunity! But prolonged conversations are not a feature of your average toddler group, and it can take time to really get to know your group members well enough for them to open up.

Our vision for *Wonderfully Made* is that it will help you to maximise the opportunities that running a toddler group gives you to share the gospel with local families.

- i. To form closer relationships with the adults in the group. As you share your parenting triumphs and woes, it will hopefully provide the opportunity to build deeper and longer-lasting relationships within the group. We want to build genuine relationships with those who come and share our lives with them, including the difference that following Jesus makes.
- ii. To have some of those conversations you don't normally have the time or space for during toddler group. The talks and testimonies will hopefully serve as great conversation starters, which you can follow up on. This will help you really engage with people, as you understand better where they're at spiritually, and what they think about the Christian faith.
- iii. To provide a first step towards finding out about the Christian faith. *Wonderfully Made* is designed to be perhaps a little less intimidating than an overtly evangelistic course that group members may not be ready for.

So that's our vision! We hope you find this course a genuinely useful tool as you aim to introduce the families in your local area to Jesus.

Four ways to use *Wonderfully Made*

Wonderfully Made is designed to be a flexible resource that can be used in a time and context that suits you. Although it's been written with toddler groups in mind, it can be used in Messy Church contexts, and for any other point of contact that your church has with parents of preschoolers in the community.

It's best to run this course at a time and place that will enable the most number of people to be there at the least inconvenience—and in a way that will minimise distractions and facilitate meaningful discussion.

The sessions will likely fill the amount of time you give them! Each session includes approximately 5-10 minutes of video content in total—the time the discussions take will largely depend on your group! So 20 minutes would be enough time to cover the material, but half an hour would give more time for discussion.

It's likely that childminders, au pairs, grandparents and dads, as well as mums, attend your group. You can encourage them to be part of *Wonderfully Made* too—because the emphasis is on sharing together as part of a discussion, they will have lots of wisdom to contribute from their experience!

Here are four ways you could use *Wonderfully Made* with your church community group:

1. During your regular toddler session. Project the DVD onto a big screen while the children play, and turn the volume up! Then let parents discuss informally with the people sitting next to them. Mums are master multi-taskers, but this option is probably not for the fainthearted! But it could work well for smaller groups, as it allows everyone to participate and doesn't require any extra helpers or further commitment from your parents.

2. Run *Wonderfully Made* during your regular toddler session, but in a separate room to where the children are playing. This way, potential distractions are reduced and not everyone needs to participate if they don't want to; you might feel it's an important part of your group's culture that Christian teaching is kept "optional". You'll need to find some extra helpers to mind the children—but volunteers are often more forthcoming when it's only a seven-week commitment, as opposed to a lifetime sentence.

3. As an "extension" at the end of toddler group or messy church. Invite mums and carers to stay on for an extra half hour at the end of your session. If the timings work, you could provide lunch or suggest that people bring a picnic along with them. This option means you can be little more relaxed and open-ended with how long the discussions take.

4. At a completely different time and place! You could combine *Wonderfully Made* with a social activity in someone's home to make it into an evening out. You might find that the change in pace and location from toddler group or messy church enables better relationship building. And with more time, you could also do the Going further Bible studies together.

Wonderfully Made: How it works

Watch

Each session we hear from a mum about her parenting experience, before watching a short talk from Mary Winter—the combined running time is 5-10 minutes. Group members can scribble down notes or questions in the space provided, or just sit back and watch.

Discuss

The discussion questions usually start by encouraging people to talk about the day-to-day challenges and joys of parenthood. There will also be one or two questions about the spiritual theme for the session—these are deliberately subtle, so that people can make as much or as little of them as they want to. It will soon become clear who in the group is genuinely spiritually hungry, so there's no need to force it. You can ask some additional follow-up questions if you sense people are open. *Wonderfully Made* is a pre-evangelistic course, designed to cultivate curiosity about God and the gospel—you don't need to arrive at all the answers straight away!

If you're breaking into smaller groups for the discussion, try and make sure that any Christians are spread among all the groups. The questions are designed to be a springboard for them to speak naturally about their own faith.

Try this at home

These are some practical tips and ideas for people to take home with them—it's very much a case of "take it or leave it".

Going further

At the end of the session, point people to the "Going further" section of the Handbook. It contains a short passage from the Bible to read at home, plus a couple of questions to help them mull it over. These are designed to get people engaging with the Bible for themselves.

In the following weeks, you might want to ask people in conversation whether they've been looking at the Going furthers, and what they've thought of them. Make it clear that people are very welcome to come back to you with any questions.

Top tips for running *Wonderfully Made*

Be prayerful. Who would it be best to invite? Is there another Christian who could join the group to help you? Ask your church family to be praying for every aspect of the course and those coming along. Pray that God would show each member of your group that he is real—and that he loves them.

Be prepared. Watch and read ahead to make sure you are aware of the issues that will be discussed. Try and anticipate the sort of questions people might ask in response to what they've watched. Maybe you can think of some additional or alternative discussion questions which will best suit the people in your group.

Be well resourced. Depending on your situation, this may mean having a supply of toys, baby wipes and a change mat to hand. It may be appropriate to have a list of useful contacts for people (breast-feeding consultant, health visitor) or helpful literature. Think about getting a selection of books which explain some aspect of the Christian message for those who are interested, as well as some Gospels. Maybe you can agree at the end of the course to all read the same book.

Be hospitable. Make your meeting space as warm and welcoming as possible. If it's not possible to meet in a home, major on the snacks! A little bit of cake goes a long way.

Be honest. It's important that we are up front about our own struggles. When it comes to parenting, none of us have got it all sewn up. The focus should be on exchanging ideas rather than dictating parenting practice.

Be willing to listen. You may have a great deal of experience to share and wisdom to impart, but remember that you are there to build relationships, not play the expert. It's also important that everyone feels able to contribute. They are not likely to do that if one person monopolises the discussion.

Be positive. As parents we can very easily feel as if we are being judged for our choices or behaviour. And it's very easy to feel that we're getting it wrong. Be as affirming as you can with the people in your group— this way they are much more likely to be honest about their struggles.

Be flexible. There maybe times when the discussion does not necessarily go the way you planned! If people are struggling with a particular issue and others want to help, let them. The relationships in the group are more important than getting through your checklist of questions.

Session Guides

Session 1

Introduction: So many questions

The emphasis in this session should really be on seeing the value in sharing together. We'll have the opportunity to acknowledge together that we are experiencing the same joys and struggles. We are encouraged to think about some of the bigger questions that becoming a parent raises and we begin to consider the Bible as a source for some of those answers.

Discuss

What do you think is the hardest thing about being a new parent?

Expect a wide range of responses from the lack of sleep, to the loss of freedom, to the physical strain and changes to a mother's body. Be ready to share from your own experience too. If there are childminders or au pairs in your group, encourage them to think back to when they first started out in that career (you may also want to adapt the next question below).

What were some of the practical questions you had when you were dealing with a new baby? What about now?

Try and keep this light-hearted as you laugh together about what you got wrong in the first few months! Make sure people know that you'll be discussing these sorts of practical questions in the weeks that follow—hopefully, this should encourage them to keep coming.

Where did you look for answers to those questions?

This question underlines the fact that none of us are parenting in a vacuum—there are always going to be people telling us how to do things! People in the West in the 21st century generally don't like to think that their behaviour is affected by external influences—we want to be masters of our own destinies. It's one reason why people are quick to dismiss the Bible as a source of authority—but the reality is that none of us are independent of voices around us. So it's important to listen to the right ones.

Do you have any "bigger" life questions that you would like to talk over in the following weeks?

You could remind your group of the questions posed on the DVD: *What should I teach them about right and wrong? How can I help them reach their potential? Is there a God out there who has given me this gift—that loves me?*

Don't feel that you have to jump in with a full gospel outline! Far better to take the time to listen carefully to the people in your group—really try to understand what they hope for, worry over and think about.

Session 2

Wonderfully made... in God's image

In this session we introduce the idea that our children not only resemble their parents, but are made in God's image. We want to show that the values we treasure and want to pass on to our children—respect for others, the value of human life, the importance of relationships, compassion and forgiveness—all stem from this truth.

Discuss

How are you like your own parents?

In what ways are your children like you?

These two questions should get people talking easily. Try to keep the discussion moving so that you have time to cover questions 3 and 4. As an alternative question for childminders and au pairs you could ask: How do the children you look after resemble their parents? What behaviours do they pick up from you?

In what ways would you like your children to take after you? What aspects of your character do you *not* want them to inherit?

These questions start to point us towards the idea that all of us are not quite the people we would like to be—we're a mixture of the good and the bad. Of course, the Bible's explanation of this mishmash is that humans are made in the image of God, but have been marred by sin ever since Genesis 3. This will be covered in Session 7, so there's no need to go into it now—but try to remember something of this discussion so that you can refer back to it in the future.

What do you think of the idea that God made each one of us?

If the answer is: "I think it's a load of rubbish!" resist the urge to respond with indignation. Thank people for being honest. As you prepare the session, think about the sort of questions you could pose to follow up a statement like that: *What makes you think that? What does everyone else think?* Make sure the discussion is not closed off completely.

Other people might say: "Yes, it's nice that God's made each one of us"—and be very content to carry on life as normal. So, before the session, think through how you would explain very simply why you believe that God made each one of us, and—just as importantly—what difference that makes in your life. Try to get across the idea that indifference to a Creator God is not really an option!

Session 3

Wonderfully made... to be creative

As we think about how to develop our children's creativity, we consider how our creativity reflects God's image. God's amazing creativity, on display in our universe, shows us something of his character, as well as offering answers to some of the questions around why we are here. Again we see that the enormous potential we identify in our children—all the good things they could discover, develop, enjoy and become—are reflections of God's good character.

Discuss

How does your child most enjoy using their imagination and sense of creativity? What do they like doing?

These questions should get people in your group talking—and draw attention to the fact that our children really can be extraordinary.

Suppose that God did create the natural world. What beautiful, amazing or just plain weird part of creation would you congratulate him on?

This question has been worded in a way that encourages those who don't believe God is our creator to join in the discussion. You can have some fun with this discussion: the intricate rainforest eco-system, the quiet wonder of the water cycle, the view from your favourite local beauty spot, or the grossness of the "blob fish". In so many ways, the world is a wonderful place to live in—how much more wonderful must the God behind it all be?

What do you make of the explanation that humans are creative because we're made in God's image? Do you agree?

Whether or not we believe that God exists, it's hard to deny that human creativity is something which sets us apart from the animals. Why are we like this? Where does this drive to create come from?

When do you find yourself getting bored? When you feel like that, what do you do?

These questions allow people to share their advice, and make sure that the session ends on a lighter note. You could refer back to some of the things that Mary spoke about on the DVD.

Session 4

Wonderfully made... to rest

The constant battle with tiredness is something all parents can relate to. This session focuses on ways to find opportunities to rest amid the chaos, and enjoy the moments we can. In Genesis we see that when God created the world, he declared it to be good and enjoyed his creation. We are reminded that God is still intimately involved in his world, rather than removed from it.

Discuss

Does your child sleep well? What have you found helps?

This should be a good opportunity to exchange practical ideas. Try to be positive: as Mary says on the DVD, this phase of sleepless nights will not last for ever!

In what ways does tiredness affect you?

This question might well produce some funny stories. But sleep deprivation can be crushing for some, so keep an ear open for those who are really struggling to cope. Then be prepared to step in with practical help, not just advice! (For example: offering to take the baby out for a walk for an hour or two while Mum has a rest, looking after an older sibling, or picking up some shopping for the family.) This is a great opportunity to love your neighbour!

“When we read that God rested, it means that he took the time to enjoy what he had made.” How could you get in the habit of taking time out of the business of day-to-day life to really enjoy it?

This would be a good opportunity to share something about your own faith; for example: *Every evening before I go to bed I usually pray, thanking God for my family and for all the things that I've enjoyed that day. And I ask for help with the things that I'm finding difficult.*

If your group has engaged well with the “God questions” in the previous three sessions, you might like to extend this discussion. You could ask something along the lines of: *On the DVD, Mary said that God is intimately involved, moment by moment, in his world. Is this how you normally imagine him?*

What do you like doing to relax and refresh?

Perhaps you could suggest doing something social as a group—this would be a great way to continue building friendships.

Session 5

Wonderfully made... for relationships

The Bible tells us that it's not good for us to be alone. The value we place on relationships, and the way we feel when they are broken, are reminders that we are designed by a relational God. We want to have great relationships with our children and with others, but we are designed also to be in relationship with the One who made us. This session begins to consider the importance of getting to know him.

Discuss

There are a lot of interesting ideas touched upon in this session's DVD presentation. So you might like to start by asking whether there was anything people were particularly struck by, and use the discussion to expand on some of these ideas. Then move on to the questions in the Handbook.

At what times do you feel lonely? What helps you deal with that? Who do you have to support you?

As in the previous session, these questions might reveal some parents who are feeling very isolated. Again, take the initiative in offering practical help—and make sure you follow through!

This would also be a great opportunity to talk very naturally about your church family, and how you have been supported by people there. Try not to give the impression that church is merely a social club (which many assume it is!). Before the session, think through how you would explain what makes church fellowship unique.

What are some of the ways in which you motivate yourself to get out and about and relating to others?

Organising to meet up with other people is a great way to do this; or perhaps setting yourself some mini "goals" for the week.

Have you ever thought of God as wanting a relationship with you before? Do you think it matters?

You could ask: *If God wants a relationship with people, why don't more of us have one?* It's great to start introducing the idea that the problem is not that God stands aloof from us, but that we push him away.

Try to get people to recognise that whether we have a relationship with God or not does matter! Remind people of what was said on the DVD: because we have been designed for a relationship with God, this is what will bring us real fulfilment and lasting happiness.

How can we, as a group, better help parents who feel isolated?

Parents in your group may well have some good ideas for what your group could do better. A lot of it comes down to group culture: Are you cliquy, or do you welcome newcomers? Is there a culture of competitive parenting, or do people feel able to be honest about how they're really feeling? Do you notice when people haven't come for a while? How about a friendly text to check everything's OK?

Session 6

Wonderfully made... to communicate

In this session we look at the value and frustrations of communicating with our children. In Genesis we see that God communicates with the people he has made, and longs for us to know him. We learn that he communicates ultimately by sending his Son, revealing himself to us. In Jesus, he makes it possible for us to have a relationship with him.

Discuss

What was your child's first word? (Or what do you expect it will be?)

This question should be easy, so don't be afraid to keep this part quite brief.

Have you ever tried communicating with God? How? What happened?

These questions could lead you in lots of directions! Be prepared with how to respond to the answer: "Yes I have, and nothing happened."

Perhaps point out that communicating involves speaking and listening. What does God want to say to us? How would we find out? Are we willing to listen?

Be ready to share about a time when communicating with God had an impact on your life.

Try not to give the impression that anyone's experience is "wrong". But where you can, remember to keep the focus on Jesus. People will have lots of ideas about how we can hear from God—but it's in the life of Jesus, as told in the Bible, that we can see most clearly what he wants to tell us.

When talking with your child, do you ever struggle to get the balance right between speaking to them and listening to them? Which way do you tend to err?

The caricatures we're trying to avoid are, on the one hand, the parent barking a stream of (ineffectual) orders at their child from breakfast to bedtime, and on the other, the parent who gives in to their child's every demand. We need to listen to our toddler's opinions and give them increasing amounts of independence as they develop—while maintaining the boundaries they need to stay happy and safe, and the structure needed to get through each day.

Getting dressed is an example of a battleground where parents sometimes lose perspective. It's good to let our growing toddler choose what they want to wear (even if we cringe a little at the resulting whacky ensembles)—but when they want to wear shorts and sandals in winter, a line probably has to be drawn.

Some of the ideas from this discussion will come up next week, so try to remember some of what is said.

Session 7

Wonderfully made... but spoiled

We all struggle to get our children to trust and obey us. What makes our human relationships so difficult? And if God designed us to have intimate, loving relationships with him, what has gone wrong? By looking at Genesis again, we see that God's image in us is spoiled by our disobedience. We consider how this is evident in our own lives, and the DVD talk ends with an encouragement to look in greater detail at Jesus, "the image of the invisible God".

Discuss

How do you deal with your child's misbehaviour? What have you found that works? What doesn't?

Let parents and carers share their suggestions, such as using a naughty step or chair, or denying a child a treat.

What *isn't* helpful is when we, the parent/carer, lose our temper and lash out with our words. This thought should provide a link to move on to the next question.

Do you agree that God's image in humans has been spoiled? Or do you think we are mostly good?

Remind people of what Mary says on the DVD: when we look at the news, we see many stories of human cruelty, but also those of great ingenuity, courage and care. There's an inherent inconsistency in human nature: we're capable of great good and terrible evil.

This isn't a problem with people "out there"—it's a problem with us, too. You could remind people of the discussion you had in Session 2—about what aspects of our character we would or wouldn't want our children to inherit—and last session, where we talked about our problems communicating with our children. None of us are quite the people we'd like to be.

Why do you think God would want to fix his relationship with humans, when we're the ones who messed things up?

This question assumes that people recognise that our relationship with God is broken. Depending on how people have responded to the question above, you might need first to ask something like: *So what does that mean for our relationship with God?*

A God who would move to make peace with those who have pushed him away would be very gracious indeed. Make it clear that our relationship with God is not in a "repaired" condition by default. He's made the offer—we either ignore it or accept it.

Looking back over this course, has there been anything that's surprised you? Has it made you change your mind about anything?

You might also like to ask: *What have you found most helpful?*

These questions provide an opportunity to see where people are at spiritually, now that you've got to the end of *Wonderfully Made*. Make sure you have an obvious next step in place for those who want to keep exploring the Christian message (see p 41-46 of the Handbook for some suggestions).

