

Charissa White's 3 Tips for a Growth Group weekend... WITH KIDS!!!

We've been involved in growth group weekends away for many years now and have always found it a really valuable thing to do. It's pretty much impossible to leave without feeling like you've become a lot closer as a group and as though you know each other on a much deeper level. It's really quite amazing that this can happen in one short weekend, but I've found it really does.

This year though, for the first time, it wasn't as simple for us to make the decision to go, because we had a toddler and a 6 month old to consider. We knew we definitely wanted to go but we really had to give a bit more thought to the logistics of it all, and for a while we weren't sure if it was actually going to work out that we could attend.

Most people in our growth group would prefer to spend less money and go camping rather than stay in other accommodation. But for us, camping wasn't an option. I'm not good at camping at the best of times, let alone with 2 little kids and health issues of my own to try and manage. As a group we all sat down and discussed options that would be a good compromise for everyone, and our growth group leaders suggested a campsite that also had cabins onsite for those that didn't want to camp. So we all agreed on the dates and location a few months out from when we actually planned to go away and the others in our group booked their places at the camp site.

Unfortunately though, we weren't organised enough and the cabins had booked out before we got in contact, so we decided to stay down the road from everyone else in an apartment. We were a bit worried this would mean we weren't going to be very involved with the group, but we worked out a rough weekend timetable as a group before going away so that we could incorporate times when we'd be able to join them onsite so that we were still involved.

Obviously because we weren't camping with everyone there were some aspects to the weekend that we missed out on but we still got to share most meals together, had a day at the beach together, went to church together, and had everyone join us for dinner and board games at our apartment one night too which was great. We still felt very much a part of the group despite not being there for everything.

Things do get complicated with kids; we had to pack pretty much everything but the kitchen sink, we had to consider nap times, we had to take it in turns participating in activities that the kids couldn't do so that one of us was always looking after them etc. so yes, it does require more thought and planning, but it is absolutely still possible to not only jump the hurdles and make it happen, but to actually enjoy the weekend too.

In reflection of my own experience this year, my top 3 tips would be:

1. **Be open and honest** about what you can and can't do, and explain your needs to the group early on so that when the weekend is planned everyone's different needs can be accommodated. There are many different ways you can do a weekend away, and what each group decides to do will look a bit different, so know there is flexibility. Having these discussions in our growth group has been something I've really appreciated.

Note: This document was originally written at the end of 2016 and was amended in May 2021. Since writing this, we have added 2 more kids to our family and have had more growth group weekend experiences to reflect on. Even though each subsequent weekend away has looked a little different to our 2016 experience that I've shared below, the 3 tips I've shared in this document have stood the test of time and have translated well to different venues, with different people and with our own family dynamics changing too. So hopefully, regardless of what your family looks like, you will find this an encouraging read and feel equipped to making your own growth group weekend a possibility.

2. Be organised! Book your accommodation early. Ask other families who've been on growth group weekends away before for their advice to help you plan. Think in advance about food and whatever equipment you'll need to keep your family running while you're away, so that you aren't rushing around on the day trying to get everything together and then worrying if you've forgotten something. Make a list of what you'll need and save it somewhere for next time you want to go away so you don't have to recreate it from scratch each time. Being organised is something we could certainly have improved on this year, so we've learnt a lot for next time!

2021 edit: Since 2016, one decision we've made that has really helped us is for Ryan to take the Friday off work so we can use the morning to pack and get ready, then we try and leave around nap time to make the car trip easier. It means we can arrive a bit earlier than everyone else too and get our millions of things unpacked without getting in everyone else's way. If you don't have the ability to take a day off though, keeping your week leading up to the weekend away freer than usual (to start getting things organised early) can help ease the pressures of trying to pack quickly on the day itself.

3. Be OK with compromise. If you have little kids, your weekend is going to look different to what it will for others in your group without kids or with kids of different ages. Your group might have a cracker activity planned over lunch, but if your kids need a nap at that time, then at least one of you is likely to miss out on it. Or maybe the board games are starting right after dinner but you need to bath your kids and put them to bed so you'll miss that, too. Perhaps the time everyone wants to eat dinner is a lot later than when you need to feed your kids, so you won't get to do every meal with the group. If you're expecting to be able to do everything the same as the rest of the group these things can feel disappointing. But if you know it's coming it makes it easier to roll with it and you can focus on enjoying the parts of the weekend that you can be involved in. Talk as a family about expectations and find compromises that work for your family. For example: for us, if the group is going on a lunch time bush walk, I'm happy to stay at home during nap time so Ryan can go out with the group, whereas I'd be keen for board games so Ryan would bath the kids.

So there you have it! 3 tips for making a growth group weekend doable with little kids. It can seem daunting and you might still be wondering if it's even possible for your family. But the only way to find out is to give it a go! There were times this year when we thought about not going because it seemed too hard, but we also knew it would be a great time away which we'd find really valuable - and looking back I'm really glad we put in the effort to do it because it was an awesome weekend. If you're still not convinced, maybe you could even try attending just for a day trip to start with and build up to a full weekend away next time.

I really would encourage anyone in a growth group to attend their weekend away where possible. We've found that it's not only us that gets something out of it, but that our family has something to offer our group too, and from my experience, the whole group benefits most when everyone is able to make it along.

We had a great time away with our group this year - it really brought us together as a group, and is always nice to relax and do some social activities together too, so now we're just looking forward to seeing what's in store for next year!

2021 edit: I thought I should also mention how great these weekends have been for our kids. Now a few years on, I can see the cumulative effect of these weekends on them – they have been instrumental in cementing our growth group members in their minds as an extension of our family. Our kids have developed some really rich relationships through these weekends, since they are able to spend more quality time with the people that they usually only see briefly once a week before heading to bed. I love that our kids have a place in our church community, and really feel that these weekends have an important role to play in deepening that sense of belonging and connectedness