

FIRST STEPS – KEY QUESTIONS

When a family has made the decision to have a Dedication ceremony there are a number of key questions that you need to ask and consider. Below are some of these key questions along with information we hope you will find helpful. If you have any further questions or need some support, please contact your Divisional Early Childhood representative.

WHAT?

What do I need to do?

The decision to have a Dedication ceremony is not made lightly. It is important that we treat this decision with the respect it is due; it is a privilege to walk with and support the family during this time. You will need to make some time to meet with the family to discuss the things that need to happen before the ceremony can take place. We would encourage you to meet with the family on at least one occasion to go through what the ceremony is and what the family would like to include. Opportunity is given for the family to compose a prayer for their child and you may need to assist them in this. Examples of a prayer are included at the end of this document.

What resources will I need?

There are a variety of certificates that can be used for this purpose and they are able to be purchased through Salvation Army Supplies. These include 2 varieties of Dedication certificates and one of the Thanksgiving certificate. Also available are a 'Welcome to First Steps Ministry' certificate and a 'Prayer for You' frame that can be customised for the child.

There is a great resource that you might like to use with the family as they prepare for the dedication of their child. Parent Cue is a website that holds lots of resources, e.g. blog, videos, podcasts etc. that are helpful to support parents. In the video section there are six clips that would be helpful for parents as they explore some key parenting strategies to support their child (www.theparentcue.org).

What needs to be included in a Dedication Ceremony?

Specific promises and commitments are made by the family before God—refer to The Salvation Army Ceremonies Book, chapter 3, Section 2 for the formal part of the ceremony. We would also encourage you to speak with the family about anything specific they may like to have included in the ceremony. It is also good to involve those in key roles in the First Steps and wider children's ministries in your preparation for this occasion. You may like to think about specific decorations or displays, music, video clips etc. that will help to support the significance of this moment for the family and for the church. While a Dedication ceremony can be held anywhere (eg. family home, parklands) it is an ideal opportunity to introduce the family to the wider church congregation if this is held as part of a regular worship service.

What is a Thanksgiving Ceremony?

While a Dedication ceremony is generally requested by Salvationists or other Christian families, there is an alternative known as the Thanksgiving Ceremony. This ceremony is generally used by families in your community who may not want to commit to the full Christian promises made in the Dedication ceremony. You will find notes about the thanksgiving ceremony in Chapter 3, section 3 of the above mentioned ceremonies book. While a Thanksgiving ceremony can be held anywhere (eg. family home, parklands) it is an ideal opportunity to introduce the family to the wider church congregation if this is held as part of a regular worship service.

WHY?

Why is this important?

This is a really special time for a family as they welcome the precious gift of a child into their lives. If they decide that they want to thank God for this gift and have their child dedicated, it is a real privilege to be invited to be a part of this occasion. This is a time where the family needs help and support as they celebrate this gift and also as they look toward the coming years and the child's spiritual development. It is not only support during this special event that is needed but also an opportunity to be a part of a faith community that will help and support the child and family in the long term.

WHO?

Who is involved?

At the meeting(s) with the family it would be ideal if the whole family is present, e.g. older siblings etc. Although parts of the discussion will be aimed more at the parents/care-givers any other children could be included in suggestions for the ceremony. Some families might like to have Godparents for the child or you might like to discuss with the family if there are any significant adults they would like to support them on the day who will continue to support the child and the family beyond the ceremony.

Who is making promises?

Because this is a significant step in the life of their child, it is not only the family who are making promises on the day—the rest of the congregation, family and friends also make a promise to support and encourage the family as well as support the child in their faith development journey.

HOW?

How do we support the parents?

This is a very special time not only for the family involved but also for the church community. What a wonderful opportunity to celebrate and give thanks for another precious life. As the family take this significant step, it is important to help and support them with a loving and caring faith community. Many will be aware of how overwhelming it can be to be a new parent and be charged with the care and nurture of a young life, so any help and support from others can help make it feel like you are not doing it alone.

Support for the parents as they undertake this role is not the only support required—we also need to support the child as he/she begins to grow and develop, and especially as they start to explore what faith might look like for them. Having a bunch of significant adults in their life—who are going to help support their parents in the role of spiritual development—is a crucial thing that can help the child develop a faith that has firm foundations.

How do the parents write their prayer?

Each family will be encouraged to write a prayer including their hopes and dreams for their child. It is important for you to help the parents explore what this might look like and suggest some language as they begin to articulate the dreams they have in mind for their child. The examples of prayers provided can work as a springboard of ideas to include in their prayer.

We really want this to be the words from the family, so help them by asking questions and suggesting a word to fit, but don't write the whole prayer for them—this is about their desires for their child.

VISIT WITH PARENTS/CARE GIVERS

This will include talking with the parents about what a dedication is and what it isn't as well as some things they may like to include in the Dedication service.

It is important for you to help the parents to understand that they are the one primarily responsible for the discipling of their child. Introduce and/or reinforce the key spiritual truths that they would want their child to know and understand before they head off to school:

- We are made by God.
 - We are loved by God.
 - We can be friends with God always.
- ✓ Spend some time with the parents/caregivers going through their thoughts and reflections to the questions below (*these should have been given to them prior to the meeting so they have had some time to think about their responses*).
- ✓ What are the key questions you might ask the parents? What are the key phrases they might like to include in the prayer? (*You will find some suggestions below of both questions and phrases.*)
- ✓ It would be helpful for them to start by writing down some dot points of the key things they would like to include.
- What sort of person do you hope your child will become?
 - What are the hopes and dreams you have for your child?
 - Who are the people/sorts of people you would want supporting/influencing your child's life?
 - What would be your desires and dream for your child, going beyond being healthy and happy?
 - I wonder what sorts of experiences you would want your child to know.
 - I wonder what sorts of relationships they would be a part of
 - I wonder what sorts of things you would like them to be known for (*this is more about who they are and characteristics, not about what they do*).

On the next page you will see some examples of a couple of different approaches to the writing of the prayer. This is an opportunity to put into words the hopes and dreams you have for your child as they grow and develop. Note that this is not about just taking one of these samples and changing the names—you must put it into your own words and language so that it sounds like it is coming from you. (*This is where it is essential that you help parents to talk this through so that they own the key things they would like to say to their child.*)

The template you will find on the website for typing the prayer into will fit a range of prayers. You can find the template at <https://my.salvos.org.au/toolkit/resource/first-steps/1254/>

It might be a short prayer using a large font or a longer prayer using a normal-sized font. You should be looking at approximately 200–400 words of normal-sized font as a gauge for putting this prayer together.

Example #1

Dear God,

We pray that *(name of child)* never loses her love for people. That she always shares her wide and beautiful smile to bring peace and joy to others. We pray that she will believe the best of all people and be quick to forgive. We pray for her good health, her kind soul, courage to stand up for what is right and patience to wait for God's plan in her life.

We pray for those people who surround her; that she would:

- know a sense of achievement from good teachers
- experience the fun and care of firm friendships
- learn from the successes and challenges of teams
- grow in the knowledge of God's love through the church
- and develop in the security of her loving family.

We pray that *(name of child)* will always know how much we love her. That she will keep her sense of adventure to travel and experience other cultures. That she will be generous and know the joy of giving to others. That she will have a hunger for learning and a passion for life. Above all, we pray that your Holy Spirit would teach her, your wisdom would guide her and your love would move her. We pray that everyday *(name of child)* will do something that will help her grow in her relationship with you. Amen.

Example #2

Dear *(name of child)*,

Today we dedicate your life back to God, and also say this prayer as we think about who you are and where you're headed.

(name of child), we pray that you laugh often. Never take yourself or life too seriously and remember that a smile is contagious. We pray that you will have a heart for others, one that is overflowing with love. At times it will get broken, but through those experiences you will also learn and grow.

(name of child), we pray that you dream big. You're never too young to start and you'll never be too old to stop. Take the time to notice the people around you. Please remember that you are never alone, that in your hardest times there are people who love you and will support you. You are valued and loved!

(name of child), we pray that you will take the time to see the world through God's eyes, the eyes of the one who created it all and loves you. Never be afraid to question your faith, because it's only by doing this that you will gain a deeper relationship with God. We promise, God is big enough to take on all your doubts and fears, and will love you through whatever you throw his way.

(name of child), take time to sit and listen to others. Equally important, don't be afraid to open yourself up and let people into your own life; it'll expand your world. We pray you will be yourself, *(name of child)*, whatever that looks like. Life won't always be easy, and things will happen that you won't understand, but look for God in those situations because we promise he will still be there.

(name of child), just love. Love God, love others, and love who you are.

Love and prayers for always,

Mum and Dad