

FIRST STEPS



FIRST STEPS - DEDICATION

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. Once the decision has been made 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 a couple of occasions—once to go through what the ceremony is and what it isn't and then another time for the family to work (with your support) on the writing of their prayer. This prayer will be included in the ceremony and printed out for inclusion in the dedication certificates. There is an appendix attached to this document that will help you with what needs to be included in these two discussions.

What resources will I need?

You will need the dedication certificate pack that will include two certificates and can be purchased from Salvation Army Supplies. One of the certificates has a space for the above mentioned prayer and the other has a space for a photo (this might be a photo of the child or a photo of the child with their family). With both the certificates you will see a space for the photo and prayer to appear, you can either attach them in the appropriate space and then place them in a frame, or you could place a backing sheet behind them and laminate them for safekeeping or display.

TOP TIP: For other information, support or resources regarding First Steps please refer to www.sarmy.org.au/en/Ministry/Children/Programs/First-Steps/

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 to make it a meaningful time. It is also good to involve those in key roles in the First Steps and wider children's ministries of the corps, 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.

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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 many 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. The certificates have been created in such a way that they can be utilised for both ceremonies.

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 a faith community that will help and support the child and family in the long term.

The Bible reminds us in a number of places about how important children were to Jesus but also about the importance of sharing the good deeds of the Lord with our children.

'We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders.' (Psalm 78:4)

After the celebration around the dedication, the focus then moves to helping the child on their faith journey—supporting and encouraging them as they explore God and what faith means for them. We want to create a picture based on Deuteronomy 6:5–9:

'And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.'

WHO?

Who is involved?

It would be great at the first meeting with the family that the whole family is present, e.g. including older siblings etc. The second meeting will be aimed more at the parent/parents but I am sure that the other children could be included in suggestions for the prayer.

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?

It is important that the whole family is present for making the promises that are outlined in the ceremonies book. 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.

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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 sticks.

How do we use the dedication certificates?

You will find two certificates in your dedication pack. One that has a space for the prayer that has been written by the family for the child, and one that has a space for a photo of either the child on their own or with the rest of the family.

You will find alongside these notes on the website a template document for you to use for the prayer. You can change the font as well as its size depending on how many words are included in the prayer. This can then be printed out and placed at the back of the corresponding prayer certificate. It would be great to have a copy of the prayer on the screen when the parents read it during the ceremony.

TOP TIP: Use an extra fine permanent marker or regular ballpoint pen. The finish is slightly glossy and you do not want to risk a smudge on this special certificate.

These certificates would look great framed and might be something that the corps would like to do for the family and have ready for the certificates to be put in straight after the ceremony.

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. We have included some questions, statements and examples in the appendices to help you and the parents as they think about this picture.

It would be great to begin to explore this with the parents on your first meeting, giving them some time to think about, talk together and pray about what they want that prayer to be. On your second meeting with the family you can spend some time talking about what they would like to include, and work on the final draft. 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.

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APPENDIX – Notes for corps officers and those involved in leading First Steps ministry.

VISIT ONE WITH PARENTS

First meeting: 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; they are the ones who have the most unstructured time with a child and will have the key influence in relation to their child's spiritual development. Reinforce the key spiritual truths that you want your 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.

Below are some discussion points to include when you are visiting with the family:

- ✓ Dedication is not salvation. In some churches the christening service is understood as the time when the child receives salvation and can, thereafter, be considered a Christian. However, in a Salvation Army dedication the focus is on the commitment the parents make to God to raise the child in a Christian manner; it is the hope and prayer of the parents that one day the child will make their own personal commitment to God. It is also an opportunity for the parents to thank God for the gift of the child.
- ✓ Have some discussion with the family about other elements that they might like to include in the ceremony, e.g. songs, images, props, other family members, photographs etc.
- ✓ It would be important to ask the family if they have considered inviting someone to support their child, either as a godparent or as a key adult who will encourage the child in their spiritual journey.
- ✓ Earlier in these notes we referred to the Parent Cue website where you will find six helpful clips about key parenting strategies. You might like to look at some of the clips with the parents or encourage them to look at some before your next meeting. These will be helpful for the parents in their preparation for writing their prayer and the dedication ceremony.
- ✓ Homework: give the parents an outline of the questions and phrases (included in visit two below) to think about in preparation for the second meeting and encourage them to begin by making some dot points.
- ✓ It is important to finish in prayer with the family.

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VISIT TWO WITH PARENTS

Second meeting: This meeting will include some information from you about all the areas of support within the church for families with children in this age group. This meeting will also include an important discussion around the writing of the prayer.

- ✓ You will need to be aware of all the areas of support for families/households within your corps in preparation for this meeting, it is important that you share this information with the family. What are the programs to support children of preschool age and then in the transition to primary school and then moving into their teens? What is the pathway of discipleship and support of the young person's spiritual journey during each of these age groups/stages? What are the opportunities for connection and growth? How does the church partner together with families for the spiritual development of their children? What does your corps have to offer the child, siblings and broader family?
- ✓ It is important to take some time to reflect on the Parent Cue videos. These clips will be encouraging the parents to think about some of the key strategies that will help them with their parenting, including: 'imagine the end', 'fight for the heart', 'create a rhythm', 'widen the circle' and 'make it personal'. More information regarding these strategies can be found in the clips or in the book *Parenting Beyond Your Capacity* by Reggie Joiner and Carey Nieuwhof. It is important for us to help to support and equip families to focus on what matters most and to know that they are not in it alone.

Writing a prayer for your child as you celebrate this milestone event...

- ✓ 'As part of an international movement, The Salvation Army, you stand with people all around the world when you make these promises. However, you have the opportunity to customise this special milestone by writing a prayer that talks about the goals, hopes, prayers and dreams you have in mind for your child.'
- ✓ Spend some time with the parents/caregivers going through their thoughts and reflections to the questions below (*these should have been given to them at the end of the last meeting so that they had some time to think and chat 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*).
- ✓ Below 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. 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.
- ✓ Spend some time with the family in prayer before finishing your time together.

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Example #1

Dear God,

We pray that ... 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 ... 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 ... will do something that will help her grow in her relationship with you. Amen.

Example #2

Dear ...,

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.

..., 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.

..., we pray that you dream big. Never stop hoping or dreaming for what could be. 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. We are built to need people in our lives, so be part of communities and let others in. There will be times when they need you just as much as you need them. 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!

..., 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. The world is broken and hurting, but through God's eyes we can see what is beautiful and what his plan is for us. 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.

..., 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, ..., whatever that looks like. Find and surround yourself with people who will help you become the best version of yourself, and never be afraid to just be who you are. 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.

..., just love. Love God, love others, and love who you are. Have the courage to simply be yourself, to help others, and to be God's hands and feet to help make the world a better place.

Love and prayers for always,

Mum and Dad