



life group guide

The local church
and the First Thousand Days



Early life: the first thousand days and why it matters

Session 1 – why is this a justice issue?

Introduction

For children to thrive, they need essential building blocks provided to them in the context of at least one loving, stable, and responsive relationship with an adult. The people who provide this are family members and caregivers. These quality relationships are foundational for all other care the child needs.

For families to consistently care in this way, they need communities around them, strengthening, supporting, and encouraging them. Parenting is difficult and was never meant to be done alone: all parents need support, encouragement, and affirmation.

The church is a gathered community (like a modern village) that can connect with and support families. It can intentionally strengthen parents and build their capacity to better provide responsive, nurturing care in this critical phase.

We believe that every local church is uniquely positioned and equipped to make a significant difference to families and the care they provide to their young ones. Together, they can play a part in writing a new story for the future of South Africa and make a significant difference in the lives of families and young children – as well as to their futures.

Resources needed:

A laptop or TV to watch videos

A Bible

“Why FTD Matters” daily devotional





Pre-work

Read: **“Why FTD Matters”** daily devotional Days 1 to Day 4 (including the inserts)



Opening

Watch: **How the church can give all children a strong start to life** – Sikunye video

Watch: **The First Thousand Days** – SA News Chanel



Open in prayer

Pray for open hearts and minds. Ask God to give new revelation and for the Spirit to work and make us more like Jesus in this specific area. Ask God to reveal to us what our role as a local church is in supporting and loving families in the First Thousand Days.



Warm up

Ask the group

- Now that you know why the First Thousand Days are important, what would you do differently – as an individual, as a life group, as an employer?
- If there are any families in the group (especially families in the FTD) ask them to share their thoughts on whether they need a village to raise their child.

Summary for life group leader to read and know the context of the research

The First Thousand Days (FTD) are the number of days from pregnancy/conception until a child's second birthday. And it is a time in life where the foundations are laid that are important for thriving in life. It is a critical phase of development that presents a powerful window of opportunity to impact young lives. It is like when you build a house, you must build a strong foundation for it to last many years – it is the same idea that the stronger the foundations we build in the First Thousand Days of a child's life the more chance a child has to succeed in life.

We know that the FTD are important because:

- It is a time of rapid brain development where the brain is growing to 80% of its adult size. This happens in every baby born. The brain is developing faster than at any other time in a baby's life.

- It is a time that language development is happening at lightning speed. Many of us may think that a baby's brain is only developing once it is born or once they learn to speak or go to school! But there is a peak in language development at 6 to 9 months of age so babies who hear lots of words develop a larger vocabulary.
- It is a time when the foundations are being laid for a child to become confident, socially capable, and able to relate to and trust other people and this happens by a baby seeks its parent's attention and it is through this healthy attachment that they learn to build relationships that are trustworthy – allowing them to develop good and healthy relationships into adulthood.
- It is when a child's development is placed on one of two trajectories based on whether or not they receive the five building blocks. If they receive them, they will thrive and if they do not receive them, they will simply survive – and in our country we see a big gap between these two paths where children exposed to negative factors and do not receive the building blocks grow up struggling to learn and understand, and they fall behind in school. We see some of the consequences of this with the high unemployment of rates in our country and the cycles of inequality and poverty are repeated from generation to generation – and in the end we all lose out!

And this is an injustice! But it is an injustice that can be very easily overcome – there is hope!

Because the brain can change and create new pathways simply by being exposed to environments that stimulate the brain so that children who are born into hard circumstances can still thrive – so if we can focus on the FTD which is a one in a lifetime opportunity to get it right, we can help change our nation by giving all children of South Africa a chance to realise their God given potential



Open up the Bible

Bring it back to The Word – **what is God's heart for little children?**

Have someone read [Luke 18: 15-17](#)

We don't see the term 'the First Thousand Days' in the Bible, but young children are described all over scripture – showing God's heart for young children.

“People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (NIV)



Activity one

Questions for discussion

1. What do you think God’s heart is for children in this scripture?

There was something about the way Jesus lived and taught that made parents want to bring their young children to him – we see Jesus corrected those followers that thought he only should care for adults. We don’t have to convince God to care for little children – he has already shown his heart towards them.

2. Do you think God’s mission has children in mind?

Most of us will agree that churches do not exist for their own members alone. Believers are the sent ones, who are invited to share and demonstrate the mission of God. Consider this: God invites little children to play a part in His story. In the Bible we see how little children – even before their birth - are agents of mission and his plan. People such as Isaac, John the Baptist and of course Jesus himself are spoken of as those who will be born to progress God’s purposes. We see that even before they were born, they ministered to others. It wasn’t only when they were older that God chose to use them for his mission.

3. Do we model God’s heart for young children in our daily lives and the way we participate in church activities?

Let’s challenge us: are we hindering parents and their young children (like the disciples)? Do we make space for young children in our everyday lives? Do our church activities demonstrate God’s heart for very young children?

Part of God’s mission includes reaching families who are particularly vulnerable. These families might be inside our church, or within our community. With 50% of children not getting the building blocks they need, as well as postnatal depression affecting 1 in 3 women in South Africa, and only 8% of children are breastfed exclusively for 6 months – it is evident that ALL families need support. Proverbs 31 tells us that we should “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.” These young lives cannot speak up for themselves. But the church can! We are to

love our neighbours – inside our church community and in our community. What a beautiful opportunity for drawing people into church communities.

But there is hope! And the good news is that...

- We know what supports and promote healthy brain development
- And we know what protects the brain and lowers any risks to brain development – so that children who are born into communities with high levels of poverty and hard circumstances can still thrive
- This means there is so much we CAN do to help the children of SA realise their full God given potential – and change our nation

The question is how do we all play our part in helping them start well?



Last impression feedback

Take one last round of feedback from the group.

Ask them to give you a one or two sentence answer to one of these questions:

- What are you leaving tonight thinking/feeling?
- Now know why FTD is important, what do you do differently?
- What does this mean for you/your family?
- What do you need to think about or read to take your next steps?



Close in prayer

Have the group pray for the thoughts and feelings that have been stirred as you've studied God's Word. Pray about the issue of poverty and need in our city and ask the Spirit to guide in response.



Homework

Have a look around you (in your community, workspace, friends) and see who is in this phase of life. Read **“Why FTD Matters”** daily devotional Days 5 to Day 8 (including the inserts). Think through, what role can we as Christ followers play in writing a new story for the future of the children of South Africa! How do we all play our part in helping them start well?

continuing the journey...

Session 2 – the role of the local church

Introduction

After one week of looking into the topic of why the First Thousand Days are so important and God's heart for children, this week we will look at how the local church is uniquely positioned to be the modern-day village to families in the First Thousand Days, and how that alone can change the trajectory of South Africa.

Resources needed:

A laptop or TV to watch videos

A Bible

"Why FTD Matters" daily devotional



Pre-work

Read: **"Why FTD Matters"** daily devotional Days 5 to Day 8 (including the inserts)



Opening

Discuss what was covered last week and everyone's thoughts over the last week whilst doing the daily devotional – and if anyone found more information on the First Thousand Days.

Having heard why the FTD is a justice issue for South Africa and our church, what is happening during this time, what all families in South Africa need – now we are going to look at what can our church do to be part of changing the lives of our children in South Africa.



Open in prayer

Thank God for another week to delve into this topic and place on your hearts how to respond to this call. Again, ask God to reveal to us what our role as a local church is in supporting and loving families in the First Thousand Days.



Activity one

Questions for discussion

1. What can churches do for families in the FTD?

There are 43,000 churches across South Africa in different communities, with a reach into millions of homes. Imagine if all 43000 churches supported and strengthened families in new and powerful ways – the future of South Africa would change!

2. What are the strengths of any local church for this justice-matter?

The local church is powerful because it has strengths and assets (e.g. teaching gifts, the ability to grow and nurture community, ability to gather people together, storytelling, prayer) and all of these could be powerfully put into action to impact families with children in FTD. Do you notice that these strengths and assets are there in all types of churches – not just ones with buildings, or those who have a paid pastor, or those who are part of a particular denomination. Every church everywhere has something that can be used to serve families in the FTD. Our church is already doing things that can be adjusted to be more impactful for families with young children (e.g. meals to the sick, take meals to families who have just returned home from hospital with a baby; we visit the sick, so also visit families etc)

3. How can those strengths be used to strengthen and support caregivers?

The local church is uniquely positioned and equipped to serve the needs of our children. There is something that no other entity/organization can do, and that is be the hands and feet of Jesus – to reach and embrace and affirm these young lives. We can be the modern-day village around families in the First Thousand Days as each of these little ones is fearfully and wonderfully made by our heavenly father.



Activity two

Watch: **“listening to what parents say in church”**

Are families saying this in our church?

Let's ask ourselves “What can my church do to be part of seeing life in its fullness?” whilst we look at what we can do as individuals and as a church to lovingly connect with and support families in the First Thousand Days (FTD).

Life group leader: the following information is about Common Good's Early Life initiative – Sikunye. Please point to Sikunye's website for more info on how your church can support the FTD (www.sikunye.org.za)



Who is Sikunye?

Sikunye, an initiative of Common Good – a South African NGO founded by Common Ground church in 2005, means 'we are together' in isiXhosa and reminds us of how it takes more than parents alone to nurture young life. It takes a village to raise a child, and so Sikunye seeks to inspire, mobilise, and equip the church to support parents, caregivers and families to provide nurturing care for their children in the First Thousand Days of life, so that they can thrive and reach their God-given potential.

Sikunye calls a church that lives out being a modern-day village to families in the First Thousand Days, an FTD-Friendly (or First Thousand Days-Friendly) Church. It is friendly to families in First Thousand Days season. It is a church community that is actively caring for those families with young children. They are taking steps forward to seek out families. They have things in place to make sure that families get more of the kind of care that they need in that season. They are not perfect or have it all together – but are taking steps forward.

Discuss

- How can we, the church, or our Life Group be this community?
Let everyone give ideas.



Open up the Bible

Bring it back to The Word – **what does God say about community and being a modern-day village around families?**

Have someone read [Proverbs 17:17](#)

Without our connection to Jesus through his love, our connections with others will be self-centred. A good, biblical community begins with God's love for mankind.

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.” (NIV)

Have someone read [Proverbs 27:9](#)

What does "a brother is born for a time of adversity" mean? God provides us friends and family to help us through hard times. He knew we would need that. God knew that His perfect creation was now corrupt with sin and we would suffer in ways He had never intended.

"Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of a friend springs from their heartfelt advice." (NIV)



Last impression feedback

Take one last round of feedback from the group.

Ask them to give you a one or two sentence answer to one of these questions:

- What are you leaving tonight thinking/feeling?
- What does this mean for you or our Life Group?



Close in prayer

Ask God to show each person which family they are to journey with – whether inside your church or outside – and how your Life Group can support those families in the FTD.



Homework

Continue with the daily devotional: **"Why FTD Matters"** Days 9 to Day 14 (including the inserts)

If your life group is wanting to know more information you can:

- Check out Sikunye's social media pages (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)
- Look at Sikunye's data free website and resource page for tools to support moms and dads in the FTD of life
- Attend a **Church & Early Life** event to discover how you can use what you are already doing, with the resources that you already have, to sow into the young lives of children in your community so that they may grow
- Continue with the daily devotional, Day 15 to Day 20 (including the inserts) asking God to reveal to you where your Life Group can play a part in being FTD-Friendly, and which families God wants you to support.

continuing the journey...

Session 3 – Christ-followers can speak up about the importance of FTD

Introduction

Today you will look at how Christ-followers can speak up and impact their workspace, their daily lives, and circles of influence to advocate for families in the First Thousand Days (FTD).

Resources needed:

A laptop or TV to watch videos

A Bible

“Why FTD Matters” daily devotional

First Thousand Day-Friendly workplaces blog

How to Speak Up resource

How to support breastfeeding in your workplace booklet



Pre-work

Read: **“Why FTD Matters”** daily devotional Days 9 to Day 14 (including the inserts)



Opening

As Christ followers, we are called to live out our faith in the places that God has placed, not just in church, but in where we live and work. We also believe that to change our nation there has to be a whole society approach to tackling the challenges families face in the First Thousand Days, so that children grow up thriving rather than just surviving and repeating the cycles of inequality and poverty. To do this, it is not only up to the local church or the health care facilities, but it is up to all of us as individuals to play our part in seeing a new generation, a new South Africa. We all have an opportunity to influence those spaces that God has placed us in. Every one of us is located somewhere. The neighbourhood you live in. The shopping centres you visit. The classrooms you learn in. The workplace you are in; and together, in these spaces, we can Speak Up for those families in the FTD to help them be positive, loving, and responsive parents to their children.



Open in prayer

Ask God to lead you in seeing how each person can take what they have learnt about the First Thousand Days (FTD) into their workplace and daily lives; how they can speak up for the littlest amongst us and support families in being responsive and caring parents.



Warm up

Read **First Thousand Day-Friendly workplaces** blog

Note to life group leader: Adjust these questions based on the group you lead – if they are students, unemployed, stay at home parents, seniors – these questions are not only for those employed but refer to the areas in which we find ourselves each day.



Activity one

Questions for discussion

Do you know what your work policy is on breastfeeding in the workspace? (If you have students, do they know what the breastfeeding policy is in their place of study?)

- Did you know that moms are allowed two 30min breaks every day to express breastmilk for their baby? Is this being adhered to in your workspace?
- What is your work policy on maternity and paternity leave?
- Do you know what your workplace policies are for families and parents – especially those in the First Thousand Days? (If you have students, do they know the policies of their place of study?)
- If you have students, how does their place of study treat or address teenage pregnancy – if that happens? What are your feelings and thoughts on teenage pregnancy?
- What can you do to support families in your workspace?
- If you are an employer, what can you do to support the families that you hire (such as your gardener, cleaner etc.)? (If you have stay at home parents, do they hire anyone to help and if so, how do they support the families of their staff?)
- If you have seniors in your group, how are they connecting with or mentoring young parents? Do they see a role as a senior to do this?

- How are you challenging your friends, or networks to support and care for families? Are you celebrating the First Thousand Days in your group of friends or family outside of church?
- What do you do when you see a mom with a crying baby or screaming toddler at the shopping centre – do you frown and judge or walk away, or do you go and help mom and be that village around her?
- Do you know the families in the First Thousand Days in your neighbourhood?



Open up the Bible

Bring it back to The Word – **what does God say about speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves?**

Have someone read [Proverbs 31:8](#)

Christ followers are to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. The little lives cannot speak up for what they need. Prayerfully consider how can use your voice in your workplace.

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed.” (NLT)



Last impression feedback

Take one last round of feedback from the group.

Ask them to give you a one or two sentence answer to one of these questions:

- What are you leaving tonight thinking/feeling?
- What has challenged you the most and what will you be doing differently tomorrow?



Close in prayer

Thank God for the space (either workplace, place of study, home, group of friends, networks, and community in which you live) that each one of you have been placed in – and the influence you have to change policy, speak up, support your staff who have families, mentor young parents, or help a mom in the shopping centre. Ask God how you can go about doing this and be led by Him.



Homework

Read **Listen to parents** and what they are saying they need for support

Re-read **FTD-friendly workspaces** and ask God to work in your heart as to what you can do in your workspace to support families in FTD

Read: **“Why FTD Matters”** daily devotional Days 15 to Day 20 (including the inserts)

