

How Children Learn

Who are our learners? What are our hoped-for, broad learning goals?

- Children's ministry should focus on whole person (know-be-do) education that nurtures (gives shape to) Christlike faith (Christlike knowledge, habits, values and attitudes).
- Nurturing a child's faith and learning requires:
 - loving the child,
 - respecting the child, made in the image of God, with the ability to grow in faith and to develop in predictable ways such that age appropriateness is considered, and
 - modeling our lives as growing disciples of Christ.
- Saving faith can be described by domain (area focus of learning).
 - Know - intellectual content about God, humans and His Story (Rom 10:17)
Therefore, we direct the natural credulity of the child towards knowledge and understanding of Bible content.
 - Be - emotional relationship with God and His people (John 17:3f)
Therefore, we engage children in the community life as members in the social context of the church.
 - Do - volitional obedience to God (1Jn 2:3)
Therefore, we seek to encourage the child's moral growth by helping them learn *how* and *why* to make godly decisions. Training towards righteousness means we must be concerned about both the right act and the right reason behind the act.
- The goal and process of spiritual maturity involves growth in these same areas, or whole person growth. Therefore, we seek to minister to the child in their physical, mental, social, emotional, and moral aspects of their personhood. Spiritual growth requires not only change in behavior and in information but also change in motivations, values, emotions, attitudes, reasoning, and beliefs.

Sample Developmental Stages

Infants (6 months to 2+ years) – Infants learn primarily through sensory perceptions and motor activities. They are developing concepts such as cause and effect, space and time, object permanence, sense of self, and basic communication skills. Through Christian education infants learn love and trust in relationships, that Church is a good place to be, and that God's people are good to be with. They become familiar with Bible story language and church behavior (like prayer and respect for the Bible).

Pre-schoolers (2+ to 5 years) – Young children begin to explore their world symbolically with mental images, drawings, play, make-believe, and language. They imitate adult behaviors but may not understand them. They assume others think and feel the same way that they do. In church they can learn memory work with body motions, begin to participate in church behavior orally with praise and prayer, act out Bible stories, sing the stories, experience simulated concrete concepts from the stories, watch others act out stories, and answer concrete questions about their experience and Bible understanding. Trust, images of faith, and emotions about church are shaped by significant adults and are strongly influenced by images, stories, and symbols.

Learning to Read (5 to 9 years) – School children use concrete objects to organize and classify information mentally. For example, although they can understand basic math, thoughts are mainly limited to their own concrete, physical experiences. In Bible study, they can dramatize the story in a simplified version after reading it out loud together; work on observing details in the text more closely, copy key words in the passage and draw symbols for them; discuss, draw and/or sing the main message and responses to the passage. Faith is highly literal (limited to the concrete), can be ordered logically, captures life-meaning in stories, and is at work sorting out reality from make-believe.

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Reading to Learn (9 years +) – Students learn through all of the above at a more thorough and complex level. Thinking is still mostly limited to concrete experiences. They can learn to manipulate ideas mentally, not just physically (e.g. hypothetical thinking). They are able to dramatize the story as they read it aloud and can learn to study Scripture independently and inductively, using their own questions.

Common Adult Errors in Teaching Children in Church

1. Moralism – BE like this character in the story. Moralism limits & fragments treatment of the Bible to a literary collection of right/wrong behaviors, or a lists of hero-phantoms we cannot live up to, rather than God’s story of redemption. It can lead to hero worship and to legalism.
2. Legalism – DO like this character. Legalism focuses on the imperatives of Scripture and/or human rules of behavior, not accounting for thinking and praying wisely about the decision to act. It can make descriptions of Biblical characters into prescriptions, adding to the commands already in Scripture.
3. Doctrinal-ism – KNOW the propositions. This is a focus on memorizing doctrine or catechism to the exclusion of understanding how it relates to Scripture. This limits faith to rationalistic, human-made categories, or a mere recitation of history. Memorization is the lowest level of cognitive learning and does not necessarily lead to understanding and transfer.
4. Personal-ism – ENHANCE yourself. This follows postmodern individualism & relativism. Based on humanistic self-esteem methodology, Scripture is used to provide personal enrichment by focusing on immediate personal application and gain.
5. Behaviorism – PERFORM to get a reward. Legalism & moralism lean towards teaching methods that seek behavior change via use of rewards and punishments. The Bible uses a variety of motivations for change. Different passages call for different responses. We must try not to confuse childishness with sin, but encourage age appropriate growth in self control.
6. Consumerism – HAVE FUN, SATISFY yourself. This perpetuates the culture’s “affluenza,” the unthinking consumption in absence of mutual obligations and responsibility to family and community health and growth. It can greatly diminish experiencing the joy of learning.
7. Individualism – COMPETE against others. This strengthens the culture’s Darwinian edge, rather than focusing on, and valuing, cooperation and community.
8. Sponge-ism – SOAK it up. The passive and inanimate sponge is a problematic metaphor of the child as learner. Collecting information is not the same as learning. Children are fellow pilgrims, needing to actively engage the learning process for themselves. We must try not to underestimate the capacity of children for learning, for true and spiritual worship, for responsible service, and for teaching others. They are not just “the church of tomorrow”, but a vital part of the church today.

Bible Story Hoped-for Learning Goals -- When teaching Bible stories, help children . . .

- identify with the story details, so that abstract issues are made more concrete by the events
- identify good and bad ways that God’s people respond to what He is doing
- rightly see themselves as part of God’s Big Story (Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation)
- apply patterns of Biblical people to their understanding of life
- focus on the question: What is God doing here in this passage?
- focus on the indicatives (statements of fact) of God’s grace, gifts, truths, and promises
- reason through how the imperatives (commands) follow in light of God’s indicatives
- see God as the hero of every story
- feel empathy for and identify with Biblical human characters, in line with the author’s original intent, and in the hope of the Gospel and God’s promises to His people