

Chapter 1:

The Importance of Biblical Training in Early Education

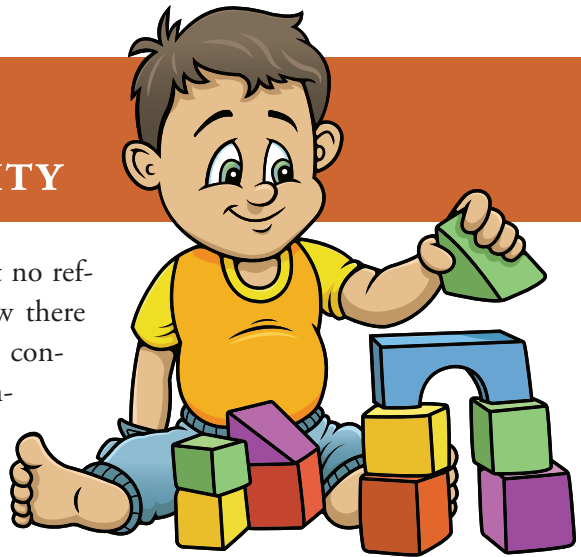
Section 1 BUILT FOR SPIRITUALITY

It has not been long when there was almost no reference to “spirituality” and “children”. Now there are numerous books, research projects, and conferences about children’s spirituality. It is important here to precisely define “spirituality” and as it exists as a crucial dimension of spirituality in science.

Spirituality is an inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and guiding. The word given to this higher power might be God, nature, spirit, the universe, the creator, or other words that represent a divine presence. But the important point is that spirituality encompasses our relationship and dialogue with this higher presence.¹

Spiritual development is the changing expression of this natural asset over time as new words and ideas – whether theological, scientific, or family views – allow us to feel, or not to feel, part of something larger, and experience an interactive two-way relationship with a guiding and loving universe. This can take the form of spirit, the natural world, God, or a sense of oneness with the world. A child’s spirituality precedes and transcends language, culture, and religion. It comes as natural to children as their fascination with a butterfly or the star-filled sky. But parents play a powerful role in a child’s spiritual development the same as every other development in their lives.²

Science now tells us that the spiritual faculty is inborn, fundamental to the human constitution, central in our physiology and psychology. Spirituality links the brain, mind and body.



In contrast to other lines of development, young children don't have to learn the "how" or the "what" of spiritual engagement. All of nature speaks to them and they respond. A smile, a loving touch, the bond between a child and parent that science cannot fully explain, speaks deeply to them also. Spirituality is the language of these moments and it is a child's birthright.³

Key Features to Understanding Children's Spirituality

The key features to understanding children's spirituality are gleaned from studies of children themselves. But the accounts from which these are drawn gives only merely useful pointers towards the insights about the full nature of children's spiritual lives. There is no substitute for learning about this in the company of children and the process of self-reflection.

Rebecca Nye, in her article "Spirituality" categorizes the 5 key features of a child's spirituality as follows:⁴

1. Everyday Aspects

Children's spirituality is not exclusively about extraordinary experiences, or a few extraordinary children. Rather it is evident in very ordinary, everyday aspects of children's lives and very probably a reality for every child, regardless of their religious or other factors of their upbringing.

The challenge is whether adults are capable of seeing or hearing this spirituality when it is expressed in such ordinary verbal and non-verbal forms. One way in which adults might learn through the eyes of a child is to pay more attention to the language of spirituality as part of the ordinary conversation among children.

2. The Depth of a Child's Spirituality

The capacity for depth in a child's spirituality often takes adults by surprise. Much of this has to do with low expectations but children are blessed by greater degrees of freedom from conventional lines of thought and responses. Their spiritual perception can take in a greater range than our trained vision.

3. Verbal and Non-Verbal

Spirituality at any age, but most of all childhood, exists on both verbal and non-verbal planes. However, there is a strong tendency to overlook the qualities of non-verbal as a stimulus, a way of processing and as a means of expression for chil-

dren's spirituality. Often verbal is valued over non-verbal, or non-verbal to the extent that we can hear it put into words. A consequence of this is that the spiritual life of a less verbal, younger child is overlooked and their journey often begins with a negative lesson that forms their spiritual life.

4. The Integrated and Erratic Course

Children do not separate the spiritual from other aspects of their lives, as adults tend to do. Children can jump to profound abstract spiritual insights one day and the next find this same style of thinking inhibiting. Another way of understanding this erratic quality is as the work of grace, or the spirit, which is something that is neither in the child's control or the educators. This challenges how to support and promote spiritual growth and questions the basis of working through stage-based schemes that follow closely to faith development theories.

5. The Endangerment

A consistent feature of children's spirituality is that it is endangered, moving toward extinction. This conclusion is not from adults but the feeling of children themselves. Despite a child's chance to share aspects of their spiritual lives, most children felt they had no value in the eyes of others and little future as they concentrated on growing up. In other words, spirituality felt like something to grow out of and this message was coming from the world, and the adults around them. This included the messages they received from ministers and their Christian educators.

Hardwired for Spirituality

Biologically we are hardwired for a spiritual connection. Spiritual development is a biological and psychological imperative from birth. Natural spirituality, the innate spirituality of young children appears to begin whole and fully expressed. As a child grows, natural spirituality integrates with cognitive, social, emotional and moral development along with physical change. If spirituality is maintained and integrated with other aspects of development, it supports a child through the challenging passage of adolescence.⁵

Without support and encouragement to keep developing that part of themselves, children's spiritual development weakens under pressure from a culture that constantly has them feeling judged and pressured. Our culture has not been welcoming to spirituality and our predominantly materialistic 24/7 media infused world is not set up for the introspective thought involved in spiritual reflection. It is how we live and what is being modeled for our children.

As parents, it is imperative to show children how to express spiritual values in everyday

interactions with animals, nature, and our own inner life. This exploration cultivates spiritual knowing, a sense of the spiritual dimension that is always present and is deeper than superficial attributes and higher than competitive and materialistic priorities.

Endnotes

1Lisa Miller, Ph.D., *The Spiritual Child*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 25.

2Ibid, 25, 26.

3Lisa Miller, Ph.D., *The Spiritual Child*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 25, 26.

4Richards, Anne & Peter Privett, eds., *Through the Eyes of a Child*. London: Churchhouse Publishing, 2009. 70-75

5Miller, 28-31.

Chapter 1 Section 2

THEOLOGY FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE



When we truly hear the voices of children we find them endlessly speaking to us of God. The ones that are allowed to be themselves explore the world as an adventure playground laughing with joy at the endless possibilities of the creation. Children tell us of love that endures, forgiveness that never ends, and a world that is good and fun. These children describe the world in a theological language reminding adults that they are amnesiac children, requiring us to remember how to play.¹

What is a Child?

It is important to begin with an exploration of the very concept of “child” showing how we all have presuppositions and assumptions about children and childhood which often are very far away from the God’s eye view of the child made in His image. Theologically the Bible tells us that children are a gift from God and God address humans as complete individual from before birth and throughout their lives. God calls each individual into a real relationship and vocation as He called Samuel, not the more experience teacher and mentor. Yet the Christian tradition has failed to show that children are active participants in the people of God who make independent contributions to the Church rather than simply responding to demands and instructions of adult Christians. Looking through the eyes of a child we should see a whole person before God, not an incomplete person or adult in the making.²

Natural Theological Understanding of Children

The spirituality of young children presents as a natural set of social cognitive assumptions. These inborn perceptual tendencies and styles of reasoning show a deep view of who we are, what we are doing here and our human capabilities in a spiritual world. A study by Lisa Miller showed three distinct features of the natural understanding in young children.³

1. An Intentional, Intelligent Universe

A child perceives God in all living being. A dog is a friend in the truest sense, a tree wants to be watered and welcomes a hug, and an ant hurries home to its children. The universe is intentional, alive and intelligent with a guiding sense of justice and we can become part of it to make the world safe and loving to all.

2. Parents as All-Knowing with God-Like Omniscience

Children assume that parents know everything but in the child's mind the parents not only know concrete things but the child also assumes their parents are all knowing, all seeing generally carrying divine qualities.

3. An Afterlife

Children assume an afterlife and only later are they socialized out of that belief. Even in cultures that do not teach them otherwise, children's assumptions of transcendent connections remain intact. Many children maintain this close connection with a loved one who has deceased whether their upbringing included a belief in an afterlife or not. They may say a little prayer to the one they have lost when they are facing a tough moment and feel the spirit of a friend in a place that they used to spend time together.

A Child's View of Sin

Church traditions offer many definitions of sin; there are the Ten Commandments, seven deadly sins and more. But what is sin through the eyes of a child? In interviews conducted by Emma Percy asking children about God's attitude toward sin, the children understood that God was sad about sin because it made people sad and unhappy, but they emphasized quickly that God forgives sin. This was explained by a strong belief that God wants people to be happy. There was little sense that sin offended God or that it made God angry. There was no expression of God's wrath. Interestingly enough, none of the children under the age of seven knew the word sin or what it meant.⁴

This brought about the question of sin being deliberately left out of Christian education with younger children. There is a tension in wanting to shield children from the darker side of life even though traditional fairy tales have concepts of wickedness. Are there Bible stories that we do not tell because they present images of God's wrath rather than love and mercy? The story of the flood becomes a story about animals rather than judgment of the wicked. Emphasizing God's love and forgiveness establishes a secure sense in a child of being loved. However, there is a danger of churches underplaying God's sense of justice and God's anger at sin. No one wants to portray an image of God looking to punish sinful children. But as

parents and leaders, are we wary of discussing the darker side of human nature and the cost of forgiveness?

Emma Percy concluded from her study that children are more comfortable talking about sin than adults are about discussing the idea of sin with children. Children clearly understood the concepts of right and wrong, but also understood that it is not possible to always get it right. However, the children had a very underdeveloped concept of the cost of sin in the realm of salvation. They were deeply assured of God's love and forgiveness but took for granted God's ability to dismiss sin. She concluded that it is important for educators to find a more distinctive language of sinfulness to help children understand life as an imperfect human.

The Bible

The Bible is not an easy resource for children. Numerous versions and adaptations are now being offered to make it more child-friendly but often the aim of appealing to children is made on the assumption that neither children nor the Bible have profound spiritual qualities. Stories are often selected on the basis of the suspected natural appeal to children, such as ones with animals. These stories are often retold by fluffy animals, cartoon characters or puppets and the depth of the story is often reduced to a simple message with a moral or take-home teaching. The complexity of the story and the child are treated as a nuisance or at least something to be got around, rather than a vital ingredient.⁵

One way of engaging children is to make Bible stories more interactive. Adults tend to be passive in their reactions to deeply ambiguous and disturbing Bible passages and cease to notice what puzzles them and what they would like to ask or explore about the story. Forming an interactive response habit early is a good idea. A child's ability to ask questions and the freshness of their approach to material are qualities to be nurtured, not discouraged.⁶

The Importance of Play

Through play we can begin to discover our own identity and our place in the world. Play challenges our ethical behavior and our choices of how we act in the world. In Rebecca Nye's research into children's spirituality she stressed the importance of play flexibility. When children described their spiritual experiences or stories, they used languages that were both playful and flexible and it allowed them to use the familiar language of their everyday lives. Nye deconstructs the familiar model of adult spirituality, often based on the extra-ordinary, and offers the challenge of the child's natural playful adaptability. It is the same challenge that Jesus offered in Mark 10:15, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will never enter it."⁷

To develop a play relationship with children it is necessary to drop adult baggage. The task for adults in these settings is to let go of egocentric needs and meet the needs of a child

by creating safe boundaries so that a child can be a child. The ability to sit back and allow others to discover their own learning, to learn the art of sitting comfortably with silence and non-action is hard, but productive.⁸

Conclusion

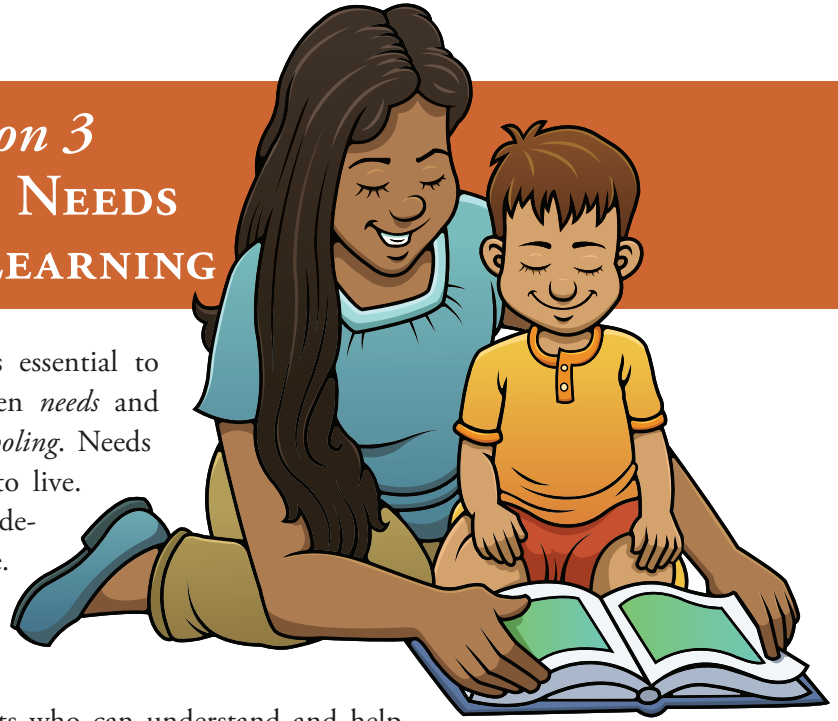
Looking through the eyes of a child is not an easy experience. It can actually be uncomfortable especially as we have been adapted to our Christian comfort zone. Children reveal the love and beauty of Jesus and are generous in a way that Christian teaching often is not. Children challenge our conventional readings of theology and teaching and demand each of us to re-examine our faith, our Christian lives and theological understanding.

Endnotes

- 1 Anne Richards & Peter Privett, eds., *Through the Eyes of a Child*, (London: Churchhouse Publishing, 2009), xxi-xxiv.
- 2 Nigel Asbridge, "What is a Child?" *Through the Eyes of a Child*, (London: Churchhouse Publishing, 2009), 1-20.
- 3 Lisa Miller, Ph.D., *The Spiritual Child*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 105-109.
- 4 Emma Percy, "Sin", *Through the Eyes of a Child*, (London: Churchhouse Publishing, 2009) 128-145.
- 5 Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality* (London: Churchhouse Publishing, 2009), 65.
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Percy, 113.
- 8 Ibid.

Chapter 1 Section 3

PRESCHOOLERS NEEDS AND WAYS OF LEARNING



To preface this chapter, it is essential to identify the difference between *needs* and *wants* versus *learning* and *schooling*. Needs are items necessary in order to live.

Wants are items that are desired but not necessary for life.

A child's want may also be what they need, but what they want seldom meets all their needs. That is why adults who can understand and help them make right choices are a preschoolers greatest need. An adult who will not cater to every want, but try to provide for needs.¹

When looking at the difference between learning and schooling it is important to realize that children do not arrive in the Bible classroom as blank slates.² They are already connected to families, communities, and cultures. Environments have already shaped and provided large amounts of learning in a few short years. The fact that young children learn primarily from relationships is a fact that is often overlooked when deciding on the mode of learning for Bible classrooms. This method of learning does not come in a packaged curriculum but is a natural process of life.

Understanding the Needs of Preschoolers

To teach preschoolers, it is crucial to understand that despite diversity in backgrounds and situations, their basic needs are consistent. Sanders and Bradberry identify a preschooler's basic needs as love, trust, acceptance, independence, security, freedom, guidance, and a sense of accomplishment.³

Love to a preschooler is an action more than a feeling. Babies who are held and hugged develop a healthier emotional life than those left without physical contact.⁴ As a teacher, the simple actions of smiling, listening, and hugging express love.

Trust is primarily developed through relationships as a result of love. Providing preschoolers with a loving, caring church environment creates this experience. By learning to trust parents and teachers, a preschooler is preparing to trust God.

Acceptance also develops out of love. Every child is worthy of acceptance and a teacher communicates this acceptance by giving a child their undivided attention and love even when their behavior may not be exemplary.

Independence is developed when preschoolers are given the opportunity to make choices and take care of themselves. This involves letting a child do things for themselves. Whether it is a simple or difficult task, fostering the ability to solve problems alone fosters responsibility.⁵

Security means providing a clean, safe, secure room for preschoolers. A safe environment allows a child to explore their world and learn about God without worry. Having policies and procedures for screening volunteers, child security systems, disinfecting, toys and emergencies ensure parents that their child is safe.

Freedom like independence comes from making choices enabling a child to become an individual. Providing several different choices in a Bible classroom fosters a sense of responsibility and self-discipline in making wise decisions.

Guidance is the direction given to preschoolers to know right from wrong and take responsibility for that choice. Assisting a child through words, actions and even room arrangements provides a child an environment in which they learn respect for themselves, others and property beginning the development of self-discipline.⁶

A sense of accomplishment comes from providing preschoolers activities in which they can develop and learn new skills thereby experiencing success. It is important to select age appropriate activities that challenge but not frustrate a child.

The Ways Preschoolers Learn

Although each child is unique, the basic ways in which they learn are constant. Sanders and Bradberry identify these eight basic ways as senses, curiosity, “hands-on” learning, satisfaction, repetition, relationships, imitation and play.⁷

Senses are the direct avenue in which a preschooler discovers their world. From

birth to early childhood, children use their senses to explore and make sense of the world around them that God made. Children also learn best and retain more information when they engage their senses.

Curiosity helps children be more observant, to think about things and to try and figure them out. As children explore their curiosity, they expand their vocabulary by using language to describe what they are thinking. The deep curiosity of a child provides a natural method to connect a child to God when they are learning and discovering new things.

Hands-on learning is the process of learning by actually doing and experiencing rather than being told about it. This is particularly important for young children as this is how they are programmed to learn. As soon as they are born, children learn from observing, copying and experimenting with their hands and body. By utilizing “hands on” teaching in Biblical education, a child will develop a greater understanding of a biblical truth and how it applies to their lives.

Satisfaction or affirmation is imperative to a child’s progress in learning. Babies and young children start life accepting everything that parents and adults tell them. That is the reason it is so important for a child be given positive affirmation and choices to gain a sense of accomplishment. They are able to learn in the way God gifted them and will discover that it is best to make choices with God’s help.

Repetition is the well-known and most loved method of learning for young children. Reading a story or singing a song over and over again may seem boring to an adult but research has shown that young children learn best in this manner.⁸ Children actually learn new words better when they hear them in the same story versus hearing them in different stories.⁹ Repetition is a toddler’s way of learning and building trust. With repetition a child can anticipate what comes next and helps them make sense of their surrounding world. It allows the building of foundational truths thereby increasing knowledge and understanding.

Relationships shape the way preschoolers see the world and affect all areas of their development. When warm and engaged relationships are developed with students, it is a reflection of Jesus who built relationships with those He taught. His purpose was to reconcile us to the Father so we can be in a relationship with God. (2 Cor. 5:18-19)

Imitation is a powerful form of learning used by children. What children do and how they behave with objects and others, often depends on what they have seen others do. Imitation games provide early exposure to understanding the concept of self

and other laying the pathway to empathy and moral sentiments.¹⁰ Living a Christian life is learning to imitate Christ.

Play is one of the main ways in which children learn and develop. It nurtures imagination and gives a child a sense of adventure. Because it is fun children will often become absorbed in what they are doing and not even realize they are learning. Play helps to promote the development of language skills, emotions, creativity and social skills. In this manner a child can learn essential skills such as problem solving, working with others and sharing.

Conclusion

Learning is happening all the time for babies, toddlers and preschoolers. These early skills lay the groundwork not only for their future school experience, but also for their Biblical worldview. Structuring a Bible classroom around preschoolers needs and ways of learning provides a variety of learning approaches enabling each and every child to absorb the same Bible truth in a method that is as unique as they are!

Endnotes

- 1 Karyn Henley, *Child-Sensitive Teaching*, (Nashville: Child Sensitive Communication, LLC, 2008) 21.
- 2 Erika Christakis, *The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016) xiii.
- 3 Thomas Sanders and Mary Ann Bradberry. *Teaching Preschoolers: First Steps Toward Faith*. (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2017) 14-16.
- 4 Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell, M.D. *The Five Love Languages of Children*, (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1997) 33.
- 5 Morlee Maynard and Jerry Aldridge. *Understanding Today's Preschoolers: Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today*. (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2001) 16.
- 6 Sanders, 17.
- 7 Ibid, 19.
- 8 J. S. Horst, K. L. Parsons and N. M. Bryan. "Get the Story Straight: Contextual Repetition Promotes Word Learning from Storybooks." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2, (2011): 17.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Andrew N. Meltzoff, Andrew N. "Born to Learn: What Infants Learn from Watching Us. *Department of Psychology, University of Washington*, (1999): 1.