Chapter 11

Interactive Age-Specific Strategies for Introducing Beginning Readers to the Bible as Authentic Text

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In 2011, the King James Version celebrated its 400th anniversary! Since 1603, this amazing and ancient publication has had significant influence on great western literature, art and music. It is the only book that has been consistently published since the invention of the printing press. It is the most translated book in the world, and it is still the best-selling publication of all time (Ball, 2011). This ancient text continues to inspire writers in the twenty-first century as demonstrated by the movie, *The Passion of the Christ* and the popular book, *The Da Vinci Code.*

If this ancient text is such a valuable and unique book, why is current research pointing to a noticeable decline in Bible reading and biblical literacy among Christians from all age brackets (Morris, 2008)? Why is there such a lack of knowledge regarding this important ancient book and its message? Even though there is a proliferation of contemporary Bible translations, easy accessibility to personal electronic Bible devices and increasing Bible affordability, why has the decline in biblical literacy continued? Peterson (2003,) wants to know, "How has it come to pass that the enormous success in achieving mass literacy so that everyone can read the Bible and the technological invention that revolutionized printing so that everyone can have a Bible to read has resulted in such widespread biblical illiteracy?" (11).

Cole and Ovwigho's research (2010,) exploring children's personal scripture engagement, found that, "less than one-fifth" of the children surveyed in their study "reads or listens to the Bible with their family at least four days a week" (111). If the next generation is going to reverse the current negative trend and embrace Christian

values and biblical truths in a meaningful and purposeful way then we need a generation of Christians who from infancy have been taught to know and love the scriptures.

One program that is actively addressing the problems of biblical illiteracy among children is *Bible Reading 4 Beginner Readers.* This program teaches non-readers and beginner readers to read and positively interact with the Bible. It aims to nurture and develop positive Bible reading habits in five and six year-olds because Barna's research indicates that the habits we form in our impressionable years are the behaviours that define us as we grow older (The Barna Group, 2004). "You have been taught the Holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus," (2 Tim 3:15).

RECOGNIZED BENEFITS OF BIBLE ENGAGEMENT

The Bible is central to a Christian's daily faith formation and experience (Ps 119:105) and it informs our understanding of who we are and who God is (Peterson, 2003). It is a living book. According to Hebrews 4:12, "The word of God is alive and active." Reynolds (2003) states that when we engage with God's word we can look into the heart of God. Age or intellectual ability is inconsequential declares Dewey (2001) because, "The simplest soul and the youngest child, if they are open to God, can get as much as anyone else from reading the Bible," (7). It is the great lesson book, says White (1943), and children should have access to its pages so that they can learn to know God. Peterson (2003) argues that, "It is not a difficult book that only 'smart' people can get" (13). According to White (1943), angels are sent to impress the mind and enlighten our understanding.

One important aspect of biblical literacy that is rarely mentioned is the intellectual benefits it affords the reader. Jeynes's (2009) research on the relationship of Bible literacy to academic achievement and behavior found that the students with the highest level of biblical literacy also ranked the highest in academic achievement and displayed the best behavior of the three groups in the cohort. Interestingly, those with the lowest level of biblical literacy also had the lowest academic scores and worst behavior of the three groups.

Other benefits of Bible engagement include a balanced life style, a resilience of character and the discernment of truth (White, 1943). Cole and Ovwigho (2012) discovered that both adults and children who read the Bible at least four times a week engaged in less risk-taking behavior and experienced less personal issues. Second Timothy 3:16 reminds the reader that, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

If children are to discover the dynamic nature of God's Word then they need to interact individually with the Bible so that the Word of God can speak to them and teach them (Castle, 1993). Children live in a fast-moving, stimulating, electronic

and instant-gratification age, so Bible teaching needs to be innovative, creative and activity-based if it is going to be seen as relevant, informative and important.

Current practical Bible teaching resources mention relevant ways of teaching Bible stories, how to have innovative Bible lessons, ways of engaging in lively and relevant discussions and many more ideas which are all necessary. However, there is a noticeable lack of a variety of resources actually showing how or where to use the Bible in a Bible lesson. Many of the resources appear to talk about teaching the Bible and Bible stories, but excluded are suggestions of actual hands-on experiences that encourage young children to individually interact with the Bible.

While it is true there are parts of the Bible that only adults can comprehend the following thoughts need to be considered.

> Our Heavenly father, in giving His word, did not overlook the children. In all that men have written, where can be found anything that has such a hold upon the heart, anything so well adapted to awaken the interest of the little ones, as the stories of the Bible? (White, 1952, 185)

Perhaps we are missing out on the most impressionable years of children's lives. Why not use the Bible as an authentic reading text in the teaching of early language literacy skills?

AN EARLY LITERACY INTERACTIVE BIBLE READING PROGRAM

It is a fact, credited to the work of the Bible Society, that the Bible can be used to teach literacy. If the Bible can be used to teach literacy to the illiterate in a variety of non-English speaking countries surely the Bible has a place in early literacy education where English is the primary language. If we believe that Bible reading brings the reader into "contact with the thoughts of the Infinite" (White, 1952, 124), why have we traditionally waited until children are competent readers before introducing them to the experience of personal Bible reading? By waiting are we wasting some of the most important years of children's lives? The author of the following *Bible Reading 4 Beginner Readers* program believes that a love for engaging with and reading the Bible can be fostered and developed in impressionable young children by engaging them in age-appropriate, interactive, supported Bible reading experiences.

Bible Reading 4 Beginner Readers (BR4), an original Bible literacy program, was designed, created, developed and trialled by this researcher. Its primary goal is to encourage five to six year-olds, both readers and non-readers, to interactively experience the Bible on a personal level. Like any early literacy program engagement, nurture and success are important considerations at this stage of early development. The BR4 program emphasises interaction with the Bible rather than information about it or how to use it. There are no pre-requisite Bible reading skills for this program. It is a non-threatening early literacy program that nurtures and encourages children to

interactively read a known Bible story. Once children's literacy skills are more developed, specific Bible reference and navigation skills are then introduced in BR4 Stage Four. This biblical literacy program can be used in a variety of settings:

1. as a stand-alone program, or
2. as an addition to any Bible story time at home, or at school, or as part of the Children's Ministry church program.

Competent reading ability is not a pre-requisite for this program. The program has been developed so that all children can experience success and achievement at all stages.

THE BIBLE READING 4 BEGINNER READERS (BR4) PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The BR4 program, currently being taught as part of a Christian pre-service elementary teacher degree program in Australia, is an interactive Bible reading program that is divided into four sequential stages. It begins with an introductory exploration of the Bible as the sacred text before developing word, sentence, and verse location skills in a supportive and nurturing environment. The structure is as follows:

- *BR4 Stage One Bible Exploration*: The beginning stage encourages an initial exploration of the Bible as a sacred book and encourages mastery of page location skills.
- *BR4 Stage Two Word Level*: The next stage introduces early literacy Bible word recognition, Bible word identification and Bible word isolation skills and strategies.
- *BR4 Stage Three Sentence Level*: This stage continues to develop the skills from BR4 Stage Two but introduces the more advanced skills of early literacy repeated Bible reading, Bible sentence rhythm patterns, and scripture songs.
- *BR4 Stage Four Verse Level*: The final stage is the most advanced stage and continues to develop the skills from BR4 Stage Three while adding the more complex skills of Bible navigation and verse location.

BIBLE READING 4 BEGINNER READERS (BR4) PROGRAM DETAILS

BR4 Stage One: Bible Exploration Explained

Bible exploration is the introductory stage where children explore the Bible as a sacred book. For children at this early stage of the program, discovering Bible page numbering, contents, maps etc. are all relevant experiences. Mastering page location skills and the skill of placing a bookmark in a specific page are extremely helpful at this stage.

These skills can save a lot of frustration if the Bible is accidently closed or the specific page inadvertently lost. If the introductory lessons are conducted in a classroom or group setting, it is advisable to use the same Bible version for the entire class. The particular version is not significant at this stage but a personal copy of a large print Bible is recommended with verse numbers easily identifiable on the margin. When the children have mastered the skill of finding the correct page, it's time to move up to BR4 Stage Two.

BR4 Stage Two: Word Level Explained

The next stage introduces the children to interactive early literacy Bible word recognition, Bible word isolation, and Bible word identification strategies. To facilitate positive initial experiences with the Bible, it is expeditious to begin with the book of Genesis. It is the first and easiest book of the Bible to find and Genesis 1 has several repetitive words and phrases suitable for the beginner reader. The word "God" appears at least fourteen times from Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 1:14 and the repetitive phrase, "the first day . . . the second day," appears throughout the chapter.

Daily revision of previously encountered words, before new words are introduced, is a valuable teaching technique for this stage of the program. By learning a minimum of one new word a day the beginner reader can recognise at least five new words within a week. By the end of two weeks the children may be able to recognise ten words and the beginner reader will now have the skill to independently read a small number of specific words found in the Bible. When the children are comfortable with finding, identifying and remembering about twenty words such as Bible characters, places and objects, they are ready for the next step in the BR4 program.

Word Level Interactive Group Bible Reading Strategies

As the adult reads a stated Bible passage:

1. The children listen for a specified word, such as God, and clap each time they hear it read aloud from the passage.
2. Groups of children listen for a specified word, for example, Group One: God; Group Two: Adam; and Group Three: Eve, and then perform a designated action for example, Group One: clap; Group Two: stamp, and Group Three: thumbs up each time they hear the word read aloud from the passage.
3. The children look for a written word such as God in their Bible and raise their hand every time they hear the word read aloud from the passage.
4. The children look for a written word such as fish or sheep and do the actions or make a sound every time they hear the word read aloud from the passage.

5. The children look for several words such as Jesus, sheep or shepherd, in their Bible, which are written on cards and given to different class members. Every time a word is read the children hold up their card.

Word Level Lesson Plan

The Lesson Plan in Table 1 illustrates the BR4 program as an integral part of a Bible story time. It demonstrates how children can interactively read the Bible when word recognition and sound identification skills are applied in a supported learning environment.

TABLE 1: Stage Two word level lesson plan

Stage Two: Word Level Lesson Aim:	
At the end of the lesson the children should be able to retell the main points of the Bible story and recognise the written name of God in Genesis 1:1.	
Procedure:	
Step 1	At the conclusion of telling the creation Bible story the adult opens her Bible to Genesis 1:1 and writes the page number on a 6 x 8 inch card and displays it to the class. The children are assisted with finding this page in their Bible.
Step 2	The children place their book mark in the correct page.
Step 3	The adult writes the word "God" on a 6 x 8 inch card and then reads the written word "God" aloud. This activity associates the sound of the Bible character's name with the Bible character's written name. This is developing word and sound identification skills.
Step 4	Collectively the children say the Bible character's name that is written on the 6 x 8 inch card before individually looking for it on the specified Bible page.
Step 5	The children say the written name aloud as they point to the Bible character's name in their Bibles. Individually they repeat it aloud again several times while pointing to their Bibles.
Conclusion:	
Individually the children point to the identified Bible character's name in their Bible, and read it aloud to several children in the class. Finally, the children leave the bookmark in the specified page. This is done to assist the children in finding the Bible story, and the relevant Bible character's name, when the Bible is next opened.	

BR4 Stage Three: Sentence Level Explained

This stage continues to develop the skills from BR4 Stage Two but now includes more advanced early literacy skills of repeated readings, rhythm patterns and scripture sentence songs. Specific Bible sentences are selected for repeated readings, sentence rhythm patterns are introduced to assist in reading and memorising the selected Bible sentences, and the selected Bible sentence is set to music. Once children are

comfortable finding ten or more Bible sentences independently it is time to move to BR4 Stage Four.

Sentence Level Interactive Bible Reading Strategies:

There are three sequential strategies for Stage Three:

Strategy A: Bible Sentence Songs Commercially Available

Strategy B: Scripture Sentences Set to Public Domain Music

Strategy C: Bible Sentence Rhythm Patterns

Following is an explanation of each strategy.

Strategy A: Bible Sentence Songs Commercially Available

Table 2 lists three commercially available scripture songs. The music may often be found on the Internet.

TABLE 2: Commercially available scripture songs

Bible Text	Bible Sentences using Scripture Songs
Psalm 118:24	"This is the day the Lord has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it."
Rev 3:20	"Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in."
Nehemiah 8:10	"The joy of the Lord is your strength."

Strategy B: Scripture Sentences Set to Public Domain Music

Table 3 illustrates how three scripture sentences can be set to well-known, traditional, public domain music. The lyrics in the following examples have been specifically written to fit the rhythm of the music.

TABLE 3: Scripture sentence songs set to public domain music

Bible Text	Bible Sentence Lyrics	Traditional & Public Domain Music
Genesis 1:27 "So God created man in his own image."	So God created man in his own image, his own image (Repeat 2x) So God created man In his own image, So God created man in his own image.	Music: *If you're happy and you know it*

Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."	In the beginning God created, God created, God created. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.	Music: *Mary had a little Lamb*
Psalms 119:105 "Your word is a lamp unto my feet."	Your word is a lamp unto my feet. (Repeat 4x)	Music: *Skip to my Lou*

Strategy C: Bible Sentence Rhythm Patterns

The five examples of rhythm patterns in Table 4 illustrate how to use rhythm patterns to read and interact with a Bible sentence.

TABLE 4: Bible sentence rhythm patterns

BIBLE SENTENCE: Psalms 119:105 NIV, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet."									
Words	Your	word	is	a	lamp	un-	to	my	feet
Example 1 Clap as you say each syllable	clap	clap	clap	clap	clap	clap	clap	clap	clap
Example 2 Clap plus stamp on major words as you say each syllable	clap	stamp	clap	clap	stamp	clap	clap	clap	stamp
Example 3 Clap plus hold up pictures of major words as you say each syllable	clap	Picture of a Bible	Clap	Clap	Picture of a lantern	Clap	Clap	Clap	Picture of feet
Example 4 Clap plus actions for major words as you say each syllable	*Action:* Point to God in heaven	*Action:* Hands open like a book	clap	clap	*Action:* Pretend to hold a candle in the palm of your hand	clap	clap	clap	*Action:* Point to your feet
Example 5 No words but actions and clapping of the entire rhythm pattern	*Action:* Point to God in heaven	*Action:* Hands open like a book	clap	clap	*Action:* Pretend to hold a candle in the palm of your hand	clap	clap	clap	*Action:* Point to your feet

Sentence Level Repeated Reading Lesson Plan

This lesson plan (Table 5) demonstrates how to use the repeated reading strategy to learn to read a Bible sentence.

TABLE 5: Sentence level repeated reading lesson plan

Stage Three: Repeated Reading Lesson Aim:	
At the end of the lesson the children should be able to independently locate and read a Bible sentence.	
Procedure:	
Step 1	With adult assistance, the children locate the allocated Bible page and sentence. A bookmark is placed in the open page.
Step 2	As the adult reads the entire sentence, the children listen and follow along by placing their finger under each word in their Bible.
Step 3	The children place their finger under each word in their Bible and read along with the adult.
Step 4	Repeat Step 2 twice.
Step 5	The children attempt to read the Bible sentence unaided. If the children still need assistance to read the sentence, repeat Step 2 & 3 again. It is crucial at this stage that the children experience success with this new skill.
Conclusion:	
The children read the sentence unassisted to two other people. If this can be accomplished without any adult intervention then the children have clearly demonstrated that they have successfully learnt to read this Bible sentence.	

Sentence Level Music and Repeated Reading Lesson Plan

The Lesson Plan in Table 6 demonstrates how to use the early literacy skill of repeated reading and music to assist learning in a stand-alone lesson.

TABLE 6: Sentence level music and repeated reading lesson plan

Stage Three: Music and Repeated Reading Lesson Aim:	
At the end of the lesson the children should be able to independently read, locate and sing the Bible text found in Nehemiah 8:10, "The joy of the Lord is your strength."	
Procedure:	
Step 1	The children are assisted by an adult to find Nehemiah 8:10. They place their bookmark in the open page.
Step 2	The meaning of the text is discussed. The text is read as the children place their finger under each word.
Step 3	The children repeat the words of the Bible text after the adult.
Step 4	The children are then taught a song using these Bible words set to music.
Step 5	The words, "The joy of the Lord is your strength," are highlighted or underlined in their Bible.

Conclusion:
The children sing the Bible text while pointing to the words in their Bible. Finally, to assist finding Nehemiah 8:10 in the future, the children leave the bookmark in its place. The Bible has now become their Bible Songbook as well as their Bible Reader.

BR4 Stage Four: Verse Level Explained

This is the most advanced BR4 stage. Bible verse location skills are introduced for the first time. BR4 Stage Two and Three skills continue to be developed. Repeated reading strategies will still assist the reading of entire Bible verses. Bible location skill development in BR4 Stage Four is a significant step toward assisting and encouraging the child to become an independent Bible reader.

When the children have mastered verse location skills, then the BR4 program has achieved its goal and the children can be moved on to programs that cover more sophisticated knowledge about how to use the Bible. The advanced skill of learning about the structure and history of the Bible is intentionally kept until the children are comfortable with independently locating Bible verses.

Upon completion of BR4 Stage Four there are a variety of available resources that can strengthen and extend the Bible skills already established. (See Appendix A)

Verse Level Strategy Using Rhyme

Rhyme is a strategy that can assist children while they are learning the skill of finding a specific Bible reference. The following example of a reference rhyme in Table 7 can be found in the book *Follow the Bible: 52 Bible Lessons for Beginner Readers Ages 6–8.*

TABLE 7: Reference Rhyme

Reference Rhyme
"First I find the book or page number of the book.
Then I find the chapter; the big number's where I look.
Last, I find the verse; the small number is the one.
I've got it now!
Finding verses is such fun!" (Ford, Spence, & Stoker, 2003, 36)

Verse Level Lesson Plan- Introducing Bible Location skills

This lesson (Table 8) is adapted from *My Volcano Adventure: Discovering the Bible's Power* (2004, 30). It teaches children how to locate a specific Bible verse.

TABLE 8: Bible location skills lesson plan

Stage Four: Introducing Bible Location Skills Lesson Aim:	
At the end of the lesson the children should have an introductory knowledge of how to locate a Bible reference or a Bible address.	
Procedure:	
Step 1	The adult explains that a Bible text has an address so that we can easily find a specific Bible verse. Our home address lets our friends know where they can find us so a Bible address lets us find a Bible location. Our home address = Town + Street + House Number A Bible address = Book + Chapter + Verse Number
Step 2	Children check the contents list at the front of the Bible to assist them in finding the names and correct order of the 39 Books of the Old Testament and 27 Books of the New Testament.
Step 3	The adult explains the Bible address for Psalms 119:105. The first part of the address is the book's name (e.g. Psalms). The second part is the chapter number (e.g. 119). -Most books are divided into chapters. -Chapters are the big numbers on each page. The third part of the address is the verse number (e.g. 105). -Every chapter in the Bible is divided into verses. -Verses are the small numbers on every Bible page. Most Bible references use a colon (:) to separate the chapter from the verse (e.g. Psalms 119:105).
Step 4	The children use their Bible to explore the selected given text with adult assistance.
Step 5	The children explain and demonstrate, to the adult or other children, how to find a Bible text. If children can do this without any prompting then it shows that they have grasped the skill of Bible navigation and verse location.
Conclusion:	
Play a game of "Bible Seek" where one person chooses a Bible text and the other player has to locate it. Once located they change roles and the game is started again.	

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

After several years of implementation, I've noted the following anecdotal results:

1. It was discovered that when the BR4 program was sequentially implemented with 5 to 6 year-old beginner readers that positive attitudes toward the Bible and Bible interactions were developed.
2. Some children chose to read the Bible in preference to other books available to them when they were given a choice of reading material.
3. Reading skill development was given a boost when the children engaged with the living word.
4. Interaction with the Bible became a regular and normal activity for the children and it extended beyond the classroom. Some parents commented that their child independently read the Bible at home.

CONCLUSION

It is my prayer that all children will have the opportunity of engaging in positive, age-appropriate and interactive experiences with the Bible while still young and impressionable. Perhaps if these early habits are nurtured and continually developed by significant adults in these young children's lives they will continue to be Bible reading and Bible practicing Christians in their teenage years. I believe, that with God's help, the BR4 program has the possibility of starting and nurturing a creative and positive biblical literacy trend.

APPENDIX A-ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

PARENT/TEACHER AND CHILD BIBLICAL LITERACY RESOURCES:

1. Davis, Mary, ed. *Big Book of Bible Facts and Fun: Cool Stuff about the Bible (Ages 6–12)* Reproducible. Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2005.
   A useful reproducible resource that includes, (as listed on the back cover): "Bible maps, fun cartoons, a kid-friendly time line, Bible study pages, Bible book cards, puzzles, and a Bible dictionary."
2. Ford, Linda, Christine Spence and Bruce E. Stoker, eds. *Follow the Bible: 52 Bible Lessons for Beginner Readers Ages* 6–8. Cincinnati, OH: Standard, 2003.
   This resource provides fifty-two reproducible lessons written for readers aged 6 to 8 that, "build enthusiasm for reading Bible stories" (p. 8) and provide skill-building ideas especially for using the Bible.
3. Lale, Tim. *We can Trust the Bible: Helping Children Understand where the Bible Came From.* Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2012.
   This book, as it says on the back cover, is "A kid's-eye view of how we got the Bible." It is written in language 6 to 8 years-olds can understand and includes valuable teaching tips and "behind-the-scene glimpses of how the Bible came into existence."
4. Volcano Adventure Team. *My Volcano Adventure: Discovering the Bible's Power.* Fort Collins, CO: Through the Bible, 2004.
   This book is about, "the Bible's origin, authority, message, and purpose," as stated on their website and provides valuable age-appropriate activities. There is a child's book and a Teacher's Guide on-line http://www.discipleland.com

CHILDREN'S BIBLICAL LITERACY RESOURCES:

1. Holmes, Andy. *If You Give a Girl a Bible.* Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Kidzone, 2005.

This delightful picture book includes comical drawings but a very serious message: If you give a girl a Bible, her faith will grow and she'll want to give her friend a Bible too. There is a similar book available for boys: *If you Give a Boy a Bible.*

2. Thomas, Jerry, D. *Detective Zack: The Secret of Blackloch Castle.* Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998.

   This well written children's mystery, chapter book, involves Zack and Stef who seek answers to the mystery of the Blackloch Castle. In the process they discover the story of how we got the Bible. It appeals to those who are aged eight or older.

PARENT/TEACHER BIBLICAL LITERACY RESOURCE:

Fisher, Barbara J. *Developing a Faith-based Education: A Teacher's Manual.* Terrigal, NSW: David Barlow, 2010.

This book offers a comprehensive and balanced view to support the nurturing of spirituality and faith formation for children zero to twelve years of age. It includes strategies for purposeful interactive reading of the Bible with children, fun ideas for memorising Bible texts, and suggestions for personal Bible study programs that are appropriate for children.

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