

Worship in an early childhood setting

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Introduction

Catch cries such as 'high quality care' and 'warm, caring environment' seem to be standard descriptors of early childhood learning environments regardless of the centre's philosophy. No longer can one claim that these descriptors are unique to a centre staffed by Christians. Christian care providers need to look deeper into their practices to determine what makes their centre unique.

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Young children can develop an understanding of a Christian world view from their own limited life experiences. It is the role of the Christian care provider to ensure that the children in their care are introduced to the loving Creator and his Son. It is in these early years that the building blocks for their life are established. The easiest way for children to develop an understanding of the Christian world view is through an adult who has a relationship with their Maker.

Many practising Christians advocate starting their day with a time of prayer and reflection. For those with a genuine relationship with Jesus, this is more than a ritualistic start to the day. It is a time to acknowledge their Maker and commit their day to service for Him. Young children do not need to be taught to value worship. A more effective means of conveying the importance of worship is by an adult showing genuine enthusiasm and by proving to the children in their care that this relationship is real and valued. By starting a child's day with stories from the Bible, singing songs of praise and speaking to Jesus, a child will come to value this special time of worship.

The key components to any worship time would include prayer, music and the written or spoken word. This may seem simple enough, but the secret of an effective program for young children lies not with the components, but how they are presented. It is important that all information presented to children is relevant to their developmental stage.

Storytelling

Jesus' primary tool of instruction was story telling because stories are such a powerful way of delivering a life message. When telling a story to

children, it is crucial that the story be used to convey a message. "What we teach matters, teaching Biblical truth affects right thinking about God, and right thinking about God affects a right heart toward God" (Oman, 2007).

Children need stories that they can relate to, such as stories about children or from the perspective of a child observer. In an early childhood setting a wide range of approaches need to be used to tell the same story several times over a period of a week or two. This variety caters for a range of learning styles, aids recall and also reinforces the story. The materials and techniques used may act as sensory, motor, preoperational, cognitive or intrinsic stimuli (Barber, 1981). The caregiver may for example, read the story from a book, tell it, use sketches or pictures to illustrate the events, get the children to act it out, have the children echo key sentences, use puppets or felts, or any of a multitude of other story telling techniques.

Sensory stimuli are one effective means of improving learning and recall of stories (Barber, 1981). Sensory stimuli such as the visual images in pictures and flash cards, the auditory stimulation from musical instruments, stories and jingles, and the tactile experience of handling a range of objects all enhance a simple story. The addition of foods to taste or perfumes to smell will further stimulate learning. Imagine the impact of the story of Mary washing Jesus' feet as the sweet scent of perfume fills the air! Although the props to be used are important, the way that the props are introduced during the story telling experience can build additional curiosity and interest. One novel idea is to use an apron skirt with about twelve multi-coloured pockets that are big enough to hold props. As the story is told, props can be removed from the pockets.

The use of effective motor stimuli that are relevant to the child's developmental level is also a valuable learning aid (Barber, 1981). A story can be enhanced through the use of dramatic play aids such as a rocking horse prop for Balaam's donkey, pots and pans for Mary and Martha, or blocks for the Tower of Babel. However, the use of motor stimuli can be further extended to include, children physically acting out some scenes from the story

being told. Young children particularly enjoy being involved in the story and relish the opportunity to get up and march around the walls of Jericho or chase the Israelites across the Red Sea. The use of props, costumes, puppets and other such aids help maintain the learners' limited attention span.

One of the biggest mistakes made when sharing God's word with children is failing to speak at their level. David Staal (2005) in his book, *Leading Kids to Christ*, reminds adults to be wary of the use of terms and analogies, as these are lost on young children. Simple phrases such as 'having Jesus in your heart' can be taken quite literally by children. This can be illustrated by relating an incident about a child called Peter who had been learning the song "Into my heart". During the week he had been studying the human body and there was a model of a human torso in the room on which the budding doctors could conduct operations. He located the heart, removed it and opened it up then sadly commented, "Jesus isn't in here!" He could locate and identify the heart, but the abstract concept of 'having Jesus in your heart' was beyond his current level of comprehension. This illustrates how young children understand concrete terms and language more easily than abstract terms and language (Staal, 2005).

Stories can become memorable for children when the language used is accessible and the story teller is engaging. Expressive body language, scene setting and character building all help transport the child into the story (Choun & Lawson, 1993), further interest can be added through facial expressions, dramatic gestures, and changes in pitch, pace and volume. Simple vocabulary and short sentences help keep a toddler's attention, whilst explanations and background events are a distraction (Haas, 1984). "Concentrate on the key spiritual idea, not the details...less is best" (Oman, 2007). Preschoolers enjoy stories that have echoing of phrases and involve some interaction with the storyteller (Haas, 1984). Carefully worded subjective questions can be used to help the listeners identify with the character's feelings or fact based questions can be used to check on comprehension of events.

It is highly advisable to spend time in small group situations at some point after the story, particularly for children who had questions during the story. While hands are active solving a puzzle or manipulating clay, the child's brain is processing information and conversation can flow. Dramatic play areas that encourage children to act out stories during free play time are a valuable follow-up to worship time. One easy dramatic play area to set up is the nativity stable as children readily engage in acting out the roles of the characters. Other possibilities include a hospital area for stories of sickness and healing or a play dough table for

recreation of story elements. The conversations that children initiate during these play times provide opportunities for integrating faith and learning and addressing any misconceptions young children may have. The secret to successfully sharing Jesus with children is being there for the questions, not just for the riveting story telling.

Prayer

When introducing children to prayer, it is best to start with prayers of adoration and thanksgiving. Simple sentence prayers or statements of adoration thanking God for specific blessings and creations through the day, prayers of thanksgiving before a meal and actual conversations instead of recited jingles are a subtle method of introducing children to a meaningful prayer experience (Barber, 1981). Children learn to pray by praying (Mathson, 1984) and by observing adults pray. If adults set the example of praying simple prayers of adoration and thanksgiving that are relevant to the child's experience and in the language of the child rather than the adult, children will learn to pray prayers that are relevant and appropriate for their developmental stage.

A simple prayer of thanksgiving that even the youngest children can pray can be taught through the use of props such as pictures, soft toys or artificial fruit and vegetables. Each child selects an item and says a prayer of thanksgiving relating to the object they have selected; for example, "Thank you

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[Photography:
Ann Stafford]



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Jesus, for puppy dogs” or “Thank you God, for my family”. The child is given the prompt for ‘thank you’ then finishes with words of their own. Older children may cut out an outline of creatures from construction paper and have an adult write their prayer on the shape—“Thank you God for the birds”. The prayer shape can be suspended from the ceiling to serve as a reminder (Mathson, 1984).

Children can be introduced to conversational prayers through letter writing. Whilst the caregiver will need to write the letter, the actual wording should come from prompts and ideas put forward by the children. The content of the letter could include thanksgiving and adoration, through to sharing experiences and making general petitions, such as ‘Please help us to be kind to our friends’. A general petition stated in a positive way such as this reinforces the desired behaviour in the child.

Prayers of intercession and petition are more specific and Barker (1981) warns against teaching children to pray these prayers too soon in their spiritual development. Prayers for a sick grandparent who is not healed can lead to the assumption that God did not help or that He took the loved one out of the child's life. Prayers of petition can soon create a misconception of God as a “celestial Santa who dispenses gifts and favours on demand” (Choun & Lawson, 1993, p. 258). These incorrect assumptions can be avoided by limiting children's prayers to the more general prayers of adoration and thanksgiving.

Songs

The Bible gives many examples of the use of music to praise God. Psalms 33:1-3 says

Good people, cheer God! Right-living people sound best when praising. Use guitars to reinforce your Hallelujahs! Play his praise on a grand piano!

[Photography:
Ann Stafford]



Invent your own new song to him; give him a trumpet fanfare. (*The message*)

Songs are a way to talk to God and others. Music can help children communicate their feelings to God as well as share God with others (Mathson, 1984). Grano (2007) refers to two types of songs, “Direct songs speak directly to God and use the word *You*. Indirect songs speak *about* God and use the word *He*.” When a child goes home singing songs both to and about God, it can be a great witness and encouragement to families. In this way, children are able to freely share words and thoughts that adults seldom get the opportunity to share with others.

Songs with simple lyrics and joyful melodies have universal appeal to children (Mathson, 1984). Caregivers can use familiar or simple tunes along with a spiritual message or verses about a specific Bible character to help reinforce a story or theme and enrich the worship experience. For example, *Old MacDonald had a farm* can be altered to “Old Man Noah had an ark”.

Action songs are effective because children enjoy gross-motor activities. To achieve maximum effectiveness the actions need to relate to the lyrics and the lyrics need to reflect the underlying message you are trying to impart to the children. Since music is a persuasive medium and the children will likely remember the lyrics, choose songs that are scripturally sound (Choun & Lawson, 1993).

Tying it all together

Even with the three essential components of story telling, prayer and music integrated in a worship program, it is of little benefit if worship is merely a ritual. To make the whole experience meaningful, the lessons learnt need to be applied in the children's play and in conversations with staff. They can then be used as a stimulus for further exploration and development. The challenge for early childhood educators lies not so much in presenting a Christian program but in allowing the child to see Christ in the educator. **TEACH**

References

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