

Children are Caterpillars

Understanding the impact of child development on your ministry to children

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Part 1: Intellectual Development

It has been fashionable, in a bid to secure certain rights and privileges for children, to refer to them as “the little people” or to think of them as “mini adults”. But children are not “mini-adults”, they are in the process of developing into adults – and that takes time. And because it takes time we will find ourselves ministering to children at different stages in that process and we need to adapt our ministry to accommodate their growth and development at every point.

Instead of thinking about children as “mini adults” it is perhaps more helpful to recognise that a child **a child is to an adult what a caterpillar is to a butterfly.**

a caterpillar is to a butterfly This of course in no way diminishes their dignity as image bearers of God nor their ability to engage in a meaningful relationship with their Creator, but it does help those who minister God’s word to them to think carefully about *how* they go about doing that and what sort of response they should expect.

Just as we wouldn’t expect a caterpillar to fly like a butterfly, so we shouldn’t expect children to have the same abilities as adults or to respond to their environment in the same way. The intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual development of children is something that every teacher of the Bible needs to consider.

Changes in these various aspects of a child’s development are so rapid at the bottom end of the spectrum (preschool) that revising teaching methods and expectations needs to be an ongoing endeavour. Think for a moment about the way in which a helpless, totally dependant newborn turns into a high-powered, skilful four-year-old.

By age two they have a brain that is 75% of its adult size. They walk, run, use objects to represent other objects, develop recognisable personalities, begin to talk and are like mental sponges.

By age three they have a vocabulary of 500 to 1000 words (girls normally have the 1000 words and boys usually have 500 words and a variety

of sounds, mostly mimicking cars, motorbikes and guns!) They climb, pedal a tricycle and form sentences of five or more words and add about fifty words to their vocabulary every month.

By age four they skip awkwardly, have greater strength, endurance and coordination, draw shapes and stick figures, paint pictures and build with blocks. They move from playing alone to interacting and playing with others. They feed themselves, almost entirely, dress themselves, go to the bathroom alone and express a broad range of emotions that change from minute to minute.

Clearly this rapid development requires ongoing change in teaching styles and expectations. It also makes **rapid development requires ongoing change** spanning age ranges within the same class very challenging as anyone who attempts to teach 18 month to three year olds together knows!

What follows is a brief summary of the intellectual development of children and some guidelines as to how this development might impact your ministry. This is in no way meant to be exhaustive, but simply a few pointers to get you thinking about how it might affect your own ministry to children.

Young children are learning through language and therefore, as noted above, their vocabulary is increasing rapidly.

So, it’s worth thinking through the different kinds of words that, if used in a lesson, might hinder a child’s understanding. When children do not understand the words they are hearing very few will ask for clarification, they are more likely to disengage and become bored.

English (mother tongue) words

These are regular words that children may not yet understand. To a child living in the city, ‘well’ and ‘desert’ may need to be explained (probably using a picture).

Some words like ‘tax-collector’ or ‘virgin’ will also need to be carefully explained in age-appropriated

language. Children who have older siblings may well know what some of these words mean even though they probably shouldn't! With sexually related terms it is advisable to check with a school teacher what is currently being taught in the education system for that particular age group.

Other regular words might also pose a problem for very young children e.g. the word 'prepare' should rather be expressed as 'get ready'.

BIG theological words

Important words like 'sovereignty', 'salvation', 'redemption' and 'justification' will need to be broken down into terms that children can understand. This may require substituting the word for a more readily used word that carries the same meaning e.g. 'salvation' = 'rescue' or 'sovereignty' = 'the boss of everything'.

It might also require thinking of ways to help children remember the meaning where no simple substitution is possible e.g. 'justified' = 'just as if I'd never sinned'.

Small theological words

These are not necessarily big words, but they carry profound meaning and need to be correctly understood. 'Grace' is a good example of this. It could be made more memorable by using the acronym:

- G - God's
- R - riches
- A - at
- C - Christ's
- E - expense

The meaning could also be made clearer for older children by contrasting and comparing words with other (perhaps better known) words.

'Justice' = I get what I deserve.

'Mercy' = I do not get what I deserve.

'Grace' = I get the opposite of what I deserve.

In the above example 'grace' is then correctly understood to mean far more than merely being shown mercy (or being 'let off the hook').

An acronym can also be used to help children get to grips with what 'sin' actually means:

- S - Shove off God
- I - I'm in charge
- N - No to your rules

With very young children it is sufficient for them

to understand 'sin' as being 'the naughty things we do', but with older children the above acronym helps to expose the rebellion that lies at the heart of sin and more accurately conveys the sense of Romans 3:10-12.

Bible names

Long Hebrew names can be a challenge even for mature Christians. It's important to remember that young children are not able to read. They will therefore be inclined to think that two different pronunciations of the same name refer to two different people - e.g. 'Hosea' which is pronounced by some people as '*Hozeea*' and by others as '*Hozaya*'. To the mind of the child they sound different, why shouldn't they be referring to two different people?

If a number of different teachers teach the same class they will need to be consistent in their pronunciation. This pronunciation will need to be agreed before you start the series.

Other Bible words

There are also other words in the Bible that are not necessarily theological words, but are fairly specific to the Bible e.g. 'disciples'. It makes sense when dealing with very young children to rather speak of Jesus' friends, but you wouldn't want the 11 year olds in your church talking about Jesus' friends when they really mean his disciples.

It is therefore helpful to think about how your ministry will transition the children from the one phrase to the other. Perhaps with under 7's you would speak of "Jesus' friends", with 7-9's speak about "Jesus' friends the disciples" and beyond 9 years only speak of "the disciples". Once again, this is a team issue and needs to be applied consistently throughout the children's ministry in your church.

Concepts

Children under 8 are literal thinkers and will struggle with abstract concepts. The phrase, "Invite Jesus into your heart", while all adults know what it means (and some may well have understood it when they were five years old and invited Jesus to do just that) is not necessarily the most helpful way to make an evangelistic appeal.

In the mind of the child this is most likely to be taken literally and therefore be misunderstood. It is probably more helpful to speak in concrete terms using concepts that they are familiar with, like friendship. While our relationship with Jesus

is much more than friendship (since he is our King as well) it is easier for very young children to understand what it means for Jesus to be their “special friend”. “Invite Jesus into your heart” might then more helpfully be expressed as “make Jesus your very special friend”.

match abstract concepts with concrete experiences Because children from a very early age possess the skill of matching it is possible to teach abstract concepts even when the children have no developed abstract thought. You will need to think about how to express abstract concepts in concrete terms using the everyday experiences of the children you teach.

Prayer is another very difficult abstract concept to grasp and yet it needs to be taught. I recently heard of an unchurched child who attended a holiday club (VBS) and when the leader started to pray at the opening session the child turned to his friend and asked, “Who’s she talking to?”

What a child sees when they observe adults praying is someone speaking to a person they cannot see. The person speaking clearly believes that they are being heard and expect to be answered - but the answer doesn’t appear to come audibly or immediately.

A concrete example from the world of the child that illustrates this seemingly bizarre scenario is of course the use of a telephone. They understand, through experience, how a telephone conversation works and therefore it is possible to use this example to illustrate the concept of prayer.

Children over 8 years old, while still thinking literally, begin to understand that life is more complex. It’s only at around 10 or 11 years of age that children develop abstract thought and begin to understand principles rather than merely simplistic facts.

Therefore, for children under 7 we generally make the application of the Bible truth for them, thinking of scenarios from their world that illustrate how the truth might apply.

But for children aged 8-9 it is better to draw out the principle, give them one example of how it might apply and get them to think of another example.

For children over 9 we simply help them discover the principle and then get them to think of two examples of how the truth might apply.

Level of Detail

Very young children have no filter which enables

them to discard irrelevant information and focus on a single idea or train of thought. Instead they have what might be called, ‘random selection’ where they will grab hold of one word and become consumed by it.

This may well derail your train of thought and your lesson plan. When you mention a snake in your Genesis 3 lesson don’t be surprised when a 4 year old boy in your class seizes the opportunity to recount how his father killed a snake, followed immediately by a little girl expressing her fear of snakes and a further child sprouting some facts that he learned about snakes on a wildlife programme - and this all seems to happen simultaneously!

For that reason, it is important to think carefully about the level of detail that you choose to include in your story telling with under 7’s.

When teaching the Transfiguration in Luke 9, for example, you probably wouldn’t want to confuse very young children by mentioning the names of Moses and Elijah since you would already have mentioned Jesus, Peter, James and John. The only time that you might mention one of them would be if you’d recently done a lesson which included either Moses or Elijah.

With older children the significance of Moses and Elijah will be important and therefore necessary to include. It is important to ask whether including a detail adds clarity to the main teaching point or creates unnecessary distraction.

The same is true for the amount of Bible text that will be used in the small group Bible study for children over 7. Vast sections of text may cause unhelpful confusion especially when it involves lengthy narrative. Consider summarising large sections and ‘zooming in’ on a few key verses or a shorter passage that brings out the main principle being taught. The goal should always be to teach one truth and to teach it well so that children leave with a good idea of what the truth is and, perhaps more importantly, how it applies to their every day lives.

Time and Distance

Children under 7 have no concept of time or distance and tend to use numbers in a way which clearly shows they have no idea of what they mean. A child will typically say, “I waited a hundred years” when they really mean five minutes. Or they may refer to something that happened, “last year” when it was last week.

With this in mind, starting a lesson from the gospels with the phrase, “Two thousand years ago...” is utterly meaningless. With children under 7 the phrase, “a long, long time ago” is adequate.

But perhaps an even better approach is to place the story in terms of how it relates to other stories that they already know about. For example, you may say of the account Jesus’ appearance to Thomas, “The true story from the Bible today happened just after Jesus came alive again, but before he went back to heaven”. In this way you can then begin building a time line of events using simple pictures so that over time they begin to understand the chronology of the Bible.

For older children regular time lines outlining Biblical history are very helpful things to have in every class.

Syllabus

Because teaching the Bible is essentially an educational process having a set syllabus is incredibly helpful. This prevents a situation where a child can grow up in a church and cover Genesis on several occasions but never know who Job was.

The syllabus needs to contain a healthy balance of Old and New Testament teaching that in some way mimics the balance given in the Bible as a whole. As many churches do very little in the line of Old Testament teaching with adults we need to get a good solid foundation in place as early as possible.

To spend an entire year studying a single book of the Bible with a 4 year-old means that 25% of their life has been spent on a single gospel - that is not a balanced diet.

Some churches also adopt a more random approach. This can result in the miracles of Jesus being taught just before Christmas when he was born or, worse still, teaching the birth of Samuel or Isaac at Christmas instead of the birth of Jesus.

A syllabus that follows the annual church calendar makes the most sense. For churches in the northern hemisphere this will mean starting a twelve or thirteen week series in Genesis at the start of the academic year in September. This could be followed by a Christmas series leading up to the birth of Jesus. The time between Christmas and Easter is helpfully spent covering an aspect of Jesus’ earthly ministry. In the first cycle this might be his miracles, in the second his parables, in the

third, the sermon on the Mount or other teachings.

This series could be followed by an Easter series leading up to the death and resurrection of Jesus. After Easter and the ascension something from the early church is helpful. Once that is complete a short series from where you left off in Genesis will generally take you to the end of the academic year. The cycle then repeats itself, but each year you will go further and further into the main Old Testament stories (in their chronological order) while Christmas, the life of Jesus, Easter and the early church each get covered from a slightly different angle each year.

This approach helps children slowly imbibe the chronology of the Bible, provides a balance of Old and New Testament teaching and does not clash with the natural church calendar.

Feedback

As part of the teaching process it is always important to employ a mechanism that enables you to test if the children have heard what you think you have taught them. Filters and preconceived ideas in the speaker and the hearer sometimes prevent us from communicating effectively.

With children under 7 the most helpful technique to elicit feedback is to retrace the lesson using the visual aids that were used to tell the story. Get the children to tell you what happened at key points in the story as you point to various details in the visual aids.

With older children, get them to act out scenarios or give you modern examples to check that they have understood the principle being taught. This will check their understanding of the principle rather than merely the facts.

Concentration

As a general rule of thumb you will be able to hold a child’s attention for one minute per year of age. This will vary from place to place and depend on a number of factors not least of all the period of time that you have worked with a particular group.

Over time you will want to stretch them in terms of their listening skills as we ultimately want them to be able to engage with a 30 minute sermon by the age of 14, but 1 minute per year of age is a good guideline.

This does not mean that the lesson for a 3 year old is 3 minutes! What it does mean is that you will be able to hold their undivided attention for 3 minutes and then something will need to change in order to

re-engage them and maintain their attention.

This can be something as simple as a change in visual aid or something as elaborate as moving to another portion of the room. This is a particularly helpful technique if you are telling a story that is spread across various locations. Label different corners of the room and move around as you tell the story.

With very young children having a sensory box or bag from which you can draw various articles relating to the story at different times in the story helps to maintain their interest.

Visual learners

The use of visual aids with children under 7 is critical and even children over 7 engage and learn better when they have something to look at.

If you don't provide something for young children to look at they will find something to look at and it will probably not be what you want them to be looking at while you are trying to engage them with the story.

Visual aids need to be bright and colourful and an appropriate size so that everyone in the group can clearly see what is going on. A picture that the children can touch and handle is also better than a projected image that is disconnected from them, but even so, a projected image is better than no visual at all.

Time lines, family trees and diagrams (e.g. the Tabernacle) are helpful for older children. When teaching a series of lessons it is helpful to produce a series of visuals (one per lesson) that summarizes the main teaching point. These can even be simple hand drawn images but they help the children to remember the lessons that have gone before and are a great way to review before commencing with the new lesson.

Sensory experience

Make every effort to engage as many of the five senses as possible. If you're teaching Jacob's deceit of his father in Genesis 27 then blindfold the children and get them to feel something hairy, smell different fragrances and hear different sounds. Jacob sounded like Jacob, but felt and smelled like Esau. The children will then experience the deceit first hand and the lesson will be very memorable.

Also try and engage the children's emotions. A lesson on favouritism is greatly enhanced if you play a game or engage the children in an activity that is blatantly unfair because someone is being favoured. The children will quickly become outraged. At this point teaching how Joseph's brothers felt makes the point very clear. Their response to Joseph becomes understandable even though it is not excusable.

Conclusion

It is a joy and a privilege to teach God's Word to children. Make every effort to ensure that you understand what it is like to be them. Take the time and make the effort to get inside their world and understand what it is like to be 3 or 5 or 10 years old.

Teach in such a way that every child, at every stage in their lives has the best possible opportunity to understand the Gospel and respond in faith. After all, someone once took the time to share God's word with you in a way which was understandable and compelling.

Of course, one of the great realities of spiritual education is that we have the help of The Holy Spirit who is able to make children understand truths that are way beyond them developmentally. But that does not absolve us of our responsibility to teach responsibly and deliberately.

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