

Principles of Child Development

A guide
for effective ministry

Many children's ministry programs continue to operate on a paradigm based upon adult education models. Children are not small adults and they have unique needs, capabilities and learning styles. An effective children's ministry requires an understanding and recognition of the characteristics of children's growth, development, needs and cognitive/learning abilities. These principles of child development and learning inform and guide decisions to make sure your program meets each child's needs.

Development occurs in a relatively orderly sequence with later abilities, skills and knowledge building on those already acquired. Knowledge of typical development of children within the age span served by a children's ministry provides a general framework to guide the design of the learning environment, realistic curriculum goals, and creating appropriate learning experiences.

Development proceeds at varying rates from child to child, as well as unevenly within different areas of a child's functioning. Each child is a unique person with an individual pattern of growth, as well as individual learning style. It also proceeds in

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predictable directions toward greater complexity, organization and internalization.

Children are active learners drawing on direct physical and social experience, as well as culturally transmitted knowledge. This is how they construct their own understanding of the world around them. They contribute to their own development as they strive to make meaning out of their daily experiences in the home, church and in their community. They develop and learn best in the context of a community where they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met and they feel psychologically secure.

Consistency

Consistent, positive relationships with a limited number of adults and other children is the basis for healthy human development. These consistent relationships provide the context for children to learn about themselves and their world. They need to develop positive, constructive relationships with other people.

Consistency can also be supported through following a familiar routine and providing orientation to the unfamiliar. Children do best in a consistent structure that limits the fear of the unknown. A well-defined schedule helps children learn the order of events that occur each Sunday.

Consistency is also important in the regulation of children's behavior. The rules for behavior must be consistent over time and among adults. Unswerving enforcement of rules is reassuring to children in order for them to understand that this is a predictable place—a place that I can trust.

Transitioning

A transition is the movement of children from one activity to another or one place to another. Children are in transition during clean up, while waiting for a venue to begin or while moving from one place to another. Young children, especially, can have difficulty adjusting to movement from one environment to another. There are no rules about what is an acceptable waiting time. However, common sense tells us that the longer and more often the children wait, the more likely they will become restless and misbehave. Children are naturally energetic, so being actively engaged during routines, including transitions, eliminates wasted time and provides an opportunity for learning.

Learning Styles

Children learn from active participation through several styles of learning—auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. Visual learners need to see the teacher's facial expressions to fully understand the content of a lesson. They think in pictures and learn best from visual diagrams and written materials. Auditory learners learn best through verbal discussion and listening to what others have to say. Written information may have little meaning until it is heard. The tactile/kinesthetic person learns best through a hands-on approach. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods of time and might be distracted by

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their need for activity and exploration. The younger the child, the higher the need is for kinesthetic learning. Activities and teaching methods should allow for all three learning styles.

Group Size

Large groups easily overwhelm children and are difficult to manage. Small group sizes make it easier to facilitate hands-on learning, form friendships and practice social skills. The younger the children, the smaller the group size required.

Behavior and Environment

The physical environment shapes children's behavior. Large, noisy, over-stimulating rooms can produce undesirable behavior in children. Smaller spaces cut down on distractions and help children focus.

Active Learners

Children are active learners. Education sometimes emphasizes rote learning of skills rather than active, experiential learning in a meaningful context. Consequently, many children are being taught scripture and facts, but they are not learning to apply those skills to problems and real situations. Rote learning does not develop more complex thinking skills such as conceptualization and problem solving.

Sense of Time and Place

Children under the age of six struggle with the concept of time. They only understand the present. Past and future have no meaning to them. Children ages six and older are beginning to comprehend the concept of time. Young children, also, have no comprehension of geography that is outside of the immediate world they've experienced.

Value/Morals Formation

The basic truth about teaching values and morals to our children is that values and morals are learned not through works or lecture, but through living it. The kind of values we ourselves treasure as adults or those that form part of our life's principles are manifested in our everyday life. Children should be taught values in concert with methods of analysis and judgment that yield answers about right and wrong, better and worse concerning personal behavior and the common

good. The integration of cognitive development and character development can best be achieved through perspective-taking, moral reasoning, thoughtful decision-making and moral self-knowledge. Since young children learn through role playing, this is an excellent way to teach values and morals to them.

Preschoolers lack abstract reasoning, the concept of time and geography, and are not ready for instruction that is more direct. Mary Irene Flanagan, C.S.J. explains it this way in *Children's Ministries that Work*:

"Preschoolers aren't developmentally ready for formal instruction in faith. They can't interpret Scripture, understand deep theological concepts, or participate meaningfully in adult religious practices. Priority isn't to communicate religious information. It's to provide a healthy, loving, family environment. Doing so reinforces a preschooler's sense of trust and independence ... If preschoolers feel valued and accepted, they'll want to return to experience more of those feelings. By sharing in the discovery and wonder with a child, we begin to lay the foundation for faith."

Preschoolers need lots of hands-on, interactive opportunities for self-directed play. Young children are concrete thinkers and learn mostly by exploring, observing, imagining, imitating (role-play) and creating, not simply talking or watching. Even into middle childhood, children actively construct their understanding and knowledge through interaction with the physical and social world. In order for learning to be effective, children need interactive, hands-on activities whenever possible. In some ways, teaching children about God has less to do with the content that is delivered as with the climate—the loving environment they encounter. A child comes to understand faith when s/he experiences an atmosphere that communicates God's love and a gracious invitation.

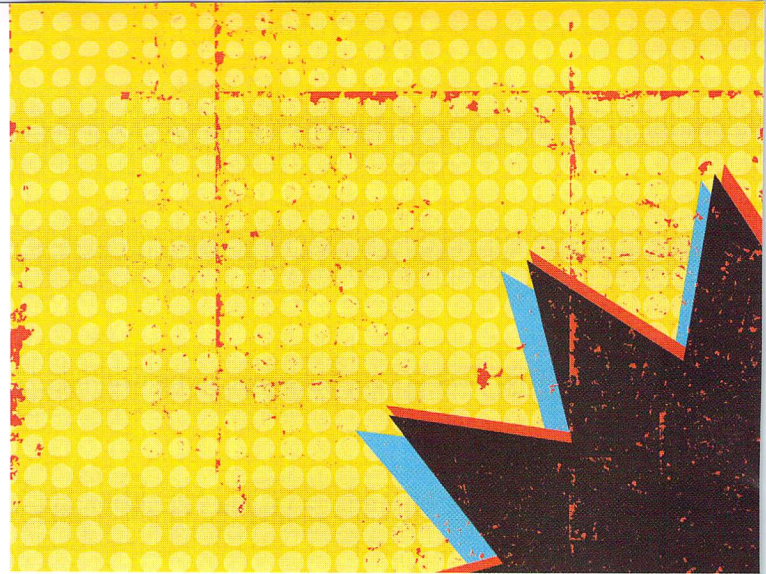
Stories

Jesus made consummate use of stories in His teachings. Although younger children do not have the cognitive development to philosophically reflect on the stories, becoming familiar with stories and the Bible still introduces them to religious words, concepts, God's love, right and wrong and the idea of faith. This pre-religious literacy becomes a foundation they build on as they grow and are exposed to more formal learning of religious concepts and language.

Storytelling evangelism has many advantages when it comes to using stories to communicate spiritual faith to children:

- Stories hold children's attention.
- Stories stir their emotions.
- Stories help them remember.

Children should not only be told stories, but they should also have the opportunity to act them out. This is especially important for children six and younger who almost exclusively



learn experientially. They need to be given opportunities to become storytellers and act out stories in playful ways. This can include role-play and pretend dress-up.

To provide children consistency and a sense of security, they need a homeroom they first go to and return to after going through performance and hands-on activity venues. They also need regular adult instructors. Children need a steady, stable environment to deal best with the challenges of learning. For 5-year-olds and younger, they should stay in the homeroom with the exception of maybe one visit to an appropriate venue or playground each Sunday.

Volunteers who are well trained in the child development principles listed above and can meet the diverse needs of individual children will better insure that your church has a vibrant ministry to kids. ❧

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