

Childhood Evangelism

Day camps at Bethlehem Baptist Church and Hunting Island State Park, family evening programs (FEPs), beach ministry, and sports clinics will all provide opportunities for relationship evangelism with both parents and children, while on mission with Low Country Ministries. It is of the utmost importance to approach childhood evangelism prayerfully and sensitively due to the short-term relationship you will have with the children you meet. The children will almost immediately love you and will be able to sense what responses please you. They may be easily led to express commitments to God beyond their ability to understand or decide. This may cause confusion and interfere with the child's spiritual life in years to come. For this reason, several factors should be considered as you prepare to share Christ with children.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN

First, consideration should be given to God-given, God-directed behavioral development because this plays an integral role in a child's spiritual development (Ingle, 146). While it is God's Spirit through grace who works with each individual, we must recognize it is not normative for God to remove a person from his or her circumstances in order to draw them to Himself (Hendricks, 249).

Children ages 7-11 are considered to be in the *concrete operational* stage of learning. As concrete thinkers, they have difficulty with abstract concepts and generally do not understand symbolic language (Davis, 249). For example, the idea of letting Jesus come into your heart may conjure a picture in a child's mind of cutting open your heart and trying to stuff Jesus inside. How is He going to fit? Or, a child might think of Baptism as washing away dirt in a bathtub.

Language development is another important consideration. As adults, we use words like *sin, saved, lost, heaven, hell, repent, and atonement* with some degree of understanding. Children with little exposure to religious settings will have problems understanding these words (Davis, 60). In addition, children may pick up words and incorporate them into their vocabulary without actually understanding their meaning (Ingle, 103). Be careful to talk to children on their level of understanding. Use terms to describe God that children can understand and relate to.

For example, most children love the outdoors and can easily understand God as the Creator, and the Maker of the world. Children can relate to what you share when you speak of Jesus because they hear stories about Him and can visualize Him (Davis, 63).

Christian theologians and educators agree that it is vital to present the gospel in children's language. However, we must not expect children to be able to express their faith in adult terms or language. Also, it is equally important when sharing the gospel in children's language, that we do not decrease or minimize the meaning or demands of the gospel (Davis, 70-71).

CHILD'S BACKGROUND

Christian education for children is vital to spiritual development because it provides the foundation of meaning upon which a commitment can be built (Ingle, 99). As you share

Christ with children, consider their family and religious background. Is there any such background on which to build a commitment to Christ? It is highly unlikely that a child who comes to day camp with no previous exposure to spiritual truth will be ready to grasp the meaning of the gospel by the end of the day camp.

QUESTIONS

Pay special attention to the questions children ask, as well as the questions you ask them.

Religious questions are important to the child's spiritual development, and may or may not indicate a child is ready to accept Christ. Treat every question as important. Take time to understand just what the child is asking, then answer simply and briefly (Davis, 56).

Ask open-ended questions, avoiding questions that may be answered with a simple yes or no. "Why do you feel you want to become a Christian?" "What do you mean?" "What makes you say that?" Children are prone to say what they think adults want to hear, and are very capable of memorizing the right answers. As you encourage children to express their feelings and thoughts in their own words, you will be able to better understand the child's level of thinking, and the child will begin to clarify what he or she really believes (Chamberlain, 60-62; Davis, 56-57, 66).

GUIDELINES FOR CHILDHOOD EVANGELISM

Present the story of Jesus and His love before the last day of a ministry week so that the children will have time to think about it and ask questions. Telling the story in small groups of 8-12 children will create an atmosphere more conducive to discussion. At the conclusion of the story, tell the children that one day God will help them know to make a commitment to Him. Encourage children to ask God to let them know when the time is right.

Invite the children to come and talk to you individually after the story if they have other questions or feel like God may be telling them it is the right time. Do not have children bow their heads and raise their hands, or respond to any type of invitation. Let children come to you on their own.

When a child approaches you wanting to accept Christ, take time to ask questions and listen to the child, assessing the child's background, level of understanding, and needs. Children sometimes approach adults because they are starving for one-on-one attention. Discuss and review the main points of the gospel with the child.

1. Jesus is God's Son, sent to earth to bring humans into a relationship with God (See John 3:16; Matt. 1:21).
2. Personal sin separates us from God (see Rom. 2:23; 6:23).
3. Christ died to provide forgiveness and salvation. He was raised to prove He has power to forgive sin (See John 3:16).
4. Forgiveness is a free gift. To accept this gift requires repentance and faith (See Eph. 2:8-9).

It may be that the child simply wants to pray a prayer of love and thanksgiving for Christ. Or it may be that the child is ready to accept Christ. If you feel the child is not ready, do not be afraid to explain to the child the magnitude of the decision and that you feel he should continue to learn more about God and wait until he understands a little more before making the decision. Help the child express his or her feelings to God through prayer. After praying, talk with the child about what has taken place.

Complete a commitment card including the hometown and home church if available. Even if the child did not make a decision, the home church may be informed of the child's interest in learning more about having a relationship with Christ.

Make all possible efforts to go with the child to his or her family to help explain the decision that has been made. Explain the process, questions, and answers you have gone through with the child and how the child has responded. This gives the missionary an opportunity to minister to the family, as well as keep an open channel of trust.

AVOIDING PRESSURE TACTICS

Being on a mission trip is exciting. Sometimes in our exuberance we may put undue pressure on those with whom we share.

It is easy for children to feel overwhelmed when more than one adult is dealing with them about a decision. Keep the ratio of leader to child low.

When sharing with children, it is not appropriate to dwell on the explicit details of Christ's death.

Focus on the relationship we are to have with Christ in life, rather than in death. When asked, "Do you love Jesus?" or "Do you want to go to Heaven?" children will naturally say yes. Salvation is more than going to heaven or hell when you die. Salvation is conscious living for Christ every day, in thanksgiving for what He has done. (Ingle, 144).

Trust the Holy Spirit with the fruits of your labor.

Trust the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of children while you are on the mission field, and after you are gone. Do not measure your work by number of decisions or even numbers of day campers, but by the love you share. You may be the one who initiates someone's journey to Christ. But, that journey would not end with the initial steps.

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