



How Children Learn Best

by Verda Rubottom

Elementary Consultant in the Sunday School Field Ministries Department

Children are like sponges, absorbing everything around them. They enjoy learning—as long as they don't have to learn "adult style." Adults like to sit for long periods and discuss abstract concepts that children don't understand. While children may enjoy the adult company, it is hard for them to learn this way. Most will squirm off their chairs and find something more interesting to do.

The apostle Paul put it this way, "When I was a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child" (1 Corinthians 13:11). Children think and reason differently than adults. We need to adapt our teaching methods to their way of thinking.

This doesn't mean we need to talk down to children, but simply to teach the Bible in a way that children can digest and in amounts they are able to handle. This principle is found in Isaiah 28:10:

"For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little."

Our teaching should include short segments of instructing, demonstration, explaining, illustrating, discussing, reviewing, and involving our students. How much time we spend on each of these depends on many variables, including the ages and maturity levels of the children we're teaching.

Draw Them In

An important first step in teaching is to plan ways to draw students into the lesson. This is not hard to do. Children are curious, spontaneous, and full of energy. They love surprises and the opportunity to participate. Ask a roomful of adults to assist you while teaching, and you'll get one or two hesitant volunteers. But ask a roomful of kids, and every hand in the room will be waving to get your attention. Consider these traits when you introduce your Sunday School lesson or prepare your message for children's church each week.

Age Traits

Children are continually growing and moving from one level of development to another. Age characteristics are given in generalities, because the rate of development varies from one child to another. Below are some general guidelines of interests and developmental traits for elementary-age children.

Primary

Primary-age children are learning to read; they enjoy hearing stories, writing, and drawing. Here is an idea to introduce your theme or a "new word for the day" in an interesting way. Use large, colorful letters cut from poster board to spell out the word; then ask volunteers to hold the letters while you introduce the topic or new word. Some simple word

themes to use are: forgive, pray, obey, and joy. Later you can use the supersize letters for reviewing the lessons or for pre-session activities. The children will enjoy spelling out the words and putting them in order. You can guide their conversation back to the meaning of these words as they put them in order.

For a Bible verse review, make a grid on a large piece of poster board. Write one word of the Bible verse (in order) on each space on the grid. Make a set of matching word cards using the Bible verse and reference. Mix up the cards and stack them next to the grid. Children will enjoy the challenge of matching word cards using the Bible verse word for word on the board. This will also help their reading skills!

Middlers

Middlers are discovering new skills almost daily. They're learning to ride bikes and play basketball, play musical instruments and use computers. They enjoy collecting everything from baseball cards and stuffed animals to coins and rocks.

One of my daughters began collecting pop can rings during this stage in her childhood. We had no idea why pop can ring openers intrigued her. She noticed the little silver rings on sidewalks and patches of grass and brought them home with pride for her overflowing collection. I asked her one day what she was saving them for. She

shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't know; I just like to collect them."

Elementary children are learning to classify, organize, and place things in sequence. They can now see the larger picture and the smaller parts that make up the whole. They enjoy putting word cards in order to form a Bible verse and complete verse puzzles.

Middlers can begin to learn the books of the Bible and, with your help, find their favorite story in the Bible. They can collect foreign postage stamps and attach them to a world map in your classroom. Let them add pictures of missionaries to the map, along with pictures of the local people, their homes and cities. When your stu-

dents study geography in school, they'll also think in terms of world missions and the needs of others.

Preteens

Older children and preteens enjoy learning fascinating trivia facts such as "How do bats see in the dark?" or, "Who invented the first ice cream cone?" They enjoy inventing secret codes, experimenting with cooking and science materials, and discovering interesting things about the natural world. Their keen memories enable them to build a reservoir of knowledge to build on for future learning.

This is one reason why games and Bible quizzing are so popular with this age group. They enjoy the challenge and gain feelings of

competence when their memorization skills and Bible knowledge are recognized.

This is an especially important time for children to memorize Scripture. In a few years they will face the emotional ups and downs associated with teenagers. They will need the stability of the Word of God as an anchor in their lives. Take advantage of their interest and ability to memorize. Explain the meaning of difficult words and passages and help the children understand how the Bible applies to their daily lives.

When you are attentive to the ways children learn best, you will enjoy teaching more, and your students will be excited about learning and growing in God's Word.

Questions For Further Study—

1. What training can you offer to better equip your ministry team to address the needs of the different age groups in your children's ministry?

2. How might you utilize the learning needs of older children in your group to assist in the training of younger children?