



# Teaching Tots

by Sharon Ellard

Learning, knowing, remembering—all are significant to becoming followers of Jesus. In the Great Commission, Jesus said, “Make disciples—**teaching** them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20, NIV). In Isaiah 1:17, God exhorts, “**Learn** to do right” (NIV). All of God’s Word is given so we can learn that He is good, know what He expects, and remember to trust and obey Him in everyday events.

## Three Ways Young Children Learn

1

### Sense It

For young children, learning is often a total body experience. God designed them to be global learners during their early years. They learn best by engaging as many of their five senses as possible.

A teacher wanted a class of 11 very active 3- and 4-year-old boys to learn the Bible verse, “Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me.’” She engaged their sight (and their interest) by laying a trail of glow-in-the-dark footprints leading from a tape line to a tall young man. As the boys stood along the tape line, one teacher gave a verbal cue: “Jesus said...” That engaged the boys’ hearing. The boy to finish with the rest of the verse engaged in movement. He followed the trail to the man who lifted him, hugged him, and

told him, “Jesus loves you!”

The teacher taught the verse through sight, sound, movement, and touch. Weeks later, the boys were still spontaneously quoting the verse at church and at home.

When a child only *hears* a verse, studies show that probably he will remember only 10 percent after 48 hours. When a child *hears* and in some way *sees* a related visual, she is likely to remember 50 percent. When a child *hears, sees, and becomes actively involved*, he will remem-



ber 90 percent. Young children learn through their senses.

2

### Repeat It

Young children also learn through repetition. Repetition functions like a shuttle that moves ideas from the short-term to the long-term memory. You know how it goes. You look up a phone number and remember it long enough to dial. Chances are, though, the next morning, after a good night’s sleep, you no longer remember the number. With frequent use,

however, that number (for work or home or the pizza man) shifts to a permanent location in your long-term memory.

Much of what children remember comes through repetition: “Wash your hands,” “Say please,” “Be nice to your sister,” “A is for alligator.” When the repetition is pleasant, children *want* to repeat. I wonder how many children have memorized *The Cat in the Hat* or *Horton Hatches the Egg*: “It should be, it should be, it should be like that. Horton was faithful, he sat and he sat.” Dr. Seuss used rhyme and rhythm to make reading a pleasure. Teacher’s quarterlies add this quality of a pleasurable experience to Bible learning. They include action verses and songs. The rhyme, rhythm, and movement of the songs help the children remember Bible concepts.

Repetition with variety is the key to keeping repetition enjoyable so children will repeat an idea frequently enough to remember it a long time. In early childhood most lessons repeat one Bible truth in a variety of ways.

3

### Sing It

New research is helping us understand why music is such a powerful learning tool. Music engages both sides of the brain. The left side of the brain deals with the words and ideas of a song. The right side responds to the emotion and creativity of the song. So music captures the

attention of young children much more quickly than simply speaking to them in a normal voice. We must have children's attention before we can engage them in learning.

Think of all the Bible verses you have memorized to music, including the long passage (at least for those who are memory challenged) of the Lord's Prayer. Begin to collect a variety of songs that review a story (e.g., "Zaccheus Was a Wee Little Man" and "There's a Hole in My Roof"), that teach an eternal concept

(e.g., "Jesus Loves Me" or "He's a Big God!"), that exalt God (e.g., "God Is So Good!" or "God Is Bigger") or that teach Christlike living (e.g., "When We All Work Together" or "I Can Be Your Friend" ).

### **So Much More**

God wants us to learn, and He created many ways to encourage knowledge. Every nerve ending in our bodies sends messages to our brains. So many sensors could overload our system and

make it impossible to focus on any one idea long enough to learn. But God has provided filters so we can ignore the sound of the plane flying over or the smell of five nearby perfumes long enough to learn John 3:16. He wants His Word to be lodged in our minds and hearts so well that it finds its way into our lives. In fact, if God wrote a slogan about learning the Bible, it might be: "Learn it. Love it. Live it." By using multiple senses, repetition, and music, God's Word can transform children from the inside out.

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### **Questions For Further Study—**

1. How do the learning styles of very young children differ from those of older children?
2. List ways that you can incorporate the following learning methods in your classroom.
  - Sense It
  - Repeat It
  - Sing It