



Five Ways Little Ones Learn

by Sharon Ellard

Early Childhood Consultant in the Sunday School Field Ministries Department

Little children think and learn differently than adults. "When I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child; I made plans like a child" (1 Corinthians 13:11, International Children's Bible). Here are five ways young children learn.

Hear-and-Say Learning

Young children need to talk as well as listen. A teacher may need to talk face to face with a baby, leaving pauses for responses of coos and gurgles. Talking helps toddlers through kindergartners focus their attention on the Bible lesson. Talking also helps young children understand what they have heard. We've all heard of a child who understood "Gladly the Cross I'd Bear" as Gladly, the cross-eyed bear. As young children talk, the teacher can gently correct misunderstandings.

Moving and Learning

Young children seem driven to move. Alert teachers plan ways to use movement to teach Bible lessons. For toddlers they may connect teaching to enjoyable activities. At a toddler slide, a teacher may show a young child where to place his hands and feet to climb a ladder. When the child is seated at the top, the teacher may say rhythmically, "Jesus loves you! Ready! Set!

Go!" By repeating the cheer each time the child slides, the teacher connects an idea about Jesus with a movement the child enjoys.

Imitating and Learning

Imitation is powerful and begins early. Babies whose parents smile and talk cheerfully learn to smile and coo happily. Babies whose parents care for them in neutral silence are less expressive by the



sixth month. Alert teachers understand that children imitate both actions and words. So teachers model desired actions by participating in the songs, dramas, crafts, and snacks.

Repetition and Learning

During the first 3 years of life,

babies and toddlers learn best through extended repetition. For this reason, alert teachers repeat one Bible lesson for a month rather than teaching a new lesson each week.

By age 3, children feel under-challenged and sometimes bored by too much repetition. So for preschoolers and kindergartners, teachers present one concept in a variety of ways. For example, in the story of God's power helping Gideon's army, teachers act out the story with paper torches covered with paper bags, make up a piggyback marching song to the tune of "The Ants Go Marching Two by Two," and compare pictures of things that are strong and weak. The variety of activities repeats one concept.

Practice and Living

For young children, play is practice. Play reflects the moral guidelines they are developing for life. Playing together with dolls or toy vehicles, children experiment with ways to interact. Alert teachers play alongside children. The teachers show children how to work together, taking turns, sharing, and following other biblical patterns.

God wants young children to learn His ways. He has designed them to learn. His Spirit can give you the insight you need to lead them to love, trust, and obey God every day.

Questions For Further Study—

1. How do the learning styles of babies and toddlers differ from those of 3- to 5-year-olds?
2. What recruitment or training procedures can you implement to address the special learning needs of preschool children in your congregation?
3. What improvements could you make in your children's ministry to better meet the needs of preschoolers? of toddlers? of babies?