



Talking to God, part 1 of 2—

# Talking to God

## Nursery Through Preschool

by Sharon Ellard

**D**uring the first six years of life, little children can learn to ask God for help, to tell God their joys, to thank God for good things, to tell God what they like about Him, and to say “God, I’m sorry.” All the ways that young children talk with family and friends, they can learn to pray to God.

### Pray in the Church Nursery

Look for ways to blend care with prayer. When you rock a baby, consider using a prayer chorus as a lullaby, such as “I Will Praise Him” Or “God Is So Good.” Just slow the tempo and lower the volume as you sing babies to sleep with prayer.

During diaper-changing times, take time to draw each baby’s attention to a nearby picture of Jesus. Tap the picture so the baby will look at it. Then to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” sing “Jesus, Jesus, I love you, and I know you love me too.”

Nursery teachers can also blend prayer with teaching. For example, in a lesson about creation, a teacher might use an animal puppet or toy to get a baby’s attention with frisky movements and animal sounds. After offering the animal to the baby, the teacher might say, “Thank You, God, for making (dogs). (Dogs) make us happy.” The same

process could be used with a book or picture.

### Pray with Toddlers And Twos

Continue to use the nursery prayer strategies with toddlers. Their higher activity level and growing understanding will also allow them to participate in some prayers. A toddler may begin singing a repeated word or two



from a song prayer, for example. Add other prayers too. If a toddler takes a tumble, apply prayer right along with the kiss and Band-Aid.

Toddlers can also help decide what to pray. If a lesson is about thanking God for food, lay play food or food pictures near the toddler(s). Say, “God gives us food. Let’s thank God for food. (Michael), choose a food. Thank You, God, for (food Michael

chose).” The child may also be able to name the food or to say “thank you.” Encourage him to say as much as he will. Always praise his efforts—even if he just looks at the picture you pass before him. Similar prayer interactions can be used with board books, posters, toys, and safe snacks.

Toddlers can also participate in action prayers. While the teacher says the prayer and does the action, the children watch and, with repetition, begin to do the actions too. Here’s a simple action prayer:

Thank You, God, for fingers.

(Wiggle fingers.)

Thank You, God, for toes.

(Reach down to touch shoes.)

Thank You for my tummy.

(Pat tummy.)

Thank You for my nose.

(Tap nose with forefinger.)

This kind of childlike prayer builds on toddlers’ ability to understand more than they can say. The gestures allow toddlers to use body language to express joyful feelings to God.

### Preschool and Kindergarten Prayers

Children between 3 and 6 years old also need practice saying prayers in their own words. I-say-you-say prayers can help children begin to pray conversationally. In this kind of prayer the

teacher uses her own words to pray, and the children can repeat each part of the following prayer after the teacher, "I like grapes....Thank You, God, for making them so sweet....Amen."

Also watch for times to say conversational sentence prayers related to spontaneous moments of wonder or need. In the block

center you might pray, "Thank You, God, that Carl can build such a good ark." Invite the child to add a sentence prayer of his own. Give him the option to say *yes* or *no*. Eventually, he may begin to say *yes*.

If a child is sad, whisper a prayer in his ear. You might thank God for being with us when we're

sad and ask God to help make the child happy.

Kindergarten children may want to dictate a short prayer as you write on drawing paper. Invite them to decorate the written prayer and to display it somewhere at home.

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### Questions For Further Study—

1. When should prayer training begin for children?
2. List ways of teaching toddlers to pray or express praise to God.
3. List ways of teaching preschoolers and kindergartners to pray.



Talking to God, part 2 of 2—

# Teaching Babies to Talk to God

by Sharon Ellard

## Babies Can Learn Too

During the first 12 months of life, babies learn many lessons. Church teachers who understand how babies learn can begin to teach them first Bible lessons in the church nursery.

Before babies will pay attention to pictures or music or other interactions, they must be comfortable, rested, fed, and at ease. So gentle, loving care is the first phase of teaching babies at church. Teachers who rock, cuddle, and feed babies help them learn to love and trust God's people in God's house.

## May I Have Your Attention, Please?

When a baby is ready to learn, the next step is to get the baby's attention. With babies, attention is a two-pronged strategy. The teacher watches for what already has the baby's attention as much as she strives to gain the baby's attention. With that reality in view, teachers scatter lesson-related toys and pictures within the baby's view or reach. When a baby looks at or reaches toward a specific toy, the teacher interacts with the baby and the toy in a lesson-related way. This may involve moving the toy in a specific pattern, singing a song about a picture while pointing to specific parts, or some combination of

these. Teachers can purchase teacher guides, such as *Radiant Baby* from *Radiant Life*, that provide pictures and suggest specific ways to teach with safe toys.

Sometimes a teacher will begin a learning activity. Here are several simple ways to gain a baby's attention. Move a teaching object through the baby's line of sight. Tap on a picture or make a sound with a toy. Begin singing a repetitive song that matches the way



you are moving a toy or interacting with a baby. Simply hold a toy out within a baby's reach. Rested, comfortable babies will respond to any of these strategies.

## You Too!

Babies learn from imitation. So nursery teachers need to participate with babies in learning activities. Sometimes this will mean

that while a baby holds a toy or baby-proofed picture, the teacher uses a duplicate to teach a simple idea about God. For example, while a baby holds a laminated magazine picture of a banana, the teacher moves a duplicate banana through the baby's line of vision, saying, "Yummy, yummy, banana on a plate." After laying her picture on a colorful, plastic plate, the teacher holds the plate out to the baby and taps the plate to see if the baby will lay his picture on the plate too. If the baby does, the teacher smiles and applauds. If the baby doesn't, the teacher smiles and says, "Thank You, God, for yummy, yummy bananas." This brings us to the next teaching principle.

## Play It Again, Sam

Babies learn through repetition. As nursery teachers repeat learning activities again and again and again, babies begin to make the connection between what the teacher is doing and what the baby can do too. This part of teaching babies involves choosing activities that fall within babies' realm of ability. For newborn babies this means holding pictures within 11 inches of their eyes. For 4-month-old babies, this means laying toys within an arm's length so he can reach the toy. For 8-month-old babies, this means rolling balls or vehicles

that they can crawl toward. The Bible teaching activities need to fit the baby's emerging skills and be repeated until the baby makes the connection: "Wow! I could do that too."

This is why baby lessons in *Radiant Baby* are monthly les-

sons rather than weekly lessons. By repeating the same ideas and activities for a month of Sunday's and Wednesdays, you give babies time to add Bible learning to the learning that is being repeated at home.

Praise is a powerful motivator.

When teachers smile, cheer, and applaud babies' efforts, babies want to learn new activities so they can please these loving adults again. Praise helps babies learn "I can do many things" and "When I do good things, I feel happy."

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### Questions For Further Study—

1. List ways of teaching infants to pray or express praise to God.
2. Why is repetition important?
3. How well-equipped is your nursery with items that can be used as teaching tools?
4. How does the curriculum you use meet the needs of your ministry to babies and toddlers? What improvements can be made?



*Radiant Baby* is a one-year curriculum containing Bible-focused activities that help you share God's love with the very youngest in your church. The kit includes a teacher guide with 12 full months of lessons, the *Little Lamb* puppet, a music cassette, 12 posters, 4 board books, activity cards, and more. Order number 59VA1595 from Gospel Publishing House, 1-800-641-4310.