



Photos courtesy of Leanne Hadley

Preschool Spirituality

By Leanne Hadley

I have spent my entire ministry studying, working with, and trying to understand the spiritual lives of children and how, as the church, we can best help them grow into adults who possess a deep and authentic faith in God. I have studied children of all ages, but most recently I have been particularly fascinated by the spiritual lives of preschoolers, and have come to a few major conclusions.

1. Relationships

My primary finding is that preschoolers learn about God through the caring and loving relationships between themselves and the adults in their lives. These relationships exemplify the love, care, and deep respect God has for children. I call this “relational spirituality.”

We have traditionally believed that children develop spiritually by using cur-

riculum designed to “teach” them about God and God’s love. Curriculum is important, but the reality is that most of what young children will understand and learn about God they will learn best by being surrounded by adults who genuinely demonstrate God’s care for them. Using the relational spirituality model, we mirror God’s love for children and in this relationship they experience God.

Scripture tells us that, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20 NRSV). As we relate to each preschooler with care and respect, we create a sacred space where God is present and will be experienced by the teacher and the child who have gathered together in Christ’s name.

2. Ritual

Preschoolers love ritual as a way of experiencing the holiness of God. Rather than *teaching* preschoolers about God’s love for them, providing times of ritual allows preschoolers to *experience* God for themselves. Ritual creates a sacred space where children begin to experience the holiness of being still and intentionally seeking the face of God in prayer, worship, and song.

Ritual also helps children learn the language, symbols, and theologies of our denomination. Preschoolers will hear new words, which they will eventually learn the meanings of, such as prayer, hymn, community, and the Trinity. Symbols used in ritual such as the cross, candles, and liturgical colors lay the foundation for later theological understandings of their significance. Praying, singing, and reading scripture together teaches the children the importance of corporate worship.

Ritual does not need to be complicated, but it should be a time “set apart” so that the children recognize it as a special and important time. The ritual can be as simple as having them sit in a circle and share their joys and concerns out loud. This reminds them that God is listening to them and cares about them. Singing songs of praise and thanksgiving allows preschoolers to experience God through music. Making a list of the things God has provided for them with, such as families, homes, and food, remind them of God’s abundant love for them.

3. Wonder

Creating Spirituality Centers where preschoolers can experience the beauty of

God's world allows them to wonder, ponder, and experience the grandeur of God. Tables with baskets filled with items from nature such as pinecones, bird eggs, fresh flowers, and other things, along with a magnifying glass, helps children explore and delight in God's world. Nature hikes and playing with sand and water are all ways preschoolers experience God. Creating opportunities to touch, taste, see, and hear the world around them will expand their spiritual awareness and appreciation for all God has made.

4. Blessing

Blessing the children reminds them that they are and will always be a beloved child of God and an important part of the community of faith. A blessing can be as simple as telling the children that they are special and that God loves them or it can be more formal, where for example, a sign of the cross is made on their head or hand (I suggest inviting the children to choose where they would like their blessing) and saying a phrase such as, "You are a blessing and God loves and cares for you." The important thing is not how the blessing is given but rather that each day, each preschooler in our care is affirmed and reminded that he or

she is a gift to God and to those around him or her.

Many people think that preschoolers are not yet old enough to be spiritual. It is my strong belief that they are; they simply do not yet have the vocabulary or experience with church terminology to express exactly what their relationship to God is. It is the task of the church and the adults in the preschoolers' lives to provide age appropriate opportunities for them to be in the presence of God and to model, through relational spirituality, the love and care God has for them. □



Leanne Hadley is Associate Pastor at First UMC, Colorado Springs, Colo. She is the president and founder of First Steps Spirituality Center (www.1ststeps.net), offering workshops and training events. Her most recent book, coauthored with Rueben Job, is *When You Pray as a Family*. You will also find a free webinar on preschool theology by Dr. Hadley at webinars.cokesbury.com.

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