The children’s message provides a wonderful opportunity for talking about God with children within the context of the worshipping community. So what should we do and say to nurture these precious souls in ways that will reach them effectively? We will look at developmentally appropriate methods for worship that meet the spiritual needs of our youngest disciples.

Wonder

➤ Recognizes a child’s innate sense of the presence of God.
➤ Helps children to explore their faith through Story.
➤ Essential for a child’s spiritual formation and development of a language of faith.
➤ Teaches children how to think theologically at an age-appropriate level.
➤ Invites children beyond a binary understanding of good and bad.
➤ Helps children “get it right the first time” so they don’t have to unlearn things later.

“Children need to learn how to wonder in religious education so they can “enter” religious language rather than merely repeat it or talk about it…. The art of using religious language needs to be learned in an environment filled with the whole system of religious language…”

Jerome Berryman,

*Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*

**Characteristics of Children**

from Preaching Homilies for Children presented by Prof. Ann Garrido, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis

➤ Children are not blank slates.
➤ Children are drawn to what is essential.
➤ Children are most interested in what is real.
➤ Children are filled with wonder and awe.
➤ Children possess absorbent minds.
➤ Beauty evokes reverence in children.
➤ Children are small in a big world.
The Prayer Shawl
A Readers Theater re-enactment of an actual Time With All God’s Children in Worship

**Adult:** Welcome! It is good to see you all here this morning!
We have a special task we need to do today — we are going to pass around this prayer shawl, that the Knitting Ministry has made, to everyone in the congregation so that they can bless it.

*Spread out the shawl between all of the children in the circle so that everyone can hold a small piece of it.*

And after we all place our blessings on this shawl, it will be brought to Olivia who is in the hospital right now. We hope that this shawl will keep her warm and remind her of our love for her, and of God’s love for her, as she heals and gets well again.
So I just mentioned that we hope that this shawl reminds her of God’s love.
I wonder what God’s love is like.

*Pause*

**Child 1:** It’s all around us.

*Pause*

**Child 2:** It’s big…very big…bigger than the whole world!

*Pause*

**Child 3:** God’s love is like my dog.

*Pause*

**Adult:** I wonder how God’s love is like this prayer shawl.

*Pause*

**Child 3:** It stretches around to all people.

*Pause*

**Child 1:** It comes in many colors.

*Pause*

**Child 2:** It’s warm.

*Pause*

**Child 3:** It’s for people who are poor, too.

**Adult:** Let’s pray over this shawl together.
Please repeat each line of our prayer after me:
May God’s grace be upon this shawl…

**Children:** May God’s grace be upon this shawl…

**Adult:** And may it keep Olivia…

**Children:** And may it keep Olivia…

**Adult:** wrapped in love.

**Children:** wrapped in love.

**Adult:** Amen.

**Children:** Amen.
Children Can Handle Language

• Children learn their native tongue by being exposed to all levels of the language at once.

• Young children’s brains are primed for language as they listen to patterns that their brains will recognize later when they begin speaking words.

• Children stretch the language they have to approximate what is beyond language. When adults do this we call it poetry.
• “If you think you have understood God, then what you have understood is not God.”
  -St. Augustine

Children’s messages and time with children in worship are not just for children or children & the pastor.

They are for everyone present.

It is a communal activity that congregations do together for the benefit of all — for the affirmation of the community’s beliefs and practices.
A Wondering Model of Questions
Abbreviated from Appendix 1 in *I Wonder: Engaging a Child’s Curiosity About the Bible* by Elizabeth F. Caldwell

This model is specifically for use with children at home, yet may be used as a guide for times with children in worship.

**Enter** (or Examen — the ancient spiritual practice of examining the day before going to sleep)
- How was your day today?
- Was there something that made you really laugh?
- Was there something that made you sad?
- Where did you see God’s love today?
- Where did you give or receive God’s love?
- For what are you most grateful?
- For what are you least grateful?

**Hear**
- The Story

**Pause**
- Sit with the Story in silence.
- With a three-year-old, you could count to ten silently with fingers.

**Wonder**
- Who is in the story and what happens to them?
- What do you think this story is about?
- What kind of story is this?
- How is this story different from the time and place in which we live?
- Why do you think this story is important?
- How do you connect with the story or what does this story have to do with your life?
- When would be a good time to remember this story?

**Bless**
- Affirm some of the things you have heard the child say about the story.
- Or
- Recall some of the good things or bad things mentioned by the child at the beginning and use them in a simple prayer of thanks or a prayer for help.
- Or
- Invite the child to pray. This could help him or her learn how to use different kinds of prayers: thanksgiving, intercession, confession, and praise.

*Another resource on this same topic may be found at Faith Inkubators: [http://www.faith5.org](http://www.faith5.org)*
**Wondering About a Bible Story**
I wonder what part of the story you liked best.
I wonder what part of the story is most important.
I wonder where you are in the story.
I wonder if there is any part of the story we can leave out and still have all the story we need.

**Wondering About Other Topics**
How might that be?
Tell me about...? or What do we know about...?
What is _____ like?
What does _____ do?
What is [theological concept]?
Where is God/Jesus in [this scenario/story]?

**Wondering-style Questions About a Bible Story**
What is happening in this story?
What do you think happened next?
How do you think _____ felt when _____?
Why did you think _____ said _____?
How is this story unfolding today in the world around us?
How is this story in my life?

**Children's Time Topics That Will Help Children to Become Fluent in the Language of the Church**
- Christian practices and the language of the practices (prayer, hospitality, stewardship, sabbath, diversity, covenant, creation care, gratitude, singing/music, Bible, storytelling, testimony, justice, mission, worship & parts of worship, call, blessing, forgiveness, death)
- Sanctuary “tour” to discover symbols and historical artifacts
- Concrete biblical images for children that take on deeper meaning for adults
- Various styles of prayer, include beautiful objects to hold or gaze upon
- Ask theological questions
- Tell a (Bible) story
- Read and share a picture Bible storybook
- Sing a simple hymn/song together (with the entire congregation)
- Guided meditation
- Concrete object to take with them (stone, shell, seed, etc.)
- Model/learn a new prayer style
- What would you add?
**Prayer Styles for All Ages**

- Hold an object (stone, shell, feather, seed, etc.)
- Write on piece of paper
- Bring something forward (written, a seed to plant in a large pot, etc.)
- Color/draw a prayer
- Come forward to light a candle
- Psalm: antiphonally, litany, chanted
- Echo
- Sung
- Hand movement or sign language
- Breath prayer
- Focus on section of a prayer at a time (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication)
- Thanks, Gimme, Wow, Oops (Marc Gellman)
- Help, Thanks, Wow (Anne Lamott)

**Prayer “Holdables”**

Very young children quickly learn to recognize Sesame Street and Disney characters because of early and repeated exposure to these images. Having symbolic objects to look at and manipulate is instrumental in shaping a sense of identity and community in very young children. Think of the intensity with which babies investigate simple toys and their fascination with and preference for playthings that mimic familiar objects such as keys and phones.

What objects could become Christian toys for babies and young children to want to play with and explore? Distribute these every time your faith community comes together intergenerationally, and provide parents with resources to use them at home.

- Bean bags (stuffed shape with or without a face)
- Smooth stones with or without words (large enough for toddlers)
- Chenille stems
- Model Magic
- Crayons (fat & thin) with card stock pieces
- Shells
- “Fortune tellers” or “cootie catchers” (pre-made with prayer guidance on them)
- http://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Cootie-Catcher-(Origami-Fortune-Teller)
- Water bowl(s)
- Sand bowl(s)/tray(s)
- Feathers
- Prayer beads
- Mandalas
- Finger labyrinth
- Fabric (shapes)
- Twigs
- Yarn/cord for braiding/twisting/knotting
- Photos
- Foil
- Prayer flags
- Cottonballs/pompoms
- Prayer shawl
- Palms, palm crosses
- Large seeds
- Prayer wheel (https://craftingthewordofgod.com/2013/04/13/i-can-pray/)
- Bibles
- Plastic eggs
- Bread dough
- Christmas ornaments/symbols/Chrismons/Jesse tree items
- Crosses
- Silk flowers
- Candles (battery-operated)
Five Criteria for Choosing a Bible Storybook  
From *I Wonder: Engaging a Child’s Curiosity About the Bible* by Elizabeth F. Caldwell, p. 60.

- Inclusive language for God is used.
- God is not referenced with a gender pronoun.
- Illustrations used with Bible stories include people of color.
- People in stories from the Old and New Testament look like they live in the Middle East.
- As stories are retold, there is an attempt to offer a critique of power.
- Issues of sexism, racism or power are indicated in the way the story is told.
- The selection of stories include women whose voice is heard or whose actions are revealed.
- At least half of the illustrations that are in the storybook include pictures of women or girls.

Elizabeth Caldwell’s Recommended Children’s Bibles and Bible Storybooks  
A more expansive list is available in Appendix 3 in *I Wonder: Engaging a Child’s Curiosity About the Bible* by Elizabeth F. Caldwell.

**Preschool to age 6**

*Children of God Storybook* (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2010)  
by Archbishop Desmond Tutu  
*The Family Story Bible* and *The Lectionary Story Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) by Ralph Milton

**Ages 6 to 8**  
*Shine On: A Story Bible* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 2014)

**Ages 9 to 11**  
*The CEB Student Bible* (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2015)

**Others**  
the Bible storybooks written by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing):

*Creation’s First Light*  
*In God’s Name*  
*But God Remembered: Stories of Women from Creation to the Promised Land*  
*God’s Paintbrush*  
*God In Between*  
*Noah’s Wife: The Story of Naamah*  
*God Said Amen*  
*Cain and Abel: Find the Fruits of Peace*  
*Adam and Eve’s First Sunset: God’s New Day*  
*For Heaven’s Sake*
Resources for Children’s Messages

Books


Articles

Biblical storytelling for the Children’s Message

Children’s book reviews with connections to scripture
http://storypath.upsem.edu

Children’s Message Do’s and Don’ts
https://www.buildfaith.org/the-childrens-sermon-5-dos-and-donts/

Cultivating Christians: North American family cultures and religious identity formation
Karen-Marie Yust
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1364436X.2017.1363721

Should there be a children’s message?
https://www.buildfaith.org/should-there-be-a-childrens-sermon/

Using Godly Play concepts in Children’s Messages
https://www.bc.edu/schools/stm/crossroads/resources/preaching/specialtouchstones/preaching-children.html