



Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation

John Roberto and Katie Pfiffner

For the past century Christian churches have structured their faith formation programs for children around a classroom model. This approach brings together teachers and children for regular, planned teaching and learning, in settings where significant relationships take shape. Many churches still structure their children's program around the "traditional" classroom model, which looks and feels the same as it did decades ago. The books and materials have been updated, but the basic model remains. Children still sit at desks or around tables listening to a teacher, reading the Bible and/or a textbook, answering questions, and doing pencil-and-paper activities.

This model served churches in previous generations, but changes in families, society, and churches have accentuated its limitations. Consider the following well-documented limitations of children's faith formation based on a classroom model.

- Children's education remains "based on an understanding of learning as the process by which an individual mind accumulates and integrates information at the developmentally appropriate time for the mind to internalize it. Much of current practice sees learning as an activity that takes place within the individual mind of a child. In this theory learning is facilitated by some combination of input from a teacher and the teacher's arrangement of a learning environment that will cooperate with that individual child's internal cognitive processes." (Mercer, 163)
- Little pedagogical value is placed on children's experiences, and volunteer teachers are uncomfortable with children's honest discussion of difficult issues; yet children still try to engage in theological reflection on their experiences, despite these obstacles. Children are capable of theological reflection (in ways that vary according to their developmental age/stage), and adults could provide much greater support for this work through more intentional engagement with young people's experience and more deliberate provision of religious language, symbols, rituals, and other interpretive frameworks and skills. (Yust 2002)
- Children's education is structured in age-graded settings that segregate children from learning with their family and with the other generations in their faith community. Children have few opportunities to observe the next stage of development that will draw them forward and help them grow in their faith. They do not have an opportunity to see how their parents, teachers, and other significant adults express their faith through worship, service, prayer, and relationships. We know that the faith life of children is nurtured as they are embraced in a family of faith and a vital faith community.
- Children's education is "too often sequestered from the practices of the wider community of faith. Christian education is formation into identity, learned through participation in the church as a

‘community of practice’ that seeks to walk in the ways of Jesus and organizes its life and practices around the central symbol of the kingdom of God, with its reordering of power and its transforming commitment to an alternative way of life” (Mercer, 163). Too often, there is little integration of children’s education with the rest of congregational life.

Today, we know so much more about how children learn than we did fifty years ago, and the learning methods and activities that engage children today are unlike those of previous generations. We know that the world of their childhood has drastically changed, and adjustments are necessary to provide faith formation that forms the whole life of the child—head, heart, and soul. Churches that understand this shift have made fundamental changes in the way they do children’s faith formation.

In *Enduring Connections: Creating a Preschool and Children’s Ministry*, Janice Haywood describes this shift.

These (effective) churches are interested in more than activities and numbers. They want to make a significant difference in the spiritual lives of children, families, and the church, so they have moved beyond both mediocre programming and “edutainment” fads to embrace a ministry strategy that is both foundational and inviting to children and families. They have ministered to children who have grown into youth and adults as faithful Christ-followers. They have attracted, encouraged, and equipped families to be the faith nurturers of all of the family members. They have grown churches that embrace all members from the youngest to the oldest, and they have thrived.

Many churches are discovering that childhood ministry is deeply rooted in relationships. They are committed to proclaiming Bible truths and stories with integrity rather than simply providing programming that has a biblical theme. They recognize that childhood ministry is first and foremost family ministry. They have found ways to be inclusive of children in their congregational experiences rather than always providing a separate event just for children. They recognize that “family ministry” is not just providing activities for all ages of family members, but it includes providing experiences in which the whole family can participate together. (Haywood, 6)

This article explores several best practices that congregations are using to make this shift to more holistic and comprehensive faith formation for today’s children. Best practices form an agenda for action that a congregation can use to re-imagine and reinvent faith formation with children. These best practices are not a definitive statement, but guideposts toward developing more vital and robust faith formation for children.

Best Practice I. Effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

The dramatic changes in our culture and new research into learning—brain-based learning, multiple intelligences, and styles of learning—are changing our understanding of how children learn. Congregations that are effective in childhood learning are using contemporary cultural trends and research to create and teach learning experiences that engage the whole child. At the heart of the most effective learning are these two components: creating an environment in which relationships among the children can flourish, and designing programs that are experiential, relevant, and engaging. These approaches have the following features.

- Incorporating learning activities that teach to the different *intelligences* of children. Embracing a “multiple intelligences” approach provides different ways for children to learn or “know” a particular concept, Bible story, or belief. While not every program can incorporate activities for all eight intelligences, having a greater variety of ways to learn promotes more effective learning and engages children more fully in the learning experience. The multiple intelligences identified by Howard Gardner include:
 - verbal-linguistic (word smart, book smart)
 - logical-mathematical (number smart, logic smart)
 - visual-spatial (art smart, picture smart)
 - bodily-kinesthetic (body smart, movement smart)

- musical-rhythmic (music smart, sound smart)
 - naturalist (nature smart, environment smart)
 - interpersonal (people smart, group smart)
 - intrapersonal (self smart, introspection smart)
- Utilizing all of the **senses** in a learning experience where children can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
 - Engaging the children in **practicing** and **performing** what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities in the learning experience. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it.
 - Having children work in small, non-competitive groups (**collaborative learning**) to discuss and process together what they are learning, to work together on projects and activities, and to practice and present what they are learning. Children are engaged in meaningful group work that requires all members to be actively involved.
 - Immersing children in **images** and the visual nature of learning. Children are growing up in an image-driven culture. They hear with their eyes. Images, art, and film are integral to effective learning today.

Best Practice 2. Effective faith formation with children provides opportunities for children to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition.

Effective faith formation in congregations weaves together stories from the Bible (and Christian tradition) and children's experiences so children discover that "this is *my* story about *me*, and it is *our* story about *us*." Karen-Marie Yust writes, "Each new generation of congregational leaders and parents must find ways to help children discover the transformative relevance of faith stories for contemporary lives. To do so, we need to understand the developmental capabilities of children at different ages, the social contexts in which they are

growing up, and the kinds of spiritual and ministry practices that contribute to faith formation. Children come to embody the gospel story through the interplay of these aspects of personal, communal, and religious life, and there is much that adults can do to shape this interplay so that children grow in faithfulness day by day" (Yust 2007, 4).

Karen-Marie Yust tells a story that embodies so many of the practices described in the first two best practices.

It's a Sunday morning, and fifteen children, ages two to twelve, are gathered in a classroom for religious education. They have been exploring the biblical story of Ruth, and they are enthusiastic participants in a quest to learn about this faithful woman of God.

The older children have spent two weeks researching the context of the story and its characters, and writing a script for the video they are about to shoot. For "homework" two weeks previous, they had consulted Bible dictionaries and multiple Bible translations to expand their knowledge about Ruth's cultural setting and the roles of women in her era. They also interviewed some adults after worship one Sunday to discover what others think about Ruth's life and faith.

The younger children have heard the story of Ruth's departure from her homeland and interactions with Boaz, and they have drawn storyboard murals and composed songs about Ruth's faith journey. They've selected costumes and props for the video drama, in consultation with the other members of the class.

The preschoolers in the group have also heard the story on numerous occasions, and have decorated large drawings of the central characters. They have imaginatively imitated Ruth's practice of gleaning wheat in Boaz's fields, examined actual stalks of wheat, and explored the connections between the popular story of the Little Red Hen and Ruth's story. Now the entire group is ready to recreate Ruth's life on tape.

Two fifth graders wield video cameras borrowed from members of the congregation. Children of all ages assume their previously agreed upon roles, and a sixth grader walks them through a practice run with the narrated script. Some of the younger children pantomime the joy felt at weddings, then the sadness felt by the three central female characters when their husbands die and they must figure out what to do next.

As the play begins, Ruth and Naomi trudge along the road to a place where they can set up a new home. Ruth goes out into a field full of gleaners (played by preschool children) and searches for scarce leftovers. Boaz directs the other gleaners to a different part of the field and encourages his field hands (a pair of second graders) to drop more stalks of wheat than usual in Ruth's section.

The drama continues through Ruth's flirtation with Boaz—an awkward moment for the two older elementary children in the roles, but an element they recognize as essential to the story. The wedding scene, with crowds of celebrating preschoolers and a beaming Naomi hugging Ruth, is a near-riot. But order is restored, and the birth of a child brings the children's videotaped version of this biblical tale to a close. The director yells, "Cut!" and the videographers turn off their cameras.

Next Sunday, the older children will use digital editing software to make a final cut of the video, while younger children design and decorate screening announcements with scenes from the story. They will invite the entire congregation to view their production after the worship service that morning. Following the screening, adults in attendance, with advance prompting from the pastor, will ask the cast and crew questions about their interpretation of Ruth's life and faithfulness.

When it is all over, the entire process will have deepened the children's engagement with the biblical narrative—and that of the adults involved as well. (Yust 2007, 3-4)

Best Practice 3. Faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.

Children's faith formation is fundamentally about nurturing their relationships with God, and in all aspects of children's faith formation, we would do well to let children meet God face to face. Karen Marie Yust writes, "Adults cannot presume to mediate children's spiritual experiences by inserting themselves between God and children as informers, but must wonder with children about the relationship between children's personal spiritual experiences and the tradition's understanding of who God is and how God is present to us in all aspects of our lives" (Yust 2002, 15).

Effective faith formation with children provides a variety of ways for children to encounter God directly in prayer, Sunday worship, ritual and sacraments, and retreat experiences. Congregations involve children in ritual experiences—in age group, family, and congregational settings—especially involving them in Sunday worship and the celebration of liturgical seasons. Churches engage children in prayer experiences—in class, programs, and other settings—where they are praying themselves using a variety of prayer forms and techniques such as:

- silence and silent prayer
- centering prayer
- meditative prayer
- praying with poetry, art, or music
- guided meditation
- reading and meditating on Bible stories
- prayers of praise, confession, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving
- prayers of discipleship.

One model of children's formation, used around the world, that demonstrates how to create an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly is *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*. Created by Sofia Cavalletti, this is an approach to the religious formation of children that is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. Children gather in an "atrium," a room prepared for them, which contains simple yet beautiful materials that they use. In the early church, the atrium was the place where the catechumens were prepared. For the child, the atrium is a place of preparation for involvement in the larger worshipping community.

In an atrium the child can ponder a biblical passage or a prayer from the liturgy by taking the material for that text and working with it—placing wood figures of sheep in a sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, setting sculpted apostles around a Last Supper table, or preparing a small altar with the furnishings used for the Eucharist. Older children who do read often copy parables from the Bible, lay in order written prayers from the rite of baptism, or label a long time line showing the history of the kingdom of God. (For more information go to: www.cgsusa.org.)

"If we want to help the child draw nearer to God, we should with patience and courage seek to go always closer to the vital nucleus of things. This requires study and prayer. The child will be our teacher if we know how to observe."
(Sofia Cavalletti)

A second model that demonstrates how to create an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly is *Godly Play*. Developed by author, teacher and Episcopal priest, Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play* teaches children the art of using religious language—parable, sacred story, silence and liturgical action—helping them become more fully aware of the mystery of God’s presence in their lives. (For more information go to: <http://godlyplay.org>.)

Best Practice 4. Effective faith formation with children embraces the lifecycle milestones as opportunities for nurturing the faith of children and their families in the congregation and at home.

Milestones are significant moments in life’s journey that provide the opportunity for children and their families to experience God’s love, and grow in faith through sacred and ordinary events both in the life of the congregation and in daily life. Milestones faith formation uses four elements to shape a vital partnership between the congregation and the home.

- *Naming* the sacred and ordinary events that are recognized in the life of a congregation and those that take place in our daily lives—our beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, and rites of passage—creates rituals and traditions that shape our identities and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.
- *Equipping* brings the generations together, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and provides information. Opportunities are provided here to model faith practices for the home.
- *Blessing* the individual, and marking the occasion in a worship service and in the home, says that it is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred.
- *Gifting* offers a tangible, visible item that serves as a reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked, as well as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life. (Anderson and Staats, 6)

Through their work with congregations, the Youth and Family Institute has identified the benefits of milestones faith formation.

- Children and youth are supported in their faith through identified milestones in their lives.
- Parents and caretakers of children are encouraged through cross-generational enrichment events to grow in their own faith, and are equipped to be teachers of the faith even in their own homes.
- Elders are encouraged to share their stories and leave a legacy of faith for the next generation.
- Faith is practiced through the four keys of caring conversations, devotions, service, and rituals and traditions.
- Meaningful feedback is encouraged through the sharing of stories as a result of specific milestones. . . .As nurturing communities work together to help and support one another, over time the benefits of milestones ministry and the life of faith are maximized
- Supportive and prayerful accountability develops for one another. Milestone moments become an integral part of the faith journey, and sojourners along the way are encouraged to support, pray for, and discuss how the journey is going for a particular individual or family. (Anderson and Staats, 7-8)

Congregations develop children’s faith formation around milestones such as:

- baptism
- anniversary of baptism
- welcoming young children to worship
- first day of school
- starting Sunday school
- First Communion
- presentation of the Bible.

Milestones faith formation is a partnership between the congregation and home with programs and resources appropriate to each setting:

Congregational Elements

- Learning program for parents and/or whole family
- Liturgy/ritual
- Prayer/blessings
- Connection to the community
- Justice and service

Home Components

- Faith conversations
- Devotions and prayer
- Service
- Rituals and traditions

For an example of baptism milestone faith formation, see the article “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation” in this issue. For more information on milestones faith formation see the resource list for Youth and Family Institute and Faith Inkubators.

Best Practice 5. Effective faith formation engages children and their parents in programs that involve the whole family in learning together.

There are a variety of ways congregations engage the whole family in learning together. These can be envisioned as a continuum from congregations that make family/intergenerational faith formation the primary model of learning, to congregations that integrate family learning opportunities throughout the year, to congregations that offer occasional or annual family learning programs. Here are several examples of family learning programs currently in use in congregations:

- monthly large group family or intergenerational learning programs
- monthly family cluster or small group learning programs (at the church or in homes)
- family-centered (small group or large group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
- family workshops throughout the year focused on family faith practices, church year seasons, and/or family-focused topics
- family-centered or intergenerational vacation Bible school
- family retreats and camps
- family Bible study
- family-centered sacramental/ritual preparation programs, such as baptism and First Communion

For a model of family/intergenerational learning that is being used in thousands of churches, see the article on “Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation” in this issue.

Best Practice 6. Effective faith formation provides opportunities for children to practice their faith through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the congregation.

Effective faith formation prepares children to participate in the life, ministry, and activities of the church according to their abilities. It involves children in learning settings that provide them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate with all their senses in the life of the community through worship, prayer, service, learning, relationships, leadership, and so on. This practice of effective congregations restores the connection between learning and practice—precisely what is missing in the traditional model of classroom learning, where the material presented stands divorced from the practice of faith. It also overcomes the age segregation so prevalent in churches today.

Congregations connect learning and practice (i.e., community participation) when the content of the childhood curriculum is aligned with congregational life. For example, the children’s program prepares children with an understanding of the theology, symbols, and rituals of the liturgical season, such as Advent or Lent, and then supports the active participation of children (and their families) in the liturgical life of the church. Children may be also prepared to take an active role in the actual liturgical celebrations of the season. *The key is that what children are learning in their program is aligned with hands-on participation in congregational life, and does not replace it.*

Many churches utilize a lectionary-based model of faith formation in which the content of the learning program is the Sunday Scripture readings. Here the connection is direct: what is learned in an educational program is experienced at Sunday worship. Connecting learning programs and congregational life can take many forms: liturgical seasons, Sunday lectionary readings, preparation for a congregation-wide service project, and so on.

Joyce Mercer reinforces the importance of this practice when she writes, “The central purpose of educating children for faith is the formation of identity among learners to enable their full participation in the mission and practices of the faith community. This identity includes their ability, in turn, to impact and transform the practices of that community toward ever-renewed and more adequate instantiations of good news” (Mercer, 197).

In addition to connecting learning and congregational life, children need to be recognized and accepted as full members of the congregation. There are many ways to engage children in congregational life.

- ***Sunday worship***, where children are present, active, and have a role in the worship. Worship leaders can incorporate illustrations from children's experience in sermons, prayers that reference the lives of children, and hymns and songs that reflect all ages in the congregation, including children. Children (and their parents) can take on a variety of liturgical roles, commensurate with their developmental abilities, such as reading the Scriptures, singing in the choir, presenting a biblical drama, decorating the worship space with art, greeting people, collecting the offering, and so on.
- ***Intergenerational learning***, where children can engage in faith conversations and storytelling with more experienced members of the congregation, and learn from the Scriptures and the Christian tradition together with people of all ages.
- ***Community-wide service***, in which children participate with adults in responding to those in need in the community, caring for the environment, visiting the sick or homebound, and so on; and congregational action for justice, in which children and adults raise money to support justice organizations or take a stand on an important social issue.
- ***Teaching programs***, where older children can be engaged in teaching younger children, reading stories, leading activities, and so on.

Most often children are capable of taking on more responsibility than we are willing to give them. They can serve as ushers and greeters, welcoming people into the assembly and helping to take up the collection. They can sing in choirs, both children's choirs and other groups that help to lead music. A real sense of leadership can develop in older elementary-age children as they stand in front to sing with the adults they are so used to watching. This also helps foster the understanding that children aren't there to "perform" when they sing, but rather are there to help lead. Too, there are times

when a child's voice reading the welcome or prayers of petition would be a nice change.

Participation in a number of service areas allows for great opportunities of growth. At one church families signed up to cook and serve a meal at a Catholic Worker House in a nearby town during Lent. They gathered together, children and parents, to prepare the food, and then shared in the experience of serving and eating with those who were coming for a hot meal that evening. The children were not just bystanders watching their parents, but rather fully engaged according to their capabilities, sharing their gifts. This shared experience gave them a starting point for faith conversations about our responsibility to help those in need.

It is important to remember that "children are not only shaped by practices in which they participate. They also 'act back' on the community of practice, with new insights, ideas, and actions that can contribute to the transformation of those practices, and therefore, of the community. For example, children in one congregation mobilized their congregation to use fair trade coffee at the church after studying the situation of coffee producers alongside their reading and reflection on various prophetic texts concerned with justice and land. Adults changed their practice to hone the insights and wisdom of children" (Mercer 202).

It is essential that a community continually assess children's involvement in the congregation so as not to lose sight of this essential element of effective faith formation. Joyce Mercer suggests questions for congregational reflection.

- How are children participating?
- What can we do to better enable the participation of children? What kinds of reflection, instruction, and study in conjunction with this practice would best assist children of different ages and abilities to learn?
- And in evaluating practices as sites for learning, what did children's participation teach or contribute to the community's practice and understanding in this particular instance? How are we as a whole changed by the presence and participation of children? (Mercer 202)

A principal factor to the ongoing religious development of a child is that they feel a real sense of belonging as they are now, not for who they might become, and to know they are a treasured part of a faith community where learning and growing in relationship with God is a lifelong process.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that an essential practice for making the six best practices effective is that *congregations dedicate significant resources—space, people, finances, programs—to a wide array of children’s faith formation activities*. Further, congregations must not limit the resources allocated to children’s ministries to a single area, such as the purchase of educational materials, but instead supply resources for children’s ministries throughout the life of the congregation. Not all of these resources are monetary. They also include the personal and communal commitments of time, skills, and energy invested in children and children’s ministry.

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Web Sites

- www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org – the web site for the Youth and Family Institute with resources for milestones ministry, training services, publications, and family and congregational resources.
- www.faithink.com – the web site for Faith Inkubators with intergenerational and family programs, Stepping Stones milestones faith formation, and training services.
- www.cgsusa.org – the web site for *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*.
- www.childspirituality.org – the web site for Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives with information about the Children’s Spirituality conference, highlights from the conference, resources, and web links.
- www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org – the web site for The Center for Spiritual Development (Search Institute) with news, research, and resources on the Center’s global initiative on the research and practice of spiritual development.
- <http://godlyplay.org> – the web site for *Godly Play* and The Center for the Theology of Childhood, which serves children and families directly through training and education of teachers in the Godly Play method. The Center participates in research and writing about the spirituality of children and maintains a membership network.

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Practice Ideas

Planning for Children's Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with children in your congregation.

Best Practice 1. Effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for children to determine how well they utilize the characteristics of learning today.
 - Incorporating activities that teach to the different intelligences of children.
 - verbal-linguistic
 - logical-mathematical
 - visual-spatial
 - bodily-kinesthetic
 - musical-rhythmic
 - naturalist
 - interpersonal
 - intrapersonal
 - Utilizing all of the senses in a learning experience where children can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
 - Engaging the children in practicing and performing what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities in the learning experience.
 - Having children work in collaborative learning groups to discuss and process together what they are learning, to work together on projects and activities, and to practice and present what they are learning.
 - Immersing children in images and the visual nature of learning.
- How can these programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to address the characteristics of effective learning today?

Best Practice 2. Effective faith formation with children provides opportunities for children to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition.

- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for children to determine how well they weave together stories from the Bible (and Christian tradition) and children's experiences so children discover that "this is *my* story about *me*, and it is *our* story about *us*."
- How well do the educational programs and resources guide children in discovering the relevance of the faith stories for their lives?
- How can these programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to so that children make the faith story their story and see the relevance of the Christian faith for their lives today?

Best Practice 3. Faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.

- How does your congregation and faith formation efforts let children meet God face to face? What types of spiritual experiences does your church provide for children (e.g., prayer, Sunday worship, liturgical seasons, ritual celebrations, retreats)?
- How does your faith formation with children engage them in practices and a variety of prayer forms and techniques:
 - silence and silent prayer
 - centering prayer
 - meditative prayer
 - praying with poetry, art, or music
 - guided meditation

- reading and meditating on Bible stories
- prayers of praise, confession, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving

- How can your congregation expand its current efforts or initiate new efforts to allow children to encounter the living God directly?

Best Practice 4. Effective faith formation with children embraces the lifecycle milestones as opportunities for nurturing the faith of children and their families in the congregation and at home.

- How does your congregation currently provide faith formation around milestone events in the lives of children and their families? For example: baptism, anniversary of baptism, welcoming young children to worship, first day of school, starting Sunday school, First Communion, and presentation of the Bible.
- How does your congregation currently 1) prepare children and their families for a milestone, 2) celebrate or remember the milestone, and 3) provide follow-up after the milestone? How does your church provide congregational activities and home resources for each milestone?
- What does your congregation need to do to strengthen its current approach to milestones faith formation?
- What are one or two new milestones around which your church can develop faith formation?

Best Practice 5. Effective faith formation engages children and their parents in programs that involve the whole family in learning together.

- What types of family and/or intergenerational learning programs does your congregation offer children and their families? When are they offered? What are the topics or themes addressed?
- How can your congregation expand the opportunities for the whole family to learn together?

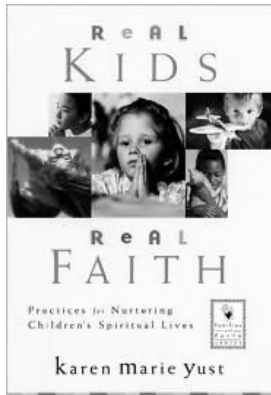
- monthly large group family or intergenerational learning programs
- family workshops through the year focused on family faith practices, church year seasons, and/or family-focused topics
- family cluster or small group learning programs
- family-centered or intergenerational vacation Bible school
- family-centered (small group or large group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
- family retreats and camps
- family Bible study
- family-centered sacramental/ritual preparation programs

Best Practice 6. Effective faith formation provides opportunities for children to practice their faith through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the congregation.

- How and where are children currently participating in the life, ministries, and activities of the whole congregation? Identify the settings and ways they are already involved?
- How does your congregation recognize and accept children as full members of the congregation with roles and responsibilities?
- How do educational programs and resources for children provide them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate with all their senses in the life of the community through worship, prayer, service, learning, relationships, leadership, and so on?
- How well does what children are learning in educational programs connect to hands-on participation in congregational life?
- What can your church and children's faith formation do to better enable the participation of children in congregational life? How can existing educational programs be re-designed to prepare children?
- What are one or two new initiatives that your church can develop to more fully involve children in congregational life, and prepare them for this participation?

Best Practices Resources

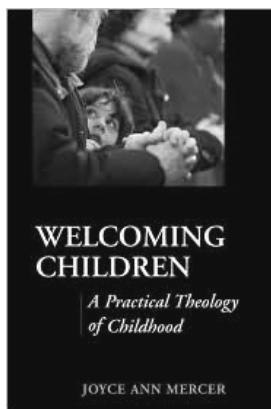
Children's Faith Formation



Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives

Karen Marie Yust (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004) [\$19.95]

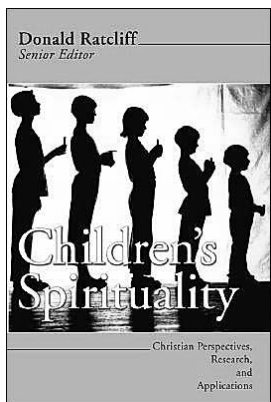
Drawn from a three-year study of children's spirituality and the best in theological tradition, Karen Marie Yust provides insights and a variety of helpful tips for nurturing children's spiritual and religious formation. She challenges the prevailing notion that children are unable to grasp religious concepts and encourages parents and educators to recognize children as capable of genuine faith. Chapters include: Creating a Spiritual World for Children to Inhabit, Telling Stories that Draw Children into a Life of Faith, Helping Children Name God's Presence in their Lives, Praying with Children, Supporting Children as They Grow in Spiritual Awareness, and Acting Out Our Spirituality with Children.



Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood

Joyce Ann Mercer (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005) [\$29.99]

"Sometimes families choose not to participate in the church because the church fails to welcome their children." With these words Joyce Ann Mercer begins her search for a child-affirming theology and for a church that genuinely welcomes children, cares about their well-being, and advocates for them in situations in which they are marginalized or harmed. She writes about how Christian identity has the power to oppose the destructive identities consumer culture offers today, and how church leaders and families can nurture children into the Christian faith. Chapters include: A Way of Doing Theology of Childhood, Religious Ambivalence toward Children, Educating Children in Congregations, and Practicing Liturgy as Practice of Justice with Children. See especially the chapter "Children in Congregations."

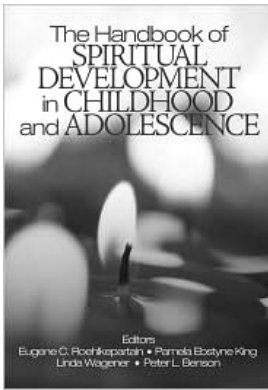


Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications

Donald Ratcliff, Senior Editor (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004) [\$39]

A collection of essays, more academic and research-oriented in nature, that grew out of presentations at the first major conference to consider the spiritual development of children. The first section considers summarizes some views of the spirituality of children. The second section highlights children's spirituality in the Christian home. The third section reflects upon the spirituality of children in the church and how spiritual growth and experiences are nurtured in church settings. The Appendix has descriptions of children's program models.

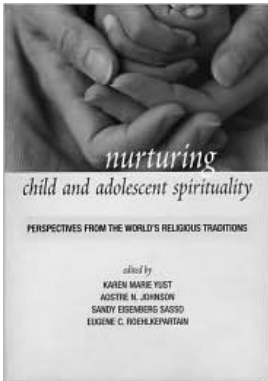
- **The Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives** web site (www.childspirituality.org) has information about the Children's Spirituality conference, highlights from the conference, resources, and web links. A valuable resource for children's faith formation.



The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence

Edited by Eugene Roehlkepartain, Pamela Ebstyne King, Linda Wagener, and Peter Benson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006) [\$125]

The *Handbook*, a collection of academic and research-oriented essays, breaks new ground by articulating the state of knowledge in childhood and adolescent spiritual development. This book provides the first comprehensive collection of social science research on spiritual development from an international group of social scientists. This book will be useful to researchers, professors, and graduate students in ministry and religion. For congregational leaders the essays on the “Ecologies of Spiritual Development” (ethnicity, family, mentors, and congregations) will be very helpful.

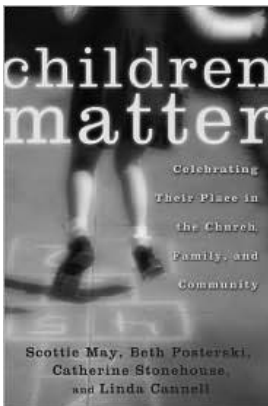


Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality

Edited by Karen Marie Yust, Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Eugene Roehlkepartain (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006) [\$57.95]

Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality is a collection of essays from prominent religious scholars that examine the state of religious knowledge and theological reflection on spiritual development in childhood and adolescence. Essays are organized into six parts: 1) Children and Adolescents in Major Religious Traditions, 2) Spiritual Change and Rites of Passage, 3) Rituals and Practices to Nurture the Inner Life, 4) Connecting the Inner Life with Ethical Action, 5) Who Is Responsible for Nurturing Spirituality?, 6) Social and Cultural Forces That Shape Spirituality.

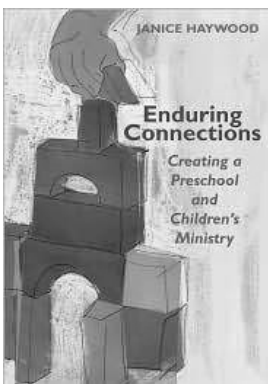
- **The Center for Spiritual Development** (Search Institute) web site (www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org) has news, research, and resources on the Center’s initiative on the research and practice of spiritual development.



Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community

Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005) [\$22]

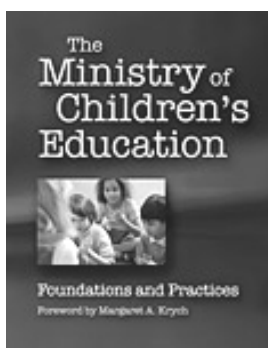
Children Matters explores the faith formation of children from a variety of perspectives and shows how the faith community can better nurture its youngest members. The authors develop the foundations and practices for children’s faith formation in three sections: 1) Foundations—biblical, theological, psychological, and historical perspectives; 2) Context and Content: children in the faith community and in the family, children and story, children and curriculum; and 3) Practices: worship, learning and teaching, specialized ministries, and leadership.



Enduring Connections: Creating a Preschool and Children’s Ministry

Janice Haywood (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007) [\$19.99]

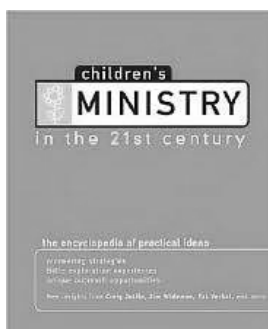
Enduring Connections is a comprehensive, practical guide for establishing a quality childhood ministry with preschoolers and grade-schoolers that focuses on building a childhood ministry that intentionally connects children to God and the community of faith through paths that are driven by relationship rather than programs. The twelve chapters in Part 1 provide the foundations, practices, and tools for developing childhood ministry; the five chapters in Part 2 are focused on leadership.



The Ministry of Children's Education: Foundations, Contexts, and Practices

Margaret Krych, Norma Cook Everist, Diane Hymans, Mary Hughes, Nathan Framback, Mary Hess, Nelson Stobert, Carol Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) [\$22]

This collection of essays presents a theological rationale for educational ministry with children, explores contexts in which contemporary faith is nurtured, and suggests strategies for creating programs that work in congregations, including practical guidance for designing and implementing specific programs. Chapters include: Theology of Christian Education for Children, Understanding Children's Development, Family Ministry, The Ministry of Children and/in Congregations, Growing Faithful Children in Media Cultures, and Teaching to Engage Children



Children's Ministry in the 21st Century

Craig Jutila, Jim Wideman, Pat Verbal, et al. (Loveland, CO: Group, 2007) [\$24.99]

Children's Ministry in the 21st Century provides a survey of key trends shaping children's ministry and practical activities to use with children, families, and the whole congregation. Chapters analyze cultural trends affecting learning, learning in the digital age, latest education research and trends, family ministry for the new century, reaching preschoolers and preteens, learning from the emergent church, and emerging trends affecting children's ministry.



Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation

Youth and Family Institute (Bloomington, MN: Youth and Family Institute, 2007) [\$99] (www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org)

The *Milestone Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation* provides faith formation resources for home and congregation designed around sixteen life milestones from birth to high school graduation. There are three elements for each of the sixteen milestones: 1) worship—a litany and blessing, 2) cross-generational learning experience, and 3) household faith resources. Included among the 16 milestones are: baptism, anniversary of baptism, welcoming young children to worship, entering Sunday school, kids & money, blessing of the backpacks, First Communion, bible presentation and adventure, first time campers, sexuality, middle school, entering confirmation, confirmation, driver's license, and high school graduation.



Stepping Stones

Faith Inkubators (www.faithink.com)

Faith Stepping Stones is a family ministry system that pulls parents into the role of primary faith mentors for their own children every night in every home. Faith Stepping Stones is a process that bonds parents and children into the body of Christ at eight crucial moments in parenting and leads them to incubate faith every night in every home. It provides faith-based parenting education from cradle to graduation through a series of eight short-courses. Each course brings parents and children together for fun and learning, and ends at the altar with a special blessing service. Parents and children develop nightly faith practices that includes blessing, prayer, scripture reading, sharing of Highs & Lows, faith dialogue, and a nightly "I'm sorry" before turning out the lights on the day.