

LEADING A CHILD TO CHRIST

Many adult Christians look back to their elementary years as the time when they accepted Christ as Savior. Not only are children able to understand the difference between right and wrong and their own personal need of forgiveness, but they are also growing in their ability to understand Jesus' death and resurrection as the means by which God provides salvation. In addition, elementary children are capable of growing in their faith through prayer, Bible reading, worship and service.

However, children (particularly those in early elementary grades) can still be limited in their understanding and may be immature in following through on their intentions and commitments. They need thoughtful, patient guidance in coming to know Christ personally and continuing to grow in Him.

1. Pray.

Ask God to prepare the children in your class to receive the good news about Jesus and prepare you to effectively communicate with them.

2. Present the good news.

Use words and phrases that children understand. Avoid symbolism that will confuse these literal-minded thinkers. *Discuss these points slowly* enough to allow time for thinking and comprehending.

a. "God wants you to become His child. Do you know why God wants you in His family?" (See 1 John 3:1.)

b. "You and all the people in the world have done wrong things. The Bible word for doing wrong is 'sin.' What do you think the Bible says should happen to us when we sin?" (See Romans 6:23.)

c. "God loves you so much, He sent His Son to die on the cross for your sin. Because Jesus never sinned, He is the only one who can take the punishment for your sin." (See 1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 John 4:14.) On the third day after Jesus died, God brought Him back to life.

d. "Are you sorry for your sin? Tell God that you are. Do you believe Jesus died to take the punishment for your sin and that He is alive today? If you tell God you are sorry for your sin and tell Him you do believe and accept Jesus' death to take away your sin—God forgives all your sin." (See 1 John 1:9.)

e. "The Bible says that when you believe in Jesus, God's Son, you receive God's gift of eternal life. This gift makes you a child of God. (See John 3:16.) This means God is with you now and forever."

As you give children many opportunities to think about what it means to be a Christian, expose them to a variety of lessons and descriptions of the meaning of salvation to aid their understanding.

3. Talk personally with the child.

Talking about salvation one-on-one creates opportunity to ask and answer questions. Ask questions that move the child beyond simple yes or no answers or recitation of memorized information. Ask what-do-you-think kinds of questions such as:

“Why do you think it’s important to . . . ?”

“What are some things you really like about Jesus?”

“Why do you think that Jesus had to die because of wrong things you and I have done?”

“What difference do you think it makes for a person to be forgiven?”

Answers to these open-ended questions will help you discern how much the child does or does not understand.

4. Offer opportunities without pressure.

Children are vulnerable to being manipulated by adults. A good way to guard against coercing a child’s response is to simply pause periodically and ask, “Would you like to hear more about this now or at another time?” Lovingly accepting the child, even when he or she is not fully interested in pursuing the matter, is crucial in building and maintaining relationship that will yield more opportunities to talk about becoming part of God’s family.

5. Give time to think and pray.

There is great value in encouraging a child to think and pray about what you have said before making a response. Also allow moments for quiet thinking about questions you ask.

6. Respect the child’s response.

Whether or not a child declares faith in Jesus Christ, adults need to accept the child’s action. There is also a need to realize that a child’s initial responses to Jesus are just the beginning of a lifelong process of growing in the faith.

7. Guide the child in further growth.

Here are three important parts in the nurturing process:

a. *Talk regularly about your relationship with God.* As you talk about your relationship, the child will begin to feel that it’s OK to talk about such things. Then you can comfortably ask the child to share his or her thoughts and feelings, and encourage the child to ask questions of you.

b. *Prepare the child to deal with doubts.* Emphasize that certainty about salvation is not dependent on our feelings or doing enough good deeds. Show the child verses in God’s Word that clearly declare that salvation comes by grace through faith (i.e., John 1:12; Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews 11:6; 1 John 5:11).

c. *Teach the child to confess all sin.* “Confess” means “to admit” or “to agree.” Confessing sins means agreeing with God that we really have sinned. Assure the child that confession always results in forgiveness (see 1 John 1:9).

GUIDING THE YOUNG CHILD TOWARD JESUS

Each of us moves through the spiritual development of life in as much of an individual rate and way as we do in any other area. God knows each person intimately; therefore, He works differently in every life. Whatever one's rate of growth or plan of development, God is tirelessly at work to bring us into closer relationship with Himself! Acknowledging this helps us rest in His good plan and look for His hand in the experiences that cause us and our children to develop spiritually.

When we present Jesus consistently by both our actions and our words, we lay a foundation for a child to receive Christ as Savior. When is a child ready to receive Christ? Remembering God's ceaseless work, we need to be sensitive facilitators of that process. God's Holy Spirit calls a child into relationship in His time, not ours. We should never put up walls, but we also should never push or manipulate children. We need to give children time and opportunity to ask questions, think through ideas and respond at their own pace. While some children at this age level (especially from Christian homes) may indeed pray to become members of God's family, accepting Jesus as their Savior, expect wide variation in children's readiness for this important step.

► To help a child give words to thoughts and feelings about Jesus, ask many open-ended what-do-you-think and tell-me-more questions. "Tell me what you like best about Jesus" will help you gain insight into what a child does or doesn't understand. This will also help you to give a child the information he or she needs, instead of an answer that doesn't apply! Kindergartners especially want to know more about many aspects of God. Every question we answer creates an opportunity to help the child understand more about a personal relationship with Jesus.

► Talk individually with children. Something as important as a child's personal relationship with Jesus Christ can be handled more effectively alone than in a group.

► Talk simply. Phrases such as "born again" or "Jesus in my heart" are symbolic and far beyond a young child's understanding. Focus on how God makes people a part of His family:

God loves us, but we have done wrong things (sinned).

God says sin must be punished.

God sent Jesus to take the punishment for the wrong things we have done.

We can tell God that we have done wrong and tell Him we are sorry for our sin. We can ask Jesus to be our Savior.

Then God forgives us and we become a part of God's family.

Consistently share this information whenever a child seems interested but only for as long as the interest lasts. Lay a good foundation for a lifetime of solid spiritual growth!

Salvation Tips

Telling the good news about Jesus is more than words alone. The telling, for a child, is mainly done through your demonstrations of Jesus' love. Every child should feel secure and loved in the church family. For the child whose home situation has not fostered feelings of love, you need to make special efforts to notice and encourage that child's actions. Use the child's name often as you chat. Be interested in what he or she has to say. Listen attentively. These actions all build loving relationships. And loving relationships are what God's family is all about! Show the love of Jesus in a way that a child can see and understand.

Most young children can understand that Jesus is always their friend and helper. The plan of salvation in Jesus Christ is simple and clear enough that some young children can understand it and respond to it at their level of child-like faith (particularly those who receive Christian nurture at home). Keep in mind, however, that spiritual birth, like physical birth, is part of a process. A baby must develop in the womb before birth. Jesus compared the preparation of the heart to the planting of seed which bears fruit at the proper time.

Every time you are with children, not only when you are talking about Jesus' death and resurrection, you are building a foundation of spiritual understanding for each one. As you model the love of Jesus in every situation, seeds are being planted. You may be the first person in a child's life to explain the spiritual truth, that Jesus is God's Son and that He died to take the punishment for our sins. But without the loving actions that have shown that love, the words have little meaning. Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance as you nurture the spiritual understanding of the children in your class.

It is important that children get a growing understanding of who Jesus is and what God has done to make it possible for us to become part of His family. Whenever it is appropriate, talk with children about God's gift of salvation. **What did Jesus do so our wrong actions could be forgiven?** If a child indicates interest in talking with you about joining God's family, arrange to talk with the child after class or during the week. It is best to do this individually rather than in a group so that a child's thoughts and ideas are his or her own.



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