

Encouraging faith to grow



TOP TIPS

on
Encouraging
faith to grow

practical pointers for anyone
working with children and
young people

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light

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The home and faith development ...

In reality...

I worked for a number of years in a church where people were encouraged to look at the Jewish roots of their faith. Families were encouraged to celebrate a simple version of the Passover meal, if not on a weekly basis, at least quite regularly, so that they could ask the same questions that the people of God have been asking throughout the generations.

In the Old Testament the home is the primary place for faith development.

‘Tie them [God’s laws] as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.’ Deuteronomy 6:8–9

Wherever family members went, they would bump into the Law of the Lord. It would be all around them, woven into the fabric of everyday lives. Being the people of Israel was their identity and anyone born into a Jewish family took on that identity. Parents and family members took seriously the command to pass on the stories of God’s people throughout the generations so that children would know that they too were part of that story. God, who did these amazing things, was their God and could be trusted in all situations.

Obviously our situation is different! In many ways we live in two cultures: the secular world around us, and the Christian community to which we belong. Our challenge (as it was for believers in the New Testament) is to find ways for our homes to be full of God’s story so that it’s all around us, and known through the things that we do together.



The role of the Church

In the Bible almost all children belong to a faith community. Times of worship and scheduled festivals were at the heart of community life, with children at the centre. In the Passover celebration, children ask the questions that prompt the retelling of the story of God's act of deliverance.

In *Will Our Children have Faith?* John Westerhoff writes, '...a community is a group of people who have shared life together and have stories of that life together ... if our children are to develop good memories of their early life in a faith community, they must have chances to share life with the faith community.'

Sadly, in many churches, people's attitudes to children and faith can be like Jesus disciples': 'Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."' (Matthew 19:13–14)

Of course there is value in children sometimes learning separately from adults. But compartmentalising church life often means that children are excluded from a large part of corporate worship. Also, because of limited time available we have become bound up in *educating* children in the *knowledge* of the Bible and Scripture, to the detriment of helping children grow to understand about and experience God's love in action. They may not experience the church as a caring community, where people enjoy being with each other and learning from one another. As John Westerhoff wrote, '... when our churches segregate children from the rest of the community we stunt the spiritual formation of the entire community.'

Of course we need to teach children biblical truths. However, if our

In reality...

The children had come back into the church to join the adult congregation for the remainder of the service (the notices and the final hymn). This particular Sunday there were more notices than usual so people had switched off by the time the band began to play and didn't respond at all. Suddenly Anna, aged 5, jumped up from her seat, ran to pick up a flag and stood at the front of church, boldly waving the flag that was almost double her size.

The congregation were soon brought back to focus! When the song had finished Anna turned to me and said, 'I know I shouldn't have stood at the front of church, but the King needed to be known'!

limited time with children is focused on teaching in a 'schooly' educational way, we will fail them. We need more time to help them apply what they are learning to their lives, to show them how one story fits into the context of the whole Bible and how the Bible can become a guide for life. We need time to respond to God in worship together and time for fun together!

We need to sometimes let children take the initiative so that *they* are helping adults to learn and grow in their faith. There has to be a strong link between church and home, so that what is taught at church is brought to life in the fabric of everyday living.



In reality...

The leadership team in a church in Harlow wanted to work out what things they could all do together rather than in separate age groupings. The church spent a day together with all ages present (complete with bouncy castle, treasure hunts, great food and times of worship) to think through what it would mean. The day was a great success and set them on the path of discovering new ways to be God's people together.

This calls for churches to actively set up occasions when the whole family of God can come together to have fun and celebrate God's goodness.

A change of heart

The Bible clearly supports the view that children can grow in faith. God's intention is that children should be raised within the community of faith, never knowing a day lived without the awareness of God's presence and involvement in their lives. However, that isn't where it ends. There does need to come a point where children own the faith of their family and their faith community as their own – knowing that the God of their family and their faith community is their God and that they love him and want to continue following him throughout their life. As Paul wrote, 'For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the Jewish ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not a cutting of the body but a change of heart produced by God's spirit.' Romans 2:28–29 (NLT)

Children need to be given opportunities to respond to God personally, but not in a pressurised way. We need to be sensitive to the

Top Tips on Encouraging faith to grow

Encouraging faith is not just something that happens formally, but certainly happens throughout life. At its most basic, it arises as God's people – adults, children and young people – relate to one another in the course of everyday living, in the home, in a church community or in the wider world.

What does the Bible say about faith? How do the three key responses of playing, learning and exploring shape our understanding of faith development? This readable and practical guide is packed with wisdom and ideas that will inspire anyone wanting to encourage the faith of children or young people.



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Top Tips booklets are designed for all those working with children and young people. Big on practical advice, but small enough to digest over a cup of coffee or two so you can get to grips with the issues fast. Get encouraged and be inspired with *Top Tips* from the experts!



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