

## Sharing Jesus with Kids

Leading a child to Christ is an exciting experience for any worker. Whether they are a weekly classroom volunteer or a student helping out on a summer missions trip, being used by God to change eternity invigorates a person like nothing else. Many older Christians fondly remember helping a non-Christian make connections about God's grace and mercy for the first time. They recall the moments when their friends or family members called out to God, asking for His Son's death to count for their sins in a genuine way. It is a faith-building experience. Paul talks about this experience in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians.

### *1 Thessalonians 1:6-10*

*<sup>6</sup>You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup>so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup>For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. <sup>9</sup>For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, <sup>10</sup>and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.*

Faith in Christ changed the Thessalonians. That faith led to a deep love relationship between Paul and the people of this church, as we see throughout the rest of his letter. His relationship with them was a constant source of joy and hope, even when other aspects of his ministry weren't going as planned.

It is no surprise then that workers in our church want to be part of the ministry of leading people to Christ. And working with students, specifically elementary aged and younger, is a fruitful field for leading people to God. The Barna group has published studies documenting this fact:

*The current Barna study indicates that nearly half of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their savior do so before reaching the age of 13 (43%), and that two out of three born again Christians (64%) made that commitment to Christ before their 18th birthday. One out of eight born again people (13%) made their profession of faith while 18 to 21 years old. Less than one out of every four born again Christians (23%) embraced Christ after their twenty-first birthday. Barna noted that these figures are consistent with similar studies it has conducted during the past twenty years.*

<https://www.barna.com/research/evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids/>

Others have also made this observation about kids knowing the Lord.

*But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."*

- Jesus, Luke 18:16

*A child of five, if properly instructed, can, as truly believe, and be regenerated, as an adult.*

- Charles Spurgeon

*If I could relive my life, I would devote my entire ministry to reaching children for God!*

- D.L. Moody

We can run into issues when a child's salvation becomes the main motivation for teens and adults doing work in children's ministry. Children desire acceptance. They long for it from their peers and especially from older individuals in their lives. They have a felt need to belong (see "The Origins of Belonging: Social Motivation in infants and Young Children" by Harriet Over, *link found below*). This is dangerous in the area of salvation because we desire for kids to come to Christ, but we run the risk of inadvertently pressuring kids into a decision they aren't ready for or one they do not completely understand. This can lead to false professions of faith by kids, or at least, woefully uninformed decisions that do not lead to lifelong walks with the Lord.

Additionally, if we as teen or adult workers, tell the student that they now have a relationship with God, it could short circuit their pursuit of knowing him further. For example, if I tell a 6-year-old that they now have a true relationship with God, they will likely believe me. They will most likely do many of the outward things that go along with an initial relationship with God. They will pray. They will share about knowing God. When they do, they will get very positive feedback from me and any adult Christian that they are around. This can feed their felt need for acceptance. But as they grow older, they may question their faith. They could come back to me and ask about it. Oh, you are fine, I might tell them. But in their hearts they are confused. Eventually, they could give up pursuing God as a deity that just "doesn't work" or who "isn't there," when in reality, they never were connected to Him in the first place. In short, we run the risk of inoculating a child to true biblical faith. We need to take care not to tell the child what to think or feel. We can instead let them grow in their understanding, which will increase with age and exposure to the things of God.

So, what do we do? We don't want to stop sharing the gospel with kids. We have many examples of kids coming to know Jesus and walking with Him for their entire lives. Walking with God and knowing Him is the best possible thing anyone can do, regardless of age. We need to walk the fine line of presenting the gospel of God without inadvertently pressuring kids into a decision. I've included some helpful lists below of things we should or shouldn't do.

### The Don'ts:

1. Don't forget that you (the leader) are HUMAN—not the HOLY SPIRIT. We can't save the child, but we do have a role to play in God's plan for each of the students He's placed in our lives.
  - Don't insist the child get saved now.
    - False professions by confused kids are risky for the child and don't bring any glory to God.
    - Consider not even calling on kids to come to Christ during your teaching. Presenting a relationship with Him as an option they can take if they want is a good way to provide them with a non-threatening, non-pressuring environment.
    - Be available after your presentation of the gospel in case kids have further questions. This lets them be them initiators of further depth with God.
  - Don't use fear tactics (fire and brimstone, wanting to be with dead loved ones, etc.).
  - Don't forget that children usually desire to please adults (e.g., raising their hands, impressing their peers).
    - Many times, children who accept Christ as their personal Savior at an early age struggle with assurance of salvation later in life. Make sure you are not pressuring them to accept Christ; it is more important that their name is truly written down in the Book of Life than any other factor.

## 2. Don't ask leading questions.

- Children will usually try to answer the question with what they think an adult will want to hear. To check their true understanding, avoid yes/no and rhetorical questions.
  - Examples of poor questions:
    - You all know that you are sinners going to hell, don't you?
    - You know that Christ died for your sins, don't you?
    - You know that by trusting Christ you will be saved from hell and on your way to heaven, right?
    - Who wants to go to heaven when they die?
  - Examples of better questions:
    - Have you ever asked Jesus to be your Savior before? When? Why did you do that?
    - What is sin? How have you seen sin play out in your life?
    - What do you think God thinks about you and your bad choices?
    - What have you been learning about Jesus? Who is he to you?

## 3. Don't use confusing terminology.

- Most of the time children think literally, so you will want to avoid certain phrases. For example:
  - "Asking Jesus into your heart" – He doesn't go down your throat and into your chest.
  - "Jesus shed His blood" – He didn't shed like a dog.
  - Don't use terms they will not understand unless you explain: propitiation, omniscient, bear your sins
- When talking about heaven, be sure to mention that they will go to heaven *someday*. Children want to go to heaven, but not right now (especially if Christmas is approaching, their birthday is coming up, etc.).
- Be careful not to change your terminology throughout, as this might cause confusion.
  - Avoid the more fundamentalist phrases, like "saved" or "born again."
  - Instead use terms such as "asking to start a relationship" or "asking for Jesus' death to count for your wrong doings".

## 4. Don't forget the FOUNDATION of our (the child's) faith: THE WORD OF GOD

- Use Scripture in your presentation. God's Word is quick, powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword. God's Word will not return void.
- That said, don't overuse scripture when sharing the gospel. If the gospel was presented well in the lesson, there is no need to re-state it a different way with different verses again at the end of the lesson. Focus on the main points. Too many verses could confuse the child.
- If they do pray for forgiveness, ask the child what he/she just did. Use a scripture verse to show the child the promise from God's word that he or she is saved (e.g., 1 John 5:13 or Acts 16:31). You don't tell the child they are saved; he/she needs to tell you what he/she did.
- The Bible will be around and available to them long after you or I have left. Help them to develop a love and respect for God's word.

## 5. Don't think your job is over when a profession is made.

- Consider giving the child a Bible.
- Encourage them to share with family and friends how he/she put their faith in Christ.
- Make a plan for follow-up where possible.

- Talk with the parents of the child. Have them follow up, if possible, on the decision the child professed.

### The Do's

1. Do be available and approachable.
  - Meetings: don't just rush into class late or dash out as soon as it's over; leave time to talk to students and parents.
  - Camp leaders/Missions Trip members: don't just spend time with other adults and workers. Also, while we should make time for fun activities, don't spend all your time with the students playing games. This is a spiritual event and they should expect some spiritual initiation.
  - Ask God to give you his heart for the work you plan to do. Discipline yourself to display the attitude of availability—genuine love, acceptance, relaxed, and a friendly demeanor.
2. Do check the comprehension of salvation.
  - Don't be so concerned with numbers that you don't check their understanding. A child who is saved should be able to explain salvation, even if it is in the most basic sense.
  - Draw information out of the child; ask how he believes a person/his friend can get to heaven.
  - They don't have to be a theologian, but make sure they understand basic doctrine. If they don't know, explain and show what following God looks like for a student at the appropriate age level.
3. Do explain the urgency of salvation and use the same term all the way through (saved, relationship, etc.). Explanation of urgency is not the same as personal pressure to make an uninformed decision. Be careful with this. Prayerfully consider its application.
  - 2 Corinthians 6:2 – “now is the day of salvation”
  - Show them how this is a good age to begin a relationship with Christ, having his friendship while growing up.
4. Do encourage the child to communicate with Jesus.
  - If Christ is properly presented in communicating the gospel, it will be natural for the child to communicate with Him.
  - Ask them what they would want to talk to God about.
5. Do pray for the children you have contact with.
  - If they are not ready, pray for their comprehension and salvation.
  - If they are saved, pray for their growth (cf. Matt: 19:14).
6. Do interact with the child's parents where possible.
  - Parents play the most vital role in the teaching and development of spiritual convictions in children.
  - We should be working as a team with parents for their child's spiritual wellbeing.

### Goals and Expectations

1. Goals change based on the age range you work with and the purpose of your meeting.

- Weekly meetings will include building longer-term relationships with the students and helping them to develop community among their peers. We also want them to learn that God is fun, loves them, and wants them to know Him.
  - Missions trips are shorter-term by design. These can be used to get students excited about God. We should try to partner with local churches in order to facilitate follow-up. It is possible that our role in these trips is to plant seeds, while others, who are better equipped for long-term relationship building, will lead the kids to Christ and engage in discipleship (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). You may have the chance to lead kids to Christ during these trips, but the more important goal should be to connect them to local believers.
  - VBS should be a fun event that presents God’s message of love and forgiveness in a way that kids remember fondly. By giving them a great experience with God, they can recall the things they learn and hopefully get connected with the local body of believers. Another primary goal of VBS is to help these kids’ parents get connected to God through Christ. We should do excellent follow-up with parents and can use children’s ministries to facilitate that follow-up.
2. Not leading a child to Christ does not mean that you failed in your work in children’s ministry. God has gifted people in different ways to play different roles. We can be happy when we do help a kid to receive Christ, but we can also be happy when we accurately reflect God’s love to a kid who has never heard of Jesus before. This takes prayerful discernment and training as well as a deliberate choice to praise God for whatever role he decides to use us for in His kingdom building.
  3. We desire students to know God and walk with him. That is our top priority. It is a huge and awesome responsibility to be entrusted with the spiritual vitality of a very responsive field. We need to be wise in how we handle this responsibility. We need to present the gospel, not inadvertently pressure kids into uninformed decisions. And we need to follow up with them and their parents about the spiritual work being done in their lives. Then we can rest assured that our work is not in vain.

Helpful Links and Sources of Information for Above Content

<https://www.barna.com/research/evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids/>

<https://ministry-to-children.com/childrens-ministry-statistics/>

<http://static.pcci.edu/CampusChurch/Downloads/LeadingaChildtoChristNotes.pdf>

<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/leading-your-children-to-the-savior/>

<http://www.wmu.com/?q=article/children/how-lead-child-christ>

<http://www.sbclife.net/article/342/leading-a-child-to-christ>

“The Origins of Belonging: Social Motivation in infants and Young Children,” Harriet Over

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4685518/>