

BASICS OF TEACHING AND RELATING WITH CHILDREN

PURPOSE

This workshop is designed to help participants explore general characteristics of children and qualities of good teaching, and to do hands-on work developing age-appropriate learning activities. It will work best with a minimum of six participants and can be used as part of teacher-training, an extended meeting of the board of Christian education, or a part of an all-church or regional leader training event or retreat. Not for teachers only, this workshop will be valuable for anyone who works with children from preschoolers through grade 6.

TIME FRAME: 2.5 hours with a 15-minute break

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

- I Introduction (*15 minutes*)
- II Common Characteristics and Needs of Children (*20 minutes*)
- III What Makes Good Teaching? (*20 minutes*)
- Break (*15 minutes*)
- IV Age-Group Characteristics (*25 minutes*)
- V Planning a Lesson (*45 minutes*)
- VI Closing (*10 minutes*)

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

You will need:

- paper and pencils
- newsprint, markers, masking tape
- Bibles
- copies of the handouts for each participant

In preparation for leading the workshop:

- Read through the workshop.
- Print out and post the workshop outline for participants to see.
- Make copies of handouts—there are several handouts, so you may want to use different colors to make it easier to keep track of them. It may be easier and save time if you set the handouts on a table for the participants to pick up as they arrive.
- Arrange for snacks and drinks.
- Make sure your space is large enough for the participants to break up into smaller groups.
- Hang blank sheets of newsprint or make available a chalk/white board and chalk/markers.

CONDUCTING THE WORKSHOP

I Introduction (*15 minutes*)

As the participants enter, ask them to write one or two words on the newsprint (or chalk/white board) that describes good teaching.

Once everyone has gathered, introduce yourself and review the purpose of the workshop. Explain where the facilities are and encourage the participants to feel free to leave as needed. This permission models good teaching in which the physical needs of the learners are taken into consideration. Then invite the participants to introduce themselves and explain why they have chosen to join this workshop.

II Common Characteristics and Needs of Children (*20 minutes*)

Explain that before looking at characteristics of different age groups, it will be helpful to identify characteristics and needs that all children share. Hang several sheets of newsprint and ask for two volunteers to serve as recorders—one to print the common characteristics of children and the other to print the common needs of children.

Invite the participants to freely share characteristics and needs that they understand children to have. Ask them to identify their suggestion as a “characteristic” or a “need” before they share it.

After a few minutes of sharing, mention that the needs identified are varied. Some are physical, relational, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual—and many represent a combination of needs; for example, the need to be hugged is as much an emotional need as a physical one. Explain that how we relate with children must be guided by their needs and characteristics.

Randomly select needs or characteristics from the newsprint and invite the participants to discuss how they might impact:

- 1) how they relate to children in general, and
- 2) how they plan and conduct a learning experience.

Distribute Handout A, “Characteristics, Needs, and Objectives,” and review together the five characteristics of children, five basic human needs, and ten objectives for our relationships with children. Distribute Handout B, “Chart 1,” and review the example. Give the participants a few minutes to identify one thing they’d like to accomplish with the children they work with and then complete the columns of their chart accordingly. If time allows, invite some to share their notes.

III What Makes Good Teaching? (*20 minutes*)

Post the “good teaching” newsprint that the participants created as they arrived. Review the descriptors on the sheet and note how many of those are relational.

Distribute Handout C, “Effective Teaching,” and review together the numbered items and five marks of effective learning experiences.

Invite the participants to spend some quiet time reflecting on a positive learning experience they had as a child and consider how that experience fits in with the parameters outlined on Handout C. It is possible that some participants will not have had any positive experiences, so give them the option of considering a negative experience to see how the parameters help them understand why that experience was negative.

Reconvene, and as time allows, invite the participants to share some thoughts. As an alternative, you may want to give the participants the option of pairing up to discuss their reflection time. Be sure to give the option of *not* pairing up to share, so that no one feels forced to talk.

Make note of the first mark of an effective learning experience, “appropriate for age level.” Explain that as much as children have in common, there are distinctions among age levels, and note that the rest of the workshop is going to be dedicated to exploring developmental characteristics and how they influence our work with children.

Ask the participants to form three groups when they return from break. The group they are in should represent the primary age group with which they work. Invite those who do not teach or lead any particular group of children to join whatever age group interests them.

Break (15 minutes)

Remind the participants where the facilities and snacks are and invite the participants to take a 15-minute break.

During the break, arrange the chairs into 3 circles and label the groups as “Preschool,” “Younger Elementary” (grades Kindergarten–2), or “Older Elementary” (grades 3–5)

IV Age-Group Characteristics (25 minutes)

As the participants return from break, remind them to gather in one of the three groups—“Preschool,” “Younger Elementary” (grades Kindergarten–2), or “Older Elementary” (grades 3–5). Distribute handouts D, E, F, and G to all the groups and ask the participants to work with the handout that reflects their age group. The other handouts will serve as useful information to take home.

Give about 10 minutes for the groups to review the age-level characteristics of their primary age group, considering the following questions:

- How might these characteristics explain some difficulties you’ve encountered with your learners?
- How might the characteristics inform or change how you approach your teaching or relationships with children in this age group?

- If you were planning an event—either a learning event or another type of gathering for this age group—what things would you need to keep in mind?
- Are your church’s normal practices (education, worship, setting) conducive to this age group? If not, what changes might you recommend?

Invite the groups to work together to fill out Handout D for one specific, agreed-upon goal.

V Planning a Lesson (45 minutes)

With the participants still in groups, distribute paper, pencils, and Bibles, and explain the next task as follows:

- Your job is to plan a lesson on the story of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes (John 6:1-13). You may want to use Handout D as a worksheet for this task.
- Rule one: the lesson must honor the text, which means the lesson must keep with the meaning of the story as revealed in a careful reading of the text—no turning it into a morality lesson on how good boys and girls should share.
- Rule two: the lesson must honor children by attending to what we’ve learned about effective learning experiences and age-appropriate learning.
- Rule three: no more rules—use your imaginations!
- When you are done, you will be given five minutes to present your lesson plan to the larger group. Be prepared to explain not only what you will do in the lesson but also *why* you’ve decided to do it that way—what characteristics of your age group are driving the elements of the lesson?

Allow 25 minutes for the groups to work then reconvene for presentations. Be sure to monitor closely the time for each presentation so that each group gets their allotted five minutes.

VIII Closing (10 minutes)

Thank the group for coming and for their commitment to children. Ask for any comments about what they learned, what they are eager to take back with them, or how they think the workshop could be improved. Provide paper and pencils and invite them to give you anonymous written feedback.

Close with a prayer or by singing a children’s song, such as “Jesus Loves Me.”

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CHARACTERISTICS, NEEDS, AND OBJECTIVES

Five Characteristics of Children

- Children learn through concrete experience and discovery.
- Children are active.
- Children tire easily or can become over-stimulated.
- Children enjoy responsibility.
- Children are eager to please and to do well.

Five Basic Human Needs

- to be taken care of physically
- to be loved and to love others
- to be accepted as we are
- to belong and contribute to a family and/or a community
- to grow spiritually

Ten Objectives for Our Relationships with Children

- to nurture feelings of trust, acceptance, and self-worth
- to encourage self-discovery
- to enable expression of feelings in healthy ways
- to share with them God's love
- to embrace them as full participants in church life
- to receive from them the giftedness they have to offer
- to invite them into ever-growing relationship with God
- to foster creativity
- to model for them coping skills for life
- to help them learn to make life-giving choices

CHART 1

| | | |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| A. What do I want to do? | B. What general characteristics or needs come into play? | C. How shall I proceed? |
| Listen and learn from the children | Children's need to be accepted, to belong, and to contribute | Practice active listening and seek to understand rather than direct |

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EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Five Principles of How Children Learn

1. Children learn best if they are actively involved—through exploration and discovery—in real rather than abstract experiences. Effective teaching provides a setting in which children experience what we want them to learn.
2. Since children cannot stay seated for long periods of time, they need the freedom to move around and to use their large muscles. Effective teaching gives learners permission to move around, become involved, and come into contact with their environment; it does not expect learners to sit still and listen for extended periods of time.
3. Since children tire easily and can become over-stimulated, effective teaching includes the proper pacing of activities: lively tasks with quiet, reflective ones.
4. Since most children like responsibility and all children need to feel like contributors, effective teaching involves children in setting up, cleaning up, and presenting material as peer-leaders.
5. Children are eager to please and need to feel as though they have done a good job, so effective teaching includes varied experiences so that different learning styles are honored.

Five Marks of Effective Learning Activities for Children

- The activities are appropriate for the age level.
- Each activity involves as much of the total child—cognition, movement, listening, creativity, emotion, connectedness to their real life—as possible.
- The activities provide for individual differences and needs and allow for choice.
- Each activity helps to build community, rather than fostering competitiveness.
- The activities are carefully planned while also being flexible enough to embrace unplanned “teaching moments” and allow for responding to children’s needs.

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CHART 2

| A. What do I want to do? | B. What age-specific needs or characteristics come into play? | C. What do I do? |
|--------------------------|---|------------------|
| | | |

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PRESCHOOL

HANDOUT E

☺ **Active/Relational Learners**

- non-readers
- need to use large motor skills—running, dancing, clapping
- limited attention span—limit sitting still to 10–15 minutes
- need to balance busy and quiet times
- very curious, can be distractible
- play is work and learning
 - 3-year-olds engage in parallel play
 - 4- and 5-year-olds play well in small groups; associative play
- just developing fine motor skills for cutting and coloring
- enjoy one-to-one with teachers
- learn values through relationships

☺ **Growing Relationships with Self and Others**

- can feel and share concern for children far away
- increasing awareness of their own feelings, but cannot yet imagine another's perspective
 - 3-year-olds have a strong need to be the center of attention
 - 3-year-olds are more aware of others than they appear to be
 - 4–5-year-olds can recognize others' feelings and relate them to their own
 - 4–5-year-olds are learning to share and take turns
- developing a sense of own abilities
- increasing need for autonomy

☺ **Need to Contribute**

- want to use developing cognitive skills
- need opportunities to take responsibility
 - 3-year-olds can begin to help with clean up and preparation of room
 - 4–5-year-olds can create their own activities
 - 4–5-year-olds need to make simple decisions—increases self-esteem

☺ **Narrative/Concrete Thinkers**

- have vivid imaginations
 - 3- and 4-year-olds confuse fantasy with reality—they are not *lying*!
- will respond to questions with stories
- learn through exploration
- limited understanding of symbols—cannot make the leap from concrete to abstract. (Object lessons usually require abstract thinking, i.e. using a shamrock to explain the Trinity requires moving from the concrete shamrock to the abstract concept of the interrelatedness of members of the Godhead.)

☺ **Learning Goals**

- 3-year-olds
 - to know God's care through interaction with caring adults
 - to experience the church as a safe, loving place
 - to develop a sense of belonging in the church
 - to sing simple prayer songs
 - to hear simple Jesus stories
- 4–5-year-olds
 - to experience God as loving and accepting of all people through adults who practice acceptance
 - to know that Jesus is trustworthy and loves children
 - to see the Bible as an important book in the lives of adults
 - to hear Bible stories that uplift the value of children
 - to learn prayer as just talking to God and as memorized simple word and movement prayers
 - to recognize the church as “my church”
 - to recognize the names of key persons in Bible stories

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☺ **Active/Experiential Learners**

- early readers and printers
- abundant energy—difficult to sit still for long periods of time
 - growth in large muscles; gradual development of small muscles—frustration over what they can't do
- improving eye-hand coordination
- 15-minute interest span
- curious, fascinated by things they can feel, smell, touch
- need to take the lead in discovery rather than follow dictated format
- developing story sequencing skills

☺ **Increased Importance of Others**

- eager to please adults
- enjoy group work
- increasingly aware of others' needs
- quick to comfort others
- “belonging” is increasingly important
- recognition from others is very important for self-esteem
- sticklers for rules, may be bossy, “tattlers,” make excuses or blame others

☺ **Powerful Feelings**

- very sensitive to approval or disapproval of adults
- excited by ideas and want immediate attention from adults
- winning is very important
- expresses emotions freely
- not ashamed to show affection and need physical contact
- very frank and say what they think
- desperately wants to belong
- needs help deciding what is fair or right

☺ **Intuitive/Literal Thinkers**

- limited ability to understand abstractions, such as dates and geography (other times and places)
- knows through observation and experience
- listening comprehension exceeds reading comprehension and expression
- respond well to stories
- love to move to and act out stories
- little sense of intent behind values
- difficulty knowing and trusting a God whom they cannot see
- will ask concrete questions: “Where is heaven?” “How is God with me?”

☺ **Learning Goals**

- to know God by experiencing love, understanding, and trust with important adults
- to learn key messages of Bible stories through role play
- to retell simple stories of Jesus through drama, song, or mime
- to understand that these stories come from the Bible
- to make connections between Bible stories and acts of worship and service
- to become familiar with components of worship, such as the Lord’s Prayer, seasons of the church year, and special phrases and terms, such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- to discover how they can contribute to church life (handing out bulletins, participating in intergenerational service projects)
- to gain confidence in personal and public prayer

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OLDER ELEMENTARY

3RD & 4TH GRADERS

- ☺ **Active/Observational Learners**
 - increasing attention span
 - need to find out about things in a physical way, taking things apart
 - self-identity tied to performance
 - enjoy language games

- ☺ **Reflective/Practical Thinkers**
 - view world in terms of moral judgment and fairness
 - tend toward perfectionism
 - friends are vital
 - need for independence/increasingly self-sufficient—may manifest in boisterous behavior
 - difficulty handling rejection or failure, may act flippant as defense mechanism
 - often anxious or worried
 - learn faith by observing adults

- ☺ **Growing Theologians**
 - still think in concrete ways—will miss abstract or symbolic concepts
 - God as creator and as a real “person” to whom they can relate
 - Jesus as a one who taught how God wants people to live and knew God in a special way
 - can understand the church as “the people of God”

5TH & 6TH GRADERS

- ☺ **Growing Abstract Learners/Logical Thinkers**
 - dramatic differences among children in growth patterns
 - physical growth spurts may make them tired, moody, or self-conscious
 - longer periods of concentration
 - developing sense of history
 - developing ability to think abstractly
 - understand time and geography
 - beginning logic and symbolic thought
 - listen and absorb factual information
 - learn best from trustworthy, sincere, flexible, spontaneous adults
 - need freedom to question

- ☺ **Importance of Identity**
 - developing individual skills, interests, and talents
 - need to be included in planning
 - like to carry out their own ideas
 - appreciate being spoken to as “peer” by adults
 - acceptance by their peer group is extremely important to identity (supersedes family)
 - tend to adopt heroes and emulate adult role models
 - tend to be competitive
 - some are ready to commit to faith
 - need Bible stories that connect with their real-life experiences

☺ Learning Goals for Older Elementary

- to master basic Bible skills
- to apply Christian teachings to life
- to recognize Christianity as a way of life
- to understand Jesus as the expression of God’s love
- to see care for creation as people’s God-given responsibility
- to hear stories of historic and contemporary heroes of the faith
- to assume greater role in the church’s worship, advocacy, and service projects
- to increase responsibility for their actions, their faith, and their relationship to the church
- to explore the concept of covenant
- to engage in reflective/critical thinking
- to explore their questions about God
- to see Jesus as a personal hero