



God Talk with Children

By Gordon Timbers

Children have many questions about God, and these questions often make adults uncomfortable. Yet these questions deserve to be treated with respect.

As a Christian educator, I am painfully aware of the lack of knowledge, or understanding, or confidence that makes questions about God so threatening to so many adults.

For example, the flow of the Christian year can lead to questions about how Jesus grows up so fast. We move very quickly from the celebration of Christmas to the Baptism of Jesus to the teachings of Jesus in the Season after the Epiphany to the crucifixion and resurrection in Lent and Easter.

It's easy for us to overlook how this flow might be problematic for children who are just developing a sense of time and logical reasoning. While we acknowledge that children will grow into an understanding of scripture, as they do of other things, we are becoming more creative about adding information to the lesson materials to give context.

One way to do this is to use the very questions children ask.

Where is God? How powerful is God? What does God look like? Concepts of God and religion and each child's own unique personality are all too complex for ready-made answers. Part of the problem is that many adults would like to be able to give a ready-made answer, perhaps thinking that this would forestall further conversation on such difficult topics.

But asking questions is part of growing up, and for children, no one is beyond questioning, and that includes God. *Why did you let Grandma die? Why do people fight? Why is there so much suffering in the world?*

In his book, *Talking to Your Child about God* (New York: Bantam, 1990), David Heller says that like sexual or cognitive development, spiritual development is a natural process which unfolds spontaneously if a child is supported and encouraged. When development is suppressed or inhibited, however, a child is neither adequately equipped to confront religious questions healthily, nor sufficiently secure to get the most out of life.

Along with love and care, there is absolutely no substitute for basic trust between parent or adult and child. If we want a child to take what we have to offer concerning God seriously, then we must build trust. A child needs to feel secure enough to explore. Childhood exploration is the initial meeting place between an individual and God.

How meaningful it would be for a child to have an adult share their wonder at the blueness of the sky or the symmetry of a flower as part of God's creation, or to have an adult empathize with their questions about life and the nature of God.

Children should be encouraged to express their feelings about God. This can be a great asset in how they come to terms with God's activity in our lives. They need to be set free to say what is on their minds. Their questions and perceptions will gain greater resolution as the child grows up. This will be especially true if the child has a sense of trust that their "God talk" is taken seriously. The responses and encouragement we give children do much to affirm the experience of God as an everyday presence.

The other day a co-worker brought me a story found on the Internet. A kindergarten teacher was observing her group of children while they drew. She would occasionally walk around to see each child's artwork. She came to one little girl who was working diligently, and asked what the drawing was.

The girl replied, "I'm drawing God."

The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like."

Without missing a beat, or looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, "They will in a minute."

This can be seen as a cute story, good for a chuckle, or we can look deeper to see the intimate relationship with God it describes. I couldn't help but wonder what the teacher said next. What would my response have been to this child's "God talk"? What would that response have done to enhance or hinder the child's sense of self and of God?

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