

Purpose: To explore how faith is formed in young children and to reflect on ways to support families in the formational work of the Spirit.

Time Frame: 2-hours

If your timeframe is less than 2 hours, make review for activities to eliminate or shorten.

Materials

- Large sheets of paper or board and markers
- Index cards and pens
- Bibles
- Copies of handouts

Preparation

- Pray for yourself and others who are leaders, as well as for participants.
- Consider who the participants will be. Will they be primarily leaders in educational ministry? Young parents? Grandparents? Pastors? Others? Read over the suggested activities and decide which ones are best suited to your audience.
- If possible, contact possible participants in advance and ask them to bring a photo of a young child they know, or if a photo is not possible, ask them to print the name of an infant, toddler or young child they know on a sheet of paper or a card.
- Review the entire workshop.
- Make copies of all handouts.
- (Optional) Download and post the full “Development through the Lifespan” chart from the United Methodist Discipleship website at www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/development-through-the-life-span
- On a large sheet of paper or a board, print the following open-ended prompts:
 - What is my first memory of hearing about God?
 - Where was it? What happened?
 - What adults do I remember being a part of that experience?
- On separate large sheets of paper, print the following words: acceptance, affirmation, accountability, forgiveness, and hospitality and post at intervals around your space or on tables.
- Post the following open-ended prompt on a large sheet of paper:
In partnership with the Holy Spirit, I commit to support, empower and equip families in their role as their children’s first spiritual teachers. One step I will take is . . .
- If expected participants include parents, caregivers or grandparents of young children, also post the following:
In partnership with the Holy Spirit, I commit to seeking out the help of my faith community in my role as a child’s first spiritual teacher. One step I will take is . . .

I. Opening

Distribute pen and one or more index cards to participants as they arrive, and **invite** them to jot down responses to one or more of the posted questions.

Convene the group when most of the expected participants have arrived.

Read aloud Deuteronomy 6:4–9.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Invite silent reflection on the following:

- What will our children remember from their early years at home?
- What are we communicating to young children at church— implicitly or explicitly— that will be formative for them?
- In what ways are we working in partnership with the Spirit in this work of formation?

Pray the following, or a prayer of your choosing:

Loving God, you have promised that where two or three are gathered together, there your Spirit will be present. Bring us into a sharper awareness of that Holy presence here now. Open our hearts to your energizing power. Open our minds to fresh new insights, to ideas that may disturb, to interactions that stimulate and inform. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Move to discussion.

Give a moment to anyone who has not had an opportunity to write responses to the posted questions. **Invite participants to form pairs** and discuss their responses (if your time is limited, discuss in the total group).

Reconvene the group after allowing a few minutes for discussion.

Invite participants to respond to each question quickly, popcorn style, as you jot down their responses under each question on the sheet or board. **Do a rough tally** of where, when and with whom participants have their first memory of interactions about God.

Ask: *How old were you when you had this first experience?*

Explain that while for some of us, these first memories of God happened in Sunday school or worship, the chances are that these experiences had their beginnings in experiences, for better and for worse, at home and with our parents or caregivers. In this workshop they will be exploring how the faith of our youngest children is formed, initially in the family, as well as what role the church's worship and educational programs should play in supporting the family in the faith formation of their children.

II. Exploration of Young Children’s Develop

Distribute copies of Handout 3 “Development: Infancy through Young Childhood.” **Form two small groups or pairs**, depending on the number of participants.

Assign to one group, or to one person in each pair, either infants/toddlers or young children. **Invite** groups or pairs to read the descriptions of their assigned age group and prepare to briefly describe the hallmarks of development for that stage.

Reconvene after a few minutes and **ask** each small group or pair to briefly report on highlights of development for their assigned stage. **Encourage** participants to keep these points in mind as they continue their exploration.

III. Examination of Foundational Spiritual Practices

Distribute Handout 1, “The Power of Practicing Presence” and provide time for participants to read the article. **Note** Marjorie Thompson’s characterization of the family as “a sacred shelter for the sake of the world God loves” and her suggestion that we can reflect God’s love in our families by focusing on basic spiritual practices grounded in relationship—practices that are built into the very fabric and structure of family life.

Invite the group to discuss the following questions:

- How do you react to Thompson’s characterization?
- Alternatively, Mary Pipher describes the family as a shelter from the storm, our last great hope against the impact of a toxic culture. She further suggests that to protect family members the role of the family is to build walls that give the family definition, identity and power Do you agree that our cultural context is toxic? If so, which aspects would you identify as particularly harmful?
- What would you say the difference is between Pipher’s vision and Thompson’s?
- How, if at all, is it different to be a sacred shelter for the sake of the world God loves than to be a self-protective entity?

Explain that, in addition to presence, Thompson identifies *acceptance*, *affirmation*, *accountability*, *forgiveness*, and *hospitality* as foundational spiritual practices that reflect God’s love. **Form small groups inviting participants to self-select** one of these practices, gathering at the sheet listing that practice. Don’t be concerned if only one person selects a practice, or if no one does. A sole selector can join another group or choose to work alone. Set aside any sheet not selected. Ask each group to discuss the following:

- How would you define this practice?
- How do you think it functions in a family with young children? How, if at all, do you think this practice functions differently in a family as a child develops from a newborn to age seven?
- What concrete faith practices do you think might strengthen this foundational practice (refer to the specific suggestions in “Practicing the Power of Presence”)?

Work as a group to answer the questions about unselected foundational practices.

IV. Considering Various Contexts for Faith Formation

Print the following on a large sheet of paper or a board:

- child care and educational ministry
- worship
- fellowship, church meals, and so forth
- service/mission

Explain that While each of these contexts is formative, they are formative in different ways. Some are explicit, meaning that they are consciously and intentionally designed for faith formation while others are implicit, forming understandings of faith through the experience of life in the church.

Discuss the following questions:

- Which context or contexts would you identify as explicitly formative?
- Which ones are more implicitly formative?
- Which could be seen as a combination of both explicit instruction and implicit, experiential formation?
- How might churches take seriously the impact of implicit formation and consciously make these experiences serve the goal of forming faith and relationship with a loving, gracious God.
- What role does relationship play in formation in the congregation?

Revisit what the group identified as characteristics of infants and toddlers and young children. **Ask** them to respond to the following:

- What sensory impressions do you imagine an infant is getting through your service of worship? In a childcare setting? At a church meal? What is the baby learning through relationships in these settings?
- What does a toddler see, hear or experience through touch in worship? What does a toddler learn through experiences in childcare or an early childhood church school class? What does a toddler see, hear or sense as he or she toddles around in a time of fellowship?
- In addition to the sensory and relational learning a young child soaks up, what words and ideas would a four to seven-year-old hear in worship? What is a child of this age hearing in church school? How does he or she experience the Bible and prayer? How might a parent build on what a young child experiences in church? How might a faith community build on what is happening at home?

V. Reflection on the Partnership of Formation

Remind the group that conventional wisdom among those involved in educational ministry is that parents and caregivers are a child's first and most primary teachers of the faith, yet we often act and program our ministries on the assumption that the church serves that role.

Invite the group to consider the following:

- Dr. J. Bradley Wigger suggests church life might actually pull families apart in the name of God through an abundance of programs, meetings and services that regularly divide families up. Do you see that happening in your congregation? How might it be different if we thought in terms of serving and supporting families as primary vehicles of faith formation rather than in terms of programs?
- To what extent—and how—does your congregation support families in their role of faith formation? What strengths in your church can build on for families?
- Might smaller congregations have an advantage over highly programmed ones?
- For parents, grandparents or other primary caregivers (if they are present): How would you like your congregation support you in your role as spiritual teacher?

VI. Closing

Invite participants sit in silence for a few moments, reflecting on young children and families they know.

Ask each person in turn to bring forward a photo or card with the name of an infant, toddler or young child, and speak the child's *first* name.

Attach each photo or card to a large sheet of paper.

Invite participants to consider the following open-ended prompt and to respond in writing on an index card.

-In partnership with the Holy Spirit, I commit to support, empower and equip families in their role as their children's first spiritual teachers. One step I will take is . . .

Invite parents, grandparents or other primary caregivers to consider the following open-ended prompt and to respond in writing on an index card.

-In partnership with the Holy Spirit, I commit to seeking out the help of my faith community in my role as a child's first spiritual teacher. One step I will take is . . .

Invite volunteers to share responses once everyone has had time to reflect.

Distribute Handout #2 "Select Resources from The American Baptist Home Mission Societies."

Close in pray with the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Come, Holy Spirit, as you have promised. Be with us now and in the coming days as we seek to participate in forming the faith of our young children, and others for whom we care. Open us to the growth we can experience ourselves. Amen.

About the writer: *Martha Bettis Gee is an educator, editor and writer with a lifelong passion for ministering with and for children. She retired in 2012 from the national staff of the Presbyterian Church USA, where she served for 26 years developing curriculum materials and working on children's ministries and advocacy.*

The Power of Practicing Presence: Young Children and Faith Formation

By Martha Bettis Gee

There are literally thousands of books, blogs, Facebook pages and other internet resources on child development, each one clamoring for a parent's attention. These resources seek to provide advice on the whole universe of how to parent—from breast feeding, sleep training, and making organic baby food to the best toys and books to cultivate a baby's intelligence. Yet when it comes to a child's spiritual growth, parents often feel ill-equipped. Most parents (or other primary care-givers) yearn for their children to experience home as spiritually formative, but they may be uncertain about exactly what that means. The idea that they might be their children's first spiritual teachers can be daunting for those who may have doubts about their own understanding of faith. They may equate the role of spiritual teacher with the kinds of intentional, systematic learning they might have experienced themselves in Sunday school.

As important as formal Christian education is, Marjorie J. Thompson urges us to embrace a foundational vision for faith formation that is both profound and simple. In *Family: The Forming Center* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996), Thompson characterizes the family as "a sacred shelter for the sake of the world God loves." She further suggests that we can reflect God's love in our families by focusing on basic spiritual practices grounded in relationship—practices that are built into the very fabric and structure of family life.

How do parents begin to expand the ways in which they nurture their young children's faith formation? Thompson suggests that one way is through *presence*. An adult can nurture a baby's growing sense of connectedness simply making time to be fully present.

Attending fully has always been challenging for adults, who are often exhausted by the responsibility of caring for a tiny human coupled with the need to meet the normal demands of daily living. These days, being present to one's child is further complicated by the reality that digital media is as ubiquitous as the air we breathe. Media at one's fingertips 24/7 presents serious competition to the demands of 24/7 parenting. Adults whose attention is focused on a tiny glowing screen need to recognize the power of attending just as fully to their young children.

How does one practice presence? Amid attending to the small tasks of child care, a parent can look for moments when deep connections are possible. A mother can notice the intensity of a nursing baby's loving gaze as he locks eyes with her in the wee hours of the morning. A father can slow down and pay attention when while diapering an infant, she reaches for his finger. Later a parent might make himself fully present to his toddler as she stops on a walk to examine a leaf, experiencing wonder at its intricacy and beauty. Adults can take cues from children, listening closely, watching what captures their attention and capturing their wonder at the created world.

Will a parent be fully present every time these possibilities present themselves? Of course not! Young parents need the good news that being fully present to their children is not feasible all the time. But spiritual formation is a partnership in which the Holy Spirit is at work in and through parents, as well as in and through their children. The more times a parent does attend, the more often the Spirit may work to enhance presence in the lives of parent and child. The more a parent is able to experience presence as a holy moment, the less he or she may be tempted to stray to a cell phone screen.

For adults who feel less than conversant with the Bible, or whose prayer life may be limited or even non-existent, parenting a young child offers the opportunity to enrich the life of the entire family by engaging in simple, intentional spiritual practices through which we encounter and connect with God. These intentional practices also offer opportunities for enhancing the Spirit's powerful shaping by practicing presence. Here are just a few suggestions that may spark other ideas:

- For those who are less than familiar with the Bible, reading stories from a good Bible storybook, such as *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (Westminster John Knox Press) allows them to encounter God alongside their young child as they experience the stories together. Adults can listen to the child's questions and comments understanding that an honest "I don't know—let's find out" or "What do you think?" is always okay. This practice can encourage adults to find the foundational stories in the Bible and enhance their knowledge of the scriptures.
- Adults and children alike can practice their prayer life, learning naturally through simple table graces. If the practice of saying grace is begun when the child is still an infant, it will grow to be a part of a family's life together as the child grows. They may choose to use a blessing they remember from childhood or locate one from a book such as J. Bradley Wigger's *Together We Pray: A Prayer Book for Families* (Chalice, 2005).
- Another simple prayer practice that primary care-givers can initiate when a baby is still very young is called *examen*. After lighting a candle on the table, each adult mentions moments from the day that were life-giving and those that were life-draining. As children learn to talk, these moments can be referred to as "glads" and "sads."

The formation that takes place in and through the life of the family truly is the foundation for a child's spiritual growth. Parents can take heart in the good news that while no one can be fully present all the time to a young child, there is One whose presence is abiding in and through the mundane events of our lives, both good and bad. All who care about families, and about children, can give thanks for that presence, seeking to be ever more attuned to the Spirit's work.

WCLL#304 Handout #2 Select Resources from The American Baptist Home Mission Societies

Downloaded at www.abhms.org>Publications & Resources

*** For print resources, call Customer Service at 800-485-3766.**

Development through the Lifespan," Discipleship Ministries, The United Methodist Church: www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/development-through-the-life-span

Family the Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation, Marjorie J. Thompson (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996)

The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families Mary Pipher, (New York: Ballentine Books, 1996)

The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace, J. Bradley Wigger, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

From American Baptist Home Mission Societies www.abhms.org> publications and resources

Advent and Christmas Activity Sheets for Children

Age-Appropriate Discipleship-Formation

Celebrating Holy Week with Young Children

Developmental Chart for Faith Formation

A Tenebrae Service for Children

Workshops for Church Life and Leadership, which include:

104 Growing Persons/104E Personas en Crecimiento

301 Preventing Child Abuse in Churches/301E Prevención del Abuso de Niños y Niñas en las Iglesias (also in Karen)

302 Basics of Teaching and Relating to Children (also in Karen)

303 Teaching the Bible to Children (also in Karen)

601E Cultivando la Fe en las Familias

603 Gracious Christian Parenting

Development: Infancy through Young Childhood

| Approximate Ages | Infants/Toddlers 0-3 | Young Children |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Values and Ethics | Does what adults say is right and wrong. Size (vs. intention) determines importance. | Obeys to avoid punishment. Understands significance of intention. Begins to see consequences of actions. |
| Sexuality | Body awareness | Curiosity about their body. Gender awareness. |
| Family | Infants do not see parents as separate from themselves. | Love me, love my family. While seeing self as separate, family is intertwined into self-understanding. |
| Needs of Age | Timely responses to needs. | Safe environment. Freedom with boundaries. |
| Gifts to Share | Hope | Awe. Wonder, Joy. Unconditional love and trust. |
| Vocation | To grow and explore their world. | Play is work. Roleplaying various occupations and adult behaviors. |
| Church Needs | Safe, loving place. | Place where I belong and am welcomed. |

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