

# **Making God Real to Young Children**

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*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:20, NIV)*

God has revealed Himself to *all* people in and through His creation. Young children - infants thru preschool - are no exception. So if God has revealed Himself to all people through nature (creation), why do we need to help young children know God? Simply stated, we must help make God real to the children with our loving words and caring actions. We also lay the groundwork for these young children as we introduce them to Jesus and how, through Him, they can have their own personal relationship with God. We help children move along a path that starts with a *general understanding* of God (what nature reveals) towards a *special understanding* (knowing about God's love and forgiveness and the promise of eternal life). Knowing God exists is not enough. Children need to learn that God is loving. They need to understand what God did to demonstrate His love for us (*But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8, NIV)*). And the great news is that children are capable of learning these things. By looking at how young children learn, how the brain develops and some different teaching techniques we can equip ourselves with all the knowledge and tools we need to help children learn about and know God.

Let's begin by understanding **how** children learn.

- First, young children are concrete, literal thinkers. Have you ever heard someone say, "*Open your heart and let God in...*"? This statement, taken in a very literal sense, is crazy. How do you open your heart? And if you could open your heart, wouldn't that kill you? If you can't see God how do you let Him into your heart? Abstract statements/concepts do not make sense to young children unless these concepts are explained in a way that they can understand.
- Second, children learn through active play and exploration. While adults might be perfectly capable and content with sitting through a sermon or listening to a Bible-based lecture, the same is not true for young children. Children greatly benefit from a Bible story/truth that is brought to life; that directly and actively involves them in the message.

- Third, children learn through relationships. The people in a child’s life have a tremendous impact on what a child learns about himself and his value. Relationships with others give meaning to words like “love” and “kindness”.
- Fourth, young children learn through their physical senses – this is their avenue of discovery for the world around them, a world full of God’s creations. Take, for instance, an apple. The apple is red; round; hard; tastes sweet or sour; smells sweet; the inside feels rough on the tongue while the skin feels smooth. A child will use all of his senses to investigate the apple. And when he is done we can simply say, “Thank *you God for apples.*”

Now that we have a better understanding of the **how**, let’s look at the **why**. Quite simply, young children are biologically prepared to learn (Pam Schiller). Research on brain development over the last few years has illuminated the human capacity to learn. Consider these facts about brain development that should inspire us to maximize this time of learning in a child’s life:

- Most of the brain’s cells are formed before birth; however, most of the connections among cells (synapses) are made during infancy and early childhood.
- Early experience and interactions with the environment are most critical in a child’s brain development
- A 3-year-old’s brain is two and a half times more active as an adult’s brain.
- Children’s brains have more synapses and the density of synapses remains high throughout the first ten years of life. Children are biologically prepared to learn. (Pam Schiller).
- Brain development is non-linear, it’s an ongoing process, but there are certain times when the brain is particularly efficient at specific types of learning.

We would be foolish not to capitalize on this small window of opportunity for learning. With deliberate planning and preparation we can help young children learn about and know God. Toddlers and Preschoolers aren't grown-ups so let's not try to teach them about God the way that we teach grown-ups. Instead, consider the following techniques:

- Teaching with Object Lessons – Jesus often used every day objects – rocks, birds, seeds, flowers – to teach. Object lessons give children tangible ways to view abstract ideas and messages from the Bible.

- Using Active/Inter-Active Bible stories – Bringing a Bible story to life by involving the children in the story helps them learn and retain God’s Truth. It encourages a child’s need to play and explore. Think about the story of Gideon. Let the children literally tear down the altar to Baal and build a new altar to God.
- Sharing Scripture with Science – Science is a method used to build and organize knowledge and understanding. Why not use science to help children build and organize an understanding of Scripture? Children and adults find science amazing; it grabs their attention right away. Once you have the children's attention, it's time to share something biblically sound from the experiment.
- Modeling your faith - Abstract ideas like love, kindness, and compassion become real when children see it modeled in our own behavior. Praying to God becomes real when children see adults pray, hear adults pray and participate in simple prayer with adults.
- Singing Songs with a Biblical Message - Music activates the whole brain which ensures much better retention and children love to sing. There are many wonderful, sweet songs available that share the beautiful truths from the Bible. The more we sing them with children the more they retain God’s Truth.
- Repetition, repetition, repetition – We already know this but it begs repeating. Children love repetition so keep telling them about God; keep thanking God for the world around them; keep thanking God for each one of them; keep teaching them about God.

The following lessons are just some examples of different methods to use when sharing Scripture with children. Hopefully these ideas will inspire you to step out of the box and try something new with the children in your ministry.

## Teaching with Object Lessons

### God's unfailing love

**Supplies:** Repeat Change bag (three compartments), pieces of "LOVE" (small pieces of fabric – one per child with about ten extra, Bible

**Scripture:** *O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is unfailing love. His redemption overflows. (Psalm 130:7, NLT)*

**What to Do:** *(The Bible says that we should literally clothe ourselves in love because it is love that holds us together in perfect harmony. But if we try to love others based on our own abilities and our own supply of love, then we have a very limited amount of love that we can share with others. Fortunately, when we let the Holy Spirit take up residence in our hearts, our supply of love changes. We no longer rely on our own ability to love others, but on God's. Now we have boundless love that never runs out; a love God meant for us to share with others. It is difficult for children to understand that concept of God's love living in us and never running out. It just doesn't make sense to them because eventually everything seems to run out. Demonstrate this concept for the children in a very tangible way. Before you begin: put three pieces of fabric in the first compartment; leave the second compartment empty; and put the rest of the pieces of fabric in the third compartment as neatly as possible so as not to be too bulky. Leave the bag open to the first compartment.)* Say, "I have a very special, red bag with me today." *(Hold your bag up to show the children)* "I love this bag. It's red and so soft." *(Let some of the children feel the softness of the bag)* "Did you know that the Bible says that God's love will never run out?" *(Allow responses)* "The Bible tells us that God gives us His love to live in our hearts and that when our love comes from Him, it never runs out. We can always go back and ask God for more love and He will always be able to give it to us. Isn't that so amazing?" *(Allow responses)* "But if we rely only on ourselves and forget to get our love from God, we will eventually run out of love. Our love can run out, but God's love never ends. That's a hard thing to understand. That's why I brought my special, red bag with me today. Let's pretend that my bag is like our hearts. We have love in our hearts and we can share our love with others. Sharing love is like smiling at someone, giving a hug, or helping someone." *(Each time you share an example, pull a piece of "love"*

*from the first compartment of the bag and hand it to someone.) “When we share love that’s great, but if our love doesn’t come from God we’ll eventually run out of love.” (Reach into your bag again and it should now be empty.) “Oh no – now my bag is empty. I ran out of love. I don’t have enough love to share with everyone.” (Switch the bag to the second compartment. Let a few of the children look into the bag and even unzip the bottom to show them that it is completely empty.) “That’s why we need to let God’s love into our hearts. When we do that, our supply of love comes from God and God’s love never runs out. It’s easy to let God’s love into our hearts, we just pray and ask Him to love us and tell God that we love Him. Let’s do that right now.” (Stop and say a prayer with the children asking God to love them and to let His love live in their precious, little hearts. This will show the children that letting God’s love in their hearts is done simply by praying, not open-heart-surgery!) “Wow – that was easy. So that means I should be able to keep on sharing love with everyone and I won’t run out because God’s love is in my heart and God’s love never runs out.” (Now switch to the third compartment of the bag that is loaded with more “love”. Reach in and start pulling out “love” to hand to each of the children. They will be amazed because the bag was just empty.) “Whoa! That is so amazing! I thought my bag was empty – I thought I ran out of love. But when we prayed and asked God to fill our hearts with His love, He listened. And God’s love never runs out!!!” (Continue to hand out “love” until every child has some.) “Wow – I had enough love for everyone and there is still more in my bag.” (Show the children that there is still more “love” in the bag.) “God is so cool and so amazing! Thank you God!!!” (It is really that simple - and this is where it is so awesome to be around kids because they don't over think things - they accept the simple truth and move forward. The kids will be absolutely amazed by this - a simple concept that is humbly accepted when shown to these children in a way that makes sense to them because they so innocently accept God’s Truth.)*

**Salvation Through Jesus Christ – Gospel According to a Tea Bag** (Retrieved from: [http://www.creativeyouthideas.com/blog/object\\_lessons/the\\_gospel\\_according\\_to\\_a\\_tea\\_bag.html](http://www.creativeyouthideas.com/blog/object_lessons/the_gospel_according_to_a_tea_bag.html))

**Supplies:** a tea bag (Bigelow “Vanilla Chai” tea works well), a lighter, a dinner plate (not paper), clear cup of hot water, a teaspoon, a big bowl, a cutting board, a fire extinguisher (safety first), Bible

**Scripture:** *For He raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:6, NLT)*

**What to Do:** *(Jesus set aside His titles and emptied Himself and became one of us. He came with a purpose, out of love, to cut us free from the things of the world. He was pierced for us. And when we ask His forgiveness, He will take away the dirt from our lives and make us pure. We can stand strong and become His light to the world. Just as He was risen we will also rise to be with Him. Use the tea bag to explain what Jesus did for us, step by step.) Say:*

*“The label identifies the tea.” (Show the children the label) “Jesus was labeled with many tags. He was called Christ, Messiah, teacher, Savior, the King of Kings, the man from Galilee, the carpenter, the Son of God, Redeemer, friend of sinners, good shepherd, Great Physician, King of the Jews and many more. At the cross, He had a sign placed over His head as ‘King of the Jews.’ Jesus was in the very nature God, but He wasn’t concerned with titles. He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Instead He took the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. He emptied Himself made Himself nothing.”*

*(Show the children the string.) “People often become attached to things here on earth – like their stuff or money or power. Jesus was tempted by Satan after 40 days in the desert with the very same things. But Jesus was not attached to these things. His focus was on doing the will of God. Jesus came to earth with a purpose. That purpose was to save us.”*

*(Show the children the staple in the bag and/or label. Note that newer tea bags are often made without staples now so you might need to staple the*

*bag prior to your lesson to make this point.)* This tea bag was pierced and has holes from a staple. Jesus was not pierced with a staple but with nails and a spear. His body was attached to a cross where He died for us.”

*(To dump the tea, carefully cut across the top of the tea bag to unfold and open it. Then dump out the tea onto a plate.)* “This is the tea. Tea looks like dirt. If you put it in water, the water will be changed to the color of the tea. It will no longer be clear and pure.” *(Demonstrate by dropping a bit of tea into the glass of hot water and stirring it around).* “We are all like this tea bag in that we are born with dirt in our lives. We are not pure. The Bible calls this dirt, this impurity, sin. Sins are the sad choices that we make sometimes. We need help from God to remove the sin from our lives. That’s exactly why Jesus came - to help us remove the sin from our lives. In fact, it is only through Jesus that our sins can be forgiven, or taken away.”

*(Straighten the tea bag out and stand it up like a tube on the plate.)* “When Jesus removes the sin from our lives we can stand pure and proud in the sight of God. We will become a light for God.”

*(Get ready to light the tea bag.)* “As you shine for Jesus you shall become closer to God in your Christian walk, and one day your soul shall join him for eternal life. Just as Christ died then rose again to be with the Father in heaven, we will also rise up to be with Him some day. We will be saved and raised with Him.” *(Now take the lighter and light the top of the tea bag that is standing on the plate. Get the bowl ready. After the tea bag is lit, it will start to burn down. As the flame reaches the bottom the tea bag will float up in the air representing the way Jesus rose. Catch the burning tea bag in the inverted bowl. No words need to be said after this very visual demonstration.)*

## Teaching with Science

### God's love is what holds us together (Houser, 2008)

**Supplies:** water gel (www.stevespanglerscience.com), 2 (9 oz) paper cups (1 with a cross on it), full water bottle, Bible

**Scripture:** *Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:14, NLT)*

**What to Do:** Say, "Love is what holds us together. God commands us to live together in perfect harmony and in peace. Even though we are all different, God gives us the ability to live and work together for His Kingdom here on earth." *To illustrate this: Have a bottle of water and two cups. One cup is empty. The other cup has a cross drawn on the outside of it and a teaspoon of the insta-gel already in it. Talk to the children about all of the people in their lives – parents, siblings, friends, teachers, etc. Each time you mention someone, pour a little of the water into the empty cup until it's about full. Then say, "We all have different jobs to do and sometimes we don't always agree. But when we work together for God and trust Him and have faith in Jesus Christ, we are held together with God's love. This cup with the cross on it represents God's love and when we add His love to our lives, do you know what happens?" Quickly pour the water from one cup into the "cross cup". The gel will immediately bond with the water and turn it into a solid in a matter of seconds. Then turn to one of the children and as you try to dump the water onto their head (literally turn the cup upside down over their head). Say that "God's love holds us together!"*

#### **Other ideas for this lesson:**

- Maintaining the unity God has given to us (Ephesians 4:3)
- One body in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:11-13)
- Friends stick together (Proverbs 18:24)

### Light Up the World

**Supplies:** two long, wooden matches, a big pillar candle, a tea light candle, three or four birthday candles, jar of play-dough to mold into a "birthday cupcake", Bible

**Scripture:** *Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:18, NIV)*

**What to Do:** *(Love is fun in two ways. First, when you give love to someone else; second when you receive love back. Love is shown not just in our words, but in our actions. Real love is an action, not a feeling. We don't want to waste our opportunities to show God's love to others.)* Say, "The Bible, God's words, tells us to love each other. In fact, God says that we're supposed to show our love with our actions and not just our words. One of the things that God created us to do is love each other – that's a job from God. If we don't show love to other people then we're wasting what God has given us. It's sort of like this match."  
*(Hold up one of the matches)* "Have you ever seen a match before? Do you know why we use matches?" *(Allow responses)* "Now you know that only grown-ups are allowed to use matches, right?" *(Allow responses)* "Good thing I'm a grown up because I want to show you something that we can learn from a match. A match can only be lit one time so it has just one chance to do its job. What if I light this match but then I don't do anything with it? I just let it burn out but I never let the match do its job. Let's try it." *(Light the match and let the flame burn until it goes out – it should burn out before it gets even close to your fingers because you're using long matches.)* "Wow – how sad. I just wasted that poor match. I lit it but never let the match do its job. I bet this match is pretty sad. And now I can never light the match again. Doesn't that make you sad?" *(Allow responses – even for this inanimate object, the children get sad.)* "I have another match. What if I light this match but instead of just letting it burn out, I let this match do its job? Should we try?" *(Allow responses)* "Okay, here we go." *(Light the second match)* "But this time I'm going to let this match do its job. First I'm going to light this big candle." *(Light the big, pillar candle)* "Wow, I bet this match has enough fire left to light this little candle." *(Light the tea light candle)* "Wait – there's still more fire on the match. I bet I can even light these birthday candles!" *(Light the birthday candles then let the match burn out.)* "Wow – that was awesome! This one match was able to light all of these candles. We didn't waste this match – it did a great job of sharing its light with all of these candles. That feels a whole lot better, doesn't it?" *(Allow responses)* "We are kind of like a match. God gives us His love, His light, to share with other people. That's our job. But if we forget to share God's love and God's light with others then we're not doing our job. It's like lighting a match and just letting it

burn out. How sad. Do you want be like that sad match that didn't get to do its job?" (*Allow responses*) "Or do you want to be like the match that did its job and lit the candles?" (*Allow responses*) "Me too! I want to do the job that God has given to me. I don't want to waste my life. I want to share God's love and God's light with other people. I want to show others what God's love is like. I want to do my job!"

**Other ideas for this experiment:**

- Fan the flame (2 Timothy 1:6-7, NIV)
- Let your light shine (Matthew 5:16)
- Love one another (John 13:34-35, NIV)

**Teaching with puppets or special characters for story-telling**

- Millie the Monkey and Stanley the Snail puppets
- Dr. KnowsItAll
- John the Baptist

**Teaching with active/inter-active stories or games**

- Gideon and the altar
- Getting rid of sin on our own – just can't do it
- Truth Treasure Hunt
- Moses and the Red Sea

**Modeling your faith**

- "Children are borrowing our faith, make it a faith worth borrowing."
- Relationships with each other and children
- The Bible
- Prayer

Prayer Window (Houser, 2011). Daniel prayed at his window three times a day. What if we are reminded to pray whenever we see a window? (*Use a dry erase marker and write "PRAY" on a window. Sit with the children at the window and write down their prayer requests. You can also pray for the things you see outside of the window and for those outside the window in the world who are hurting or suffering. Pray at the window*)

*with the children. Encourage parents to do this at home with their children.) Never stop praying. (1 Thessalonians 5:17, NLT)*

### **Singing songs with a biblical message**

- *King of the Jungle by Great Worship Songs Kids Praise Band*
- *Sweet'n'Wonderful by Kathie Hill*
- *The B-I-B-L-E by Little Praise Party (Yancy)*
- *Love One Another by Little Praise Party (Yancy)*
- *Hosanna Rock by Little Praise Party (Yancy)*
- *L-O-V-E, Love That's Why by Karyn Henley*
- *My Best Friend by Little Praise Party (Yancy)*

### **Repetition, repetition, repetition**

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#### **Other Great Resources:**

iTunes

<http://www.stevespanglerscience.com>

<http://www.madaboutjesus.com>

<http://www.creativeyouthideas.com>

<http://www.kidssundayschool.com/>

<http://www.sharonministries.org.za/KidsObjects.htm>

<http://www.sermons4kids.com/>

<http://ministry-to-children.com/category/object-lessons/>

<http://www.creativebiblestudy.com/object-lessons-for-children.html>