

Helping Children Take Their First Steps in Faith

By Kate Ristow

Curious...creative...enthusiastic...growing in independence, yet sometimes shy...eager...wonder-filled...spontaneous. These are just a few of the words that describe young children. As catechists, we can build on these and other qualities to help our young believers come to know and love God as we share with them our Catholic faith.

1. Cultivate the Religious Imagination

Young children “meet” God, Jesus, and people of faith by seeing them in their mind’s eye. They can learn how God calls us to live by role-playing and acting out stories and real-life situations. Costumes and props add to the experience. They can use a large box as a boat to travel with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee. A lesson conducted outdoors enables them to become witnesses to Jesus teaching his first followers. Help them to put themselves into the lessons you teach.

2. Imitate Jesus’ Example as a Storyteller

The Gospel is filled with the simple parables Jesus told to help his followers understand what it means to love God and our neighbor. Gather the children around you as you tell a story. Invite them to retell the story through play or discussion. These activities not only contribute to the children’s understanding of Catholic values, they also increase vital learning skills, such as comprehension, vocabulary development, and the importance of listening.

3. Promote Active Learning

Children easily become restless if they are expected to sit too long. Remember that youngsters learn best when their senses are engaged. Move the children from their tables to a “story rug” or a prayer circle. Use music with gestures or movement to reinforce concepts. Vary lesson activities. Drawing and coloring every week stifles creativity. Use assorted resources—chenille strips, poster board, paper towel rolls, panty hose “eggs”, tissue paper, shoe boxes, colorful magazine photos—to reinforce learning.

4. Foster Prayerful Experiences

Prepare a prayer table in your teaching space. Dress the table with symbols representing the weekly lesson theme. Teach reverent religious actions—the Sign of the Cross, bowing, genuflecting. Introduce traditional Catholic prayers—the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be. Use echo prayers, inviting the children to repeat a short phrase after you. Teach simple responses, such as “Alleluia!” or “We praise you, God!” In addition to prayers of thanksgiving, praise, forgiveness and blessing, encourage the children to pray spontaneously, using their own words to talk to God.

Incorporating these four principles into your sessions will ensure a solid foundation for young believers. It will enable them to joyfully begin the lifelong journey of faith!