

Workshop 3 – Faith with Under Fives in Toddler Groups

Toddler groups: a community for exploring faith together

Space

'A space needs to be safe, relational, invitational, and confidential', Brendan Hyde, in *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, Jessica Kingsley, 2008.

Safe Safe for them and emotionally safe

Confidential Safeguarding

Relational How do you welcome and end your session so that you build relationships? Names, newcomers, waiting list – whether face to face or online.

Invitational Room set up and ready; warm and welcoming; well signposted; accessible.

Elizabeth Jarman's work on child friendly spaces says there needs to be a space the under 5s can escape to where they can express what they are thinking where they can re-enact what is inside them.

Elizabeth Jarman, *The Communication Friendly Spaces Approach; Re-Thinking Learning Environments for Children and Families*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2009

Community

If children and carers are part of a community where there is love, trust, forgiveness, they will begin to understand that these are signs of a God who loves us. Bible stories, rituals and celebrating festivals help create community.

Play:

- is a place of discovery where children are free to explore and express themselves – a child's vocation.
- allows children to explore ideas bigger than themselves, e.g. the Bible, and their mystery.
- is misunderstood in church if we are intent on people 'understanding' faith.
- "What is learned in play will be stronger and last longer than what is told." David Elkind, *The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally*, Da Capo Press, 2007.
- Areas for spiritual play can enhance children's imagination without restricting their exploration as they encounter a Bible story.

Deep play is about the intensity of the engagement:

- 1 Absorption – the child loses a sense of time and the world around them.
- 2 Nonattachment – the child becomes detached from a fixed sense of self and from material things.
- 3 Transcendence – a sense of stepping outside of yourself while playing.

Provide open-ended activities allowing children time to stop and slow down.

urc.org.uk/our-work/children-and-youth

How do we put this into practice?

Create a community

What is it that shapes and makes your group?

- Rituals around story-telling – where, how is it introduced?
- Tell a story, don't read it, and engage and involve children. Create a special place to gather and share a regular story time with a story that involves the children in sounds, actions, movement or a story bag. Regular song or rhyme time.

Keep these distinctive elements of your group if you are meeting virtually.

Zone your space

Play areas

- Big play area – equipment.
- Response space for open-ended play, e.g. role play, dressing up, play materials for children's own response.
- Sensory play area – deep play may happen here, don't overstructure it, e.g. a sensory tub of 'things' the children can explore with their senses – different textures, colours, scents, noises.
- Heuristic play (Elinor Godschmied, *People under three: young children in day care*, Routledge, 1994), the discovery of objects – treasure baskets. You can prompt families to make their own.

Creative area

Craft or making

- Keep it open ended, let the children do it, don't do it for them
- It doesn't have to be a take home product, it can just be messy play or playdough.
- Use items people will have at home if meeting online.

Space

Create space for the child to be and to explore; easily done at home, too.

- A throw over a table is a den or a palace or a cave...
- A pop-up shelter is a personal space for a child

As you weave the stories of faith through opportunities to play you will create an intentional spiritual play place.

Trust in the process of play. Trust in the child. Trust in God.

Alison Hulse, Workshop leader

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