

Spiritual styles

Meeting the spiritual needs of very young children

Here is a reminder of the different individual preferences which help people to connect with God.

Word

- Need Bible facts and figures
- Like hearing Bible passages read well
- Appreciate carefully crafted prayers
- Value words of hymns and songs which read like poetry

Emotion

- Enjoy participation through drama, music, spoken or sung responses
- Welcome opportunities to sense God through feelings and emotions

Action

- Actively work for justice
- Need opportunities to improve a situation, to 'make a difference'

Symbol

- Need quiet times for reflection
- Use images, symbols, metaphor and parable to explore and express faith
- Sense their faith when in the natural world

Introduction

The ROOTS resources take account of people's different spiritual preferences. These preferences were described as 'spiritual styles' by Canadian theologian and practitioner, David Csinos. He wrote six articles for ROOTS on the different ways in which people express their spirituality and experience God. They can be found in the *Worship and learning support* section of the ROOTS website, www.rootsontheweb.com. We suggest you read *Meet the styles* (also in the same section) before reading this article about how to put an understanding of spiritual styles into practice.

Very young children are extremely adaptable and tolerant. For them, life is an adventure and they soak up every experience as they explore the world. Their openness makes it easy for them to engage spiritually and encounter God, when given the opportunity. However, if they are told to sit quietly and listen to a sermon that doesn't engage them, then they will get bored quickly and create their own distractions.

Impact of parental preferences

Pre-schoolers may experience church in a variety of ways:

- a midweek toddler group or service
- staying in an 'adult' service with no provision
- an all-age service
- crèche during a Sunday morning service
- a pre-school group session
- a mixed-age group session with older children.

Parental preferences clearly play a key part in the spiritual experience of very young children. They will determine which church, if any, they go to and what type of service the family attends. A child's desire to stay with its parent can also affect the adult's decision, and have an impact on the whole worshipping community. Clingy children being juggled in church by adults

who need their own spiritual sustenance, but are trying to compensate for a service that doesn't really cater for their child's needs, can lead to a lot of noise, and frustration on all sides.

Good practice

It is possible for baby and toddler groups to provide an experience that is rich enough to nurture their parents or grandparents as well. Indeed, some parents who choose to accompany their children to their own groups may come away feeling more spiritually satisfied than if they had stayed in the main service! But there are also real opportunities for the spiritual engagement of very young children in regular church services: listening to music, watching the communion bread being lifted up, and going forward to receive a blessing. Parents who are enabled to worship alongside their children can build a mutual relationship of spirituality that will nourish the whole family, and form the basis of a lifelong journey of faith.

Spiritual style preferences

Even very young children display spiritual style preferences. The ROOTS resources provide a range of appropriate and supportive activities for this age group that will help young individuals engage more fully in worship, whether in a main service, a mixed-age or peer-group session.

Word

The words of the Bible are most easily accessible as story, the more visual and dramatic the better: a blue cloth, a wooden boat, a figure of a person and a plastic fish can transform the telling of the story of Jonah. Alternatively, take a parachute or a large piece of cloth, rustle the fabric with increasing strength to represent the stormy sea, sweep the fabric up and over the children as Jonah is swallowed by the fish, then whisk it away as he is spat out on the shore. Add more figures to the boat scene, an orange net and some silver foil fish, and you can tell the

story of the miraculous catch of fish. Invite some of the children to sit in a large box or baby bath trailing a strawberry net, as the others help to fill it with fish. Very young children love repetition, and can respond, 'and also with you' when greeted in the Peace. They enjoy singing or doing actions to simple familiar hymns, or dancing to more complex lyrics. Prayers with repeated simple responses can aid their participation.

Each week under **Share the Word with very young children** ROOTS provides a short version of the Bible story with simple actions or props. There is always a prayer activity for small children. A repertoire of familiar songs can be built up from the weekly song suggestions.

Emotion

Young children's feelings are engaged through participation, the more multi-sensory the better: looking at candles, hearing the sound of water being poured into a font or baptismal pool, touching the stones used in a prayer activity, smelling incense, tasting communion bread (or a biscuit at coffee time!). Three to five-year-olds can also participate more formally by carrying the offertory, or greeting people at the door as part of the welcome team. Children's emotional response can be validated when they are asked to name or point to the part of a story that they have enjoyed most, or are invited to put a little figure, representing themselves, into the story scene. Little children love to be involved at church – and will be if we don't stop them.

The weekly **Gather activity** can be used or adapted for this age group and the paraphrased Bible story involves participation through copying physical actions. A selection of play activities are offered.

Symbol

Very young children quite naturally engage in symbolic play. Turning on a battery tealight, watching bubbles rising during the prayers, washing their hands or pouring water over stones in the confession, are instantly meaningful. Coloured ribbons, simple figures of people and animals, small crosses, pebbles, shells and shimmer stones can be offered, with close supervision, to enhance their interaction and response.

The range of play and prayer activities include reflective moments and symbolism. Activities in the Explore & respond section for children can also be adapted.

David Csinos is Assistant Professor at Atlantic School of Theology, where he teaches in the areas of practical theology and ministry studies. He is the founder and president of Faith Forward, an ecumenical organization for innovation in ministry with children and youth. His book, *Children's Ministry that Fits*, was published by Wipf and Stock in 2011.

Action

Pre-schoolers may be very caring towards others and have a strong sense of justice, which can be nurtured through discussion; recognising the Fair Trade logo can become a habit quite early in life. However, their awareness of the world is necessarily limited, so a desire to change it is more likely to develop as they get older. Action-centred spirituality should not be confused with being physically active, which is a trait of all very young children.

Each week the ROOTS resources offer **Go with God 24/7** suggestions. Very young children can be included in this way of thinking, and many of the activities suggested, with their families or carers and alongside the rest of their community.

Benefits for the whole congregation

Using a range of spiritual styles to engage very young children can be an extremely positive experience for everyone. There are adults who would like to wave a flag, but would feel uncomfortable doing so without a small child alongside them. Watching candles being lit, or putting a leaf on a prayer tree, can be meaningful to both young and old. People of all ages relish the opportunity to get out of their seat and move around prayer stations or take part in a procession. A Bible reading accompanied by objects and images can help everyone to connect with it in a new way. Familiar songs and responses can offer security to all, while contrasting lively music and movement with moments of calm and contemplation can also be helpful. The key is providing variety for a diversity of spiritual styles.

Can we provide more?

It is possible to create resources designed specifically for very young children to be used alongside other members of the congregation. If you don't already have one, why not create a children's area in church or an area for the youngest children within a Sunday school room? Stock it with Bible storybooks and worship toys and objects. Perhaps make some story sacks, each containing a Bible story and related play items, or a worship box which might include a cross, wooden bread and grapes, a flag, a purse and a prayer cube. These objects will enable the children to relate to what is going on in the service. Even in a mixed-age group context, when telling the Bible story to all the children, providing space and freedom for the youngest to play with toys and creative resources connected to the story, will enhance their spiritual experience.

Conclusion

It doesn't take very much effort to involve very young children in church activities, and the effort is usually beneficial for everyone. Their actions and responses can be deeply spiritual in a way that many adults fail to appreciate. Perhaps more of us need to cast aside our cerebral concerns, 'become like a little child' and allow ourselves time to play and explore our faith in new ways.

Victoria Goodman is an early years practitioner and is a founder of the Spiritual Child Network, www.spiritualchild.co.uk.

Spiritual styles

Meet some real children

Here are some very young children who display definite spiritual style preferences. Do you recognise any similarities with the children you know?

John is a 4-year-old with a **Word preference who**

- enjoys attending services with his dad
- listens to the words sung by the choir
- joins in all the responses during the service
- knows the Lord's Prayer off by heart.



Hannah is a 3-year-old with an **Emotion preference who**

- likes coming out to help whoever is leading the service
- is happy to lead a procession of other children
- volunteers to light candles, answer questions and take the collection
- sits close to the storyteller, and hands over the story objects when needed.



Louise is a 4-year-old with a **Symbol preference who**

- enjoys playing with symbolic objects at home and in church
- holds up a relevant object when she hears it mentioned or sung in a service, e.g. Lamb of God
- brings her play communion set when going up for a blessing with her parents.



Oscar is a 3-year-old with an **Action preference who**

- prefers free play to creative activities
- has a strong sense of justice which emerges in Godly Play sessions
- responds well to 'wondering' questions
- actively moves figures to free them from chains in the story of the Exile.



Victoria Goodman is an Early Years practitioner who leads ministry with the under fives at her church in Cambridge. She wrote materials for very young children in the ROOTS resources for several years.

Useful resources

You may find it useful to assemble a kit box each of play equipment, worship toys and art and craft materials to support your work with very young children, or use some of the ideas below to add to your existing resources. Think about storage facilities. Do you want plastic containers with lids, wooden boxes or a big chest? If items cannot be left out in church, do you have an accessible and secure cupboard? You will also need to ensure that the children's area is comfortable and can be kept clean, so make sure that the flooring is soft and any rugs and cushions are washable.

Play equipment

A wide range of play items will enhance your sessions. These could include: a waterproof cloth and water tray (a baby bath will do); Water toys including boats and fish; a Sand tray (a plastic under-the-bed storage box works well); a play parachute; wooden building blocks; linking toys, e.g. Galt Octons™; plastic construction blocks, e.g. Duplo™; plastic or wooden play food and tea service; plastic or wooden animals and people (adults and children); jigsaws; cuddly toys and dolls; seashells; smooth pebbles or stones; Playdough (see recipe below for making your own).

Worship materials and toys

The following items will help very young children to role play and learn about the context or setting of the Bible story being read to them: toddler Bible and Bible storybooks; coloured felt or cloths (white, green, red, purple, blue, yellow, brown); play communion set (wooden or metal egg cup and coaster); wooden or plastic bread and grapes; small wooden cross, e.g. a holding cross; play baptism set (small metal bowl and jug); battery tealights; coloured ribbons or scarves; musical instruments, e.g. shakers and bells.



Art and craft materials

Craft and collage supplies including paper, card, glue sticks, round-ended safety scissors, glitter pens and stickers, tissue paper, scraps of fabric, gardening and baby magazines to cut up. Paints, brushes and aprons, if your space allows for messy activities.

Recipe for playdough

You will need: 1 cup flour, ½ cup salt, 1 teaspoon cream of tartar, 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, 1 cup water, food colouring.

Mix everything together in a pan and cook on a low heat until it forms a mass. This will keep in the fridge for about a week.

For links to websites that sell Christian games and worship toys, see *Further resources* on the [WEB](#).