

The Do's and Don'ts of Teaching the Gospel to Children

The Don'ts

1. Don't aim for simple and end with distorted.

"God loves you so much that Jesus died on the cross for you. He wants you to love him too and to ask Jesus into your heart." The child should wonder: What does someone dying on a cross have to do with God loving him? Is the appropriate response to the gospel the prayer that Jesus would come into one's heart? What does that even mean? Such a "gospel presentation" only muddles things. In your attempt to help children understand it, don't explain the gospel in such a way that it is no longer the gospel the New Testament teaches.

2. Don't be simplistic.

"Simplistic" is not the same as "simple." "Simple" is easy to understand; that is what we aim for when we talk to young children. "Simplistic," however, concentrates on one aspect of the gospel to the exclusion of others. For instance, "Jesus died on the cross for us. We need to believe in him so we can go to heaven and be with God forever when we die." What about sin and God's wrath? Who is Jesus? What did he accomplish and how? Our gospel presentations must be faithful to the truth of the whole gospel.

3. Don't ignore a child's limitations.

While avoiding oversimplification, we can't just charge ahead with our teaching as though children were adults. There are big words and bigger concepts in the gospel, and we need to find ways to explain it that make it comprehensible to children. As a teacher of children 10 and older, I find that children often use the Christian jargon they've heard all their lives, but when you ask them "What does that word mean?" they aren't able to explain the term they've just used.

4. Don't count on shortcuts.

Both the gospel and children are important enough to merit our best efforts at bringing them together, which will necessitate large blocks of time. Christians often think of a gospel explanation as one quick, possibly dramatic presentation that produces a conversion on the spot (à la Charles Finney). A clear understanding of the gospel requires knowledge of who God is, which means being acquainted with many of his attributes. It requires a grasp of our need, our sin, and the reason we cannot resolve these things on our own. It requires a familiarity with God's plan for saving people for himself, an awareness of Jesus as perfect God and perfect man in one person, a knowledge of what Jesus did in his living and dying that accomplishes salvation. It requires a comprehension of how the redemption Jesus purchased is appropriated by an individual.

The best manner of presenting the gospel, therefore, comes by steady, faithful, well-planned teaching over a series of days, weeks, and years. (After all, God did give us an entire book. Nowhere does he tell us that we're responsible to pass on only a page or two of it.) Be content to be used of God to teach and explain as faithfully as you can, little by little, over time. Your child may have a dramatic moment of conversion sometime, or he may grow steadily and invisibly into a grasp of his need for a Savior and into solid confidence in Christ's perfect adequacy as that Savior. If he does, it will be because Christ drew him, not because his parents followed every step of a formula for producing perfect disciples. This is one of those places where we do what God calls us to do, and we leave the results of our doing to God. As Samuel Rutherford wrote often, "Duties are ours; events are the Lord's."

The Do's

1. Do recognize that your children will not understand everything perfectly.

Sometimes we hold off on explaining important doctrinal truths to children because we assume they're too young and won't understand. But think about it: this is God we're talking about. Compare who God is, in all his fullness, with what you understand about him; isn't what you understand just the tiniest fraction of who he is?

God has chosen to reveal himself to human beings by Word and Spirit. He has called us to share his self-revelation in his Word with others, without putting a minimum age limit on our audience. In his wonderful grace, God sends his Holy Spirit to give enough understanding to draw his people to repentance and faith in him. We acknowledge that our explanations and our children's understanding will not be perfect; but we explain anyway, trusting our gracious God to give understanding as he sees fit.

2. Do believe that all doctrinal truth can and should be shared with children.

The tendency is to wait too long. We share a few, oft-repeated Bible stories and simple prayers now, thinking we'll get to the "hard stuff" when the children are older. But then we don't, because we're not in the habit and because we haven't trained little minds to think in terms of theological truth. Yes, we have to take the time to think through what important theological words mean and how they could be explained in terms a child would understand. While that's not always easy, it can be done

3. Do take time to reflect.

Take time to reflect on the gospel and each of the important truths it comprises and on how the child thinks. What does she already know in her usual, everyday world that could serve as a bridge to explain each concept?

4. Do develop a plan.

In what order will you present to the child the truth of God's Word? When will you teach and how often?

5. Do use Bible stories.

Those of us who work with children, knowing how they love stories, rejoice that God has developed an entire history of his dealings with his people that we call "redemptive history." This history is full of stories that educate us on who God is, how he relates to people, what he requires, what he provides, and how desperately we need him. So use the stories! Just be sure to use them as God intended them to be used: as stepping stones leading to a clear understanding of the salvation provided in Christ, not as isolated, stand-alone lessons in good character or morals. Keep God the central character in each story. What is God doing in this story and how does that advance his purpose of redeeming a people who would be his people? Use the years your children are in your home to ground them in a solid, chronological understanding of the Bible narrative.

6. Do use catechisms.

Godly men, having studied Christian theology long and hard and having thought through what believers must know, distilled the essential truths of Scripture into the questions and answers of catechisms. Build family devotions around the memorization and discussion of these questions and answers. ." After a year or two of memorizing, when you finish one catechism begin it again to review what was memorized and to see how much more clearly the concepts are understood now than when you went through it before, or go on to a different catechism. ."

7. Do recognize the patience of God and be willing to teach, teach, teach (as well as allow others to teach) your child, perhaps for years, before there is a clear response to the gospel.

My favorite illustration of God's work over time comes from Elisabeth Elliot's biography of Amy Carmichael. Out for a carriage ride one day, Amy and her spiritual mentor stopped to watch a man breaking up stones by the side of the road. The man swung his heavy hammer time after time until finally a stone would crack, then break into pieces. "Which blow is it that breaks the stone?" Amy's mentor asked her. "It's the first blow, and it's the last blow, and it's every blow in between." So cumulative teaching of the Word of God breaks a sin-hardened heart, and every blow not just the final one matters.