

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Developing Children's Ministry



SESSION 2
Children in Scripture

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Children in Scripture

SESSION OVERVIEW

Children in Biblical Perspective

**Practical Theological Insights to
Children's Ministry**

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- articulate a biblical vision of childhood.
- appreciate important biblical passages and stories that contribute to theological understandings about children.
- understand the role of practical theology and the basic categories for a theology of children's ministry.

Children in Scripture



INTRODUCTION

Roy Zuck, in his book *Precious in His Sight*, reports the number of biblical references to words concerning babies, children, youth, and family (see parentheses for number of times mentioned):

- Baby, babies, infants (24)
- Firstborn (more than 100)
- Child (121), children (448), childhood (4)
- Son(s) 2,700 (without Son of God)
- Young, younger, youth (401)
- Family terms (mom, dad, uncle, aunt, as well as households, families (2,300)
- Total of family and child-related terms in the Scriptures is more than 8,000.

The Bible is not silent about children and family relationships! Some of these references serve as metaphors, and they do not speak directly about children. However, to understand God's purposes, we must understand the place of children and family relationships from a biblical perspective to provide a framework for a basic theology of children's ministry.

CHILDREN IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE



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In our first lesson, we began with a basic biblical mandate for ministry with children. Beginning with the words of Jesus and the basic commandments of God through Moses provides a good beginning but leaves much more to be said from the Bible. Also included in the lesson was a preliminary introduction to the experience of the child and a practical theological framework for beginning ministry. Understanding all three tasks remains important; ultimately, we have to bring Scripture into conversation with what we know about our world. To fashion a coherent theology of children's ministry, we have to respect both God's revelation through the Bible, alongside the teachings of our Wesleyan tradition, and our own experience with children in a reasoned and reasonable manner. Over the next few lessons, we will explore more fully the history, culture, and psychology of children to possess this broad perspective. It helps to begin with at least the basic biblical framework to guide our reflections.

Children as a Blessing in the Old Testament

Throughout God's story, children have been seen as a blessing. Blessing appears as a central theme of the Bible, and it involves God's personal approval and provision, often through the giving of a gift. Children were part of the first blessing God gave Adam and Eve at creation, along with their gift of dominion over creation. This initial blessing spoke of God's satisfaction and value for His very good creation, humanity.

This blessing is also a token of God's work to come. God blesses purposefully as a sign of value and recognition of the individual. Blessings should be treasured and stewarded appropriately. We must remember that Adam and Eve received this blessing on behalf of humanity, and fruitfulness and multiplying (children) are given to humanity as a whole in the same way that stewardship of the earth is a task for all humanity, not for a limited few. Nurturing children is part of our lifelong human task (Psalms 128:1-6; 113:9; 127:3-5; Deuteronomy 7:13-14).

In addition to these specific references to blessing, the Old Testament portrays children in an interesting light in the day-to-day context of public Hebrew life. Children were part of the gathered community at important times. When God's message was given during the Feast of Tabernacles, Moses commanded the people to gather the men, women, children, aliens, and children of aliens to hear the Word of the Lord. This gathering provided an example of God's policy of inclusion for those who would not otherwise have been respected. Children were also included when Joshua read the Law to the Hebrews at Mount Ebal (Joshua 8:30-35),

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when the people were called together under King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20), during the celebration of the rebuilding of the temple under Nehemiah (Nehemiah 12:43), and perhaps in other events as well. From these examples, we can affirm that the absence of children in other passages merely reflects the biblical authors' assumption that their presence was already established. As our historical review will make evident in the next lesson, we should not be surprised by "only four" references. Instead, we should marvel at the amazing fact that, in the ancient world, the presence of children in public life is noted at all!

Scripture seems to assume that children and parents are interacting in daily life. Deuteronomy 6 paints a picture of spiritual formation happening in the daily course of life. Teaching and learning the ways of the Lord was to be imbedded in the context of shared life, at the table, through festivals and celebrations, and in experiencing gathered community, even in the midst of very frightening political threat.

This inclusion should not be interpreted to mean that children and adults were seen as equals in Old Testament society. In fact, Deuteronomy 1:39 tells us that the children who were too young to know good from bad would not be held accountable for the poor choices made by their people. This passage indicates that while children may have been present in the community, they were not part of the decision-making process of the community. This view may have been in part because children need direction and discipline before they were capable of acting wisely (Proverbs 22:15).

Children were not always portrayed in Scripture as sweet and adorable or lacking in responsibility for their personal actions. In 2 Kings 2:23-25, Elisha met some rude children who paid for their disrespect with a bear-mauling! The realistic picture of children in the Old Testament helps us understand that children need direction, skills, and basic socialization to help them learn to be productive, contributing members of the community.

While we possess a description of how children fit into the community in the OT, stories of individual children in biblical narrative provide much more about how God interacts with children. From Ishmael, we learn that God hears children in their distress—even children who are from less-than-perfect family situations. God makes provision for them when their families fall short (Genesis 21). From Joseph's earliest dreams at 17, we learn that God speaks directly to children and young people, perhaps even before they are old enough to know what to do with God's message (Genesis 37). From Miriam, we learn that children can carry out God's plans in heroic ways. Imagine how frightening it must have been to hide in the bushes to protect her baby brother from crocodiles, then to stand face-to-face with one of the most powerful women in the world (Pharaoh's daughter) and volunteer a creative solution to her problem (Exodus 2)!


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From Samuel, we learn that God speaks directly, yet children can choose either to ignore or answer God's call. God called Samuel to respond more than once and was patient with Samuel's confusion. We also learn that God entrusted this young boy with a message that had national significance, not some trivial information. God gave a child the task of communicating that message to adults who had become distant from God (1 Samuel 3).

From David, we learn that God can use the natural giftedness of children in significant ways (1 Samuel 17), and God chooses people with regard to what is inside them, not their social status. From Naaman's slave girl, we learn that early teaching is long-lasting, and children can put what they know about God to work to carry God's good news from the lowliest of positions, even across cultural boundaries (2 Kings 5). From Josiah, the boy king, we learn children can overcome bad examples and their personal histories to do the right thing (2 Chronicles 34). From Daniel, we learn that early commitment to God can hold a person firm in the face of nearly unbearable pressures from the outside (Daniel 1).

As we talk about God in the stories of children in the Bible, we recognize that we are part of the ongoing story of God as well. Many of our own experiences mirror how God worked through children in the Old Testament and how God continues to work today.

Children in the Gospels

From the stories of Jesus as a child, we learn that childhood is a significant part of life. God sent his Son as a tiny, vulnerable baby, and that fact is celebrated by shepherds and kings alike. Jesus does not come to us as a fully-formed adult. Infant Jesus' nature and purpose was already in place, and it was recognized by God's prophets, Simeon and Anna, in the temple at Jesus' first public outing.

Luke tells us that over time, Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and people, as all children have the potential of doing (Luke 2). Jesus was a model for life in childhood as well as in adulthood. These "increases" or "growing areas" that were identified in Jesus' life help us understand that the central tasks of childhood are development of mind, body, spirit, and community. In His public ministry, Jesus did not take childhood for granted or give children a backseat in the work He was doing. Instead, He took children into His arms and blessed them (Mark 10). From the story of the loaves and fishes (Matthew 14; Mark 6; John 6), we know children, as well as women and men, were present in the audiences Jesus taught.


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The children's presence proves especially significant if we think back to the historical place of children in Jesus' world. In contrast to the Hebrew understanding of children as a blessing from the Lord, Greco-Roman culture saw children as the property of their fathers. Children were something to be tolerated because of their potential to become adults. To be compared to a child was an insult in the Greco-Roman world. Jesus teaches something entirely different. He says, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). To be compared to a child is not an insult. Childlikeness describes a concept that turns ideas about how to please God upside-down. Comparing adults to children is one way Jesus teaches that the "least" is the "greatest" in God's kingdom. Children are not to be overlooked; adults can learn from them.

New Testament scholar Judith Gundry-Volf identifies six ways that Jesus points out the significance of children [in Bunge, Marcia. "The Least and the Greatest." *The Child in Christian Thought* (p.36)].

- He blessed the children brought to Him.
- He taught that the kingdom of God belongs to children.
- He made children models of entering the kingdom of God.
- He made children models of greatness in the kingdom of God.
- He called His disciples to welcome little children as He does, and He turned the service of children into a sign of greatness in the kingdom of God.
- He gave the service of children ultimate significance as a way of receiving himself and the One who sent Him.

For scriptural references that support these assertions see: Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-15; 21:14-16; Mark 9:33-37; 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17.

Through His teachings about children, Jesus made the inclusion of children an inseparable part of following Him. When Jesus saw His disciples holding back the children from Him, He expressed indignation (Mark 10:14). While we see Jesus' anger at several points in the New Testament, this is the only time this particular Greek word is used to describe Jesus' displeasure. It is a word of passion. Jesus passionately told His disciples to "forbid them not" (v. 14, KJV) from coming to Him. He also taught His disciples to observe children, protect them, and become like them. We cannot do these things if we separate ourselves from children. Jesus made it clear we need children among us to understand discipleship better.



It is obvious children need us to care for and nurture them and help them to develop in the ways that God designed them to develop (in wisdom, in stature, in favor with God and people). It is perhaps less obvious, but no less true, that we need children to help us grow in our understanding of the kingdom of God and our discipleship.

PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS TO CHILDREN'S MINISTRY



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Connecting theological insights within our children's ministry represents an attempt to understand God in such a way that we can begin to develop an understanding and a model of who children are in relationship to Him, as well as understand our responsibility in our interactions with children to help them fulfill who they are called to be in Him. These reflections represent more or less a statement of belief but also ongoing reflection concerning our ministry. Theology describes a daily discernment of God's activity in the real world, using Scripture and our theological heritage as important references. Often, ministers call this approach "Practical Theology," since we do our theology in the intersection of daily ministry and biblical/theological mandates.

"Practical theology" describes both a domain within the broad field of theology as well as a particular method of theological reflection. When ministers use the term theology, they primarily describe a particular approach to exploring and talking about the nature and actions of God in the world. Christian theology begins with the assertion that God has been revealed in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Ministers, using:

- the resources found in Scripture,
- core Christian doctrines,
- the history of the church, and
- the experiences of day-to-day Christian living

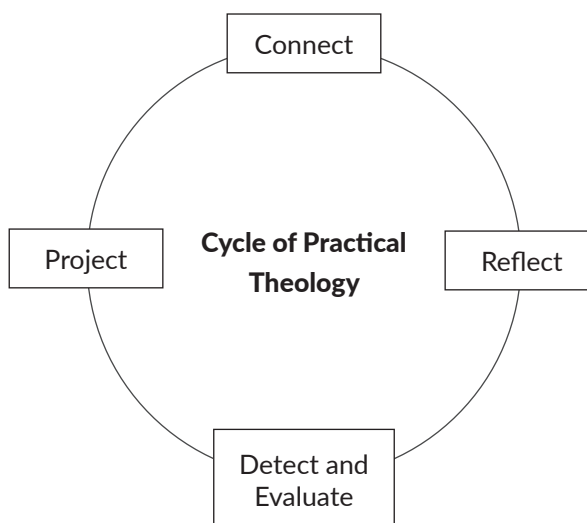
seek to name the grace of God, offer salvation through Jesus Christ, and discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in the world. Over the years, different specializations have grown up around certain resources that inform our understanding of God and God's work in the world. Ministers and academic theologians begin with their own resources to guide their thinking. Some ministers began by studying Scripture and seeking to find connections between God's actions in the Bible and the world today. Other ministers choose to focus on historical periods of the Church or specific Christian doctrines as a key resource and attempt to explain their meaning for today. Still other specialists focus on how we think, on particular philosophies, and relate those ideas to life and meaning. And yet other ministers choose to begin in the pastoral practice within the Church or in the practical concerns of daily Christian living as the beginning point for seeing and understanding how God is at work today. Like the overall framework of a house, all of these approaches provide the basic "architecture" of theological study. Together, they lift up important points for our consideration: Scripture, church history, doctrine, philosophical assumptions, pastoral concerns, and daily life.


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For this course, the final two approaches provide our beginning point. That stance does not mean that we ignore Scripture, church history, and doctrine. We will find that the “contents of the Christian faith” remain vital; otherwise, it will be hard for us to call our ministry a Christian ministry. However, the method we will employ begins in daily living and our ministry responsibilities in the life of the Church. This method has proven a powerful resource for both youth workers and youth alike. While we begin in everyday experience and ministry practice, we also take advantage of the full experience provided within the life of faith as well as God’s revealed will found in Scripture and formulated through the doctrine of the Church. Nevertheless, experience, while not the final teacher, becomes the context to shape our questions for learning.

Kenda Creasy Dean, in the book *Starting Right*, provided key terms to describe this process. First, we start by naming our concrete experiences, seeking to name and **connect** their importance to challenge our understanding of their true meaning. We **reflect** on those experiences, probing our assumptions and revealing what we think is the most important part of those activities. Once we explore fully the experiences of children and our ministry with them, we will then bring the knowledge we have gained into direct conversation with Christian thought and historical practice. In this phase, we **detect and evaluate** our daily practice with the Christian faith, allowing our core Christian beliefs to shape a more faithful ministry. Then we attempt to **project** what new ministry looks like that proves to be more faithful to the nature of God and what God is doing in the world. Obviously these new more faithful approaches to ministry create even newer experiences that we can then connect, reflect, detect, and project once more to create an even deeper, more mature approach to our ministry.

ILLUSTRATION: CYCLE OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY




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- **Connect:** Naming and connecting everyday experiences that are part of our ministry. (How well do we see what is really happening?)
- **Reflect:** Taking a step back to probe our assumptions, selecting those aspects of the experience that prove to be most important. (How well do we understand the various influences that shape our experiences and what we value about them?)
- **Detect and Evaluate:** Bringing the “big ideas” that surface from our reflection into direct dialog with Scripture, Christian doctrine, and the history of the Church. (How do the contents of the Christian faith critique or affirm our ministry actions?)
- **Project:** Beginning to imagine and implement new ministry strategies based on a more faithful vision of ministry. (How well do we learn from our experience as we plan the next ministry activities?)

While this approach seems abstract, lay workers and ministers use this approach regularly.

A practical theology of children's ministry describes an attempt to understand God in such a way that we can begin to develop an understanding and a model for how we can best help children come to know, love, and serve God. While we can't fully cover this topic in one lesson, we can acknowledge at least basic categories that emerge from Scripture to guide our ongoing reflection. How we use these theological insights will make a difference in the kinds of ministry approaches we choose, the way we carry out our ministry, and the way we address pastoral care of children and families. It will make a difference in the way we see children and our churches. It will make a difference in what we do in our communities for children and how we vote or make decisions about public policies affecting children. The following insights provide a beginning point as you shape your own practical theology of childhood. You may or may not agree with every statement; the key question remains: How do you articulate your own belief, and how is it shaped by Scripture and daily theological insight?

The Value of Children

Psalm 127 states that children are a “heritage from the Lord.” It is the Lord who provides the gift of children to parents. The child's heritage stands in direct relationship to God. Children are God's creation and they carry on God's work. Genesis 1:26 says that we are created in the image of God; upon completion of human beings, God pronounced, “It was very good” (v. 31). The image of God, our relationship to our Creator, exists at every point along the life course,


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from infancy to old age. Psalm 8:2 states, “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.” God delights in the praises of children. Children have the capacity to know and to praise God; they have value. Therefore, anything that would devalue children would be in opposition to God and His creation. Children are not second-class citizens. Their value is the same as any other age group. When the disciples attempted to keep the children away from Jesus, Jesus rebuked them and reached out and touched them and held them. Children have great value.

The Nature of Children

Children, as part of God’s creation, also suffer from the consequences of the Fall. We have all inherited from Adam’s disobedience the capacity of a sinful nature (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12-19). Because of the sin of Adam, children enter a world of sin that includes themselves. This reality does not mean that sin has destroyed them. We believe in the power of God’s prevenient grace (a grace at work even prior to salvation) that works to intervene and to ultimately change children so that they can be used by God even while they are still children. As a children’s leader, this insight provides one of the primary hopes and missions—to raise children up in the congregation and ultimately lead children to salvation through Jesus Christ, that they might experience the full regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, even though born with a sinful nature, we believe in the great potential of children through God’s prevenient grace.

Children, Though Valued, Are Not Mature

There are many indicators of a child’s immaturity. Physically, intellectually, and emotionally, children are obviously not at the same level as most adults. They are in the process of growing up. The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:11, states, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.” Ephesians 4:14 says, “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.” These Scriptures indicate that children are in their formative years of thinking, reasoning, making moral judgments, and so on. They are susceptible to influences both good and bad. They lack experience and understanding in righteousness. They need to grow with the help of parents and others into mature adults. A lesson to be learned from this is to not expect children to be mature. Leaders need not overlook inappropriate behavior, but children should not be criticized for their immaturity. Instead, the Christian community should model the love of Jesus lovingly and patiently in leading them to maturity.


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Children Are Naturally Dependent

Jesus said in Matthew 18:3, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus, in presenting the child as our model, does not suggest that children are sinless or that they are mature. Yet Jesus allows the child to model dependence—on family, on society, and on other Christians—much like we all rely on God's grace in our own lives. Children rely on the guidance of caring adults for provision, safety, and security. Children live in an unpredictable world where adults cannot guarantee each child's protection, but adults must do their best to support children as they grow in their own abilities and strengths.

Children Become Accountable

Childhood defines a continuum from utter dependence to mature adulthood. Children gradually become more and more accountable for their beliefs and behaviors. It makes sense that there is a time early on when children are not accountable for their failure to know and believe. However, as children mature, they begin to understand and make rational choices. Children become more and more accountable for believing what is right. Exactly when full accountability occurs remains unknown. The mark of moral decision-making revolves around the individual having the cognitive ability to know what is true and right. Children must have a mind that can perceive and choose based on relevant information. There is a time when children prove spiritually responsible to accept the call of Jesus to be their Savior.

The Responsibility of Parents

The Bible is clear that parents share responsibility for the spiritual development of their children. Some parents would like the church to take on the primary role of spiritual development. However, Christian parents need to recognize their responsibilities. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Then, Moses continues in verse 7, "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Proverbs 22:6 tells parents, "Train a child in the way he should go." Ephesians 6:4 admonishes, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." The passages demonstrate that parents have authority coupled with responsibility. The church must partner with parents to discern strengths and challenges in parenting and provide resources. Congregations may model for parents a gracious, authentic sense of authority and leadership. Parents should not feel abandoned by the church; both congregation and family work together to create faithful homes for the sake of children.

**NOTES***Implications for Children's Leaders*

Since parents have been mandated by God to train children in the ways of God, children's ministers should see their role as providing assistance to parents, not taking over that role from them. They should seek to provide spiritual experiences that will fit the needs of children as well as support what the parents are doing at home. At times, it will be necessary to be the extended family of God for children who come from unbelieving families. The children's minister can be a Christian model, a teacher of the Word of God, as well as a support and encouragement to the children and their families.

Combining a biblical vision with a series of theological convictions concerning children and children's ministry provides a beginning framework as we explore the historical, cultural, and developmental characteristics of children. This framework serves as a reference in our daily ministry as well, where we often engage with other leaders and use the cycle of practical theology to inform our actions for a more faithful ministry.

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Interview a minister about the last time he or she preached or taught a biblical passage that supported children in the church or the role of children's ministry. Which passage did the pastor use?
2. Take one of your recent ministry activities and apply the cycle of practical theology. How well does it work to help you think about the ministry activities and reflect on their faithfulness?
3. Talk with parents about their basic views of children (use the theological categories at the end of the lesson to frame your questions).

EXAM


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1. Blessing represents:
 - A. God's recognition and value of persons.
 - B. Hope of God's future work for people.
 - C. Our ability to both treasure and steward what God provides.
 - D. A and C.
 - E. All of the above.

2. The Bible always portrays children as obedient and lovable.
 - A. True
 - B. False

3. Matching: Match the appropriate person to the right description.
 - _____ Children can overcome bad examples.
 - _____ Children can choose to ignore or answer God's direct voice.
 - _____ Children can carry out God's plans in heroic ways.
 - _____ Children can hear God in their distress, even when they come from difficult family situations.
 - _____ Children can use their natural gifts for God.
 - A. Miriam
 - B. Samuel
 - C. Ishmael
 - D. David
 - E. Josiah

4. Children are an inseparable part of our following God.
 - A. True
 - B. False

5. Matching: Match the appropriate term to the right description.
 - _____ Naming our current context and relating to our ministry.
 - _____ Bringing the big ideas into direct dialog with Scripture, doctrine, and Church history.
 - A. Reflect
 - B. Detect and Evaluate
 - C. Connect
 - D. Project

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. How can we affirm God's blessing in and through children in our ministry?
Are there particular obstacles or opportunities for stressing the blessing of children in the church?
2. When we think of the resources for a theology of children (Scripture, doctrine, Church history, daily experiences), do we tend to place an emphasis on one or more sources over the others? If so, why?
3. When we think about the cycle of practical theology (connect, reflect, detect and evaluate, project) are there moments in the cycle where we feel particularly strong or particularly challenged in our theological reflection?
4. How do we balance both gifts and need for guidance in the lives of children?
How can we distinguish between their abilities and their lack of maturity?

Review your answers with your mentor, then respond to the following:

How many responses focus on supporting children (particularly in areas where they are not yet fully self-reliant), and how many answers focus on empowering children?

Which of these answers support the goal of living Christlike relationships? Why?

What do we need to add to our list to make our approach more comprehensive, more faithful? Which do we need to incorporate into the role of the children's leader as one who both supports and empowers Christlike relationships with children?