



By Crystal Caviness

United Methodist children's ministry leaders share tips for how to help the children we love build faith in their lives. Image design by Stacey Hagedwood, United Methodist Communications

Helping kids learn about God may seem daunting. The good news is that a theology degree isn't required and it has less to do with words than with actions. Check out these tips from United Methodist children ministry leaders for how to make faith real in the lives of the kids we love.

Every day presents teachable moments

"Every moment of every day is a teachable moment and that doesn't stop with your faith," says Aimee Cox, director of children's ministry at Christ United Methodist Church.

"People think you have to be in a worship setting in your sanctuary to have sacred moments," Cox explains. "When you allow your kids to talk about how they are feeling and how to approach things in a Christ-like way, you're having that sacred moment without naming it."

Sitting around the table at mealtime, taking a walk, snuggling at bedtime are ideal holy moments, says Melinda Shunk, the Arkansas Conference's children's ministry coordinator. "Adults can take these routine opportunities to tell children that you thank God for them or for the time you're spending together.

"It's a blessing to that child to hear those words washed over them," Shunk points out.

Engage all five senses

Asking children what they see, what they smell, what they hear in the world helps them experience God's creation in a variety of ways, Cox says.

Employing this tip isn't just for nature walks or outside settings, Cox clarifies, suggesting the same questions can be asked following all activities, including church.

"Always engage kids after worship by asking, 'What did you see today? What smells did you smell?'" "Help them walk through the experience of being at church," she says.

Allow kids to have their own experiences

Sometimes, parents fear how their child may react to a Bible story. Leaders suggest we share the story anyway without editing and introducing personal biases.

"Children take it in and they understand what they understand for their age," explains Cox. "Let them ask questions."

Read the stories together, followed by a discussion.

"You don't have to be an expert in understanding the Bible," Cox points out. "Ask questions, such as 'What do you hear? What words spoke to you?'"

Asking open-ended questions is important to keeping the conversation going, says Brittany Sky McRay, director of children's and family ministries at Los Altos United Methodist Church.

"Invite kids into the experience of the story, giving children an opportunity to think about the feelings or who is missing or the most important part makes the Word living. Asking questions is meant to engage our curiosity. There are no right or wrong answers," McRay points out.

Take time to wonder

"I think the greatest gift our kids give to us is the curiosity they bring to the table," McRay shares. "The wondering about how God works in our world creates more biblically literate children and creates lifelong lovers of Jesus."

Build a spiritual library as a way to nurture wonder and create a space for discovery, McRay says, offering that books by the likes of Matthew Paul Turner, Fred Rogers and music by Rain for Roots are good starting places. The Deep Blue Bible Storybook, which McRay wrote as senior editor of children's resources at The United Methodist Publishing House, was developed specifically to engage conversations.

Being present is a spiritual act

"Showing up, being there and listening to your child is the cornerstone of faith," McRay says. She explains that numerous studies indicate the understanding of God, ourselves and the world comes down to five foundational relationships in a child's life.

"Particularly the adults who love you when you are really small set you up for who God is," she tells us.

Authenticity rules!

Admitting you don't know the answer or that you messed up is OK too.

"Being authentic is really key, because our kids see through the (façade)," McRay explains. "I want to model what it means to be a believer, but we have to remind ourselves that life is hard and we are going to struggle."

"I have to give myself space to be a good enough person who my son will watch his whole life and internalize that being a good person means making decisions every day, saying, 'I'm sorry' when I mess up and trying again the next day."

Be a faith storyteller

Children love a good story, particularly when someone they love is the main character.

"Tell stories about when you were a child, what you thought about God, how you first came to your faith," Shunk suggests. Grandparents, especially, make excellent faith storytellers because they have the time and experiences to share those stories.

"Just like the Bible teaches us about God's people from long ago, our faith stories from long ago are valuable to children," Shunk suggests. "Being a faith storyteller makes faith come alive and weaves into your family's faith story."

Pro tip: "Save the stories about their parents as children for tweens," Shunk says. "Those stories are going to be so valuable and so fun."

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