

Parent Leaflet

Children and Salvation

Guiding Your Child

Guiding children to take those first steps toward faith can be the most rewarding opportunity of life for parents. Parents who have growing relationships with Christ should create an environment for a child to begin to know Jesus from the first days of life. As a child grows and matures, his knowledge of Jesus will grow. By laying these foundations for spiritual conversion, parents become partners with the Holy Spirit as He prepares and calls their child to accept Christ as Savior.

Jesus as Friend

From the first days of life, your child should begin to associate Jesus' name with positive feelings. During the preschool years, a child needs to associate Jesus with the Bible, church, family, and self. The goal is to lead preschoolers to understand Jesus is a friend who loves them.

As a young preschooler, your child can understand that Jesus was a special baby. As a boy, Jesus had a family and worshiped God. Jesus grew to be a man. Jesus helped people because He loved them. Jesus loves all people and wants people to love Him.

In the middle preschool years, a child begins hearing Bible stories that emphasize Jesus as God's Son. God sent Jesus to the earth. Jesus studied and learned. Jesus did things that people cannot do. Jesus wants people to love and help each other.

For kindergarten-age children, concepts are enhanced in content and meaning. Jesus is God's one and only Son. Jesus performed miracles and healed the sick. Children can grow like Jesus—in mind, body, and in their relationships with God and others. People should follow the example and teachings of Jesus. Jesus died on the cross. God made Jesus alive again. Jesus is in heaven.

Jesus as Savior

As a child matures through the elementary years, he moves from the stage of knowing Jesus as friend to an increasing understanding of Jesus as Savior. For a child, becoming a Christian happens both in "bits and pieces" over the years and in one "big event." Parents work with the Holy Spirit in the "bits and pieces" process, laying the foundations that introduce the child to Jesus as friend. Then the Holy Spirit in the "big event" calls the child to accept Christ as Savior. Part of the Holy Spirit's role is to reveal to the child his personal sin. A child must realize that he is lost before he can be saved. This process requires time and patience.

When a child begins to ask questions, it may only signal the early stages of acquiring more information. Both the child and Holy Spirit should be in the driver's seat, setting the pace and course for discussion. The "big event" occurs at different ages for individual children since each child is unique in his relationship with God. Here are some simple questions to consider as you talk to your children. The child must understand:

- Who is Jesus?
- Why did Jesus come?
- What did Jesus do?
- Why should I become a Christian?
- How can I accept Jesus as Savior?

The critical aspect of conversion is a life change. Second Corinthians 5:17 reminds us that to be in Christ involves change. This fact is true for children as well. There is no separate gospel for children. The child must understand and be convicted of his broken relationship with God. Parents must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's work. Where there is no conviction, there can be no real change and spiritual conversion. Decisions that last a lifetime are decisions based on conviction and conversion.

Children are unique. The signs of conviction are unique. Deal with each child individually.

Children begin asking questions in a sequence often beginning with the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Later they move on to questions of Jesus' death and resurrection, then to the ultimate realization of sin and salvation.

Answering Children's Questions

- *Ask follow-up questions.*
When a child asks a question, he often does not know exactly what to ask. Get clarification before deciding how to answer. For example, you might say, "Tell me more about what you are thinking." Or you may ask: "What made you ask that question? Where did you hear about this?" Remember, the question a child asks may not be the actual question he has. Also, a child may struggle with putting his questions into words that adults can understand. Avoid asking questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no." This can lead to misunderstandings for the child and the adult.
- *Avoid giving more information than a child needs.*
Adults can be tempted to tell all they know on a subject. When a child asks a question, only answer what the child is asking. If the child wants more information, she will ask more questions.
- *Do not jump to conclusions.*
A child may ask, "Why did Andy get baptized?" This question may be only a request for information, not a request for the gospel. A child incorporates concepts and information over time. Asking questions allows him to gain information, correct misconceptions, and gain new insights.
- *Speak in clear terms.*
Avoid symbolic analogies that may distract from discussion and understanding.

Parents should be aware that a child may ask questions that they are unprepared to answer or the child may even lose interest for short times. Both extremes can be present over time or even in one visit. Always remain sensitive to the child and the Holy Spirit.

Leading Your Child to Become a Christian

No decision is as life-changing or eternal as the decision to become a Christian. For this reason, children need to be counseled with the greatest care, wisdom, and integrity. Your goal should not be to get a "yes" answer. Your goal is to aid in understanding, as a partner with the Holy Spirit. Parents, no matter how experienced and well-trained, cannot call a child to salvation, but parents can be tools of the Holy Spirit in accordance with God's plan for the child. Parents often ask, "What are the signs that a child is struggling with becoming a Christian?" Just as children are unique, the signs of conviction are unique. You must know the personality of the child and deal with each child individually.

One of the most common indications that a child is thinking about Christianity is persistent questions about salvation, sin, death, or even hell. The key in knowing how to answer is to let the child set the pace and depth of the responses. Children will ask again if they require more information. Remember to look for the intent of the questions.

The Discussion

Below are some hints in talking with your child about salvation.

- *Remain conversational.*
Many adults fall into two traps when counseling children about salvation. They try to make it only a presentation, or they try to make it a question-and-answer test. In reality, the experience should be a dialogue or conversation. The conversation should focus on the child's comments. Therefore, each conversation is different.
- *Avoid symbolic language or analogies.*
A child does not possess abstract capabilities until later in adolescence. Speak in simple and concrete terms. Rather than using the phrase "accepting Jesus into your heart," say the words "becoming a Christian."

- *Encourage the child to express his own ideas.*
Let the conversation be natural and at ease. If the discussion turns to hell or the eternal consequences of sin, deal with it in a factual way, not in a way that causes fear.
- *Give time for thought.*
Children need time to think. Open-ended questions require thought, so affirm his time to think. Smile and be patient.
- *Rely on the Bible.*
The Bible is the only resource you need to lead a child to Christ. The actual dialogue should be centered on the Bible. Other tools that are symbolic, such as color-coded cards or beads, can actually confuse a child by immersing him in analogies that hold little or no meaning to a concrete-thinking child.

The Plan

The following plan is simple. It utilizes five simple statements and Scriptures that will help you as you discuss Christianity with young children. Before you begin, remember to determine the true intent. The first part of any conversation with a child should begin with open-ended questions that allow the child to express his desire. Then determine the context. In some cases, children begin to think about becoming a Christian because of a situation or event. A friend may have become a Christian or a child may want to participate in the Lord's Supper. Knowing this information can help you know how to guide this discussion. Begin with simple questions: "How long have you been thinking about becoming a Christian? When did you first start thinking about becoming a Christian?"

Model Discussion

1. *God loves you and has a great plan for you (Psalm 139:13-16).*

Talk about these truths: God made the world, God made people, God made you, God wants to have a relationship with people, and God wants to have a relationship with you. Say, "Tell me one way you know God loves you."

2. *Everyone has sinned (Romans 3:23).*

Sin is best understood as choosing to do things your way instead of God's way. (Give some examples of sin such as disobedience, ungratefulness, untruthfulness, and so forth.) Then ask the child: "Have you sinned? What does God think about sin?" Point out that everyone has sinned.

3. *Even though you choose to sin, God still loves you and offers to forgive you (Romans 5:8).*

Ask, "How do you think it makes God feel when you sin?" Focus on the fact that God loves the child even when he sins. Say: "God promised that one day a Savior would come and not sin and would die for all people. Do you know who that Savior is? Did you know that He died for you?"

4. *Jesus died for you (John 3:16).*

Talk about John 3:16 and explain that because sin separates people from God, everyone needs a Savior. Ask, "Do you know why Jesus died?" Say, "Jesus loved you so much, He willingly died for you so you could be with God forever." If the child is old enough to understand the resurrection, say, "Jesus rose from the dead so you could have eternal life."

5. *You can become a Christian by confessing that Jesus is your Savior and Lord (Romans 10:9).*

Encourage the child to tell you in his own words what he understands. Ask the child: "Do you want to become a Christian? Do you want Jesus to be your Lord and Savior?" If the answer is yes, review that the child must pray:

Admitting he has sinned and is sorry for his sin.

Believing that Jesus is God's Son.

Confessing that Jesus is his Savior and Lord.

Encourage the child to pray in his own words. After the child prays, read Romans 10:13 and remind him that this verse is a promise. It means that he has become a Christian. Suggest some special way to remember the occasion such as writing the date in his Bible, beginning a journal, or taking a family photo. Discuss with him how your church handles the next step for baptism.

Adapted from Thomas Sanders, *When Can I?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001). Used by permission.