

How to Care for and Teach Children – by Zoe E. Jones

A Biblical Approach to Children's Educational Programming

Scripture amply reminds us of the ways that God, our Father, cares for us. A multitude of Psalms share this common message: God will protect and care for his children. They include nurturing images of being “under” or “in the shadow” of God’s wings: He holds and cares for us like a mother bird shelters her chicks (Psalm 17:8, 57:1, 61:4, and 91:4). Psalm 12 speaks about how he watches over us both day and night - talk about vigilance! He is both forgiving and compassionate (Psalm 103). In Matthew, Jesus declares that the Father is a giver of good gifts, and that he delights when we ask for them (7:11). We are all equal in God’s eyes, Paul writes in Galatians 3:28. At the same time, our cultural and racial differences are wonderful to him—why else would he have representatives from every tribe, tongue, and nation surrounding his throne (Revelation 7:9)? He disciplines us, but only out of love, so that we can grow to be more like him (Hebrews 12). Genesis 1 and 2 and Romans 1: 18-23 show how he made this world for us to tend and enjoy. He clearly makes himself known to all people through his work of creation. This is but a taste of how he treats us as adopted sons and daughters (Ephesians 1:3-6). How the Father treats and develops us, his children, serves as the model for our own practices as educators, disciples, and caregivers, inspiring and instructing our design for children’s educational programs.

Human Learning Domains

To understand better the subsequent paragraphs, we shall go over the seven areas or domains of learning and the skills/abilities attained in each domain:

Physical - Large motor skills (like kicking, running, and walking), and small motor skills (like grasping a rattle, feeding oneself, building with blocks, and writing).

Sensory - Experiencing, exploring, and learning about God’s world through the five senses.

Language - Listening, speaking, reading, and writing (in that order).

Emotional - Recognizing, naming, and managing one’s own emotions and accurately identifying the emotions of others.

Social - Learning how to have healthy relationships with others.

Cognitive - Thinking and applying truth learned through language and the senses, including God’s Word and world.

Creative - Using the imagination to express truth, feelings, and thoughts about self, others, and the world.

Moral – Having a clear understanding of right and wrong.

Educators and disciples use all these domains to encourage and promote natural development and human connection to God and his world. We must note that we are born **spiritual beings**—in the image of God, but that it is only through his Spirit that we can grow and develop spiritually. It is not the job of caregivers or teachers to “make converts.” Instead, our roll is to pray for, model, teach, and nurture truth based on God’s creation, his Word, and our own relationships with God, through Jesus Christ.

Why Jesus? He was sent by God the Father to live here on earth, fully God and human at the same time. He experienced every stage of human development, yet without sin. He died the death we could not die to pay for our sin on the cross. He showed his power over sin and death, rising on the third day, so that we could have a relationship with God forever. Jesus united us to himself by his Spirit, giving us hope and the Helper on whom we can depend during the process of human development and maturity.

Human Developmental Stages

How does God allow human children to develop? First, children are born or brought into a family. Perhaps not the conventional family that God created before the fall (for instance, the church can be that ultimate family, by his grace), but nevertheless, his good design includes a family: loving and caring for its new member. Healthy child development follows an incredibly ordered and systematic plan, though the timing of healthy development can be different. Still, all children begin life as completely vulnerable and helpless beings: All their needs must be met by another. At this stage, healthy attachment to a loving adult—most often Mom—is critical. Only after these needs are met can a child can really begin to learn and grow. It is much better to go overboard meeting these needs, rather than risking doing too little. Infants cannot be spoiled! Thus, the growing process begins, with different ages focusing primarily on certain types of development. The most rapid development occurs at the youngest stages, beginning even before birth. Our personhood and growth begins prenatally, in the secure warmth of our mother’s womb.

By the time a baby is ready to be born, all organs and systems are in place, with many fully developed. During the first year of life, both physical and sensory learning dominates. Physical and sensorial domains continue to grow during the next two years, but the emotional and language areas really take off. These different forms of learning are what, in turn, develops the brain. At the end of a healthy child’s second year, the brain is almost the same size as an adult’s and all

the connections are in place for the rest of life. The most critical stages of development have now come to an end.

The preschool years are the time when the domains previously mentioned continue to be refined, but cognitive, creative, moral, and social learning come front and center. By the time healthy children hit school age all these domains have been introduced. Now the educator and caregiver should continue to encourage growth and maturity in all these areas. The next period of rapid development will not occur again until adolescence.

Children (as well as adults) have many different ways of learning. Three of these learning modes should especially be highlighted: visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), kinesthetic (doing, manipulating). The majority of babies, toddlers and preschoolers learn kinesthetically; these other learning methods apply more to school age children. However, when a kinesthetic approach is used in teaching, *all* children will benefit (Kinesthetic learning naturally incorporates visual and auditory learning as well).

Learning Context and Biblical Framework

How does a knowledge of Scripture and development affect how we work with our children? First, we must focus not just on the children as individuals, but as part of a family: We care about both the children and their families. They need to be treated as God treats us, and when we fail, as we are not God, we need to ask for forgiveness. We need to teach children in love, which requires both nurturing and limit setting, with consequences in case of infractions. The environments we teach in should reflect the ones whom they are serving, as well as our God: beautiful, organized, child friendly, with most of the items at the children's eye levels.

It is also important to recognize that we are all one in Jesus but value our differences. Our children must be introduced to a wide variety of God's people. Practical ways to do that is to be mindful of our toys, pictures, storytelling props, and books, in addition to reaching out to all our neighbors, especially ones whom are different than us: We must be conscious of whether we are representing people of color in our classrooms, as the world is mainly people of color. This should even be the case in predominately white classrooms! When teaching and utilizing curriculum, we need to be aware that our own cultural biases, as well as those of authors, can interfere with how we teach. In addition, we should make sure that our teachers and volunteers reflect whom we are ministering to: Children need to see themselves in their role-models. That might mean going out of our comfort zones when recruiting people.

In terms of the actual learning, include as many domains as possible when working with children. One of the ways to accomplish this is to use a

multi-sensory, experiential curriculum at all levels (this will naturally differ according to the various ages and stages). Ways to do this would include using objects (and pictures with older children) to tell stories and providing opportunities to play and explore.

Children do their most profound learning through play! A multitude of studies support this. Play-based learning is especially essential in the early years up to age seven. Other suggestions include incorporating movement activities, music, poetry/finger plays, books, and art. This form of teaching will not just benefit healthy, normal functioning children, but will also positively impact at-risk, special needs, and compromised individuals (chronically ill, delayed, etc.,). When normal development cannot occur, the results can have a significant impact on children's future functioning. Where some people and philosophies offer little hope, we know that intervention is possible. We see that children can reach their God given potential, though it is a tough road for children and caregivers alike. One example of this is to allow compromised children to repeat stages of development over again, no matter what the age. Two examples of this: School aged children and youth invited to explore and play in a toddler or preschool environment—this I have personally witnessed. Another is the story of an adopted parent night after. Night holding and rocking a four-year old child who was from an orphanage and unable to attach in that environment. It is equally important to respect all children as learners, and to be thoughtful of each one's developmental abilities and limits.

It is obviously necessary to have a biblical framework when working with children. I have pointed to the care and nature of the Father, to “God with us”(Jesus) who affirmed our embodied nature and modeled perfect human development, and to the Holy Spirit, our helper and reason for hope in the maturity process and for healing/repair of the compromised. However, operating with a biblical framework does not require that everything that comes out of our mouths, the learning activities, or décor need to be *directly* related to the Bible (biblical posters, memory verses, “Christian” themes and motifs). When God created the world, both it and all who dwelt in it were perfect. When people sinned, everything was broken, but his beauty, order, and image in people still show. Jesus' sacrifice wasn't just about redeeming souls, but restoring whole persons and the entire creation. Thus, if it is from God, there is no separation: One child can be playing with dolls, another exploring sand, another looking at a Bible picture book—all of it brings him glory!

Approaching children this way will benefit all children and their families, perhaps especially seekers, the marginalized, and those unfamiliar with traditional church culture—it presents the aroma of Christ, light and life to those who are perishing in darkness and in despair. Jesus' approach when he taught

people—experiential, vibrant, life-giving, affirming the human story—gives us a glimpse into effective children’s programming.

Though imperfect, as with all our human attempts, we seek to be the “hands” and “feet” of Jesus, pointing children and their families to the ultimate, loving parent: our Father God.