



Baby Jesus and Rudolph

On Christmas Eve, my niece and I strolled through town, passing a church with a beautiful Nativity scene on the front lawn. "I'm glad they have the Nativity scene," I said, "because it helps us remember the real meaning of Christmas." Michelle drew up to her full five-year-old height and said, "I already know what Christmas is about – Baby Jesus and Rudolph and all that stuff."

As we walked on, I asked Michelle how she learned about Christmas. She said, "My teacher at church told us about Baby Jesus, then we learned to sing 'Rudolph' for the Sunday School Party."

FANTASY AND REALITY

Michelle's teacher probably did not understand that she and her preschool friends were not able, mentally, to separate fantasy from reality. Since the same teacher taught about Baby Jesus and Rudolph, she assumed that they were both part of the "real Christmas" story. The danger is that when Michelle is old enough to discover that Rudolph is not real, she may conclude that Baby Jesus is not real, either, since she associated both of them with the same teacher and church experience. The relationship of fantasy and reality is only one of several important principles to consider when teaching spiritual truths to young children.

Literal Thinking



Preschoolers are very literal-minded. They accept what they hear at face value. When a frustrated Mom says, "You're driving me up the wall!" the preschooler likely visualizes Mom driving the car up the kitchen wall. Likewise, when we say "God is the Good Shepherd and we are his sheep", preschoolers visualize a pasture of sheep and a shepherd standing nearby. When one Sunday School teacher made that statement, she quickly lost control as the children began crawling on the floor, imitating sheep baaing.



CONCRETE VS. SYMBOLIC

Six-year-old Shannon lustily sang, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." Her dad suspected that she did not understand the symbolic meaning of letting her light shine, so he asked her what light she meant. She hesitated and then answered, "Well, I guess my night light."

Preschoolers think in concrete terms. They do not yet understand how an object can mean something else. For example, when talking about the Lord's Supper, preschoolers CAN understand that observing the Lord's Supper helps us think about Jesus. However, they are not mentally ready to understand that the bread is a symbol for His body and the juice is a symbol for His blood. To them, *juice* is juice and *bread* is bread.

Seeing is Believing



Mark's parents surprised him with a new puppy. Mark's first response was to ask to buy clothes for the puppy. His storybooks contained pictures of animals wearing clothes and living like humans. To a three-year-old, seeing is believing. He had seen the pictures, therefore he believed this behavior was normal for animals as well as people. Often, religious art is just as confusing to preschoolers. For example, a well-known painting of Jesus' ascension looks like Jesus standing on a cloud. The preschooler's image is a literal Jesus standing on a cloud in the sky (where is Jesus on a cloudless day?).

So, what does it all mean?

For us as preschool teachers, an understanding of preschoolers' mental development helps us communicate clearly the Bible truths they are ready to understand, and avoid words or phrases that they will only understand later in life. Everything the child sees and hears at church should be true, so that the child is never confused. We do not want the child to learn anything now that he will have to unlearn later.

◆ **Room Décor**

The hallways and rooms in the preschool area should be free of fantasy figures. Wall paintings of cartoon characters do not mix with Bible truths.

◆ **Activity Materials**

Books, pictures, puzzles, and toys should accurately depict Bible stories and truths. Nature items should look realistic. Apples with smiley faces and animals who wear clothes are not being depicted in the way God created them.

◆ **Music and Games**

Songs used with preschoolers should teach Bible truths. When I was a child, a popular song was "The B-I-B-L-E." A phrase of the song is "I'll stand alone on the word of God." At a young age, I thought that meant we were to put the Bible on the floor and stand on it. My misconception came because I was literal-minded, and I did not understand the symbolism of standing on God's word.

◆ **Special Events and Celebrations**

The calendar year affords several opportunities to teach Bible truths if we are careful to avoid symbolism and untruths that the preschoolers may understand literally.

February

Valentine's Day tempts some teachers to talk about letting Jesus into our hearts. To a concrete, literal-minded preschooler, this concept is a physical (not spiritual) act. If Jesus is in your heart, what happens when you have a heart attack or a heart transplant?

April

Easter is the most holy and significant of all Christian celebrations. It is also among the most difficult to teach young children. A wise teacher will emphasize joy and happiness in celebrating the fact that Jesus loves us. He will avoid eggs, chicks, bunnies, and other symbols of New Life which the preschooler cannot yet understand.

October

Halloween is not a Christian observance and the trappings of Halloween (ghosts, jack-o-lanterns, witches) have no place in the preschool room or activities. Appropriate observances of the fall season include cutting and cooking a real pumpkin, collecting fall leaves, and learning about animal behavior in fall.

November

Thanksgiving is an historic celebration, and is a wonderful opportunity to help preschoolers learn to be thankful to God. Time at church is so limited, however, that it is better to leave activities such as making Pilgrim costumes to the school programs.

December

We all want our preschoolers to love Baby Jesus and the story of the nativity. Because preschoolers do not separate fantasy from reality, we will want to avoid traditional Christmas images such as The Little Drummer Boy, Santa, and Rudolph. Instead, we'll focus on the events surrounding Jesus' birth, and on the joy of making and giving Christmas gifts and cards to family and friends.

CONCLUSION

An educator has written: "Learning builds on learning: children (and adults) gain new knowledge only by building on what they already know."¹ He continues by saying that it is essential to begin building solid foundations of knowledge in the early years when children are most receptive because . . . deficiencies from the first years can permanently impair the success of later learning. We as preschool teachers strongly desire to provide the kind of learning in the preschool years that becomes a solid foundation for all of life.

John, in his third letter, wrote "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." (III John 4). As we remember and implement guidelines for appropriate teaching, we prepare the children we teach to walk in truth throughout their lives.

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¹ Hirsch, E.D. and John Holdren, What Your Kindergartener Needs to Know - Preparing Your Child for a Lifetime of Learning, New York: Doubleday, 1996, p. xviii.