

Overcoming the



A panel of Christian educators take an in-depth look at Christian education and child development

Children are born with the spiritual capacity to respond to God at an early age.



A popular assumption among many Christian education workers is that kids can't understand abstract concepts like *the blood of Jesus* and *salvation*. This idea presents serious obstacles to those called to evangelize children. We asked a panel of experts to discuss the implications of this philosophy and how it compares to God's Word. Then we asked them to recommend practical ways to bring the Gospel to children clearly and understandably. Here's what they had to say.

ETC: Why do you believe that an intelligence-based approach to evangelism is out of touch with God's Word?

Dr. Martha Wright: "An intelligence-based approach to evangelism implies that children must reach a higher level of intellectual development before we can present the Gospel. Often Christian educators erroneously base this view on Jean Piaget's theory that children can't understand abstract concepts until logical thought processes begin to develop around age 12. Children's workers must remember that the requirement for salvation is *faith* (Eph. 2:8)."

David Staal: "As author Karyn Henley says, 'Children are often more ready to express a simple, matter-of-fact faith in Jesus than we adults who have become skeptical about anything we can't experience with our five senses.' Applying a minimum age or intellect requirement to the Gospel seems to limit the Holy Spirit's work."



Dr. Martha Wright
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LEARNING

Dilemma

Sylvia Foth: “Children are born with the spiritual capacity to respond to God at an early age—even before psychologists say they can adequately consider abstract concepts. Some say *God* is an abstract concept. Children know differently. It is much like riding in a car. We do not need to understand every detail about how the car operates to open the door, take a seat and enjoy the ride.”

Cynthia Tobias: “Faith comes much more easily to children than facts. We are given such a wonderful window of opportunity during these early childhood years to help them form a deep and unshakable bond with the one who knows them best. They understand the Gospel best when it is loved into them from the very beginning.”

ETC: In what ways does biblical insight into spiritual development parallel or differ from most models of intellectual development?

Staal: “A significant difference is that intellect can be measured, but spiritual development is an issue of the heart and seen only by God (Psalm 139).

“However, in 1 Corinthians 13:11, Paul also points out an obvious parallel: ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child....’”

Wright: “Both spiritual and intellectual development are gradual processes. Spiritual growth begins at conversion and takes place as the Holy Spirit works to conform the child to the image of Christ.

“Peter told Jewish believers that as newborn babes they should desire the ‘pure milk of the Word.’ Later, they would be ready for the ‘meat’ or deeper things of God.”

Tobias: “Children themselves can see differences between intellectual insight versus that of the heart. They react much like the blind man healed by Jesus. When he was asked to explain the *reasons* for his healing, he shrugged and smiled as he replied, ‘I don’t know about all that. This I do know—once I was blind, but now I see.’”

Foth: “The Bible teaches that simplicity, humility and especially childlikeness are qualities God looks for in members of His kingdom. A high IQ is not God’s qualification for salvation. Response to His invitation for forgiveness and eternal life *are* required.”

Staal: “Intellectual development and spiritual development embrace in certain spiritual disciplines such as reading Scripture. Intellectual development models have real value helping to determine discipleship *pace*. But other spiritual practices run independent of intellect models—such as the faith-filled prayers of a six-year-old, ‘God, please help my daddy not get any sicker and to feel all better.’”



Sylvia Foth
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Cynthia Tobias
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Styles Unlimited,
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ETC: What examples can you share that support the fact that children can understand the Gospel?

Tobias: "Growing up, our children were surrounded by those who lived the Gospel. Even now, at age eleven, our boys' first instinct in times of trouble or crisis is to pray. Their hearts are so in tune with Christ it doesn't even occur to them to do anything else."

Wright: "Many Christian leaders were converted as children. Corrie Ten Boom was saved at age five, Amy Carmichael at three, Jonathon Edwards at seven, Matthew Henry at ten, Luis Palau at eleven, Isaac Watts at nine and James Dobson at three. Someone has said, 'If you doubt the child's ability to communicate with God, don't doubt God's ability to communicate with the child.'"

Foth: "Think about yourself. Do you understand the Gospel? Do you fully comprehend what Christ did for you or why God chose to save you? If not, does this preclude you from being a believer? No! The Gospel will always have elements of mystery. It will also require faith. Children who make early decisions do need their commitments to be defined and reinforced as they grow older. However, their decisions still count."

Staal: "In an essay, a second grader at a public school wrote, 'The best gift I ever got was Jesus... I got Him when I was young. God gave it to me... If I didn't have Him life would be different. If He didn't die for our sins we would be dead. I love Jesus so much!'"

"Is this kid saved according to Romans 10:9? Absolutely! His words simply reflect a second grader's vocabulary."

ETC: What are some specific strategies to communicate abstract truth to children in a concrete way?

Staal: "Adults often choose symbolic language to explain the Gospel. Paul discourages this approach in 1 Corinthians 2, '...I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.' Instead, learn how to personally share the good news of salvation and your own testimony using kid-appropriate words."

Foth: "My favorite tools are object lessons. I find simple items within a child's concrete world and assign Bible meanings to physical properties. Forgiveness, for example, is a huge concept. An eraser removing chalk marks from a chalkboard gives a concrete demonstration of how forgiveness works. The teacher helps to assign meaning to the words and the actions."

Tobias: "Talk about what they know; relate abstract concepts to situations they understand. For instance, *sin* is a strange word to most children. But if you give examples—a child steals a classmate's turn on

the swings, talks back to his teacher or thinks mean thoughts about the child who beat him out for a part in the church play—it won't be as hard as you think to communicate the concept of sin."

Wright: "I like to use stories that illustrate a certain truth. I have seen children's eyes light up when I tell the story of the little red hen who covered her chicks during a barnyard fire, giving her life to save theirs. This is a story that helps them understand the substitutionary atonement of Christ. Probably the most effective strategy I know of to help children understand abstract concepts is prayer and the ministry of the Holy Spirit as I teach. I'm glad the Lord is the master teacher!"

ETC: How can teachers incorporate child development research into their philosophy of Christian education without jeopardizing opportunities for evangelism?

Staal: "View the research available as tools to increase evangelistic effectiveness. For example, knowing where kids are in moral development helps determine how to explain the concept of sin and the relevant terms to use. Kid-appropriate language changes from first grade to fifth (and beyond), so we serve children well when development models are used to calibrate our words."

Foth: "Excellent teachers always try to better understand their students. They study developmental issues with the hope of better translating Bible-sized concepts into language and activities children can understand. Whatever age you teach, present the Gospel on the age level of your students."

Wright: "Realize, too, that huge differences exist between the children Piaget studied and today's children. We all acknowledge that modern kids are developing more rapidly than ever before in every area. We as children's workers should not be intimidated by child development research. Instead, let's take advantage of the young and tender years when children are moldable to reach them for Christ!"

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