

Do Babies Matter

Churches can use Sunday School to teach babies and reach young families for Christ

Church growth experts state that one characteristic of a growing church is a dynamic and caring preschool ministry. Parents want their children to learn about God in a loving, fun, and safe environment. If parents do not have a positive experience at church with their children, they will not come back. Here are some suggestions for saying "babies matter" at your church.

Begin with the pastor.—The pastor with a vision for preschool ministry will help teachers understand that this ministry is a priority and will help them believe they are part of something important. On the other hand, a pastor who does not understand the purpose or have a vision for preschool ministry often must confront confusion and conflict among preschool teachers and parents.

Use age-appropriate curriculum.—Churches that use age-appropriate curriculum communicate that they are doing more than "baby-sitting." They demonstrate a commitment to teaching preschoolers.

Provide space.—Providing appropriate space is much more important for preschoolers than adults. Adults know how to adjust; babies do not. The facility at Lynwood Baptist Church in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, provides permanent space for preschoolers while adults will meet in large multipurpose rooms. This decision was an effort to communicate to their community that "children are important to us."

Use permanent volunteers.—When churches use volunteers in a rotating system in classes without permanent teachers, children often feel insecure in the church environment. Babies like and need stability.

Believe babies can learn.—The real question is, "What will they learn?" In a quality preschool ministry babies will learn basic concepts about God and His Word. They will learn that people at church love them in the name of Christ. Unchurched parents will learn that the church cares about their families and that their children are important to the church.

Do babies matter? They certainly do. What is done in the early years of children's lives can make an eternal difference in preparing them for the time when they will commit themselves to Jesus Christ. "Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD, children, a reward" (Psalm 127:3). This verse suggests they matter to the Lord. And if babies matter to Him, they should matter to us, too.

Bible Teaching Indicators

Is Bible teaching for babies taking place in your church? Use the following checklist as indicators of good Bible teaching for babies.

- ☐ Teachers talk about the Bible as they use pictures and books.
- ☐ Teachers use appropriate activities to encourage new skills.
- ☐ Teachers encourage movement of babies and ones by placing toys and manipulatives in the reach and view of the children.
- ☐ Teachers provide a variety of choices and activities.
- ☐ Teachers sing and talk to babies as they meet basic needs of diapering, feeding, and holding.
- ☐ Teachers build relationships and trust with babies by being in Sunday School on a consistent basis.
- ☐ Teachers lovingly interact with babies by reading, talking, and playing.
- ☐ Teachers use Bible thoughts, Bible conversation, and songs to encourage Bible learning on the child's level of understanding.
- ☐ Teachers use real nature items (safe and appropriate) as they talk about the things God made.
- ☐ Teachers allow babies to touch and hold the Bible as they talk about God and Jesus.

Recent Findings on a Baby's Brain Development

- At birth, the brain is a jumble of billions of nerve cells waiting to form connections.
- Genes determine general brain structure, but environment begins to influence development immediately after birth. Experience literally provides the organizational framework for the child's brain.
- Many abilities depend on the maturation of particular nerve cells. Repetition of activities is needed to strengthen neural networks. Repeating tasks—sending the same messages to the brain over and over—seems to result in chemical and anatomical changes that help a baby retain something she has learned.
- Music (listening, singing) trains the brain for higher forms of thinking.
- It takes two years for the cells, which control posture and movement, to form functional circuits. Organization of these cells takes place using information gleaned from when the child moves about his world. Restricting activity inhibits the formation of connections.
- Because of the brain's plasticity, it is vulnerable to trauma. Every interaction can contribute to a baby's brain development.
- Because no two babies have the same experiences, no two brains are wired the same.

"I praise you because I am unique in remarkable ways" (Ps. 139:14, NIV).

Spiritual Implications

- The first year of life is critical in the spiritual development of each child.
- Babies can learn about God through loving sensory experiences.

Because of the importance of the spiritual implications we need to

1. Commit to providing Sunday School departments that teach biblical truths to babies. Do not just provide a baby-sitting service for parents to attend Sunday School and worship.
2. Provide rooms that allow babies to explore and discover God's world in a safe and loving environment.
3. Train teachers of babies in the use of Sunday School curriculum and equip them with an understanding of the importance of Bible teaching for babies.

How Babies Learn

Understanding how babies learn can help you make the most of teaching opportunities.

- A baby learns as she explores with her senses. She learns as she sees, hears, touches, smells, and tastes.
- A baby learns by doing. As he reaches, stretches, turns over, sits, crawls, and stands, he is learning. Play is a primary way that a baby learns through doing.
- A baby learns through relationships. Relationships are formed as the baby experiences your loving care, voice, and attention.

As you look at the developmental chart, identify opportunities for babies to learn through their senses, by doing, and through relationships.

Newborn

- Sees objects 8 to 10 inches from eyes.
- Searches for something to suck.
- Keeps hands fisted but grasps adult's finger when palm is touched.
- Communicates through crying.
- Enjoys touching, holding, and rocking.
- Responds to soothing teachers at church.

1 to 3 Months

- Eyes slowly follow moving objects.
- Holds head up and turns it from side to side.
- Finds hands and mouths them; attempts to grasp objects.
- Responds to human voices.
- Expresses unhappiness and excitement; smiles and coos.
- Learns trust as needs are met by teachers—trust that is foundational for trusting Jesus.

4 to 6 Months

- Uses hands together; can grasp, hold, and mouth objects.
- Rolls from stomach to back—turns and twists in all directions.
- Sits up with support.
- Responds to name.
- Coos, gurgles, chuckles with joy; may begin to understand more of what you say.
- Responds to happy times at church.

7 to 9 Months

- Transfers objects from hand to hand; has good control in manipulating objects; waves bye-bye.
- Sits up for longer periods of time; sits freely with good head control.
- Begins to scoot, crawl, pull to standing position, and sidesteps around objects.
- Watches your mouth; starts imitating sounds; begins to learn “no.”
- Gets excited about playing, especially with parents; cries when separated from mother.
- Develops associations between good feelings and hearing about God and Jesus.

10 to 12 Months

- Coordinates hands; may feed self or hold cup.
- Crawls well; may stop to pick up objects; pulls up to standing position; “cruises.”
- Enjoys playing games, rolling back and forth, and imitating teachers and parents; shows preference for favorite toy.
- Begins to understand what adults say; may say “mama” and/or “dada”; learns independence.
- Shows feelings of hurt, anger, and happiness.
- Likes the same familiar teachers at church.

Babies learn spiritual truths the same ways they learn other things—through their senses, by doing, and through relationships. Look at the spiritual truths babies can learn. These foundational truths are the building blocks for all other spiritual truths.

God

- God is good.
- God made me.
- God loves me.
- I can say thank-you to God.
- God cares for me.
- God loves people.
- God gives rules because He loves me.
- I can love God.
- God wants people to love Him.

Bible

- The Bible is a special Book.
- The Bible tells about God and Jesus.
- People in the Bible told about God.
- The Bible has stories about things Jesus did.
- The Bible helps me know what to do.

Self

- God made me.
- I am special.
- I can make choices.
- I am learning.
- I can talk to God.
- I can grow like Jesus grew.
- I am learning to take turns.
- God loves me.

Natural World

- God made day, night, plants, sky, sun, moon, stars, animals, water, birds, fish.
- God made people.
- God made food for people and animals.
- I can care for things that God made.
- I can enjoy things God made.
- I can thank God for the things He made.

Jesus

- God chose a family for Jesus.
- Baby Jesus was born.
- Jesus grew and had a family.
- Jesus went to church and learned about God.
- Jesus told people about God.
- Jesus helped people because He loved them.
- Jesus wants me to love Him.
- Jesus loves me.

Family

- God made my family.
- My family loves me.
- God gave me a mommy and a daddy.
- Family members help me. I can help my family.
- My family tells me about God.
- My family is kind to me.
- God loves my family.
- My family helps

Church

- People at church love God and Jesus.
- People at church love and teach me.
- People at church help me.
- People enjoy going to church. They sing, talk to God, listen to Bible stories, and talk about God and Jesus at church.
- God wants people to go to church.

Others

- God made people.
- I can help.
- People tell about God and Jesus.
- I can talk to God.
- People work together.
- God cares about other people and me.

Natalie's Story

Natalie was adopted around her first birthday. Her family enjoyed growing closer and making up for that lost first year. As Natalie approached her second birthday, one thing began to worry her parents. Natalie did not speak. They began to inquire of family friends, including her Sunday School teacher Miss Diane. Most folks, even Miss Diane, encouraged the parents to give Natalie time.

During a week in December that year, the family had been kept indoors for five days because of endless streams of rain. Each day Natalie's mom would open the curtains to see only rain splattered on the large windowpane. On the fifth day, Natalie's mom opened the window and with a sigh of disgust remarked, "God, when will this rain end?"

A voice she had not heard before responded: "God made the rain. Rain is good." Natalie spoke and the first words she had chosen to speak were not just words, but sentences—sentences about God's creative power in the world. Natalie's parents were overcome with joy.

After a short investigation, they discovered that just a few weeks earlier Miss Diane had taught using the Sunday School session "God Made the Rain." During the session Natalie had looked at pictures of rainy scenes. She had played in water. Miss Diane had talked to her about God making rain. Miss Diane had helped Natalie open a Bible and sing the song "Pitter Patter."

We cannot underestimate the impact of quality teaching for younger preschoolers at church. Through actions and words, teachers can encourage significant gains for young children. They are learning more and at a faster rate than at any other point in life. Can you or your church afford to waste this valuable time for teaching the children about God and His ways?

Get the Word Out

Increase the awareness of teaching babies at church by reviewing this list of ways to use this resource • Choose several key facts or statements to feature periodically in your church newspaper or bulletin.

- Give a copy of this issue to your pastor, Sunday School director, minister of education, or preschool workers.
- Provide copies for Adult Sunday School departments. Target both younger and older adults. Some older adults may be searching for a place to serve.
- Create bookmarks with this information and place them in your sanctuary hymnals at the song "Jesus Loves the Little Children."
- Discuss some of this information during preschool workers meetings.

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