



Going for growth resource sheets

Margie Hillenbrand has been blogging about aspects of Christian ministry with children since 2006. This article explores some of her ideas about toddlers and Bible stories.

Toddlers and Bible Stories

Toddlers are relatively new arrivals on this planet. They are learning about their world through their senses. They are learning about living and non-living things around them. They are still learning words and language to go with these new objects and experiences. To understand a story requires an understanding of language.

When you interact with a toddler, they understand more language than the language they use. A toddler can get the doll for you before they can say, "doll." Their language skills and attention span are limited. They have vocabulary based on development and experience. They may have experiential memories and associations for which they don't have words. Using pictures and picture books expands their vocabulary. It may give them opportunity to generalize a sensory association to a picture.

At this age you are giving children words for things they hear, smell, and touch. When you tell a story to a toddler, focus on using pictures and sounds and taste and touch. When you do, attach a word. If you're telling the story of Noah's ark, use a picture or stuffed animals. Name as many things in the picture as you can. Bring a pan of water with a boat and name the water and the boat.

Reading and storytelling are a time when a child or small group of children can enjoy your focused attention. Snuggling in your lap or sitting close gives the story a positive association. Turning pages is probably a little like hide & seek. Maybe they will associate the word cat or the cat on Noah's ark with the furry creature at grandmas.

Toddlers are learning words, vocabulary, language, so use a big picture that tells a story. Point out and name the different things in the picture. Use sound and touch and smell. Point to things: Who's that? What's that? Be creative and record some sounds: Listen! What's that sound?

Most of a toddler's vocabulary involves nouns - concrete objects and actions. Use the word "Jesus", the word "God" as much as you want, not because they're concrete but because they are in the category of learning "Mommy loves you" for a toddler.

Think about family or church rituals and patterns of action that send messages to little children. Pray with toddlers when you tell a Bible story. Pray before you eat, asking God's blessing, say simple prayers at night before bed. Use Advent candles and a Nativity scene at Christmas to tell the story over and over. I think our calling on God, and actions repeated over and over in the lives of toddlers (like prayer) send a message to toddlers and they'll come to expect it and even initiate it.

Finger plays (though their small motor coordination is still relatively undeveloped); action rhymes (the sounds and actions are upbeat & fun) and simple songs are other ways to tell stories to toddlers.

And sometimes tell the story by acting and becoming it. For instance, Noah's ark: Create a boat in the middle of the room (a sheet, chairs, cardboard). Leave stuffed animals all over the room before the children come in. Encourage them to search for the animals and bring them into the boat. Eat, sleep, make rain by drumming fingertips on the floor. Then take all the animals off the boat and find them homes. Hand paint a rainbow together and thank God for his love.

Doing is how toddlers learn. It gives them opportunity to use their senses and to learn names. Those experiences will give story more meaning as their language skills grow.

Margie Hillenbrand blogs at Emerging Kids <http://emergingkids.blogspot.com/>