

Symposium 2017: Faith Formation with a New Generation

Forming Faith with Children

Tanya Eustace Campen

Safe Space

Children need to know that their world is safe. Trust is of utmost importance for children- especially in the early years (0-5). Infants and toddlers need to know that they can trust those who care for them including their faith community. Therefore safety and safe places are essential for health and wholeness as the child develops. As the child ages they will begin to make conclusions on what and who are safe in contrast to who and what are not safe. It is our job to help children learn to trust us- their community who loves them. Parents, caregivers, church communities and other important people and places in an infants life must focus on being a person and a place that children can trust. needs safe loving place, growing and exploring the world around them.

The gift that children bring to this work is **vulnerability**. This gift allows children to be open and receptive to the world around them. As children age their experiences help them learn who they can trust and who they cannot trust. Their experiences also teach them what is safe and what is not safe. When we are intentional in building trustworthy relationships and safe places for the children in our care, then children in their vulnerability remain open to all the possibilities that these people and places offer. This includes trusting the message that God loves them, that their family loves them, and that church is a safe place.

- **Caring Relationships** is the faith formation process that ensures children see their home and their faith community

as a safe place. As children grow their experiences help them believe God loves them and so their narrative begins to develop from “God loves me” to “I can trust God.” **Caring relationships** help them move from understanding “I am loved” as a young child to “I can treat others the way I want to be treated.” When children feel safe they remain open to all the possibilities that come from being surrounded by God’s love and grace. In return they begin to find ways to share that love and grace with others.

Purpose

Children need to be affirmed as important and whole just where they are. We are not waiting for children to “grow up”- but instead we must affirm their value in the here and now. As children grow and learn they begin to discover their meaning or **purpose**. Younger children begin this work as they seek autonomy. You might often hear “I can do it!” as a toddler struggles to put on their shirt, or “I walk!” as they struggle to put one foot in front of the other. In the early years this is the work that helps children investigate and learn what they can do. As children grow they take these learnings and begin to discover their own gifts and capacities for productive work (Fowler 67). From day 1 children are learning and practicing new physical and cognitive skills that help them impact the world. Children enjoy meaningful work, making a difference, serving others. Our role as ministry leaders is to provide opportunities for children to try new things, to encourage children to contribute to the community, to create space for

children to serve, and to affirm children as they discover their gifts and begin to share them with others. However the risk is if children are not included or encouraged, or if they fail at a task and are not encouraged to try again- they begin to pull away becoming more isolated and less willing to try again. Our role is to encourage, invite, and guide. If something doesn't go as planned, acknowledge the disappointment, frustration, etc., and then find a way to invite the child to try again, helping him or her discover or imagine another way.

The gift that children bring to this work is that of **helper**. Children want to participate, to help, and to be part of the bigger picture. Younger children can be encouraged to share, help, or lead a prayer. Older children can build on these helpful skills by identifying areas where they can help and then creating ways they can be helpful. Older children thrive when persons invite them to identify a need in their community and then to find ways to respond faithfully. The faith formation processes that closely align with this learn are

- **Rituals and milestones and serving, working for justice, and caring for creation.** Rituals and milestones affirm and celebrate children's gifts and the work they are doing in and for the world. Serving, working for justice and caring for creation give children an opportunity to practice using their gift as helper- affirming their purpose and meaning in their community.

Opportunities to Try New Things

As children grow they are taking in information, trying new skills, and learning new things. Our role is to give them safe places to listen, learn, practice using different skills. These are the moments when children start discovering and responding to the world around them. A child might reach for a crayon curious about it's color,

texture, and/or purpose. The first instinct for a young child might be to put that crayon in their mouth- the mechanism they have used for from birth to explore and assess a specific object. We can lovingly guide and direct the child as we show them how to use the newly discovered tool. We must be careful not to shame or guilt the child- telling them in a harsh tone "no" as they place the crayon in their mouths only startles an infant- instead we can guide them using our words and actions showing them in a soothing voice how the crayon might be used. As children grow we can continue to model best practices as we remind them that crayons are not meant for eating, nor are they meant for coloring on walls- instead we can use them to create all kinds of fun new creations using the paper or other tools provided. Creating a safe space for children to learn and grow, along with a helpful guide encourages children to live into their wonder and curiosity safely as they discover all that God's good creation holds.

As mentioned earlier, the gift children bring to this work is **courage**—the desire to try and to successfully accomplish new tasks and responsibilities. Our work in ministry to is to encourage children to try new things- Young children might be encouraged to hold or open the Bible. As children get older they can be encouraged to find scripture in the Bible or to read silently or aloud to the group. Young children can learn different ways to pray and as they grow they can begin to pray aloud, lead a group prayer, or write a prayer for the congregation to say together. Younger children can be encouraged to share their wonderings and as they grow learn the art of story telling either through oral tradition, journaling, or drawing.

- Many of the eight faith formation processes give children an opportunity to try new things and to develop new skills. **Learning the tradition, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, and Worshiping** are just a few.

Relationships Are Key

Families with children need us! *Caring relationships are essential to a child's health and wholeness.* A child's caregivers are one of the most important aspects of their early development. From birth, children are working on learning who to trust in their new environment. Children desperately need caring relationships- people that infants, toddlers, young children, and older children can trust and rely on for their care and safety. Children thrive when they are in a safe and loving environment. Therefore the role of families and the persons caring for children in a faith community is essential for development. Children need to know that they are surrounded by people who love and care for them. By being present with children, listening to them, taking care of their basic needs, offering hugs and an environment full of love and support families can create a healthy space for children to grow and learn. As children grow, relationships continue to be important. For younger children they observe and learn from those most closely connected to them- their immediate family and their caregivers. As a child ages and their brain develops they become increasingly aware of their families and the differences between self and friends. For older children relationships with family and caregivers remains essential along side new relationships with peers and other adults outside of their family. Relationships have "great significance for social and moral development... [relationships enable] the child to begin to take account of differences of perspective between them self and others" (Fowler 64) As children interact with their family and their surrounding community they start to develop an understanding of me and them, or us and others. Positive and caring relationships are key in helping children understand and learn how God calls them to interact with others. Older children yearn for role models- persons they can observe who might teach them new skills and show them different

ways of showing up in the world. They continue to mimic and practice the behaviors they see modeled for them noticing those who are different. For this reason it is important that children are surrounded by strong role models who can help show them the way.

Intergenerational relationships are important for all children and become increasingly more important for children from five to ten.

The gift children bring to the work of developing relationships is a **relational awareness**. Children are equipped to respond to their interactions and experiences in the world and with God. Children are aware of "being in relationship with something or someone" (Hay 109). This is often referred to as relational consciousness or relational awareness. According to research done by David Hay and Rebecca Nye, children have the biological capability to recognize relationship, claiming and expressing awareness of relationships in four dimensions: child-God, child-people, child-world, and child-self (Hay 115).

- The faith formation process that reflects this learning is of course **caring relationships**. As parents, caregivers, or ministry leaders our most important job is to ensure children have persons in their life who love them, who care for them, and who are faithful shepherds and guides. It is also important to ensure children have the opportunity to build relationships with peers as they learn how to build caring relationships of their own.

Practice Makes Perfect

As children grow they need space to practice the skills that they are observing and learning.

Children need space to "try out new behaviors, exaggerate, modify, abbreviate or change the sequence of behaviors" as they try new behaviors and develop new skills (White bread 15). As the

old saying goes- practice makes perfect. In order to increase competency and improve performance children need time, space, and permission to practice what they are learning. Families can also model new skills and invite children to practice these skills at home. Whether it is giving an eager toddler his or her own broom and inviting them to help clean, or inviting an older child to help cook dinner, every moment is an opportunity to learn and practice new skills. The risk, however, is that we can quickly overwhelm our children with lessons, activities, and structured play. While a moderate number of lessons or scheduled activities can be beneficial for children, research increasingly shows that “children being over-supervised and over-scheduled, with decreasing amounts of time to play with their peers or parents, is likely to have an adverse effect on children’s independence skills, their resourcefulness and the whole range of developmental benefits” (Whitebread 12). Since families often have the most influence over a child’s schedule and routine it is important that the days be ordered in a way that provides space for children to process and practice all they are observing. Children are constantly taking in information- therefore one of the families role is to help children take a break from learn and observing and to provide opportunities for them to reflect on, respond to, and practice what they have been experiencing.

The gift children bring to this work is **play**. Play is the work of the child. This is not structured play as described above, but is what many describe as free play- unstructured time where children can make their own decisions and has permission to initiate their own activities It is through free play that children find ways to process and practice the information they take in and the skills they observe during the day. Over the years in ministry I have lost count of how many parents tell me that after participating in holy communion or baptism at church their children return home only to reenact all that they saw, heard, and experienced. Play is how children

reflect on and responds to the world around them. This is where they consider the rules, push against them, and create new ones as they seek to find their way in the world. Time should be given for free play- an opportunity for children to play with minimal rules and regulations. The opposite of structured play, scheduled activities, plotted out crafts, or detailed lesson plans- free play offers children an opportunity to investigate the world around them, to imagine, to problem solve, and then to discover ways to respond.

- **Rituals and milestones, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, and worshiping** are the faith formation processes that provide children an opportunity to observe new skills as well as space to practice these skills.

Explore the World Together

As children grow and begin to walk and explore it is important for us to create a safe space for children’s exploration. This might be the backyard in your home, the playground at a local park, or the sanctuary in the church. Engaging all five senses is important. Faith formation requires the use of sight, touch, smell, hearing, and taste. For young children faith does not just get passed down in a story that someone reads to the child- but instead faith formation is experiential. Children should be invited into the story as they experience all the story has to offer. Use of various manipulatives and visual images are helpful when working with children. Providing pieces for children to touch and move as they respond to all that they are hearing and seeing offers children an opportunity to connect to the lesson as they process the information presented. Also, children need space and time to respond to what they have experienced and learned. Often times children are presented with an object lesson- a game or a craft that is supposed to help the child absorb the day’s lesson. However, what is truly needed is an opportunity to creatively

respond in their own way. Children should have permission to choose how they want to respond. Journaling, drawing, building, and acting out the story are a few responses a child might choose.

The gift that children bring to the work of exploration is **curiosity**. Children are innately curious- especially in their early years. Full of wonder, children eagerly survey their surroundings looking for something new or exciting that might catch their attention.

- The faith formation processes that create space for exploration and wonder include **church year seasons, praying and spiritual formation, caring relationships**. Objects and symbols open a child's eyes to God as they explore the world around them. Pointing out where and how you see God as well as identifying a specific object or symbol helps children make connections and remember what they are seeing and experiencing. Studying and watching for the church year seasons, praying and engaging in spiritual formation, and exploring with those they are in relationship with are all fruitful ways for a child to explore and learn from the world around them- using their curiosity to help them experience God's amazing creation.

Work is Important

Work—an activity that is done in order to achieve a purpose or result—offers every person an opportunity to experience and respond to God's presence in their lives. Every person's work is different. God calls us to Holy work- where we pay attention to God's presence in our lives and where we respond by loving God and loving neighbor. No matter our vocation we have an important role in transforming the world and building the kingdom of God. This call to work includes persons of all ages. Therefore, children

are also called to Holy work. As discussed above play is often a child's work- the space and time where children can explore, imagine, discover, and create ways to respond to God's love. It is essential that we value and respect a child's work- whether it is a game they create, a Lego creation they build, a drawing, or any task they choose to engage in. It is in this space and time that we have an opportunity to "see ourselves as human beings", discover and practice the rules of our society, identify and solve problems, and find new ways to engage in the world around us. This process of work offers an opportunity "to discover our deep identity as Godly creates, created in the image of God" (Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* 7-8). We must also create space and provide time for children to do their work.

The gift that children bring to their work is **wonder**. Wonder engages children in the process of identifying the work they feel called to do and then seeking ways to understand and respond with faithful action. As children wonder they discover and practice using the Christian language, they work to make sense of their surroundings, they grow in their understanding of the world, and they identify how God is calling them to respond.

- Each of the eight faith formation process: provide children an opportunity to identify and engage in the work God calls them to. As ministry leaders part of our job is to provide children with choices and to guide them as they choose their work. Some may choose reading the Bible, others might choose leading in worship. It is important to give children permission to choose their work based on their individual interests and skills. Exposing children to all eight offers them an opportunity to discover which is their favorite.

Children are Justice Seekers

As children grow they begin to develop a moral compass as they observe the behaviors of others and begin to determine an idea of what is right and wrong. Younger children assert their need for justice as they learn the rules and begin to respond when rules are broken or an injustice is done. Toddlers may cry or lash out in anger when a toy is taken away or they might move to give another child a hug if they see someone who is upset or crying. They are learning to share, the help, and to be kind to others. They are starting to gather information that helps them understand what is right and what is wrong- what is fair and unfair. Over time this transforms into the ability to identify what is just and what is unjust. As children grow their moral compass continues to develop. They continue to observe the world around them and begin to make moral judgments as they assess the actions of others. Older children become the moral actor- aware of and taking into account “the interests, needs, and claims of others” (Fowler 66). “That’s not fair” becomes a common response- as is a child’s need to play by the rules, and the act of tattling. These are our justice seekers- they want things to be right, just, and fair and are beginning to be able to determine what is right and good based on their experiences in the world. Rules are increasingly important as are the need for those rules to be followed. It is important to remember that as older children (5-12) begin to develop this tool they are still working concretely and logically. Clarity about expectations is important- as is working to make sure care is given to ensure expectations are followed. Children are also testing the world around them to see if a rule sticks or if what another person says holds true. Therefore consistency is also important- as caregivers and ministry leaders we must work to ensure our actions reflect our words- if not one of our children are bound to point it out.

The gift children bring to this work is **empathy**. Children have a deep concern for others- this gift is revealed in a young child’s desire to help others, to offer hugs, or to offer words of comfort. Older children show this gift as they pay attention to others and start identifying injustice and by offering compassion to others.

- The faith formation process that offers children an opportunity to do this holy work is **Serving, working for justice, and caring for creation**. Through this process our justice seekers have opportunities to use and develop their gift of empathy as they find ways to love God and neighbor in all they do.

Ritual and Liturgy are Essential for a Child’s Faith Development

Liturgy, coming from the Greek word *leitourgia* is often translated as the work of the people. This is what we do in order to be in relationship with God and neighbor. The words, symbols, and actions we use form our liturgy. This is the language we use to express our faith and communicate with God and each other. Each of these pieces of our work (words, symbols, and actions) are helpful and essential to a child’s development. When we invite children to practice religious language, look for objects in the world that remind them of God, and respond with works of mercy (actions that extend God’s compassion and mercy to those in need) they are able to discover their role in this world as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Children thrive when they are invited into this work and given an opportunity to learn the tradition and practice the liturgy. They will begin to learn the words, recognize the symbols, and find ways of sharing God’s love with others. Ritual is an important part of this developmental process too. Ritual is a series of actions that are repeated regularly according to a prescribed order. When we create

a liturgy and use it over and over again we are creating a Holy ritual that allows us to practice being in communication and relationship with God and neighbor. This is true for children too. Children thrive on routine and structure, or in the churches' language- ritual.

The gift that children bring to this work is **order**. As young children develop they are seeking to make sense of the world around them to find some order in all they are experiencing. As they get older they start to logically put these pieces together trying to understand how the world works. The same is true for faith development. Children need opportunities to observe and practice the traditions of the faith. To participate the liturgy and to create their own rituals that help them connect to God and neighbor. It is essential that we do not shame them but instead model our traditions, and then invite and encourage children to participate and practice until the liturgy becomes familiar and the ritual becomes their own reoccurring practice.

- **The faith formation processes that help with this include rituals and milestones, learning the tradition, and worshiping.**

Story is an Essential Part of Faith Development.

Combining much of what we learn in all four areas development story provides children an opportunity to practice cognitive skills, build relationships and learn from others when they share stories with members of their community, and story provides a entrance for children to step through as they learn who God is and who they are as children of God. Reading books and telling children stories is continually recognized as one of the most important activities for language and literacy learning in early childhood (Rvachew 1). Children enjoy hearing the stories of others and they also enjoy telling their story to anyone who

will listen. Story helps children collect information as they develop their own language and understanding. Babies enjoy stories from birth and benefit from the warmth of the story teller, and the sound and rhythm of the storytellers voice. Toddlers love to hear their favorite stories over and over again and often surprise caregivers by memorizing the story as they entertain themselves by flipping the pages and repeating the story again and again. As words develop preschoolers take joy in telling their story- and it is important that we listen. We can wonder with children as they share their thoughts and feelings. As children get older story provides an opportunity for their imaginations to consider different view points and experiences giving them a depth of knowledge and wisdom on which to build their own understanding, personality, and identity.

Story helps children cope with their feelings, develop confidence, and discover new ways for showing up in the world around them. Story provides a child to process and share how they are experiencing God helping them make memories that will support their lifelong faith formation process. If you choose to read to children from an e-book or a digital application it is important to make sure to engage with children- interacting with them as you read. Children thrive from the colorful images, the kinesthetic action of turning pages, the sound of the human voice, eye contact, and the space to stop and wonder about all they are hearing and experiencing. When using digital media it is important to “pick e-books with clear learning goals. If there are sounds our additional interactive features make sure they enhance the story and do not distract children from the flow of the story. (Rvachew 2). Researchers still agree that the best practice for story telling is reading from a real book or to use 3D manipulatives to help tell a story. This gives a child something they can touch, feel, and use to recreate the story again and again.

The gift children bring to this work is **imagination**. Imagination is essential in the learning process and can advance cognitive development. “Children are natural learners” (Robinson). Using their imagination, children learn about historical events, different cultures, or people that they will never meet. Imaginative play is a way for children to discover the world that surrounds them. It is also a tool that children use to connect to God and to engage in a

relationship with an entity that they may not be able to see, touch, feel, hear, smell, or taste.

- The faith formation processes that help children use their imagination and engage in story are **reading the bible, learning the tradition, and worshiping**. Each of these aspects of faith formation provide children space to hear stories of the faith and to share their story with others.

Summary

Key Developmental Learning	Gift	Faith Formation Process
Create Safe Space	vulnerability	Caring Relationships
Discover Purpose	helper	Rituals and milestones; serving, working for justice, and caring for creation
Try New Things	courage	Learning the tradition, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, and Worshiping
Build Relationships	relational awareness	Learning the tradition; praying and spiritual formation; reading the Bible; Worshiping
Practice	play	Rituals and milestones; praying and spiritual formation; reading the Bible; and worshiping
Explore	curiosity	Church year seasons; praying and spiritual formation; caring relationships
Work	wonder	All
Seek Justice	empathy	Serving, working for justice, and caring for creation
Participate in Ritual and Liturgy	order	Rituals and milestones; learning the tradition; and worshiping.
Engage in Story	imagination	Reading the bible; learning the tradition; worshiping