



Sowers & Seeds

Published by the WELS Commissions on Youth Discipleship & Parish Schools to assist those in early childhood ministry.

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in My Christian Preschool

By Dr. Joel A. Nelson, Administrator - WELS Youth Discipleship

Robert Fulghum wrote a book titled, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." There, Fulghum said, he learned about how to live, what to do, and how to be. He felt the sand pile of kindergarten taught him more than the mountain of graduate education. Fulghum reduced his "life learnings" to the following list:

Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some. Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why,

but we are all like that. Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we. And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

Fulghum's list is quite insightful and inclusive. But something is glaringly missing and any WELS preschooler could tell you what it is: Jesus loves me this I know. That "life learning" is absolute truth and reflects total confidence. Jesus loves me, so much that he suffered, died, and rose again, and because of it, someday I'll be in heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit, I know this with every fiber of my being. This simple Bible truth is sometimes the only thing I need to get through life.

I was powerfully reminded of this while working on the second edition of the WELS *Walk In My World* video/Bible studies for parents and teens. These studies share the real life stories of WELS youth and families who have gone through some difficult issues. In one of the episodes, a family deals with the horrible and senseless murder of their teen daughter. As the family struggles through the tragedy the mother says what really helped to get her through was, "that little child's verse, 'Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.'"

What a privilege you have to be able to teach "that little child's verse" to the children in your early childhood ministry. What joy is yours to know that this "life learning" is something that can carry them through the toughest times in life. What a calling you have: teaching little ones and their parents all they really need to know.

In This Issue

Task Force Works to Strengthen Early Childhood Ministries.....	p. 2
Mixed-Age Classrooms.....	p. 2
My Very Own Bible Play Box.....	p. 4
Final Tips for Helping Children in Church.....	p. 6



Task Force Works to Strengthen Early Childhood Ministries

by Jeff Inniger,
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Providing assistance to WELS Early Childhood Ministries (ECM) is part of the Commission on Parish School's (CPS) mission. To improve its assistance to ECM, CPS created a task force which began working in June 2005. The task force is chaired by former CPS administrator Dan Schmeling and also includes Professor Cheryl Loomis (MLC), Mrs. Cindi Holman (St. Marcus, Milwaukee, WI), Mrs. Betty Van Loon (St. John's, Caledonia, MN), Mrs. Janis Visaggio (Bethany, North Fort Meyers, FL) and CPS Associate Administrator, Jeff Inniger.

The Early Childhood task force is pursuing four specific goals:

- Review and refine standards for ECM accreditation.
- Develop formative and summative evaluation programs for ECM teachers and administrators.
- Identify best practices for outreach through early childhood centers.
- Recommend a structure to ensure the ongoing support for early childhood ministries.

You can learn more about current committee activity with each goal by contacting Jeff Inniger: jeff.inniger@sab.wels.net. Please keep the task force in your prayers and watch future *Sowers & Seeds* issues for more exciting details about its work.

Mixed-Age Classrooms Build Capable Learners

By: Janis Visaggio, Director, Bethany Preschool, North Fort Meyers, FL

Some preschools group the three and four year old children together in the same classroom. This is called a mixed-age group. Other preschools choose to group by age and have a separate classroom for each age. Both types of classrooms focus on taking children from where they are developmentally and preparing them for the next step in life – kindergarten. But each type of classroom has its own particular characteristics. What follows is an explanation of the benefits of the mixed-age classroom.

Mixed-age groups resemble families

Mixed age groups most closely resemble our own families. Just like families, mixed-age classrooms are special groups of people who support and take care of each other. Mixed-age groups of three and four year olds spend their time caring, helping, working, playing, and cooperating.

Mixed-age groups have a purpose

The primary purpose of a mixed-age classroom is to group children that are in similar stages of development rather than group them by age to stimulate learning. By grouping three and four year olds the class encompasses a wide range of developmental stages, which lets each child find his own place along the continuum. The curriculum is designed specifically to support the wide range of developmental abilities. Each child has the opportunity to complete the developmental stages at their own rate. Children end up where they need to be, prepared for kindergarten, with less pressure to develop skills at the same rate.



The environment plays an important part in the curriculum. The environment is set up to engage children in planning and working by making the materials available to children in learning centers. Children are active learners. They choose and work with the materials according to their own interests and abilities.

Another important part of the mixed-age classroom is the accessibility of the teacher. The teacher is actively involved with the children throughout the day not only in the teacher-initiated activities, but also in those activities the children initiate and carry out themselves. The teachers are right there in the learning centers with the children encouraging communication, helping with problem solving, and asking questions to extend thinking. In the mixed-age classroom, teachers see children as individuals. Each child is compared to himself and his individual progress along a developmental continuum.

Each new year the teacher wastes no time in getting to know ½ the class. Continuity from year to year saves valuable time. Children who know the routine and expectations share their knowledge with new friends.

Mixed-age groups stimulate cognitive and language development

Children's thinking is stimulated when their knowledge or abilities are similar, but not identical. Those children who are more language proficient learn how to explain or demonstrate the skills they have mastered. They adjust their communication to their listeners. Therefore, while less language proficient children are integrating new information; more language proficient children are taking their knowledge one-step higher. They are learning how to put what they know into words. When mistakes are made, the teacher explains to both children.

Mixed-ages benefit social/emotional development

Teachers know that children develop unevenly. Children do not learn the same things at the same time in the same way. All children progress through the same developmental stages, but not at the same rate. This is particularly obvious in watching children's social/emotional development. A four year old may enter a classroom and be extremely comfortable playing with the three year olds. Why? Perhaps he has had little interaction with other children and is still learning to play cooperatively. He usually takes the lead in playing with these three year olds, which builds his self-confidence, and when ready he moves on to more imaginative play with the older children.

This is a wonderful opportunity for those shy, older children to develop leadership skills as they relate to their younger friends. Therefore, someone who would not normally emerge as a leader or teacher in a group of peers has an opportunity to do so in a mixed-age group. This also works for the three year old who has been playing with older siblings at home and can easily play with the four year olds. He has the opportunity to participate in play that is more complex.

Age is not the important factor in choosing a friend. Older children often facilitate and organize the participation of younger children in play. Older children do not just simply dominate their younger friend either, but engage them in meaningful interactions. Children who have difficulty controlling their own behavior often improve when helping younger friends follow expectations. Younger or less mature children model helpful behavior of older or more mature children.

Mixed-age groups encourage positive interactions

A concern parents often have is that of older children playing too roughly for younger children. Aggression seems to occur more often between peers. Older children are seldom aggressive toward younger children, because older children have a natural confidence in their own abilities.

When a younger child is aggressive toward an older child the older child is more capable of handling the situation in a positive manner. Conflicts are resolved with words, because the older child has been taught how to resolve conflicts and reach a solution. The more proficient preschoolers share the process with the less proficient.

(Continued on next page . . .)





My Very Own Bible Play Box

By Dr. Sharon Burow, Wisconsin Lutheran College

A child's spiritual development begins early in life and is furthered through Christian practices that are a seamless part of daily living. When parents model faithful habits and establish religious patterns, such as regularly attending church and intentional time for family devotional routines such as praying, singing, and providing faith-based stories, these become an integral part of living and can serve as a beacon to others. God's Word provides such direction and reminds all of us, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your forehead. Write them on the doorframe of your houses and your gates"* (Deut.6: 5-9).

The point for parents can be paraphrased in these words: As you go about your daily lives, as you work and play, as you eat and rest, as you engage in each of your daily activities—do it in Jesus' name. And, as you go, lead others by his grace to become his disciples and to grow in their discipleship. The words "work and play" can hold a special significance for parents of young children as well as early childhood

teachers. Vygotsky (1976) stated that play is the work of children. Additionally, Piaget and other theorists of child development asserted that make-believe play helps young children understand reality as they reconstructed and repeated familiar events (McCune-Nicholich, 1981).

With that in mind, suggestions for development of a "Bible Play Box" are offered. Both parental and early childhood teacher expertise can result in a unique and collaborative partnership to provide children with the environment and tools to nurture a child's faith life. Depicted in this article is my personal development of a religious play box, used with kindergarten families that I previously served. The Bible Play Box was added to throughout the school year. Little modification is necessary for preschool.

Promoting the Bible Play Box

At my late-summer home visits I brought my own decorated "Bible Play Box" (See sample at the Web site mentioned below). It was covered with a collage of Christ-centered Christmas and Easter cards, church bulletins, Sunday school lesson cutouts, religious wrapping paper, stenciled pictures, stickers, and photographs of my family and pets. On the visits, my Bible Play Box became a source of conversation and

(Continued on page 5 . . .)

("Mixed-Age Classrooms" . . . Continued from page 3)

Mixed-age groups foster life skills

Children are readily able to assess each other's abilities and needs and are willing to help and cooperate when given the opportunity. The children in mixed-age groups look to each other, not just the teacher for assistance. It is not unusual for one child to help another open his lunch box, reach a paper towel or make a puzzle. Assessing what is needed in a situation and responding in a helpful manner takes thinking, skill, and confidence.

What usually happens are those children who are able to help, take care of those children who are less able. There is always a way each child can be helpful to another. Each child is appreciated and accepted for his unique contribution to the group. Each child has a time for stimulation and a space for comfort.

A collaborative learning environment is developed. Interaction and cooperation among children is highly important and encouraged. Teachers see more cooperation

and less competition. Children learn to mentor and seek mentors. Life skills of communicating, showing empathy, giving help, learning to ask for help, and accepting limitations are nurtured. Mixed-age groups give each child a place to be an equal, a leader, and a teacher.

Mixed-age groups and research

According to the Association for Childhood Education International, "Research indicates that academic achievement in multiage classrooms is the same as, or better than, in same-grade classrooms. Multi-age classrooms do not negatively affect student achievement. Students in multiage classrooms do have significantly more positive attitudes toward school, themselves and others."

For more information on mixed-age groups read, "The Case for Mixed-Age Grouping" in *Early Education* by Katz, Evangelou, and Hartman.



("Bible Play Box" . . . Continued from page 4)

activity as students were encouraged to choose from bags of collage materials and cut out pages of religious coloring books. Bringing my own box served as a springboard for children and parents to consider developing and designing their very own box. If children and parents wanted to get started right away, I had empty boxes in the back seat of my car. Most families, however, wanted to search for their own boxes instead.

Also inside my Bible Play Box were samples of some of the "play collectables" that were made by students during the previous year. At the home visit, we chatted about why we made the "collectables" and their connection to Bible lessons. I also provided the families with the school mission statement and my classroom mission statement to further validate the use of the box. (See samples at the Web site mentioned below).

The decorated boxes were to come to school the first day. This was to be considered a family designed box so that children could see their parent's enthusiasm and interest. On the first day of school we celebrated and admired each other's creativity and took a picture for our first class book that revolved around the decorating of the boxes. Each child received a copy of this class book that would be the first item housed in the Bible Play Box. (See samples at the Web site mentioned below).

On the second day of class, the pastor or principal came to our room with a large box filled with the children's Bibles and his Bible. We could see how worn his Bible was from use because he so loved reading it. Then, the students were presented with their own Bible to be housed as the key component of their box. (I used the *Young Reader's Bible* for this project. Each parent had paid for the Bible at registration but did not take it home. Parents were made aware that the Bible would also be used in first grade for devotions so that it was more than a one-year use.) On the interior of the Bible I had a note for the family to further remind them of the collaboration necessary in using the Bible. (See sample at the Web site mentioned below).

The children also decorated a mini-treasure box in which they could place their memory (treasures) passages throughout the school year. A personalized music folder for the many religious "piggy-back" songs learned throughout the year and a decorated binder for the *Christ-Light* take-home lessons were also elements of the Bible Play Box. When each new element was added, the children invited the principal into the classroom to celebrate.

After two weeks the Bible Play Boxes were taken to church and put in the narthex for family pick-up after the weekend church services. That way the box would not need to be carried on the school bus. Taking the boxes to church also made other church members aware of the project, so they could share in the enthusiasm and validate the Bible Play Box concept.

(16 suggestions for enhancing the use of and adding to the Bible Play Box can be found at the Web page noted below.)

Final Thoughts

The families knew that during the final month of school they could bring their Bible Play Box back to school for show-and-tell so that we could celebrate the various goodies they collected. Each year I was surprised at the creativity and the genuine use of the Bible Play Box, and the special pride and space given in the home to regularly playing with spiritually enriching materials.

Children learn through repetition and "hands-on" manipulation of materials that aid in making sense of their world, and they scrutinize each of us to ascertain value. I just knew that when I took out my sock puppets, Henry (who tried to follow God's commandments) and Harold (who didn't follow the

commandments) that soon the parents would be finding a use for two mismatched socks. How humbled I have been to see the power of the Holy Spirit work in the lives of the young families I have been privileged to serve. Most families really do want to nurture their child's faith life, but just don't know how. They are looking to you. (You can see all of the appendices mentioned above as well as visual examples from the Bible Play Box at www.wels.net/jumpword/ecm. Look in "WELS Early Childhood Resources – Full-time Settings" and then in "Print Resources." You can also email Dr. Burow: sharon_burow@wlc.edu.





Sowers & Seeds

Final Tips for Helping Children in Church

Adapted from Cindy Bailey - "Shining Star" 1996, Issue 44

Here are tips 11-15. (Tips 6-10 were in the last issue.)

- ♦ Take turns. Dad walks the baby this week while Mom listens to the sermon. Switch next week.
- ♦ Leave your young children with Grandma (or someone else) once in a while. Developing worship habits as a family is very important, but sometimes Mom and Dad need to worship together as husband and wife without distractions. If the children are too small to get much out of the worship service, and your church provides no child care, consider asking someone else to help you out.
- ♦ Recognize your limitations. Inform the pastor that you don't plan on playing organ, singing in the choir, or ushering for the next couple years.
- ♦ Remember that most people glancing your way are:
 - a) chuckling to themselves, remembering when,
 - b) wishing they could help you somehow,
 - c) praising the Lord it's you and not them,
 - d) all of the above.
- ♦ Keep it in perspective. Realize "this, too, shall pass" and with an extra sippee cupful of perseverance, one day you'll be the one doing the chuckling.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, New International Version © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. *Sowers & Seeds* is published four times a year by the WELS Commissions on Youth Discipleship & Parish Schools. Comments about this *Sowers & Seeds* and ideas for future issues can be directed to Joel Nelson, Administrator WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship.

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