

Basic Teacher Training



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The Why of Teaching: A Scriptural Command

Why do we teach Sunday school? As Christians seeking to do the will of God we can't escape the clear command in both the Old and New Testaments to pass along our faith to a younger generation.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

Deuteronomy 6:4-7 (NRSV)

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Mark 10:13-16 (NRSV)

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

The Why of Teaching: A Scriptural Calling

It's clear that God commands his church to teach children but why do particular individuals teach? Why are you a Sunday school teacher? The simple answer is: you have been called.

God has equipped the church with what it needs to obey the Great Commandment by giving each of us one or more spiritual gifts. Ephesians 4:11-13 lists some of these spiritual gifts: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..."

Teachers are not glorified babysitters or doing a job that "anyone can do." Teaching in the church is one of the most important ministries a person can do! Rejoice in your calling and be assured that God's spirit will guide you and equip you with all you need to fulfill your calling.

The Who of Teaching: Teachers and Learners

When we talk about the who of teaching in its most simple form, we're talking about teachers and learners (or students).

In reminiscing about their time in Sunday school, many adults will talk about a memorable teacher they had rather than lessons they learned. The importance of the relationship between teachers and learners can't be stressed enough. It is often said that faith is caught, not taught.



Henrietta Mears, a Christian educator, author, and founder of Gospel Light Publishing, describes the Sunday school experience this way: "First I learn to love my teacher, then my teacher's God."

Teachers embody Christ in the classroom and model faith for their students. A teacher's relationship with children may have more impact on their faith journey than the facts and Biblical knowledge that the children receive. If we expect children to stay connected with the church as they grow into adulthood, we need to make them feel welcome and see the church as a place where people are loved and accepted.

Teachers should pray with and for children. Remember that the Holy Spirit is with you in lesson preparation and in the classroom. Look for moments for spontaneous prayer in the classroom, such as when a child voices a joy or concern.





The Who of Teaching: Age Level Characteristics

The chart on the next two pages shows characteristics for four age levels. There are different ways to group children by age and your curriculum may use the age groupings listed here or may use different ones.

It's important for a teacher to understand children and what their capabilities and interests are at different ages. As an example, children in preschool are just learning to use scissors. A craft project which involves a lot of cutting may be frustrating for them, so the teacher may need to pre-cut some or all of the materials used for the craft. Not realizing this ahead of time can result in disastrous consequences. Knowing that children are concrete thinkers until middle or older elementary age is helpful if a teacher is trying to introduce the concept of symbolism to children.

Age level characteristics are useful as guidelines, but each child is unique and probably won't conform to these characteristics exactly. Get to know your students and adapt your lessons accordingly.

The Who of Teaching: Age Level Characteristics

	Preschool \ Kindergarten Ages 3-5 	Younger Elementary 1st-2nd Grade 	Middle Elementary 3rd-4th Grade 	Older Elementary 5th-6th Grade 
Physical	<p>Developing rapidly in all areas. Motor skills are being fine-tuned. Very active; learning to skip and hop. Enjoy using glue and stickers and beginning to use scissors.</p>	<p>Very active physically and eager to use their energy. Coordination is improving and complex fine motor skills are developing. Enjoy art activities.</p>	<p>Growth beginning to slow; better able to use small muscles. Gaining skill and confidence in physical abilities. Active physically and may have trouble calming down.</p>	<p>Energetic and active and thrive in team activities. Competitive; like to win in games and sports. Find it hard to sit still; approaching puberty.</p>
Mental	<p>Rapidly developing language skills--advancing to sophisticated words and complex sentences. Attention spans between 5 and 10 minutes; interested in new experiences. Great imaginations and enthusiastic learners.</p>	<p>Thinking is generally concrete; interpreting symbols is difficult. Reading develops; attention span around 15 minutes; able to follow multistep directions. Eager to learn and enjoy puzzles and paper and pencil games. Able to find books and verses in the Bible.</p>	<p>Just beginning to think in abstract terms. Developing analytical and evaluating skills. Attention span is around 20 minutes but interests change rapidly and they work best at short, sequenced projects.</p>	<p>Starting to think through decisions; able to plan and evaluate their own work. Enjoy challenging and rewarding activities. Have mastered basic reading and writing skills; memorize easily. Attention span may be as long as 30 minutes.</p>

	Preschool/K	Younger Elem.	Middle Elem.	Older Elem.
Social	Still looking to adults to help learn how to act; imitate the behavior of adults. Starting to become independent. Learning to play together with other children.	Usually prefer to be with children of their own gender. Competitive, especially between genders. Begin to have a strong sense about what is fair. Still dependent on parents and teachers but seeking to be more independent.	Building social relationships; will imitate the behavior and speech of older children. Very focused on fairness; beginning to take more responsibility for their actions. Becoming strong willed and may be rebellious and talk back. They are sensitive and their feelings are easily hurt.	Social life very important and want to be accepted by their peers. Can exhibit negative behaviors such as bullying and teasing. Beginning to question authority. Want adults to listen and respect their ideas. Emotionally may be on a roller-coaster; can be overly critical of themselves.
Spiritual	Beginning to experience a sense of belonging to God and learning that God loves them. Easily accept what adults teach them about God. Experience worship and starting to ask simple questions about God.	Accept what they are told about God. Able to form simple spontaneous prayers and feel awe and wonder at God and creation. Learning to distinguish between right and wrong. Feel a sense of belonging to a faith community.	Beginning to ask serious questions about religion and developing values. Able to understand Jesus' teachings and discovering and applying Bible truths.	Developing value system independent from adults in their life. Looking for spiritual answers; capable of applying Christian principles to personal and social issues. Important for them to have older Christians they trust.

The Who of Teaching: Faith Development

There are different theories of faith development in children and adults. John H. Westerhoff III in his book *Will Our Children Have Faith?* suggests that we may move through four styles of faith.

***Experiential Faith**

This first faith style includes times we experience God, sometimes through others or through experiences that other people prepare for us.

***Affiliated Faith**

People who helped you to understand God better throughout your life, whether they told you Bible stories or encouraged you to talk about your beliefs, are part of your affiliated faith. God made us to be in relationship with God and with other people; through these relationships we are active in our affiliated style of faith.

***Searching or Inquiring Faith**

Most people move into a searching or inquiring faith in late high school or their early twenties. In this style of faith we search for our own answers to age-old questions of life, and we sort out what we believe. It is a natural process of maturity.

***Owned Faith**

When we move to owned faith we own and acknowledge our beliefs, live them in word and action, and feel comfortable sharing them with others. At the same time, we are not threatened by others whose beliefs may differ and remain open to hearing other views while searching.



The What of Teaching: Learning Goals and Evaluation

Learning goals can be used as guidelines to evaluate your classroom experience. They may be included in your printed curriculum or your Sunday school may have composed their own. Learning goals may include such things as: helping children have a relationship with God, learning specific Bible stories, memorizing scripture, and living their faith. Specific learning goals for each grade level may include such things as: memorizing the 23rd Psalm, knowing the Lord's Prayer, being familiar with Jesus' parables, etc.

You should plan your lessons based on the learning goals of your students. Your printed curriculum will contain lesson plans with activities for you to pick and choose from. Select activities that reinforce your learning goals.

Once you are aware of the learning goals of your Sunday school class, you can then set a time, perhaps each week or once a month, when you evaluate whether you are achieving these goals. If not, it may be time to make some changes in your teaching or bring in some supplemental material.

The What of Teaching: Curriculum - Explicit, Implicit, and Null

When we hear the term "curriculum" we tend to immediately think of what may be called "printed curriculum" which usually includes teacher and student books as well as other items such as posters and music CDs. However, the term curriculum has a much broader meaning. Curriculum is actually anything that interacts with students to create learning.

Explicit curriculum refers to what we intentionally present, such as the basic lesson plan to be followed in the teacher's book.

Implicit or hidden curriculum is what children learn shaped in part by the norms and values of their church. It may send a message that the church does not consciously intend to send. It can be communicated through physical surroundings, attitudes of leaders and other students, the times when we offer educational offerings, etc. For instance, if the adult Sunday school class is located in a nicely decorated room with comfortable chairs and your children have a musty room in the basement, the children are learning that your church values adults more than children.

Null curriculum is what is left out. If the posters in your classroom don't portray children of different races or children with disabilities, you are sending the message that these children are not included in the church. If there are no male teachers in your Sunday school the children are learning that Sunday school is for females but not for males.

The What of Teaching: Printed Curriculum, the Different Types

There is a dizzying array of printed curriculum available for Sunday school teachers. Years ago most churches simply ordered the curriculum published or suggested by their denomination. This is no longer true and a number of Sunday school curriculum publishers are not connected with any denomination. Your curriculum may be selected by your pastor, superintendent, or a committee and you may be asked for your input. More and more churches are developing their own curriculum based on printed and web-based resources.

Some of the types of curriculum are:

- One room or multi-graded - This curriculum is made specifically for small churches where the entire Sunday school is taught in one group or there are classes with a wide age range.
- Classroom/traditional/thematic - This type of curriculum usually includes a teacher's guide with activities to choose from as well as other resources such as learner leaflets, posters, and music CDs. The stories studied may follow a chronological order or be theme based.
- Lectionary - The Bible stories studied are from the Revised Common Lectionary which many churches use to select their scripture readings each week in worship.
- Large group/small group - There is a group lesson or activity for all students, then students break into smaller groups based on age for more activities.
- Montessori/worship-centered - This type uses storytelling to encourage children to enter into the story and be filled with awe and wonder. Then the children respond to the story with art materials or play.
- Rotation model/learning centers - This model has children learning one story or topic for 4-6 weeks. Each age group visits a different workshop each week. Popular workshops include storytelling, art, science, food, drama, computer/Bible skills, and music.
- Whole church - This type of curriculum has material for age groups from nursery or preschool to adult with everyone studying the same Bible story. Worship resources may be included.
- Self-created - A personalized curriculum can be put together using books, DVDs, websites, and other resources.

The What of Teaching: Sunday School Lesson Plan

A good way of organizing your lesson and making sure that you are reaching your learning goals is to complete a lesson plan each week. A simple one is printed on the next page.

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON PLAN

Bible Story/ Bible Verse _____

Goal (This is the main point of the lesson and how your students will relate this lesson to their lives.)

Arrival Activity (If your Sunday school doesn't start in worship.) _____

Opening Prayer and Introductory Activity _____

Telling the Story _____

Reinforcement Activities _____

Conclusion and Review _____

Supplies Needed for this Lesson _____

The Where of Teaching: Creating a Welcoming Environment

A good teacher knows how to create a welcoming, warm environment for learning to take place. We want our students to feel they are in a place where they belong, a place where they are loved and wanted, and a place where they can learn about and find God.



Some suggestions for creating this welcoming environment include:

- Arrive early enough to have your classroom set up and your lesson ready to go. This will allow you to concentrate on welcoming each child into the room as well as greeting and talking to parents.
- Learn the children's names and use them. If this is difficult for you or you have a large class, consider using name tags or table cards. Taking photos of each child and posting them to a bulletin board with their names is also helpful; you can include a title such as "God Loves Each One of Us!"
- Keep track of your class attendance and send postcards on birthdays or when a student hasn't attended in a while. Church supply companies sell these postcards specifically for Sunday school students.
- Be prepared for visitors or new students. Have a welcome packet of information and a registration form available.
- To keep your children safe, make sure your church has a Child Protection Policy and familiarize yourself with it.

The Where of Teaching: Physical Space

Some things to consider in this area include:

- Get down to the eye level of your children and see the room as they see it. Are posters, bulletin boards, etc. at a comfortable level for your students to view? Is the furniture appropriate in size?
- Make sure your classroom is clean and uncluttered. Use bright and cheerful child-friendly posters and decorations. Make sure there is adequate lighting and that the temperature is comfortable.
- Create a safe environment by going over every area of the room and looking for potential hazards. Are there sharp corners on furniture, anything children might trip over, or any exposed electrical outlets?
- Have a first aid kit and a plan if a child is injured. Have latex gloves available and know how to handle bodily fluids you may come in contact with.
- Have enough supplies for each child and have them ready for the projects planned each week.
- Have a place in the classroom to display the children's work.

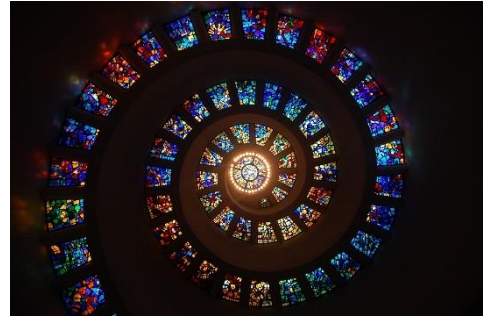


The Where of Teaching: Spiritual Space

The environment you teach in is also a spiritual space.

Begin your classroom time by reminding the children that God is with them right now. Lighting a candle to symbolize God's presence is a good visual aid; for safety's sake try a flameless electric candle.

The candle can be part of a simple worship center table decorated with a cloth the color of the current church season as well as other meaningful objects.



Make prayer a primary part of the classroom experience. As well as formal prayers, look for opportunities for spontaneous prayer, such as when a child shares news about their life with the class.

The Where of Teaching: Sharing Space

Most Sunday school classrooms do double duty during the week as preschool classrooms or meetings rooms.

Communicating with those you share your space with is important, as well as maintaining a generous Christian spirit. Some matters to clarify include how the room is arranged, where supplies are kept, whether you are willing to let the other group use your equipment and/or vice versa, and wall space usage.

If you don't have storage space in your classroom, a rolling cart or lightweight containers with lids and handles can be moved into the room each week.

If your children are distracted by toys and other items that must remain in the classroom, covering them with sheets may be necessary.



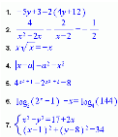
The How of Teaching: Multiple Intelligences

Dr. Howard Gardner originally proposed seven different intelligences, or ways of knowing, and this is referred to as the Theory of Multiple Intelligences. He later added an additional intelligence. Gardner believed that each person is born with the ability to learn in these eight intelligences, although we usually have two or three preferred ways of learning. Thomas Armstrong and Barbara Bruce are two disciples of Gardner who have taken his theory and translated it into user friendly terminology. The following list of eight intelligences uses both Gardner's terminology and Armstrong's "smart language" terminology.



Verbal/Linguistic Word Smart

*learning through reading, writing, speaking listening



Logical/Mathematical Number Smart

*learning through math, science, problem solving, sequencing



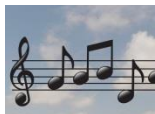
Visual/Spatial Picture Smart

*learning through visual clues: charts, videos, maps, etc.



Body/Kinesthetic Body Smart

*learning through moving the body and manipulating objects



Musical/Rhythmic Music Smart

*learning through songs, sounds, rhythms, beats, and tempo



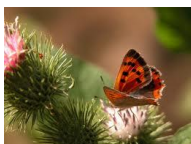
Interpersonal People Smart

*learning through connecting with others



Intrapersonal Self Smart

*learning through inner reflection and quiet time



Naturalist Nature Smart

* learning through observing, understanding and organizing patterns in the natural world.

The How of Teaching: Applying MI Theory to Teaching

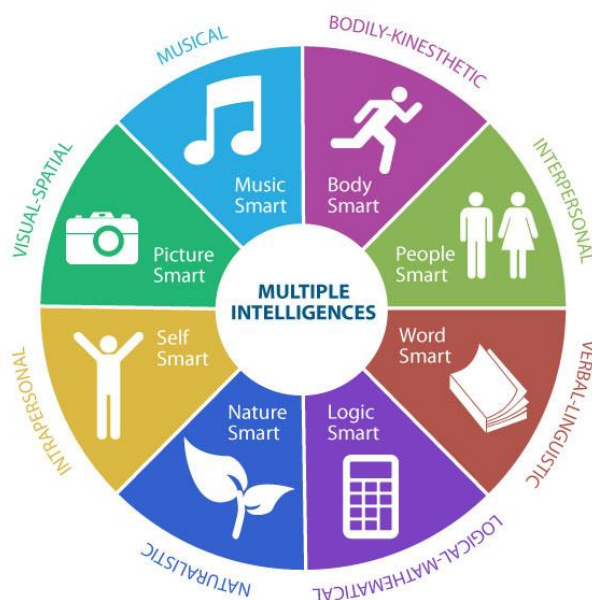
It's a good idea to involve as many intelligences as possible when teaching. Most publishers of Sunday school curriculum try to do this in their lessons and the Workshop Rotation Model is very good at this with many of the workshops relating directly to a particular intelligence.

Since teachers tend to teach using their own preferred intelligences, it's important to know which intelligences are your strongest. There are many online tests to help you determine your strongest intelligences. Here's a [link](#) to one on the Multiple Intelligences section of the Literacy Works website.

Once you're aware of the intelligences you are strongest in, think about which activities you use most often in teaching or in your own personal learning; they will most likely be related to your preferred intelligences. While teaching from your strengths may be the most effective and comfortable way for you, try to challenge yourself to include activities in areas you may be weak in; this way you're including as many of your students' preferred intelligences as possible. Intelligences can be developed so it's good for both teachers and students to explore activities using all the intelligences.

Chinese Proverb

Tell me and I will forget.
Show me and I will remember.
Involve me and I will understand.



The How of Teaching: Telling the Story in Many Ways

As a Sunday school teacher, you are privileged to be one of a long line of storytellers who have been sharing their faith for thousands of years. Children love stories and, with practice, you *can* improve your storytelling skills.

Some tips for telling stories include:

- Remember you are *not* reading the story; you are creating an experience for the children through the story. Get rid of your self-consciousness and get into the story! Make sure you know the story well so you can tell it without referring to notes. Know why the story is important for your children to hear.
- Draw the children into the story by asking questions such as: "Have you ever been scared? Today I'm going to tell you the story of a little girl who learned what to do when she was scared."
- Involve all the senses. Dress in costume; even a simple shawl can create a mood. Have the children sit with you around a pretend campfire or on a special rug. Use props, including items that the children can smell, touch, and taste.
- Make eye contact with the children and use your whole body to tell the story. Let your facial expressions, hand movements, and voice create excitement, joy, fear, and other emotions.
- Use dialogue as you tell the story and, if you're brave enough, use different voices for the characters.
- Get the children involved in the action by having them do hand motions or say a word when you give them a verbal or visual cue. Tell the children to imagine they are feeling things like wind or rain.
- Practice in front of the mirror or in front of another person.
- Have fun!



The How of Teaching: Discipline

Many teachers shudder at the mere mention of the word "discipline" but proper preparation can prevent many discipline problems. Being familiar with the age level characteristics of the children you're teaching will help you have realistic expectations for their behavior. You can maintain an air of authority (without being rigid) and children will respond accordingly. Likewise, a teacher who is hesitant about his or her authority invites students to test the limits. Remember that children in Sunday school may be unsure of what is expected of them. They know that Sunday school is not like regular school but isn't exactly the playground either; it's up to you to let them know what you expect of them.



Some tips for maintaining control of your classroom:

- Have clear expectations for behavior by posting classroom rules; let your students take ownership of the rules by helping create them. Make sure you have positive rules (do) and not just negative ones (do not).
- Let the children know the consequences of misbehavior and be consistent with enforcing the consequences.
- Be respectful and empathetic with a child who misbehaves. The goal of discipline is not to control the child but to skillfully guide them toward appropriate behavior. Stay calm and don't take the misbehavior personally.
- Make sure the child understands why his or her behavior was unacceptable.
- It may be necessary, especially with younger children, to redirect their attention to a different activity in order to defuse a difficult situation.
- Come into the classroom well rested and well prepared and you'll be better able to give your full attention to the children and prevent discipline problems.
- Have a signal to get the children's attention such as turning the lights on and off, ringing a bell, or having a signal that everyone copies, such as putting your hands on your head.
- Be prepared for special needs children. Don't hesitate to seek advice from your Sunday school superintendent or pastor. Talk to the parents to see if there are specific techniques they use to help their child behave appropriately. Children's Ministry website has a short article on [Ministry to Children with ADHD](#). Helpful books on children's ministry with special needs children include Gospel Light's [Special Needs Smart Pages](#) and Group Publishing's [Children's Ministry Pocket Guide to Special Needs](#).
- Pray for your children while teaching and during the rest of the week.

The How of Teaching: Prayer and Other Spiritual Practices

Children today are growing up in a fast-paced, multimedia world where silence and time for reflection are increasingly rare commodities. You have the opportunity to create a sacred space for your students where they can open themselves to the presence of God. Provide some quiet time for your students and you may be surprised at how hungry they are for a break from the many stimuli that are thrown at them in their daily lives. Some specific spiritual practices you might want to try with your students:

- **Breath prayers** - A breath prayer uses praise and petition and is very short. It has three to nine syllables and two parts: a praising name of God and a request. The first part is said when inhaling; the second when exhaling.
- **Centering prayer** - Centering prayer uses a single word that is repeated to help the children center themselves on God. A beautiful book on centering prayer for children is [*Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children*](#).
- **Creative Christian writing** - Activities for this practice include having children keep spiritual journals and writing poetry focused on God.
- **Guided meditations** - This is an activity where the children listen to a reading which invites them into scripture or an encounter with God. Some Sunday school curriculums include guided meditations and there are also books of guided meditations written specifically for use with children.
- **Labyrinths** - Walking the labyrinth is an ancient practice. The labyrinth is a bit like a maze but, unlike a maze, there is one path to the center. There are indoor and outdoor labyrinths as well as portable labyrinths. Walking a labyrinth can mirror our journey to find God and rest with God in the center of the labyrinth. If you are unable to have the children walk a full-scale labyrinth you can have them use a [*finger labyrinth*](#).
- **Praise through art** - Children can write the words of their prayers into pictures, use clay to create a "prayer," or cooperatively create a prayer mural. A technique for "prayer doodling" has been adapted for children in the book [*Praying in Color Kid's Edition*](#).
- **Prayer beads** - A bracelet can be made to help children memorize Psalm 23 by using beads of different colors to represent certain phrases.
- **Prayerful movements** - Let children dance out the words to their prayer.



The When of Teaching: The Sunday School Hour

There are 168 hours in a week; Sunday school typically lasts an hour or two. There may be no Sunday school in the summer or it's not well attended. Attendance during the school year is irregular for most students. Is it possible to create faithful disciples in the limited time we have with children?



What can we do to increase the time devoted to the faith formation of the children in our churches? It's important for those in children's ministry to have a relationship with the families of their children. Some ideas for doing this include:

- Get to know your parents. Get to the classroom early and be prepared so you can talk to parents when they drop off their children.
- Send something home each week about what your children learned in Sunday school that day. E-mail your families mid-week to follow up on the learning. The e-mail could contain quizzes, games, and contests related to the lesson.
- Have a Sunday School Open House where parents can visit their children's classrooms, get to meet the teachers, and see the children's projects on display.
- Although not all parents are called to be teachers, there are many other ways to get them involved in Sunday school. Have a "parent of the week or month" on a rotating basis; the parent will help with the lesson and perhaps bring a special snack. Invite parents to share their gifts with the class, such as a hobby they enjoy or reading a book to the class. Invite parents to pray for their child's Sunday school class.
- Use your church bulletin boards to display news of what is going on in your students' lives outside of Sunday school such as vacations, school activities, scout awards, etc.
- Consider having a page on your church website devoted to children's ministry or create a Facebook page for your Sunday school.
- Have a separate children's section in your church newsletter or create your own newsletter. Have the children contribute articles, poems, and drawings.
- Send postcards to your students for their birthday or if they haven't been in Sunday school for a few weeks. Parents will also appreciate a short note letting them know how their child is doing in Sunday school.
- Encourage your church to plan intergenerational programs. Consider having a family Sunday school class once or twice a year where parents and children learn together. An intergenerational evening or weekend Vacation Bible School will keep families together.
- Have families serve together in worship as greeters or in other capacities; encourage your church to have family worship services, perhaps once a month.

The When of Teaching: The Church Home Connection

Help your families with their children's faith formation at home by giving them tools:

- PRC offers resources for churches to provide to families with lots of ideas for encouraging faith formation at home through their [Holy Moments](#) program.
- Send home materials for families to use at home, such as dinnertime discussion guides or [Parent/Child Conversation Prompts](#), as well as family devotional books.
- Resources for families to use at home can be purchased inexpensively in bulk through companies such as [Creative Communications](#).
- Consider having a book/resource fair where you have Christian books, DVDs, and other products available for purchase. Some Christian bookstores will work with you so you can get products on a consignment basis.
- Stock your church library with materials suitable for families and children and let your families know they are available for borrowing.
- Use your church website or Facebook page to give parents information about good Christian websites and apps for children and other online resources.



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