

The Spiritual Nurture of Young Children: 4 Approaches



Don Ratcliff, Ph.D.

Wheaton College



Internal Faith

- Sometimes even the best Christian leaders and parents overlook some of the most effective approaches with kids.
- I'm especially concerned that methods help children "internalize" their faith—that it becomes part of them, while they become part of their faith—reciprocal relationship.
- All of these are described in detail on an online resource, available without charge.

Encouraging Spiritual Development

- Much of the research indicates that the family is central in this respect.
- Church (or Christian school) rarely has a major impact apart from the family.
- Dozens of studies indicate that, in general, church and school have minimal influence unless they build upon religious practices in the home (Hyde, 1990; Roehlkepartain, 1993). **But there ARE exceptions!**

Encouraging Spiritual Development

- This suggests the first priority is NOT a new church program, but parent education: observation & practice.
- Parents can be taught in church, and some practices from church can be adapted to the home.
- The church should have strong programs that build on family influence AND provide something for those without family faith practices.



Four Approaches

- 1. Jerome Berryman's Godly Play
- 2. Bible Story & Life Enactment
- 3. Celebrating the Old Testament Holidays
- 4. *Children Doing Ministry*
 - A very old and very new idea
 - A bit controversial but much for many situations



Approach One: Godly Play

- Jerome Berryman developed "Godly Play" which highlights the experience of God by the child (quiet, reflective; space and time for God).
- Adapted from Maria Montessori and her "disciple" Sofia Cavalletti.
- Researched by Cathy Stonehouse (Asbury Theological Seminary) and being adapted for families by Scottie May (Wheaton).

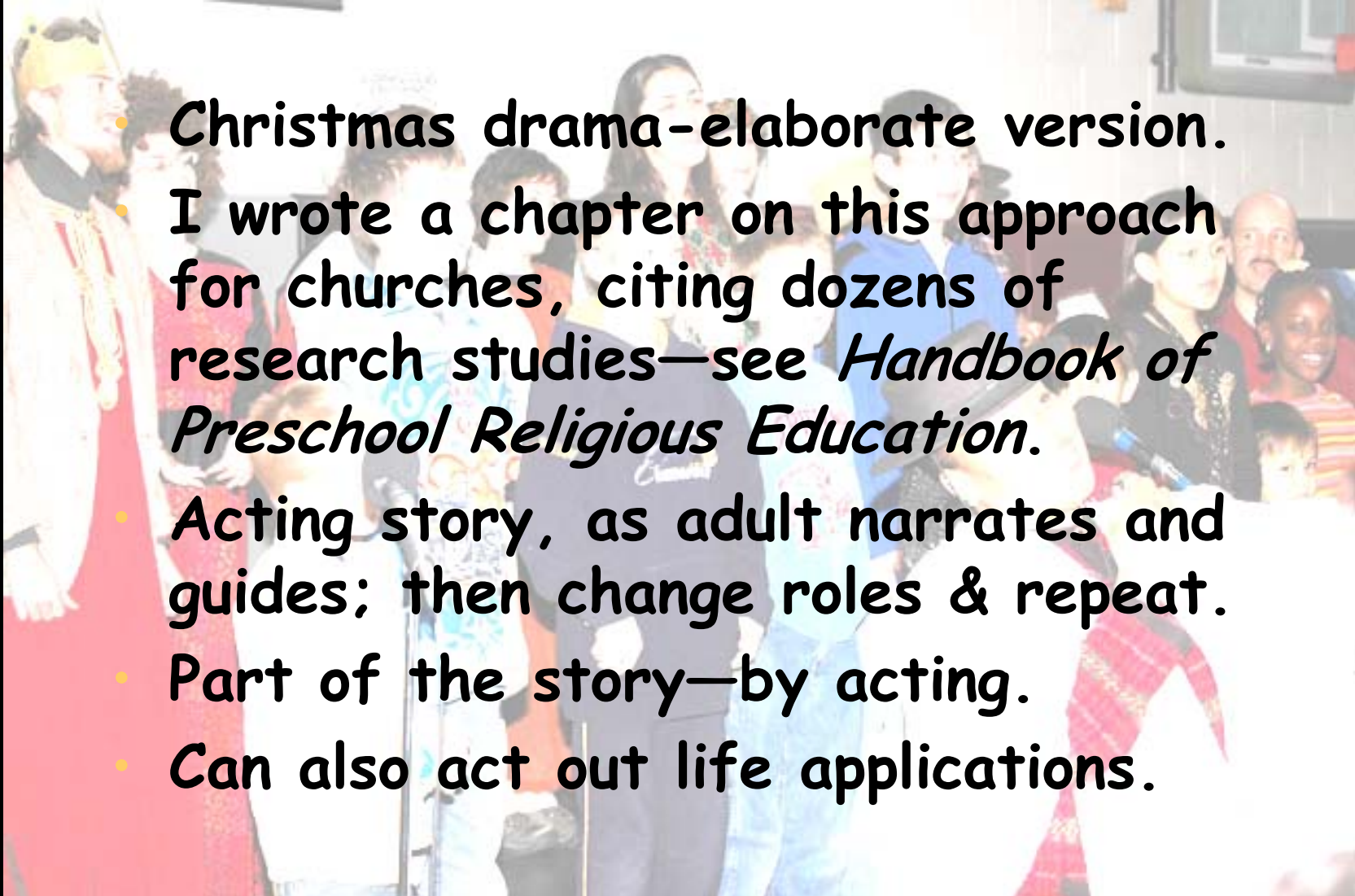


Key Aspects of Godly Play

- “I wonder” statements lead children to enter the story, not just hear it.
- Eye contact with story, not with children.
- Quiet, reflective atmosphere.
- After story, self-chosen exploration of variety of media.
- *Experience* of story . . . And possibly God.

Approach Two: Story Enactment

- Christmas drama-elaborate version.
- I wrote a chapter on this approach for churches, citing dozens of research studies—see *Handbook of Preschool Religious Education*.
- Acting story, as adult narrates and guides; then change roles & repeat.
- Part of the story—by acting.
- Can also act out life applications.



Story and Life Enactment

- Easily adapted for families—I sometimes used it with my kids, as have others with whom I have spoken.
- Example: my colleague.

Key Aspects of Enactment

- View story from actor's perspective—from within story frame.
- Kinesthetic/tactile learning, not just auditory and visual.
- Because it is experiential, perhaps transfer to daily life is more likely.
- Can add daily life enactment to aid transfer.



My family—about 1999

Approach Three: Biblical Holidays

- We celebrated the Old Testament holidays with our children—participatory aspects.
- Each year they—and we—learned new aspects of the holiday, including how Christ related to each (spiral curriculum).
- Not legalistic about it; we could miss some days, and eventually discontinued.
- My wife has curriculum on free web pages.

Celebrating the Old Testament Holidays: A Family Approach Now Adapted for VBS



- The church we attended while in California had a VBS that emphasized the Old Testament holidays—I was “Rabbi Don”
- Yet many of the related activities were fairly typical of VBS (commercially available)

Key Aspects of Old Testament Holiday Observance

- Home and church-based curriculum available without charge (but also minus graphics) at: www.brenda.ratcliffs.net
- We chose to emphasize children's activities related to these celebrations (more traditional observance tended to emphasize the verbal—e.g. several hour seder).
- The VBS version is a bit limited in scope.

Approach Four: Children Doing Ministry



- My own experience—always seeking more of God (saved at least 97 times).
- I recall thinking something should change because of the altar experience, but not sure what.
- I think what I sought was opportunity to minister to other people.

Children Doing Ministry

- Many possibilities: nursing homes, praying for people at home and in church, singing, drama, even preaching & evangelizing.
- But we need to see them as capable, yet need to offer guidance and discipleship.
- Becky Fisher (in the "Jesus Camp" movie) is very controversial, and I don't agree with everything she says and does with kids, but I think the idea of involving children in church and family ministry is on target.

Key Aspects of Children in Ministry

- Need to discover children's gifts and encourage and help develop those gifts.
- Make a place in the church—even the service—for children (and others!) to use their abilities—active involvement.
- Not suggesting a change in theology, but exploration of appropriate ministries within one's given denominational tradition.

Experiencing God and Spiritual Growth with Your Children

- An online book that elaborates the 3½ ideas described today—and more.
- Written for parents and churches that want to teach parents how to nurture their kids.
- God impressed upon me that it needed to be made available without charge on the internet.
- www.childfaith.net/experience



Conclusion: Five Priorities

- 1. Parent education by the church.
 - Parents are often at a loss as to what to do (other than prayers at dinner and bedtime).
 - Parents may feel their role is unimportant.





Conclusion: Five Priorities

- 2. Emphasis upon the importance of children and children's ministry by pastors, theologians, church leaders.
 - Tendency to ignore children--or emphasize their "cuteness" rather than their importance.
 - Luke mentioned or alluded to children in almost every chapter of his Gospel. How often do we make kids central to our efforts?

Conclusion: Five Priorities

- 3. Open consideration by churches of a number of alternative approaches.
 - Not automatically default to the typical.
 - Experiment a bit, discuss with parents and others.



Conclusion: Five Priorities

- 4. Study your denomination's historical archives to discover views of children and children's ministry
 - What did children experience in the early years?
 - How did that vary across holiness groups?
 - If it changed with time, what changed and why?



Conclusion: Five Priorities

- 5. Follow Christ's example:
 - He placed a "child in the midst"—what difference would it make to center our theology and ministry on children?
"When you do it to the least . . ."
 - We need to see children as examples of what *we* should be—have the faith of a child (this is humbling but needed).