

# SALVATION – Helping Your Students Embrace God’s Grace

**W**e would think a farmer foolish if he worked hard all season watering, fertilizing, and pruning, only to let the crop rot or go to seed. There is only one reason for tending a garden with such care: to reap the harvest. Just so with our teaching. Leading students to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour and experience His grace in their lives is the real reason for what we do, whether we teach kindergarten or graduate school, English or auto shop, in Azerbaijan or Zambia. Carefully planned learning activities, attractive classrooms, and caring teachers don’t count for much unless students meet Jesus and fall in love with Him.

## **Sin, Grace, Jesus, and the Cross**

As young people grow, their understanding grows. Let’s look at how an understanding of sin, grace, Jesus, and the Cross develops, so we can introduce our students to Jesus’ love and grace at each age, beginning with kindergarten.<sup>1</sup>

By Donna J. Habenicht and Larry Burton

## **Kindergartners**

Four- and 5-year-olds have no doubts about God’s love and salvation. In our research<sup>2</sup> on the understanding of salvation, young children’s simple faith can be seen in their spontaneous, unconditional belief that Jesus will take them to heaven.

At this age, children’s understanding of sin and its effects is very limited. Most 4- and 5-year-olds say sin is “something bad” and then describe something they have done. Four-year-olds have no idea how sin began, but 5-year-olds talk about Satan and Adam and Eve. They realize by now that God loves them even when they “do something bad.” Some children say that prayer can help

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them quit doing “bad things.” Many children this age believe adults are good—they do not sin!

Although their understanding of the Cross is quite limited, kindergartners’ drawings about salvation often include Jesus’ death on the cross, reflecting the pictures they have seen. Some children draw the Second Coming; others draw children praying or doing other good things. Most kindergartners have no idea why Jesus died. They say He came to life again and is in heaven now, and are very sure Jesus will take them to heaven when He comes again.

Their belief is simple, full of trust and love for Jesus. Theological words like *grace* and *salvation* are still a mystery. Kindergarten children don’t need to know the theological terms. They just need to trust and love Jesus—and they do.

As you teach kindergartners, focus on *loving, trusting, and obeying Jesus*. How sin entered the Garden of Eden and Jesus’ death on the cross, resurrection, and Second Coming are important stories. When you tell the stories simply,

children can grasp something of their importance, but not the details or the whys. Kindergartners need a Jesus who is their Protector, who takes care of them. Emphasize His loving care. Loving, trusting, and obeying Jesus is the gift of grace for young children.

Occasionally, the intellectually gifted child will understand more about why Jesus came to Earth and will realize that he or she is a sinner and needs a Saviour. Some even accept Jesus as their Saviour before age 6, but they are the exception. Be alert to these children, and be sure they have an opportunity to learn everything they can understand about salvation.

### Ages 6-9

These are golden years for learning about sin, forgiveness, grace, and salvation. Children take great leaps in understanding during this time.

Our research on salvation<sup>3</sup> shows that by age 8 or 9, children begin to be more specific that sin is disobeying God. Although they rarely speak of God’s laws, they measure their behavior by how well they obey home and classroom rules. They express a great deal of uncertainty about one sin keeping them from being saved. Children ages 7 to 9 seem to be preoccupied with forgiveness, being sure every sin is forgiven. This is the right time to emphasize grace, what Jesus does for us when He forgives us.

These children talk a lot about “trying hard” to be good. Christ’s righteousness as a solution to the uncertainty is not generally understood. Some children, however, have gotten the message. They usually say, “I have faith in Him, and I trust Him [referring to Jesus].”

The behavioral ideas about salvation peak around ages 8 to 9 and then gradually decrease, while the grace-faith ideas gradually increase. Doubts about being saved when Jesus comes start at ages 6 to 7 and reach around half of the children by ages 8 to 13. However, the good news is that the other half of the children express a spontaneous, unconditional assurance of salvation.

Many children accept Jesus as their personal Saviour during these years. Many understand they are sinners and need a Saviour. They reach out to Jesus and begin their lifelong walk with Him. Complex theological terms are still beyond them, but they don’t need to know. They need to understand in their hearts and accept the love Jesus offers, even if they do not understand everything Jesus did on the cross. Ellen White is very specific about their ability to understand: “Christ came to teach the human family the way of salvation, and He made this way so plain that a

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little child can walk in it.”<sup>4</sup> She specifically mentions these ages in another important statement: “Children of eight, ten, or twelve years are old enough to be addressed on the subject of personal religion. . . . If properly instructed, very young children may have correct views of their state as sinners and of the way of salvation through Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

Our responsibility as teachers is to *teach simply* so children will understand; *live our ideas* about love and grace; and *watch carefully* for the right moment to reach each student with the message of God’s grace and salvation.

### Ages 10-14

Harvest time has come! Most children born into Adventist homes in North America accept Jesus as their personal Saviour and request baptism between ages 10 and 14. The peak years for baptism are ages 12 and 13. Few youth—although there are some—who have been reared in a Seventh-day Adventist home and attended church school are baptized during the academy or college years.

Youth who have not attended church school—and thus have received less religious instruction—are more likely to make this important decision in their mid-teens, rather than earlier.

Children ages 10 to 13 make great leaps in their understanding of sin and how to overcome it, the meaning of baptism, and the relationship of faith and grace to salvation. They understand

much better that salvation has to do with a relationship with Jesus. But many children are still very focused on behavior. They can be very concerned about “being ready” for Jesus to come. Many doubt they would be ready if Jesus came today or tomorrow because of the details of daily living—“I forgot to make my bed today” or “I quarreled with my brother.” They need to be reassured that the direction of one’s life and the beauty of Christ’s covering grace are the determining factors for salvation.

Because of their increasing capacity for thinking, these youth make great leaps in religious understanding. These are very important years for salvation. Instruct carefully and diligently. Live out and witness to your own experience with the Lord, and you will see many youth accept Jesus as their Saviour and join the church through baptism.

### Readiness for Accepting Salvation

When is a child ready to accept Jesus as his or her Saviour? One might be ready at 5 or 6 years of age, while another not until 12 or 14, or later. Many things make the difference.

### Mental Maturity

Some very intelligent children think about things their peers haven’t dreamed of yet. Often, they are ready to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour at a very young age. They should be encouraged to answer the call of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, however, very bright children postpone this decision because they think they need to understand “everything” before making a commitment. They need answers for their questions and encouragement toward faith and trust in Jesus.

### Religious Background

If the child’s religious background has been solid, he or she will be ready at a younger age to accept Jesus. Here are some questions that reveal the child’s readiness: Does he or she

- Have a knowledge of God and a love for Him?
- Understand wrongdoing and sin?
- Realize that he or she personally has sinned and that sin deserves punishment?
- Understand that Christ died for his or her sins—He took the punishment?



- Realize there are two opposing forces at work in the world and in his or her personal life—God and Satan?

A child reared with religious instruction at home, church, and school will come to this realization at a younger age than the child who has not been exposed to these ideas.

### Ability to Love and Trust

Love is the motivating force in salvation. Children respond to and through love. The teacher's example guides them, and they respond by trusting God. In *All the Children of the Bible*, Herbert Lockyer stresses the importance of love: "The language of love is the one a child learns most easily, and it is because its heart is most susceptible to love that it can be won before it is able to give a reason for its hope."<sup>6</sup>

Some children from very deprived backgrounds do not know how to love or trust. It may take them longer to respond to God's love through the teacher than the child who has grown up with affection and trust. These children need to learn what love is. On the other hand, a child deprived of love may have a deep yearning for it. If Jesus' love is reflected in the life of the teacher and is presented in an attractive way, the child may reach immediately for the love he or she has never had. Pray with and for these children.

### Knowledge of the Scriptures

The student who knows, believes, and loves the Bible will want to respond through obedience. This kind of confidence in the Scriptures is the foundation for salvation. It is learned step by step through the instruction and modeling of adults and the influence of the Holy Spirit. Remem-

ber that your students may differ greatly in their acquaintance with the Scriptures.

### Personality

Children who by nature are emotional respond more quickly to the story of the Cross. They feel what Jesus has done for them, and they reach out with their feelings. However, feelings are easily swayed. Work with these students to strengthen the knowledge base for their response.

Students who make decisions through thinking, rather than feeling, may take longer to respond. They want all the facts and feel a need to understand everything before responding to the appeal of the Holy Spirit. Once they make a commitment, they are not easily swayed because they know what they believe. Pray that the Holy Spirit will touch their minds and their hearts. Present salvation to each student in the way to which he or she naturally responds. Emphasize that we can never know everything; some things come through faith. We must believe and trust God.

### The Child's Home

The child who comes from a home rich in spiritual life will sense a need for the Saviour earlier than the one who has never been surrounded by religious influences. However, the child who lives in a home where actions contradict instruction will be hard to reach. Because of living with hypocrisy, this child will, in a sense, have "turned off" religion and salvation. Such children may be more difficult to reach than those who come from a completely non-Christian background because they have hardened their hearts against the Saviour.

When one parent is a Christian and the other is not,



the child may feel conflicting loyalties. He or she may not want to offend either parent and may sincerely not know what is the right thing to do.

### Response to the Saviour's Call

Both the head and heart must respond to the Saviour's invitation. Be careful before deciding a child is too young to respond—children vary greatly in their spiritual insights and ability to understand salvation.

Do not look for violent emotion as an indication of conversion of children. This is not necessarily evidence of conviction of sin. Neither is it necessary to know the exact time when a child is converted.<sup>7</sup> But it is important to extend the invitation, to give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to work in the life of the child. For the child brought up in a Christian atmosphere, conversion is one step of many toward a goal—godlikeness. It is a definite acceptance of God's grace and a commitment to live God's way.

The child from a non-Christian home, or a recently converted family, will probably respond in a more dramatic or precise way. Such a child is accepting a change of life—something that is completely different from the past.

### Importance of Childhood Commitment

The results of a 2001 survey by Barna Research<sup>8</sup> on the relationship between childhood religion and adulthood religion confirms the truth of the following statement made by Ellen White many years ago: "With increase of years it is probable that there will be a decrease of sensibility to divine things, a diminished susceptibility to the influences of religion. Every day Satan works to fasten them [young people] in their habits of disobedience, their spirit of impenitence, and there is a less probability that they will become Christians."<sup>9</sup>

A majority of people who attended church as a child attend regularly as adults, while a majority of those who were not church-goers as children are still absent in adulthood. The vast majority of people who are Christians were converted before the age of 18.<sup>10</sup>

What a solemn and important responsibility: To cooperate with the Holy Spirit in bringing young people to Christ before time has hardened their hearts.

### Leading Students to Christ

Leading students to Christ is the most important thing you as a teacher can do. It should be the point of everything, the goal of all activities and relationships. Leading students to Christ has several steps: (1) preparing them for salvation experiences, (2) introducing them to what Jesus

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did for them on the cross, (3) inviting them to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour, and (4) showing them how to grow closer to Jesus, become more and more like Him, and solve problems God's way.

### Preparing for Salvation

1. *Provide sound Bible teaching and love.* The Bible provides a foundation for faith and discipleship (2 Timothy 3:15). Love provides a basis for the relationship with God (1 John 3:1, 16).

2. *Help children become accountable to God.* Children are first accountable to their parents (or other caregivers), then to their teachers. They say things like: "My Dad won't let me." "It's against the school rules." Introduce them to the idea that they are also accountable to God.

This is an important step in readiness to accept Christ's sacrifice. You will know they have made the transition when you hear an earliten say: "I really wanted to skip church and hang out with my friends, but something whispered to me, 'Jesus will miss you if you don't stay,' and I knew I couldn't disappoint Him." A younger child might say: "I think I need to tell Josh I'm sorry. That's what Jesus would want me to do."

3. *Help your students experience different aspects of coming to Jesus:* Joyfully experiencing God's love and trusting Him; feeling guilty, being sorry, and confessing wrongdoing; forgiving others; making an effort to change their behavior; helping others; reading the Bible and praying. Start very young with these experiences. Look for child-friendly books about God's love.

4. *Teach your students how to make little decisions between right and wrong from the time they are very young.* Your youngest students are already making decisions about right and wrong every day. Their conscience is beginning to speak, and they are already moral creatures who know some actions are right and some wrong. Encourage them to do the right thing.

5. *Encourage your church to be a warm, caring community for children.* Challenge the adults to learn the names of all the youth and greet each one whenever they see them. This simple strategy will begin to build relationships between adults and children. Encourage the adults to mentor the young people, engaging them as assistant greeters and junior deacons and deaconesses.

### Accepting Salvation

**Pray for the Holy Spirit to speak to your students' hearts.** It is the Holy Spirit that convicts the heart and mind. Only He can convert a child.

Help your students understand the **vocabulary of salvation**. Words like *sin*, *Saviour*, *salvation*, *grace*, *Holy Spirit*, and *forgiveness* may be foreign to them. Interpret each term with simple words children can understand. Some Bible stories are especially helpful: Nicodemus, Philip and the Ethiopian, Jesus and the woman at the well, and Jesus and the woman caught in adultery.

**Lead your students through the steps to salvation.**<sup>11</sup> Be sure they understand each step. Show them in the Bible what Jesus will do and what they must do.

1. *Begin with God's love* (John 3:16, 1 John 4:8). God loves everyone. He made a perfect world full of love, but the first people in our world chose to disobey God. That is how sin began.

2. *Everyone does wrong things*. We are all sinners. Because of this, we cannot see God or talk to Him face to face. Death is our punishment for doing wrong. No one can be good enough to live in heaven. Be sure children recognize that they are sinners (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

3. *Jesus died on the cross so we don't have to die forever, so someday we can live in heaven* (John 3:16). Jesus loves us so much that He was willing to die in our place. Then Jesus came back to life again as our Saviour from sin and death (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4). When you say to Jesus, "I want You to be my Saviour," all your sins are forgiven (Isaiah 1:18; Psalm 51:10; 1 John 1:9). God will never remember them again. They are gone! That is grace. We don't deserve to be forgiven, but God does it anyway because Jesus died for us.

4. *Ask your students if they would like to accept the gift Jesus offers—forgiveness for all the bad things they have ever*

*done*. Help each child receive salvation by asking Jesus to be his or her Saviour (John 1:12, Revelation 3:20). Help each student pray a simple prayer: "I am sorry for doing wrong things. Jesus, I believe You died for me. I want You to be my Saviour from sin. I want to be part of your family." Remind them that this is all they have to do. Salvation from sin is a gift from Jesus.

5. *Help your students feel assured of salvation* (John 3:36; Hebrews 13:5, 6). Tell them "You are now Jesus' child; you will have a place in His kingdom, in heaven. You are a new person who doesn't want to do wrong because you love Jesus and Jesus loves you [2 Corinthians 5:17]."

As you take your students through these steps, help them find the Bible texts and underline them. Use pictures, drawings, or objects to help explain, or ask them to make their own booklets with drawings to illustrate each step.

6. *Show your students how to grow in a new life: through prayer, asking Jesus to help them overcome sin, telling others about Jesus, and reading the Scriptures.*<sup>13</sup>

Conversion leads to a change in lifestyle. This will be noticeable even for children. After all, "Even a child is known by his doings" (Proverbs 20:11, KJV). Consecration to God will help a child study better and do more faithful work, be more obedient and more unselfish, helpful, and kind to those around him or her.<sup>12</sup> However, we must not expect perfection. Explain to your students about the two natures (the old and the new) struggling inside. God is stronger than Satan, so the new can be stronger than the old. It is very important to explain what your students should do when they sin: confess, believe God forgives, and ask for help.

### Helping Your Students Make Decisions for Christ

1. *Don't be afraid to ask for a decision.* The Holy Spirit is responsible for the results.

2. *Avoid pressuring your students to make a decision.* Depend on the Holy Spirit to work on each one's heart.

3. *Use natural situations for decisions about salvation. Be on the alert for the student who is being convicted by the Holy Spirit.* This may happen during class time, worship, or week of prayer, while riding in the school bus, or when you are just talking together.

4. *Ask your students to make a decision inside (one that no one else knows about) before asking for a public decision at a later time.* The student who makes a decision "inside" may want to tell you about it afterward. This way, it is a personal decision. Peer pressure is not involved.

5. *Be alert for lessons that lead naturally to receiving Jesus.* The Holy Spirit speaks to each heart continually. Be aware of His leading. Some of the following suggestions might be used for a decision opportunity: Prepare small cards with appropriate Scripture verses for students to sign and keep in their Bibles as a reminder of their decision. Sing songs about coming to Christ. Tell a modern-day story



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that illustrates salvation.

6. Encourage students to share their decision with someone else, perhaps parents or grandparents, unless they are known to be extremely opposed to Christianity. If so, suggest they wait until later to share with these people. They can share with the pastor, the Sabbath school teacher or Pathfinder leader, or some other interested adult. Encourage children to share their decision with their peers. This reinforces the decision.

7. An invitation to accept Christ and give oneself to Him should not be so easy that acceptance is not genuine. On the other hand, it should not be so difficult that the child never responds. Some children will not respond to a general invitation. They need an adult to take a personal interest and give a loving, one-to-one invitation. You might be that adult. Be alert for students who need a personal invitation. Some teens are still waiting for the personal touch.

8. Do not judge the genuineness of a student's commitment by his or her emotions. All children do not react with the same emotions. If a child cries in response to an invitation, quietly hand him or her a tissue and wait silently. Remember, some children do not show violent emotions, but this does not mean they are not converted.

9. While your students are not terrible sinners with a huge amount of guilt to commit to the Lord, many of them may feel troubled about past sins. They may feel convicted to make restitution, but do not know how. Help them find the Bible instructions and promises for forgiveness. You can offer to go with the child to confess. An older child might need to be encouraged to make a long-distance call or write a letter to a former teacher, or speak to a friend or sibling. Whatever you do, do it with love. Never blame, berate, or express shock. Remember, God accepts all repentant sinners with love, but He shows that love through you.

As teachers, we are privileged to be partners with God for the salvation of every student in our classes. If we pray for each one and watch for opportunities to show God's love and speak of His grace, the Holy Spirit will prompt us to words or actions at precisely the right moment and we will experience the thrill of seeing a student respond to the call of the Spirit. ✍



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This article has been adapted from a forthcoming book by **Donna J. Habenicht and Larry Burton**, *Teaching the Faith: An Essential Guide for Building Faith-*

*Shaped Kids* (Review and Herald, in press) and is printed with the permission of the authors and publisher. **Larry Burton** is Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. **Donna J. Habenicht** is Professor Emerita of Educational and Counseling Psychology at Andrews University. Both have taught at all levels from elementary school to graduate school and have also been involved in children's ministry in churches.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This article deals mainly with younger students, as that is the focus of the book from which it is adapted. Teachers of older students can creatively adapt the suggestions and add some of their own.
2. Donna J. Habenicht, Victor Korniejczuk, Bradley Booth, and Megan Brown, "How Children and Adolescents Understand the Concept of Salvation, With Implications for an Integrated Approach to Spiritual Development." Presented at the Conference on Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Concordia University, River Forest, Ill., June 10, 2003.
3. Ibid.
4. Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1930), p. 15.
5. \_\_\_\_\_, *Child Guidance* (Nashville: Southern Publ. Assn., 1954), p. 490.
6. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Children of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publ. House, 1970), p. 61.
7. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1898), p. 515.
8. "Adults Who Attend Church as Children Show Lifelong Effects," Barna Research Online, November 5, 2001.
9. Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1938), p. 80.
10. Sixty-one percent of adults who attended church as a child continue as an adult. They are also more likely to take their children to church. Seventy-eight percent of adults who did not attend church as children do not attend as adults and are less likely to take their children to church.
11. The following steps have been adapted from Child Evangelism International, an organization dedicated to bringing the Good News of salvation to children; *Children's Ministries* (AdventSource, pp. 38-40); *Coming to Jesus, Growing in Him* (AdventSource); and *How to Help Your Child Really Love Jesus* (by Donna J. Habenicht, Review & Herald, p. 136).
12. An illustrated story that pulls toward salvation: *The Little Boat Twice Bought* (Living Stories, Inc., P.O. Box 8001, Milford, Kansas 66514). Several others are available from this publisher. *Evangelizing Today's Children*, from Child Evangelism International, has an illustrated story about some aspect of the Christian life in every issue. For other ideas see: Donna J. Habenicht, *How to Help Your Child Really Love Jesus* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1994), chapter 12, and Art Murphy, *The Faith of a Child: A Step-by-Step Guide to Salvation for Your Child* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000).
13. See White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 79.