

Theology *for* Children

Three-year-old Alisha wore a puzzled expression as her family settled themselves on a church pew, waiting for the service to begin. Soon Mother felt a tug on her sleeve and heard Alisha whisper, “Mommy, Teacher said the church is God’s house. Where is His bed? Where does He cook?” Mommy tried to hide her amusement as she replied, “I’ll explain after church.”

Children often misunderstand theological concepts. After all, many adults are not too clear themselves on the meaning of some theological ideas, and books on the subject are not generally known as light reading. Many theological ideas are abstract and symbolic, hard for children to understand. So the teacher has the responsibility to help explain theology to students. The really important parts are not difficult to understand.

Learning Theological Concepts

When children are very young, they do not have the mental ability to understand theological ideas. But they are building a foundation for later theological thought. Every experience the child has is a part of the foundation for later thinking processes and for understanding theology.

Young children have difficulty putting all the facts together to form a concept. For example, a young child might call every woman “Mommy” and every man “Daddy.” Later on, the child would learn that mommy, sister, and grandma are all women. We say the child has learned the *concept of women*. As thinking progresses, the child will realize that men and women are *people*. For young children, facts can be disjointed. Two unrelated facts might become linked in the child’s mind and cause confusion.

Many experiences help to shape a child’s theological concepts. Five-year-old Brianna, learning about the second coming of Jesus, might have these thoughts or experiences:



GOD DRIVES ADAM AND EVE OUT OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN (GEN. 3:23, 24)

By Donna J. Habenicht and Larry Burton



Brianna wonders who will dig the dirt from the grave so Granddaddy can get out.

All of these thoughts and experiences—and others—might be part of Brianna’s concept of the second coming of Christ.

The child’s home provides a very important foundation for theological and doctrinal ideas. Children associate many ideas about God with the way they feel about their parents and relate to them. Children also hear many comments about theological issues at church and at school, which influence their thinking.

DIGGING UP GRANDDADDY (1 THESS. 4:16)

- Brianna sees a picture of Jesus coming and notices the open graves. She feels afraid.

- Teacher said Jesus will come soon, but He hasn’t come yet! He should be here by now.

- Teacher said everybody would see Jesus when He comes. Brianna wonders whether Jesus will be on TV.

- Brianna’s playmate told her that Jesus is going to burn all the bad people when He comes. She didn’t obey her mommy. Will Jesus burn her?

- Brianna went to her granddaddy’s funeral. Mommy says Granddaddy will come out from the grave when Jesus comes. Brianna wonders who will dig the dirt from the grave so Granddaddy can get out.

- Mommy goes out for the evening. Brianna wonders if Jesus will come while she is gone. How would she find Mommy?

- Mommy said Jesus was very unhappy with her because she told a lie. Brianna’s afraid. She doesn’t want Jesus to come.

- Teacher says all the good people will go up in the air to meet Jesus. Brianna wonders whether there will be airplanes or helicopters or rockets to take all the people.

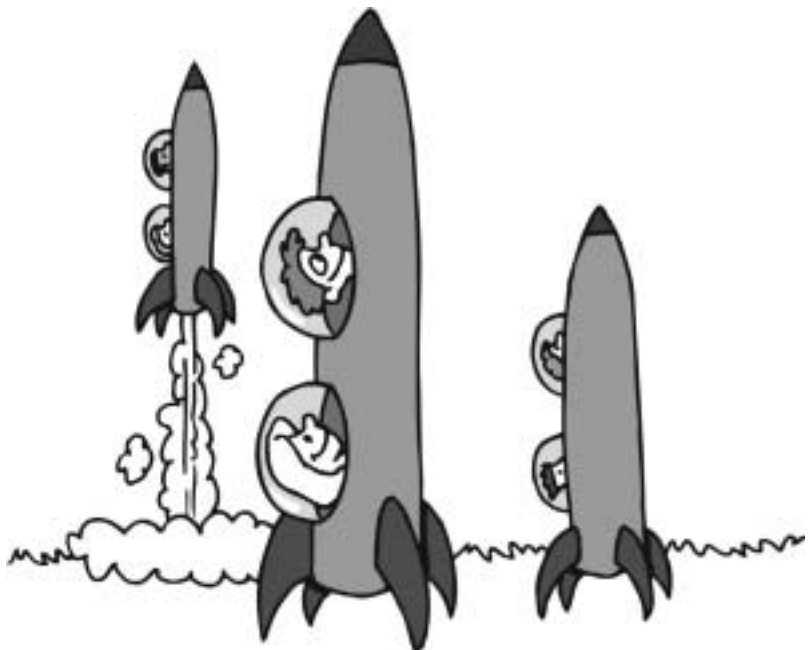
- Mommy reads a story about heaven. It shows a picture of a family

in white robes. Brianna thinks that wouldn’t be very much fun—she couldn’t play because her robe would get dirty.

- Brianna’s mommy and daddy are divorced. She wonders whether Jesus will know where to find her daddy when He comes. Will she and Mommy and Daddy be together as a family again in heaven?

Mental Development and Theological Ideas

Children’s stages of mental development will influence what theological ideas they can understand and whether they associate doctrines with a particular church. Research¹ on children’s thinking about churches shows that before age 7, most children have no understanding of what it means to belong to a certain church or what that church believes. Many



FLYING UP TO SEE JESUS (1 THESS. 4:17)

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don't know which church they belong to; they even think animals could be members of a church. By 7 to 9 years of age, as children mature into concrete operational thinking, they know that all children do not belong to the same denomination and that animals cannot be church members because they cannot participate in church services. However, they use outward signs to tell that a person belongs to a certain church: "I know he is a member of the Catholic Church because he goes into that church." Usually they do not have a clear idea how a person becomes a member of a church.

Not until 10 to 12 years does the word *religion* appear spontaneously in response to questions about churches. Children now grasp that religious identity requires an inner commitment and describe it by using words such as "repent" and "pray to God." Church membership means the person thinks, studies, and observes a certain code.

In his study for a Master's thesis at Andrews University, Arthur Kroncke found that even 6th graders (usually 12 or 13 years old) who attended church schools were hard pressed to identify what their church believed. Most could think of only one belief. The Catholic children identified "the Virgin Mary," the Lutherans, "the Holy Spirit," and the Adventists, "the Sabbath."²

How Misconceptions Occur

Childish misconceptions about scriptural ideas can occur for many reasons.³ First, many children experience mental overstimulation. Too much input from the mass media clutters their minds with ideas that they cannot really organize or assimilate.

Sometimes teachers mistake quantity for quality, and urge children to memorize more and more Bible verses, to know more and more stories, without paying attention to how much they really understand. Children may repeat mechanically what

they have been taught, but without any real idea of what it means. Never urge children to learn theological concepts that are too advanced for their level of thinking.

Children have no way of checking their own observations or what adults tell them. They must depend on their senses, because they do not yet have the mental capacity to judge and reason. They believe what others tell them, and sometimes misunderstand what is being said. Children can also pick up much misinformation from their friends who don't understand any more than they do.

Sometimes a child's previous experiences cause him or her to draw conclusions contrary to biblical concepts. Mickey insisted that the Flood story his teacher told was wrong. "It didn't happen that way," he said. "I know. I saw a video." Young children believe TV and videos are real life. Religious videos create much confusion because of their inaccuracies.

Many words have more than one

meaning. While you may be perfectly clear about the meaning you are trying to convey, the child may infer something else. Visuals may be misleading (such as videos), or perhaps no visual is used when one is needed. One little boy thought Peter walked on water covered with ice, but his brother knew what really happened because his teacher had shown the class a picture of Peter walking on the water.

Children often hear words incorrectly, especially in songs. When words are unfamiliar, they insert a word they know and come up with an incorrect idea of what is being taught. One little girl thought the birth of Jesus was announced by angels "While shepherds washed their socks by night."⁴ Another child, asked if he had seen the Dead Sea Scrolls at a Chicago museum, responded, "Mom, why did we want to go see the Dead Sea squirrels?" Another child, asked to recite the text "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted," responded, "He that humbleth himself shall be exhausted."⁵

Try asking kindergartners or primary-grade children to tell you what "He's the bright and morning Star,"



PETER WALKED ON ICE? (MATT. 14:29)

“amazing grace,” “fishers of men,” or “This little light of mine” mean. You may be surprised at the response.

Checking Children’s Thinking

To understand what your students are thinking, first study child development. Knowing the kind of thinking most children do at a particular age will help you identify ideas that might be confusing. You will also be able to listen with greater understanding.

Listening to your students’ conversation is very helpful. Listen to the meanings given to stories and events. Listen to how songs are sung. Listen to their answers to questions. Careful observation will give you invaluable insights into their thinking.

Talking with your students informally will also help you find out what they are thinking. Ask questions about common religious words and ideas. When they give you pat answers, be wary. These are not evidence of insight and understanding. Pursue the idea further. Ask them what they think the word *really means*.

Often children can express their religious ideas better through art, music, or role playing than in words. Ask your students to draw a picture of

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the Bible story. You may be amazed at their interpretations. Then you will have an opportunity to clarify misconceptions. After a child has drawn a picture, ask him or her to tell you about it. Just say simply, “Tell me about your picture.” Never make fun of what the child says or has drawn. If the explanation reveals misconceptions, note these for future reteaching. Never belittle or embarrass a student because of a misconception.

More than one child has drawn Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden in a car driven by an angel or Jesus. When teachers say, “Adam and Eve were driven out of their beautiful garden,” they set young children up for this kind of misconception. Watch your words carefully, especially when teaching younger students.

Learning Correct Theological Ideas

1. *Be sure you understand clearly what you are trying to teach your students.* If you are fuzzy about the meaning of salvation, you will have difficulty explaining it.

2. *Use easy-to-understand words.* Avoid complicated religious phrases and symbolic explanations. On the other hand, be sure your simple explanation is doctrinally correct.

3. *Use familiar objects and everyday events to teach Bible truths.*

4. *Use illustrations familiar to the child.*

5. *Explain the Bible lesson using objects to handle or visuals to look at.*

6. *Illustrate your teaching with stories.*

7. *Don’t rush the students.* Use short periods of instruction. Teach here a little and there a little. Give the students time to digest what they are learning.

8. *Do not confuse the students with many ideas at a time;* teach one idea well before moving on to another.

9. *Teach the same idea in many different ways.* Strive for real understanding of a few very important ideas rather than encyclopedic knowledge with little understanding. Teach an



THEOLOGY FOR CHILDREN

from Ellen G. White

Theological Idea	What to Teach	References
God the Father	God is a loving father who wants loving obedience from each child. God is love. God cares for children. Angels help us.	<i>Child Guidance</i> 487, 548; <i>Testimonies for the Church</i> vol. 8, 320; <i>Adventist Home</i> 321
Law of God	Children should love God and obey His law. They need to understand what is right and what is wrong.	<i>Child Guidance</i> 43, 81, 89, 490
Life of Jesus	Tell your students about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as soon as they can understand. Associate every lesson with Christ. Help them understand that God shows His love through Jesus.	<i>Child Guidance</i> 487, 494; <i>Adventist Home</i> 320, 321; <i>Testimonies</i> vol. 8, 320
Scripture	The children should learn to love the Bible as the rule of life. The Holy Spirit will help them understand. Reading the Bible is very important.	<i>Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students</i> 172
Salvation	Teach the Plan of Salvation simply. Disobeying God's law is sin. Jesus will forgive sins; help your students believe He does. They should ask daily. Invite them to give their hearts to God. Help them to understand that Jesus loves us so much that He came to live on Earth and to die so we might be forgiven. Teach with love and tenderness. Explain about the Day of Atonement and forgiveness.	<i>Counsels on Sabbath School Work</i> 79, 80; <i>Child Guidance</i> 490, 491; <i>Messages to Young People</i> 15; <i>Testimonies</i> vol. 5, 520
Victorious Life	Help your students look to God for strength. He hears their prayers. If they believe and trust God, He will send the Holy Spirit. Encourage them to thank God for His goodness and to use the Bible as a guide and help. With God's help, they can be true to Him in all circumstances. Explain how to obtain eternal life.	<i>Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students</i> 109, 50, 131; <i>Testimonies</i> vol. 2, 287; <i>Child Guidance</i> 146, 147, 172, 173
Creation	Nature is God's second book. Rightly understood, it teaches many different lessons—God's care, love, creation of the world, sin and suffering, the new earth. Provide a strong foundation on creationism.	<i>Testimonies</i> vol. 8, 326, 327; <i>Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students</i> 185-190; <i>Education</i> 99-120
Healthful Living	Teach about self-control and self-denial, the laws of health, and the function of the human body. Help your students understand that many kinds of illness are caused by what one does.	<i>Testimonies</i> vol. 3, 567; <i>Child Guidance</i> 104, 362
Heaven	Describes the glories of heaven and how to enter the Holy City.	<i>Child Guidance</i> 487, 488
Pillars of Faith	Help your students understand the pillars of the faith, the reasons why Seventh-day Adventists are separate and distinct from the world.	<i>Testimonies</i> vol. 5, 330, 331
Prayer	Teach your students how to pray clearly, distinctly, and simply. Help them memorize the Lord's Prayer.	<i>Child Guidance</i> 522, 523
Reverence in Worship	Teach your students to have the highest reverence for God and His house. Describe proper deportment in the sanctuary and in other religious settings.	<i>Child Guidance</i> 541, 542; <i>Testimonies</i> vol. 5, 494
Sabbath	Teach your students about Sabbath observance and preparation and about the importance of attending worship services. Explain that keeping the first day of the week is not true Sabbath keeping since it contradicts God's law.	<i>Child Guidance</i> 530; <i>Testimonies</i> vol. 6, 193, 356; <i>Education</i> 251
Service	Teach your students to be helpful to others, starting with their own family. Encourage missionary activities.	<i>Adventist Home</i> 286, 486, 487
Stewardship	Teach your students to deny self and to give to others or earn money to help others. Help them understand the need to return tithe and offerings. Center birthday celebrations around God's blessings.	<i>Counsels on Sabbath School Work</i> 139-143

KEYS TO THEOLOGY FOR CHILDREN

- † Teach simply, but always teach accurately.
- † Increase complexity as your students' thinking matures.
- † Check your students' thinking for misconceptions.
- † Teach important doctrines thoroughly so children understand what they believe.

important idea in 10 different ways, instead of teaching 10 different ideas.

10. Don't talk too much. *Avoid long, tedious explanations and prayers.* Children will become bored with religion.

11. *Give the students an opportunity to explain in their own words what they have learned.*

Wise counsel from an inspired source makes the point very clear: "Make sure your scholars understand you. If they cannot comprehend your ideas, then your labor is lost."⁶

Important Theological Concepts for Children

The same inspired source gives us important counsel about the theolog-

CHECK IT OUT and Learn More

The following books tell the story of the great controversy between God and Satan for children of different ages:

✓ For kindergarten and primary children: *Forever Stories*, vol. 1-5, by Carolyn Byers (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1989). *Margie Asks, Why Do People Have to Die?* by Laura Locke Winn (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2000).

✓ Sally Pierson Dillon, *Michael Asks Why* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2000). [ISBN: 08163175953]

✓ For primary and junior children: Sally Pierson Dillon, *The War of the Ages*, vol. 1-5 (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2000-2003).

ical ideas children need to understand. The chart on page 39 summarizes this information. Notice that the theological concepts mentioned first and most often are really fundamental to understanding grace. They are the essentials. Teach them often and in many different ways.

The first six theological ideas are stressed many times by Ellen White. Over and over, she indicates that we should teach our children that God is their Father, that He and Jesus love them very much, and that they should study the Bible and obey God's law. When they do wrong, Jesus, who died to save them, will forgive their sins and help them live a victorious life. They will be filled with the Holy Spirit and the grace of their Saviour.

The remaining theological ideas are in alphabetical order. Ellen White specifically mentions that each of them should be taught to children, but they are mentioned less frequently than the first six, which are really the core of salvation.

Teach these doctrines frequently and thoroughly. Begin with very simple ideas for young students. Little by little, add more information as their mental ability matures.⁷ Be sure older students understand what God's Word teaches about these doctrines and what they mean in everyday living by the time they complete elementary school. This will give them a "sure foundation" for the future. ✍



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This article has been adapted from a forthcoming book by Donna J. Habenicht and Larry Burton, Teach-



Larry Burton

ing 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.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. David Elkind, "The Study of Spontaneous Religion in the Child" in *The Child and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

2. Arthur J. Kroncke, "A Comparative Study of Religious Attitudes of Elementary Students in Seventh-day Adventist, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran Schools in Berrien County, Michigan," Master of Arts Research Project, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1978.

3. For an excellent discussion of this topic, see "Children and Their Theological Concepts" by Norman Wakefield and Robert E. Clark, in *Childhood Education in the Church, Revised and Expanded* by Robert E. Clark, Joanne Brubaker, and Roy B. Zuck, eds. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986). We are indebted to Wakefield and Clark for inspiration and ideas for this article. Also see *A Theology for Children* by William L. Hendricks (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman, 1980), a classic book with many useful ideas for explaining theology to children and helpful connections between child development and an understanding of theology.

4. Dick Van Dyke, *Faith, Hope, and Hilarity: The Child's Eye View of Religion*, Ray Parker, ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), p. 70.

5. "Give & Take," *Adventist Review* (October 13, 2003), p. 7.

6. Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1938), p. 118.

7. To help you do this, obtain the CD, which accompanies the authors' upcoming book, *Teaching the Faith: An Essential Guide for Building Faith-Shaped Kids*, where you will find the 27 doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church broken down into ideas children can understand, including suggested ages at which each idea can be taught.