

Connecting Children With GOD THROUGH PRAYER AND WORSHIP

Children connect with God by learning to pray, to worship, and to enjoy a personal connection with God every day.

Connecting children with God is the most thrilling aspect of helping them grow spiritually. As teachers, we can help them experience a direct connection to the Power House of the Universe, to the God who is the King of the Royal Heavenly Court, who loves them more than they can imagine, and who wants the very best for them. Children connect with God by learning to pray, to worship, and to enjoy a personal connection with God every day. Each is an indispensable part of the connection.

Prayer and Worship

Worship and prayer belong together because they both are part of connecting with God. What is prayer? What is worship? How do they relate?

The Nature of Prayer

Ellen White says that prayer is “the key in the hand

of faith to unlock heaven’s storehouse, where are treasured the boundless resources of Omnipotence.”¹ Children understand this aspect of prayer easily. Ask, and you will receive—God will give you what you want, He can do anything—just pray and He will. Gradually, children learn that asking and receiving also includes asking for help, protection, and guidance—not just things—and not just for themselves, but for others, too.

Prayer is friendship with God. “Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend.”² Prayer is telling God all about your life, sharing the intimate details, the joys, sorrows, mountain tops—anything. As children begin to understand friendship, they can more easily relate to prayer as talking to a very special Friend who is always there for them. They can always depend on Him and can tell Him anything, anytime.

Prayer changes us, not God. “Prayer does not bring

By Donna J. Habenicht and Larry Burton

God down to us, but brings us up to Him.”³ Prayer opens God’s perspective to us; we begin to see things as He sees them. Prayer pulls us out of our self-centeredness. We open our hearts and lives to God, not because He doesn’t know us, but because we want to receive Him. This perspective on prayer is the most difficult for children to understand. It comes to them gradually, over time, generally not until near the end of childhood. Guidance from the family, church, and school are an important help to children as they grow into this more mature view of prayer.

Stages in the Development of Prayer⁴

Researchers in child development and religious education have concluded that children go through four stages in their prayer life. Each stage reflects changes in their thinking processes and in their actual experiences with prayer. Children from different religious faiths appear to go through the same stages, but they may reach each stage at a younger age if they have had many experiences with prayer. The chart below summarizes these studies, which begin with children 5 years of age.

The Nature of Worship

Worship is . . .

Stages in the Development of Prayer	
Stage	Characteristics of Prayer
5 - 7 years	Children are confused about how prayers reach God. They may believe that they must say their prayers “correctly” to receive an answer and that multiple prayers bring quicker responses. They think that all children pray and that animals pray. Their prayers are self-centered.
7 - 9 years	Children now realize that animals don’t pray, nor do all children. They believe that God has limited ability to answer prayers. They may believe that no answer means they were bad, silly, or prayed too quietly. They request specific things and begin to pray for others. They may hold a tit-for-tat idea: You respect God, and He will respect you. Doubts begin around 8 years of age.
10 - 12 years	Children now see prayer as private conversation with God. It is intensely personal, is heard directly by God, and comes from feelings and needs.
Earliteen years (13 -15 years)	Children begin to realize that prayer changes the person who prays. They see prayer as valuable in and of itself. Although their overall belief in prayer declines, they pray anyway. Their requests are often specific and mundane.

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- giving of ourselves to God in response to His love for us.
- reaching out to communicate with the Creator because He is worthy.
- praising God for who He is and what He has done.
- giving reverence and honor to God.
- experiencing admiration and awe of the Eternal One.
- responding with our hearts and wills to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Worship produces changes in us. It makes us aware of our personal need, strengthens our faith, and provides spiritual power. Worship also brings personal fulfillment and results in commitment.⁵

Worship includes God’s Word, prayer, praise, music, giving, devotional inspiration, and an emotional response of commitment. Prayer plays a central role in worship because it involves actual communication with God—our hearts reaching out to His heart.

Helping Children Pray and Worship

Prayer is both “caught” and “taught.” A lot of prayer is “caught” at home if the home is a praying one. However, Adventist schools enroll many children who do not come from real praying homes, including non-religious families and children from other religious backgrounds. Do not assume that even children from church families have had a strong praying experience. Teaching your students to pray is a vital aspect of Christian education.

Kindergartners

Prayer is natural to kindergartners if they have grown up with daily devotions in their homes. Capitalize on these children’s ease in “talking to God.” Soon other children who lack the home experiences will begin to join in. Kindergartners have a strong faith and belief that God can and will answer their prayers. Providing many prayer experiences will help children grow in their understanding of prayer.

Sing a prayer preparation song to get children into the proper physical position and mood for prayer. A prayer response song at the end of the prayer helps maintain an attitude of reverence and worship.

Ask kindergartners for requests: “Is there something special you would like to ask God today?” Teach them that God loves to listen to their prayers—He bends down to hear them (Psalm 116:1, 2, NLT).⁶ He will answer in the best way for each child. Sometimes, God may need to work on it for a while before He answers. Sometimes, He will give them something different because He knows that is best for them.

Teach **different kinds of prayers** to older kindergartners:

- “Good morning, God!” prayers when they wake up.
- Prayers thanking God for the food before eating.
- Family prayers at worship time.
- Going-to-bed prayers—“Thank you for the good things that happened today. I’m sorry for being naughty. Please be

with me tonight. Please bless my family.”

- Prayer when they need help—“Please help me, God!”
- Public prayers at church service—teach parts of public prayers, one at a time: praise, thanks, petitions, confession, and forgiveness. Ask the children to listen for one part during the prayer at church.

Older kindergartners may be ready to learn the **Lord’s Prayer**, even though they may not understand all the words. Explain the meaning, using visuals or motions for each phrase, and reinforce the meaning with stories. Ask them to repeat the phrase several times. Inform parents that the children are learning the Lord’s Prayer so they can help at home. After your students have learned it, pray it once or twice a month to keep it fresh in their memories.

Kindergartners can learn a **model for prayer** if it is illustrated. Prepare a scrapbook with a picture of a child praying on the cover. The children can pose for pictures for the contents to make it personalized. You can also use pictures from magazines or simple drawings. Use the following simple model: **God, me, you, God.**

God (hands pointed upward) - Always begin by saying “Thank You” to God for all the good things He has given you.

Me (hands pointed inward) - Tell God you are sorry for the bad things you did. Ask Him to help you be good. Ask Him for anything you need.

You (hands pointed outward) - Ask God to help and take care of other people: Mom, Dad, brothers and sisters, missionaries, people who are in war, anyone who needs help.

God (hands pointed upward again) - Tell God you love Him and want to live with Him in heaven. Thank God for loving you. Amen.

Make your prayers appropriate to the level of your students’ understanding, but don’t underestimate them. Give individual children an opportunity to pray in small groups where they can be heard. If the other children cannot hear, they get restless. If

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a child volunteers, but suddenly can’t say anything, start praying and let the child echo you, phrase by phrase. Echo prayers are an excellent way to teach kindergartners to pray.

Early Elementary Level

Prayer time provides a splendid opportunity to help primary children learn to enrich their prayer life. Develop a prayer list for the whole class, using a **Prayer Book**, divided into Prayer Requests and Praise sections and stored in a loose-leaf binder. Each child who makes a prayer request enters the request on one page,

illustrated with his or her own drawings, photos, or pictures from magazines. Each page is dated and allows space for God’s response to the prayer. Children can also insert individual Praise pages where they praise God for something wonderful He has done for them.

Each request in the Prayer Book is entered on the **prayer list**, posted prominently in the room, and written on a small card or piece of paper. These small papers are kept in a basket or small box. At prayer time, several requests are drawn from the basket, including all the new ones, for special prayer that day.

Ask one boy and one girl to pray with you at the front of the room. Be sure the others can hear. If possible, use a prayer preparation song and a prayer response song to encourage a worshipful atmosphere.

Vary the prayer time to maintain interest. When the children have had some experience with praying in small groups (see instructions below), have them occasionally pray in their small groups instead of directed from the front of the room. Distribute several prayer request cards to each group. The children pray for these requests and any others their group has.

You may want to continue the God-Me-You-God model from kindergarten. It is very easy to remember and use and is based on people and relationships.

Introduce **Promises for Kids** by focusing on one promise



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each month. Post it prominently, teach its meaning, tell a related story, use it in activities, and refer to it often.

Early elementary students are ready for **group praying experiences**, but they need to be taught some new skills. The simplest way is to ask each child to think of one thing he or she is thankful for. Teach a model of this simple prayer: "Dear God, Thank you for my new baby brother. In Jesus' name, Amen." This teaches children how to address God with respect and reminds them that we can pray to Him because of what Jesus did for us. It also clearly marks the end of the prayer with "Amen."

Now, ask each child to pray in turn thanking God for one thing. This provides enough structure so children feel comfortable.

A class of older students might try a **conversational prayer**. Children ages 7 to 9 usually need coaching. Save totally spontaneous group prayers for older children. The "volleyball approach" is a good introduction for this age. Decide on a topic (i.e., asking God to help someone). Ask each child to choose someone to pray for. You begin, then "toss" the prayer to a child by saying her name. She prays, then "tosses" the prayer to someone who has not prayed. Continue the same way until all have prayed.

By age 9, students are ready to think of **prayer as a conversation** with a good Friend. They can tell God everything that has happened to them during the day—as they might do with a close friend—their concerns, and anything they feel really happy or sad about. It may help some children to hold a telephone receiver and pretend they are talking on the phone to God. Others might like to write their conversations with God in the form of an E-mail, if that is how they usually converse with their friends. Facing an empty chair and pretending Jesus is seated there helps some children make the conversation real.

Ages 10-14

Start each school day with **worship**, including a praise song, prayer, a Bible verse, and a brief inspirational story that en-

courages a personal response. Use the same theme as the Bible lesson. Set up the classroom to include a worship center where beauty, order, and some symbol of God's presence will draw the eye during the worship service. The worship center should be hidden (perhaps with drapes or a screen) during the more active instructional portion of the day and revealed only during the worship experience.

Review the previously taught **prayer model**, or teach a new model. The ABCs of prayer also appeal: Ask, Believe, and Claim God's promises. Older students are ready to pour out their hearts to God, especially teenagers. The friendship aspect of prayer appeals to them. They also look to God for guidance in the many decisions and events of their daily lives. They need to hear you, as their teacher, share your prayer and worship journey. Your prayers become models for them, so leave the simplistic prayers of early childhood behind and model a more mature prayer. Your students need to hear you presenting a problem to God and asking how to solve it; interceding for other people; confessing and asking forgiveness in a corporate way.

Continue to **teach about prayer**. Older students usually have questions about the efficacy of prayer and what it really means to pray. They have left the complete trust of the earlier years and now have doubts. Respond to their feelings and questions honestly, but tactfully and lovingly. Try to "hear" beyond the words to what the child is experiencing and really wants to know. Encourage trust and faith. Express your own faith and how you arrived at this point in your relationship with God. Your students need to see a real-life model of what they have been taught as it works in adult life. They may not be seeing this at home, so your model becomes very important for their spiritual development.

Earliteens can begin to understand that prayer changes us, not God.⁷ It is time for them to grapple with the thought that "the whole meaning of a journey into Prayer Country is to find God, not answers."⁸ When they find God, the specific answers to their prayers do not matter so much. They know they can trust God with their future. They must give everything over to God to do whatever He decides is best for them. This is a very important transition for earliteens. It will bring them to an entirely new level of maturity in their relationship with God.

Prayer and worship come together in praise and thankfulness. Guide your students to see the joy of praising God and to understand what praise can do for them personally when they feel discouraged or are having a bad day. God wants to hear about anything that perplexes them. He specializes in unraveling perplexities and healing broken hearts.

Suggest some **innovative ways** to bring God into your students' daily lives. For example, as they jog, pray for the people in each house as they pass by. Walking to school is a good time for connecting with God in the same way. Riding in the car with a parent and other siblings can be a perfect opportunity to worship God through praises and songs.

Earliteens are ready for more serious thinking about prayer:

CHECK IT OUT and Learn More

Rick Osborne, *Teaching Your Child How to Pray*. Chicago: Moody, 2000. Complete book on helping children grow up as praying people.

***Fifty-two Ways to Teach Children to Pray*.** Rainbow Books, a division of Success With Youth, P.O. Box 261129, San Diego, CA 92196.

Karen Holford, *100 Creative Prayer Ideas for Kids (And Grown-Ups, Too!)*. Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2003.

Ruthie Jacobsen with Noelene Johnsson, *Putting Their Hands in His*. North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists with Autumn House, 2001.

Jack and Ann Calkins, *Children in Worship: Experiencing God in Meaningful Ways*. Lincoln, Neb.: AdventSource, 1998.

What does God mean when He says, “Ask, and you will receive”? Why are some prayers not answered (or at least it seems so)? Are there conditions for answered prayer? Should we pray over and over for the same thing, or is once enough? If we pray a long time, is God more likely to answer? What does prayer really do for a person? How does prayer give us spiritual life and energy? If you are open to hearing your students’ concerns, you may also have the opportunity of helping them find a solid prayer and worship relationship with God that will see them through the turbulent years ahead.

A variety of **prayer activities** will make prayer new and exciting for students. The next section provides some suggested activities for starters.

Pray a lot for your students. Ask God to give you the wisdom to help them really connect with Him before they leave your classroom. Their connection with God is what will see them through the next years of changes, decisions, and pressure. It is indispensable for growing young Christians.

Prayer Activities for Children⁹

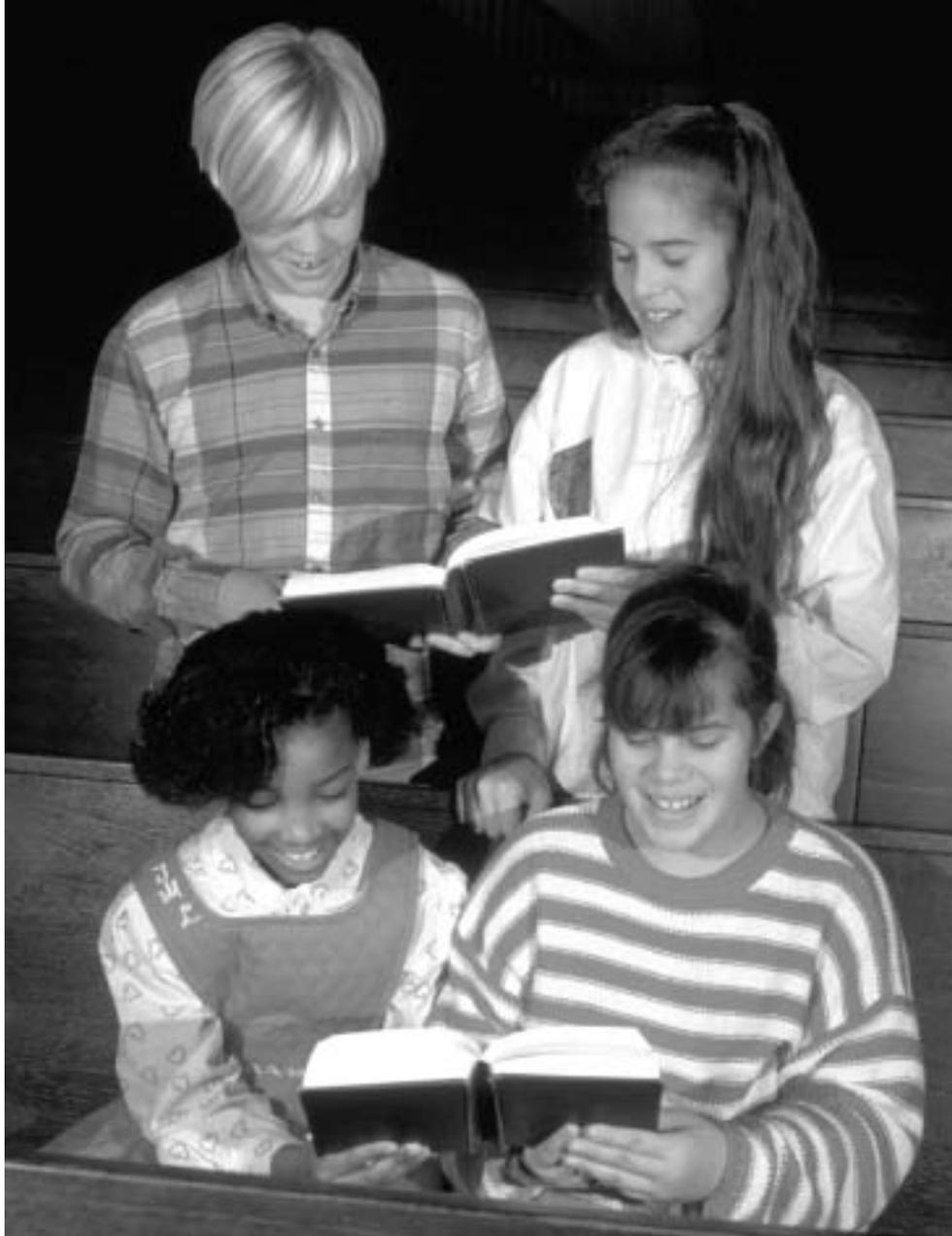
The following prayer activities are but a sampling of what you can do with children to enhance and broaden their prayer experiences. Additional ideas may be found in our book, *Teaching the Faith*.

Updated Bible Prayers (Ages 7-15). In small groups, the students read one of the Bible prayers, such as Psalm 23; Daniel 9:15-19; Revelation 12:10-12; or Psalm 51:1-4,7-12. Then the children write in their own words or draw what this prayer means to them. Each child can work on one or two verses, which can be combined at the end; or the whole group can work together through several verses, and one child can write the prayer. Pray the paraphrased version at the end.

Prayer Letters (Ages 7-12). Each student writes or draws a prayer letter to God. Volunteers can read their prayer letters as a prayer. Quieter children can say their prayers silently.

Praise Collage (All ages). Ask the students to cut out pictures from magazines (religious, nature and geography, general, women’s) to make a collage of things for which they want to praise God. Write “We Praise God for . . .” at the top of a large sheet of paper, and paste the pictures on the paper. Each small group shows its collage to the entire class, and then prays a praise prayer about the things on the collage. At the end, sing a praise song.

Musical Prayers (Ages 10-14). Pass out hymnbooks/songbooks, and ask the children



to find songs that are prayers. Remind them that prayers include praise, confession, thanksgiving, and requests. Take a few days to sing the prayers they have chosen.

Helping Children Connect Personally With God

Encouraging children to develop a personal devotional life is vital to connecting them with God for the rest of their lives. Communicate with your students’ families to encourage them to help the children experience personal time with God. Show your students how to experience “God Time” through reading and memorizing one verse in the Bible, doing the suggested activities in the Bible lesson, talking with God using the prayer model they have learned, writing or drawing a response or idea in their journal, singing praises with a tape/CD, listening to God’s impressions, or responding to God through nature experiences.

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tion with God is learning to give their will to Jesus every day and experiencing grace and forgiveness, as well as how to forgive. Their “God Time” is made to order for these experiences. They need to experience getting rid of the guilt—burning it or throwing it into the bottom of the sea, as God promises to do. Encourage them to focus on praising God when tempted to think about the guilt. Provide experiences that show them what to do at home.

Introduce your students to some of the personal prayer journeys described below. The analogy of journeying to God Country¹⁰ can provoke interest and deepen their personal connection with God.

Palms Up, Palms Down Prayers (Ages 13 and older).¹¹

This is a prayer of release and acceptance. Say, “With palms down, push away each of your concerns, one by one, talking with God about each one. Give them all to Him. Then, with palms up, prepare to receive God’s blessings. Ask for a specific blessing in connection with each concern. Pause after asking to listen for God’s impressions. Then go on to the next concern. At the end, pause again to receive God’s impressions. A Bible verse may come to mind or a distinct impression about something you need to do or release.” This prayer can be written on a sheet of paper and divided in half, one side for Palms Down and the other for Palms Up.

Text Prayers (Ages 13 and older).¹² Have students find a Bible text that expresses what they need at this point in their lives. They can make that text their own, thinking about every word, one by one. Ask them to look up the words in a Bible concordance to find similar verses and put them on cards or in a computer file. They can also go to Christian bookstores to find bookmarks or other memorabilia related to the verse. They are to keep this verse for at least three months, maybe longer, before moving on to another Bible verse.

Answering Questions About Prayer and Worship

So-called “unanswered prayers” raise the most questions with children. Think carefully about how to respond to situations where a child was hurt or even killed in an accident or as the result of violence, or a parent died or left the family through divorce. Understanding tough times is difficult, especially for children who tend to see God as a Giver and Protector. They wonder: Doesn’t God send angels to protect people? Then why did this terrible thing happen?

Children need to gradually come to understand that there is an Evil One roaming the world and that he is the one responsible for all bad things. God is the solution to the evil, not the problem. Be careful how you say things. Do not subtly blame God for hurricanes, wars, deaths, or family breakups. The Evil One is at work in all of this, and God’s people are not immune to his strikes.

You can help teenagers—and perhaps some younger students—to understand, through searching and prayer, that we may not know all the answers to our questions until eternity,

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when we can ask God directly. We must trust God in everything. He will see us through the difficulties. If children continue blaming God for what happened, bitterness may fill their lives, and they will reject God.

Be careful with often-used Christian phrases such as: “It was God’s will.” “God permitted it.” They are very hard for children to understand. Simply say, “Jesus is right beside you. He will carry you in His arms. He loves you and is crying, too. Jesus hates the bad things that happen. Satan is to blame for the bad things.”

Think through your own feelings and theology carefully. When you work with children, these difficult questions are sure to arise.

Try to translate the thoughts God gives you into children’s language, considering what you know about your students’ thoughts and feelings. Then you will be prepared for the tough questions. When the questions come, breathe a prayer for God to give you the right thing to say and do. ✍



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This article has been adapted from a book by Donna J. Habenicht and Larry Burton, *Teaching the Faith: An Essential Guide for Building Faith-Shaped Kids* (Review and Herald, 2004) and is printed with the permission of the authors and publisher. **Donna J. Habenicht** is Professor Emerita of Educational and Counseling Psychology at Andrews University. **Larry Burton** is Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. 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. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1908), pp. 94, 95.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See Kenneth E. Hyde, *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press), chapter 5 for a review of the studies on prayer and other religious beliefs; D. Long, D. Elkind and B. Spilka. “The Child’s Conception of Prayer,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1967), vol. 6, pp. 101-109.
5. For further discussion of these points, see Eleanor Hance, “Teaching Children to Worship and Pray” in *Childhood Education in the Church* (Clark, Brubaker & Zuck, eds.), Chicago, Ill.: Moody, 1986), pp. 420, 421.
6. Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996. Used by permission of the Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.
7. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 93.
8. Dorothy Eaton Watts, *Prayer Country* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1993, p. 10). Watts writes about a journey into Prayer Country to meet God, using a travel metaphor. Each chapter describes a different way of making the journey. Some of these journeys into Prayer Country would be inspiring for teenagers.
9. These prayer activities have been gathered and adapted from various sources, including the North American Division Children’s Ministry certification instructional module: “Teaching Children to Pray.”
10. Watts, *Prayer Country*, p. 10.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*