



# Devotions in the **Early Years**

Devotions can be a powerful and meaningful experience for young children, but they should be tailored to match the children's age and stage. This guide will look at the need of this age group and provide some ideas for organising devotions for the early years.



## Developing faith in the early years

### **The imaginative world of the 3- to 7-year-old**

Have you ever stood with a young child who is fascinated by a spider spinning its web? From the earliest years, children have experiences of awe and wonder. It seems that all children are born with a sense of the incomprehensible, the holy – a sense of God.

Impressions of God are generally positive – a fun, playful God or a God that may take on a magical or superhero quality. Three- to seven-year-old children readily imagine unusual creatures like monsters and dragons, so thinking of God as a superhero is not unusual. Believing in miracles presents no problem to them.

One of the most important spiritual needs of young children is the freedom to create and find spiritual images of God, heaven, and death that express their feelings and understandings. They also need to create and participate in meaningful practices and rituals, like prayerful bedtime conversations and table prayers, that acknowledge that God is active in the ordinary events of life.

Pretend play gives children the chance to try out the roles and behaviours they see around them.

The three-year-old 'mothering' a doll and the five-year-old who sets up a school room and teaches his teddies and dolls are familiar examples. It is crucial that we give our children positive role models to copy.

Young children may have alternating feelings of being powerless and of being able to take on the world. This mirrors how they feel about their personal security and the trustworthiness of those on whom they depend.

Praying with our children and talking about the trustworthy, loving nature of God will help them feel secure.

Children love stories that clearly define good and evil, which is why Bible stories (and fairy tales) are so well loved. These stories help them recognise feelings and behaviours that threaten and bother them and help them to identify with the triumph of good over evil.

Music, art, stories, pretending, eating, wondering, praying – all are important in these early years. They help teach trust – of ourselves, other people, the world, and God.



# Devotions in the Early Years

We know that in Early Childhood Services, children often do not attend full-time, and not all children will be present at the same times on the same days as each other. Anyone working with young children appreciates that they often have short attention spans and need simple ideas presented clearly.

- Keep it very simple. Daily devotions at this age are usually based on Bible stories. It makes sense at this age and stage to incorporate the content from the Christian Studies Framework into your planning, as there is very limited time with children and it's probably better not to introduce too many new concepts at a time.
- Slow and steady is fine! Don't try to rush through too many stories in a week. You could spend a whole week or even longer on one story if your students are still enjoying it. Try some different ways to explore the story each day.
- As your students are very young, it would be better to keep devotions to 5–10 minutes each day. Try to pick a regular time for your devotions.
- Consider adding some Christian practices into your daily routines. These require little or no preparation and don't take very long, but can really add a wonderful dimension to your classroom by covering the day with God's love.

We have included a couple of simple patterns for you to follow at the end of this guide. You might also like to check out the **Christian Studies Curriculum Framework** for your age group.



“We need to allow space for children to explore the story in ways that are meaningful to them.”

**IVY BECKWITH,**  
2010, **Formational Children's Ministry. Shaping children using story, ritual and relationship**



## The power of play

Young children love to use their imaginations and learn while playing. Devotions can be a great time to incorporate play. Look for opportunities to have fun, like dressing up, role-playing, crafts, drawing and creating the world of the Bible story.

# Christian Practices

God isn't just with us during devotions – he's present all the time! Helping children understand this can bring them a sense of security and bless your day as well. Christian practices can include:

- regular routines to begin and finish each day and to remember that God is with us during key moments. A day could begin with devotions or a short start-of-the-day prayer, feature a table grace before snack or lunch time, and finish with a short blessing as children leave. While the words used can remain the same every day, or change each week, it is important to keep have these moments in the same spots each day so children can get used to them.
- 'teachable' moments – look out for moments in the day when something special happens, you notice a connection to what you are learning in Christian Studies or devotions, or perhaps when something sad happens. These can be opportunities for casual conversation and prayer which reinforce their understanding and bring comfort.

RESOURCES & IDEAS FOR CHRISTIAN PRACTICES



# Sacred spaces

Teachers are encouraged to create a worship space/altar for class devotions, to signal that devotions are a special time, set apart from the rest of the day. You might like to create a sacred space by setting up a small table with a cross, perhaps a special cloth, a Bible story book and perhaps a couple of battery-operated candles. Involve the children in decorating the space as much as you can.



IDEAS FOR SACRED SPACES



# Rituals and routine

Children respond well to clear and consistent routines, actions and patterns which signal that it is time to worship, time to pray, time to listen etc.

- You might like to ring a small bell or sound a chime as a sign that it's time for devotions.
- You could play a familiar, quiet piece of music as children settle then begin the devotion by 'lighting' the (battery-operated) candles and saying the invocation together.
- When it is time to listen to the Bible story, consider having a short phrase or prayer which leads into the story to signal to children that they are hearing from God. For example,

'Now we will hear from God.  
Let's listen carefully to the Bible story.'

'Let's pray before we hear the Bible story. Dear God,  
open our ears and our hearts to hear you today. Amen.'  
(You could include gestures to match the prayers).

- When it is time to pray, show children how to fold their hands and bow their heads.
- You might like to encourage the children and staff to bless each other at the end of the devotion time. Use simple words and include a simple gesture like making a cross on each other's forehead or arm.

'God bless you today [name]';  
'Jesus loves you, [name]. Have a great day!'

- Share each other's highs and lows, and include them in your prayers.

## Involving children in devotions

Here are some ways to involve the children in your devotion time:

- Ask children to perform the small rituals to start devotions, like 'lighting' the candle or putting fresh flowers on the altar. It's a good idea to practice this beforehand and have a roster so everyone gets a turn.
- Action songs or songs they can dance to are a great way to get the wiggles out and to help reinforce the message.
- Even young children can contribute to prayers. You can leave space for them to chime in with their own prayers or teach them some memory prayers like the Lord's Prayer or very simple prayers.

IDEAS FOR RITUALS AND ROUTINES



# Planning Devotions

**Simple and regular is more important than elaborate and time-consuming with devotions. Usually devotions will include:**



Inviting God to be with us (invocation) 'In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'



A Bible story and possible a short discussion/ question time



Prayers



Blessing

“Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'”

**MATTHEW 19:14**



**Here are some thoughts for how you could plan your devotions:**

- Check with your director or ECS chaplain whether there is a whole ECS devotion plan or resources that they already have. Some centres might have a plan of which Bible stories to teach already in place.

**PLANNING RESOURCES**



- If you aren't very experienced with devotions, you might like to ask another staff member to partner with you. See if you can watch them in action or ask them to help you practice. You don't have to be perfect! God is doing his work in the children just by your class gathering in his name and listening to him.
- Look at the Christian Studies curriculum for your age group. There is a list of Bible stories which teach the concepts about God that the children need to learn. Exploring these stories in devotional time will help the children grasp the ideas (and save you some time!)

**EARLY YEARS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK**



Please note: devotions should be held distinct from Christian Studies, but they can complement each other.

- Once you've chosen your Bible story, decide how you will share it with the children. You can use lots of different ways to explore a Bible story. Think about what the story tells us about God or how it points to Jesus.

**BIBLE STORY RESOURCES**



- Gather your resources and choose a song to match the story if you can. If you can't find a song that exactly relates to the story, either have the children choose from a few familiar songs or teach them a song which highlights the main point of the week's story.

**MUSIC RESOURCES**



- Get creative and use all the senses to explore the Bible story. Here's a simple weekly pattern you could adapt to suit your group:



### MONDAY

Listen to the story from a children's Bible. Check for basic understanding:

- What is the name of the person in the story?
- What happened?

Introduce a song related to the story.



### TUESDAY

Watch the story using a video clip. Ask children to draw/create something from the story as they listen to the song.



### WEDNESDAY

Teach the children the song, reminding them about the story along the way. Teach them some actions or get them to make some up.



### THURSDAY

Act out the story, using Godly-play type figures, puppets, a sand tray etc or ask the children to dress up and act out the story.



### FRIDAY

Worship time instead of devotions – put together all you've learnt this week to share the story, respond to it with pictures or drama and sing the song.

CREATIVE  
DEVOTION IDEAS



- Teach the children how to pray. There are lots of different ways for young children to pray:
  - o Classic short prayers learnt off-by-heart (eg the Lord's Prayer, table graces etc).
  - o Action prayers which help children remember what to pray for (eg The Five Finger Prayer).
  - o Creative prayer patterns/styles (eg popcorn prayers, drawing prayers, colouring prayers etc).

## Resources for Early Years Worship

PRAYER RESOURCES



MUSIC RESOURCES



BIBLE STORY RESOURCES

