

*How Do Our  
Children  
Grow?*



# *How Do Our Children Grow?*

**Introducing Children to  
God, Jesus, the Bible, Prayer, Church**

*Delia Halverson*



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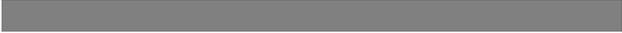
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Dedicated to  
the children and youth  
of the  
millennium generation





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## *Introduction*

The foundation of this book extends far beyond my years and yours put together. The foundation of this book reaches back to essential concepts in scripture, when God commanded Moses to have the people pass the laws and their faith on through the generations, from their children to their children's children. (Deuteronomy 6:6–9 and 31:12–13) Jesus affirmed the importance of the child in our midst, even in a society that sought to push children aside. (Mark 9:36–37 and 10:13–16) This desire to share my faith with future generations was passed on to me through my parents and through a professor I had in Christian education some years ago, Carrie Lou Goddard.

But the actual calling to write these ideas down did not happen until almost twenty years ago as I began conducting workshops for parents and teachers. I found them anxious to do more than give pat answers to questions that the children posed to them. They were serious about sharing their faith but did not have the necessary tools. And today's parents and teachers are still looking for ways to talk with children about God in everyday opportunities.

Since I first began working with parents, some of this material has been written, added to, and refined many times as I have seen changes in children and changes in the circumstances of our children's lives. Today, as we approach the next millennium, it is appropriate that the message come forward again, in the context of a new world. I find parents anxious to be a part of their children's spirituality. We are even exploring ways

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to offer planned learning opportunities for parents and children as they grow spiritually together. It is indeed exciting to be a part of this new generation of families!

Another exciting venture has been grandparent and grandchild experiences in faith. Because our extended families live miles apart, we must be intentional in sharing our faith across the miles and during the days that we are together. Many of the suggestions in this book have helped grandparents take some responsibility for their grandchildren's spiritual formation. It is in this way that our understanding of God will grow, from generation to generation.

I welcome any comments and ideas you may have concerning children and youth and their faith search. You may contact me by e-mail at [samandee@compuserve.com](mailto:samandee@compuserve.com). I would also enjoy hearing how you have used some of these ideas as you share your faith with children and youth.

Delia Halverson

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## CHAPTER 1

# *Teaching Children and Youth to “Do” Religion*

As I entered the party store to purchase special napkins, I saw a woman with a small son in tow, being helped by the store clerk. As I searched for my napkins I realized the young boy was obviously bored by the adult conversation. He continued to escape his mother’s grasp and wander about the store, investigating the colorful items on display. In order to distract the child, the clerk tied a helium balloon to his wrist.

As the adults continued with their conversation, I watched what I believed to be an act of worship. Standing in the middle of the party store, that little boy spent five minutes (which is a very long time for such a small child) pulling his arm down and watching as the helium lifted his arm again into the air. The child’s communication skills were not yet developed enough to explain his experience, but there was an expression of awe and wonder on his face that went deeper than simple puzzlement. At a young age, that child was exploring thoughts about something we cannot understand. He was “doing theology” and dealing with the concept of a power greater than ourselves—not just the power of helium gas, but the power that makes all things possible.

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Our own theology, simply stated, is *our belief in God*. As parents, we usually have a grasp of some aspects of God that we are certain we believe, but often there are beliefs with which we continue to struggle. This is natural, because a growing faith continues to search. You need not wait until you have all the answers to share your faith with your children.

We will never know all there is to know about God. If we did know it all, then God would not be God. Our awe of God, the very reason for our existence, would be lost. Just as most of us are not master mathematicians but are comfortable helping our children learn to count and solve simple addition problems, so we can also help them with the basic steps of faith, while we are still growing ourselves.

Jesus told us we are to become “like children.” Children are not looking for complicated theological explanations to their questions. In fact, sometimes they don’t need any answer at all—they need to be able to share their questioning minds and to know that we are seeking answers to questions with them, side by side. When we are still not sure about our beliefs, it’s okay to admit that we are reaching. Our children, by observing our explorations, learn that religious development is an ongoing, ever-searching experience and never a closed book. Our relationship with God and our faith in Christ’s teachings stand as the foundation for sharing with our children.

#### ***How Early?***

Some years ago, we parents were told that our children would do better in school if we did not teach letter identification or reading before they began kindergarten. We were told that this would confuse the child. Now we recognize the mistake of that theory.

In the same manner, I hear parents say that they will wait until their children are older, and then let them decide on a religion themselves. Parents are afraid they will “mess up” by teaching one religious preference, only to have the child decide on another.

In reality, we cannot avoid teaching our children. Whether we realize it or not, we teach every day of our lives. We teach our children intentionally or unintentionally. We either teach

them that our religion is important to us, or we teach them that we don't place enough importance in our religious faith to share it with them.

In a national study of 11,000 youth, adults, pastors, and teachers in six mainline denominations, the Search Institute revealed the family as a major impact on faith maturity, closely followed by Christian education in a church setting. Among the youth polled, “family religiousness” ranked highest. This included families where the parents talked about faith and God with their children, practiced family devotions, and worked together on projects that helped others.<sup>1</sup>

The earlier you begin, the better. In fact, you can begin to lay the foundation during prenatal months. Establish or improve your relationship with a church family. Enrich your own spiritual foundation and relationship with God.

### ***Using the Book***

This book will help you talk with your children and youth about faith and about God. It is not a book of theory, but rather a book to give you concrete handles on methods and opportunities to share your faith with your children and youth, so that they will grow in their own faith.

The suggestions laid out in this book are experiences that may be had spontaneously or with little preparation. I urge you to read through the whole book, so that you are alert to ideas and can draw on them regularly. You may then want to concentrate on one section at a time.

Please don't try to deal with everything at once. Instead, pick and choose what seems appropriate to your family and the age level of your children. Because children and teens vary in their psychological and religious development, I cannot be specific about appropriate ages. I have suggested some things for very young children (early preschool), young children (generally preschool), elementary (sometimes older and sometimes younger), and youth (grades 6–12). As you work with your family, you will learn how to determine whether an activity or discussion is appropriate for your children or youth. The excitement will mount, and soon ideas will snowball, and you will think of other ways to share your faith with your family,

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ways that I haven't even thought of. God gives each of us the guidance necessary to follow our own calling as witnesses of the faith, whether it be in church, in the business world, or in the home.

As you use these suggestions and methods, you will watch your child wonder over discoveries of newness, develop an awe of God, and discover meaningful direction and purpose to life. Arthur Gordon, in *A Touch of Wonder*, relives such a time in his life.

Many summers ago a small boy lived in a tall house by the sea. The house had a tremendous peaked roof made of weathered shingles that towered above all the surrounding cottages. In this roof, near the top, was a trapdoor that could be reached only by a ladder propped up on the attic floor. Children used to play in the attic sometimes, but no one ever climbed up to the trapdoor. It was too high and forbidding.

One sunny day, however, when the boy's father was storing some boxes in the attic, he glanced up at the underside of the great room. "Must be quite a view from up there," he said to his son, "why don't we take a look?"

The boy felt his heart lurch with excitement and a touch of fear, but his father was already testing the shaky ladder. "Up you go," he said, "I'll be right behind you."

Up they went through the mysterious darkness, each step a terror and a delight. Up through the tiny sunbeams lancing through the cracks, up until the boy could smell the ancient heat-soaked shingles, up until the trapdoor, sealed with cobwebs, touched the top of his head. His father unhooked a latch, slid the trapdoor back, and a whole new universe burst upon his dazzled eyes.

There lay the sea—but what a sea! Gigantic, limitless, blazing with splintered sunlight, it curved away to infinity, dwarfing the land, rivaling the sky. Below him, queerly inverted, were the tops of trees and—even more unimaginable—the back of gulls in flight. The familiar path through the dunes was a mere thread where heat waves shimmered; far away a shrunken river with toy boats coiled into the sea. All this

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he saw at a glance from the protective circle of his father’s arm, and the impact of such newness, of such violently expanded horizons, was so great that from that moment the world of his childhood was somehow altered. It was stretched; it was different; it was never quite the same again.<sup>2</sup>