Study Guides for Children

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to recover a richer picture of childhood that should inspire renewed commitment to serving all children. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

A Vibrant Theology of Children
Many distorted and simplistic views of children see them as commodities, consumers, or economic burdens, or only as sinful creatures that are ‘not yet fully human.’ In Scripture and Christian tradition we discover a richer picture of childhood that should inspire creative religious education and renewed commitment to serving all children.

The Childhood of Jesus
The mystery of God’s incarnation in the child Jesus is a memorable theme in the Gospel of Luke. Why is it important that Jesus “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom” through the influence of his human family?

Living in the Shadow of the Manger
What is the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood? When we prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man, we will recognize and serve the needs of children entrusted to our care.

Beyond Noah’s Ark
We want to guide our children into Scripture’s rich banquet of stories of promise, deliverance, human failure, and divine forgiveness and fidelity. But how should we go about imparting to them a deep knowledge of the Bible?

Caring for Children in Crisis
How should we respond to the pain and grief children suffer in crises such as sexual abuse, divorce, and death? We can respond in creative ways to God’s call to care for children beyond our families and faith communities.

Parenting Virtues
Parenting can be an unnerving prospect, for it opens us to vulnerability, change, and being permanently shaped by the habits we practice. Yet, as we parent with Christian intentionality, how may we be advanced in holiness by our children and shaped into new creations embodying hope, humility, and hospitality?

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers
For teachers who use these study guides in class, here are optional lesson plans with detailed teaching suggestions.
Many distorted and simplistic views of children see them as commodities, consumers, economic burdens, or only as sinful creatures that are ‘not yet fully human.’ In Scripture and Christian tradition we discover a richer picture of childhood that should inspire creative religious education and renewed commitment to serving all children.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-15

Responsive Reading†

See Israel’s gentle Shepherd stand with all engaging charms.

Hark! how he calls the tender lambs, and folds them in his arms.

“Permit them to approach,” he cries, “nor scorn their humble name; for ‘twas to bless such souls as these the Lord of angels came.”

We bring them, Lord, in thankful hands, and yield them up to thee; joyful that we ourselves are thine, thine let our children be.

Reflection

Pointillist artists, led by George Seurat (1859-1891), achieved more vibrant hues by placing dots of contrasting pure color on the canvas rather than mixing their paints. The viewer’s eye combines these bits of red against green, or yellow next to purple, into sparkling rich colors.

In a similar fashion, Marcia Bunge invites us to retrieve a more vibrant theology of childhood by holding in tension these six contrasting, almost paradoxical ways of describing children in Scripture and Christian tradition. She reminds us they are:

- gifts of God and signs of God’s blessing, though they are sinful and selfish. They are “gifts” not only to their parents, but to the community. “Parents in the past perhaps wanted children for reasons we do not always emphasize today, to perpetuate the nation or to ensure someone would care for them in their old age,” Bunge notes. “Nevertheless, there is a sense today and in the past that one of the great blessings of our interactions with children is simply the joy and pleasure we take in them” (see Luke 1:14; John 16:21). In contrast, the Bible also realistically depicts children as sinful moral agents (Genesis 8:21; Psalms 51:5 and 58:3; Romans 3:9-10).

- developing creatures in need of instruction and guidance, yet are fully human and made in the image of God. The Bible encourages adults to nurture children emotionally, intellectually, morally, and spiritually (Genesis 18:19; Deuteronomy 31:12-13; Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4). Beyond “providing children with a good education and teaching them skills that are necessary to
earn a living and raise a family, adults are to instruct children about the faith and help them develop moral sensibilities, character, and virtue so that they can love God and love the neighbor with justice and compassion.” Yet, though they are developing, children are already created in the image of God; thus, “all children, regardless of race, gender, or class, are fully human and worthy of respect.”

- *models of faith, sources of revelation, and representatives of Jesus,* though they are *orphans, neighbors, and strangers* who need to be cared for with justice. Jesus praises children’s humility and says that by welcoming a child in his name, we welcome him (Matthew 18:1-5 and 19:14). How startling! “In the first century, children occupied a low position in society, abandonment was not a crime, and children were not put forward as models for adults. Even today, we rarely emphasize what adults can learn from children.” The Bible instructs us to care for all children, especially poor children who are among the most vulnerable members of society (Exodus 22:22-24, Deuteronomy 10:17-18 and 14:28-29).

Whenever we focus “on only one or two aspects of what children are,” Bunge warns, “we risk treating them in inadequate and harmful ways.”

**Study Questions**

1. In your family or congregation, do you emphasize some of these six aspects of children over the other facets of a biblical view? To which aspects should you attend more carefully?

2. Are any of these aspects of children neglected in our society? If so, does this lead us to treat children in harmful ways?

3. How might we mistreat children if we exclusively emphasize their sinfulness? Yet, toward what three important truths, according to Bunge, does this biblical view point?

4. How could a congregation’s religious education program for children and worship be shaped in order to respect them as moral witnesses, models of faith, and sources of revelation?

**Departing Hymn:** “We Come in Childhood’s Joyfulness” (verses 1a and 2)

We come in childhood’s joyfulness,  
we come as children free!  
We offer up, O God, our hearts,  
in trusting love to Thee.

We come not as the mighty come:  
not as the proud we bow;  
but as the pure in heart should bend,  
we seek thine altars now.

“Forbid them not,” the Savior cried,  
“but let them come to me.”  
O Savior dear, we hear thy call,  
we come, we come to thee.

*Thomas Gray, Jr. (1833) alt.*  
*Suggested Tunes:* AZMON or ST. COLUMBA

†“See Israel’s Gentle Shepherd Stand,” Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), published by Job Orton in 1755; alt.
The Childhood of Jesus

The mystery of God’s incarnation in the child Jesus is a memorable theme in the Gospel of Luke. Why is it important that Jesus “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom” through the influence of his human family?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:39-52

Responsive Reading†

Within the Father’s house
the Son has found his home;
and to his temple suddenly
the Lord of Life has come.

The doctors of the law
gaze on the wondrous child,
and marvel at his gracious words
of wisdom undefiled.

Lord, visit then our souls,
and teach us by your grace
each dim revealing of yourself
with loving awe to trace;

till we behold your face,
and know, as we are known,
you, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
co-equal Three in One.

Reflection

Luke records two stories about Jesus’ childhood: his presentation in the temple as a newborn (2:22-39) and his visit to the temple for Passover when he was twelve years old (2:41-52). The latter is depicted in “Jesus Among the Doctors,” a colorful manuscript illumination from circa 1400-10 (Children, cover and p. 50).

The temple location and other details emphasize that Mary and Joseph faithfully raised their son according to Jewish law. They took him to be circumcised as “required by the law of the Lord” (2:21, 39) and traveled each year as a family to the Passover festival (2:41). On his twelfth Passover visit, Jesus stays behind for three days, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (2:46). As he shares the ideas and questions stirring in his heart and surely nurtured by his parents’ care, the gathered teachers “were amazed at his understanding and his answers” to their replies.

When his anxious parents finally find him, Jesus says: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” After all, they had faithfully brought Jesus to the temple for years!

“Despite his enjoyment of what he was doing and the fact that neither Mary nor Joseph understands him, Jesus obediently follows them. From this point, Mary’s role in the story takes a different tone,” Hornik notes. “While continuing as the loving mother who will guide her son, she must accept not only the sometimes painful separation as he matures, but also the deep mystery of the earthly role given him by his Father.”
In his human family, Jesus grew physically, intellectually, and spiritually in ways that please God and humans (2:40, 52). By carefully choosing words that echo 1 Samuel 2:26 ("Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men"), Luke relates the loving sacrifices of Mary and Joseph to those of Hannah and Elkanah, who selflessly dedicated their child Samuel to God’s service in the temple. These stories are the last time the gospels mention Joseph. “We must assume, as the many writers of various legends and apocryphal stories throughout the later centuries did,” Hornik writes, “that [Jesus] was taught by his father Joseph the skills and wisdom learned from his own life as a carpenter.” Indeed the people of Nazareth associated Jesus with his father: “Is not this Joseph’s son?” and “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” they wondered when Jesus spoke with prophetic wisdom in their synagogue (Luke 4:22 and Matthew 13:55). 

Gerrit van Honthorst’s Childhood of Christ, imagines the young Jesus assisting his carpenter father as he works into the night (Children, p. 36). The candle he holds to light the piece of wood on which Joseph is working has religious iconographic significance, reminding us that Jesus is the light of the world.

Study Questions

1. How is Jesus depicted as both a teacher and a pupil in Jesus Among the Doctors? What insights into Luke 2:41-51 do you gain from this manuscript illumination?

2. Compare and contrast Luke 2:40 and 2:52. How do these verses guide our interpretation of Jesus’ visit to the temple?

3. What might children enjoy in Childhood of Jesus and in Jesus Among the Doctors?

4. According to “O Master Workman of the Race,” how does the carpenter of Nazareth inspire and guide our lives?

Departing Hymn: “O Master Workman of the Race”

O Master Workman of the race, O Man of Galilee, who with the eyes of early youth eternal things did see, we thank you for your boyhood faith that shone your whole life through;

“Did you not know it is my work, my Father’s work to do?” O carpenter of Nazareth, builder of life divine, who fashions us to God’s own law, yourself the fair design, build us a tower of Christ-like height, that we the land may view, and see, like you, our noblest work, our Father’s work to do. O Lord, who does the vision send and gives to each the task, and with the task sufficient strength, show us your will, we ask; give us a conscience bold and good, give us a purpose true, that it may be our highest joy our Father’s work to do.

Jay T. Stocking (1912), alt.
Suggested Tunes: ELLACOMBE or FOREST GREEN

† “Within the Father’s house,” vv. 1, 2, 5, & 7, James R. Woodford (1863), alt.
Living in the Shadow of the Manger

What is the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood? When we prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man, we will recognize and serve the needs of children entrusted to our care.

Prayer
God of compassion and understanding, help us to unite in a faithful and nurturing community of love and support as we care for the needs of children in our families, in our congregation, and in our world. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:13-23

Responsive Reading†
Lully, lullay, thou little tiny Child, by, by, lully, lullay.
O sisters too, how may we do, for to preserve this day this poor younling for whom we sing by, by, lully, lullay?
Herod the king, in his raging, charged he hath this day his men of might, in his own sight, all young children to slay.
That woe is me, poor Child for thee! And ever morn and day for thy parting neither say nor sing, by, by, lully, lullay.
Lully, lullay, thou little tiny Child, by, by, lully, lullay.

Reflection
When we help others who are suffering or vulnerable, it is often because we experience some connection with their lives and can empathize with their distress. Perhaps from personal love we care for a family member or friend who is hurting, patriotism moves us to help a fellow citizen stranded in a foreign country, or a sense of common humanity motivates us to assist a stranger.

Yet there are even stronger, more mysterious ties binding us together. We are members one of another with other Christians in the body of Christ, such that “if one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). And in each suffering person we may see one for whom and with whom Christ suffers (Matthew 25:37-40).

How may we strengthen our perception of the suffering of Christ within the suffering and vulnerability of children specifically? Guider suggests that we prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Infant Christ. “God chose to enter into creation,
taking on not only our humanity, but the fragility and dependency of the human condition as the Infant Christ yet unborn, as the Infant Christ in need of affection and protection, and as the Christ Child impressionable and growing up in a dangerous world.” The gospels record Christ’s infant poverty, rejection, and danger, as well as his loving acceptance, worship, and care. From the “shadow of the manger,” we can especially recognize the Infant Christ suffering for and with the poverty, rejection, and danger of all children in the world today.

Guider offers ten meditations to “prayerfully reflect from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and on the condition of children today.” Several of them draw attention to the violent events recorded in Matthew 2:13-23 and mourned in “Lully, Lullay, Thou Little Tiny Child.” Use her meditations to guide your prayer as you seek “discernment of our responsibilities as adult Christians to care for children in our congregations, our immediate communities, and in the larger world.”

Study Questions

1. Use “Meditation on Name” (Children, p. 23) to guide your prayerful reflection. Is God leading you and your congregation to participate in ensuring that each child has a name, family identity, nationality, and sense of belonging?

2. Use “Meditation on Personal Safety” (Children, pp. 23-24) to guide your prayerful reflection. What is God saying to you through this meditation about the Christian commitment to at-risk children locally and globally?

3. Use “Meditation on Protection from Cruelty” (Children, p. 25) to guide your prayerful reflection. Does God give you and your congregation opportunities to protect children from cruelty and endangerment?

4. Each day this week, use one of Guider’s meditations to guide your prayer (Children, pp. 23-25). Share with your study group or a Christian friend when God stirs your conscience and provides direction for your congregation’s ministry.

Departing Hymn: “Child in the Manger, Infant of Mary”

Child in the manger, infant of Mary, outcast and stranger, Lord of all, child who inherits all our transgressions, all our demerits on him fall. 

Once the most holy child of salvation gently and lowly lived below. Now as our glorious mighty redeemer, see him victorious o’er each foe. Prophets foretold him, infant of wonder; angels behold him on his throne. Worthy our savior of all our praises; happy forever are his own. 

Mary M. Macdonald (1789-1872); translated from Gaelic by Lachlan Macbean in Songs and Hymns of the Gael (1888)

Tune: BUNESSAN

† “Lully, Lullay, Thou Little Tiny Child,” Renaissance Carol.
Beyond Noah’s Ark

We want to guide our children into Scripture’s rich banquet of stories of promise, deliverance, human failure, and divine forgiveness and fidelity. But how should we go about imparting to them a deep knowledge of the Bible?

Prayer

Gracious God, help us to guide children as they grow up in the midst of this fast-moving and often confusing culture, and to give them opportunities to love Scripture, to pray, to study, and to worship you.

In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 1:1-7; 3:10-17

Responsive Reading (Psalm 78:2-4, 6-8)

I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.

We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

That the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;

and that they should not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Reflection

Timothy, converted perhaps on Paul’s first visit to Lystra, joined the missionary’s team on the second visit and became a valued helper (Acts 16:1-3). Paul acknowledges that Timothy’s faith grew from seeds planted during childhood by his Jewish mother and grandmother as they shared all the Scripture with him.

We face challenges in sharing the Bible with children today:

Finding time in a busy family schedule. “Take heart from the fact that you don’t need to find large chunks of time,” Garrett counsels. “And don’t be discouraged if you can’t make it a time for the whole family: start one-on-one with a single child if that is what you can manage.” Read the Bible a few minutes before mealtime grace, include a passage in a child’s bedtime readings, or start a brief family devotion time. “Once the seeds have sprouted, you may find that God-talk also happens readily at other times throughout your days: while riding with your children in the car, reflecting on a TV news report or an incident at school, or discussing a routine matter like recycling or feeding the family pet.”
Answering children’s questions. “Your children will ask you questions about faith that will stump you,” Garrett admits. “As parents, however, giving a wrong answer is not such a great risk. There are other, greater risks: the risk that by avoiding our children’s questions we will convey that home is not the place to discuss deep or serious matters, and the risk that our sons and daughters might miss the grand opportunity to live as children and friends of God.” Garrett suggests that we learn along with our children, one Bible book at a time. Devotional books with readings and prayer for children are helpful; but she cautions that “story Bibles” leave out too much, especially the parts of Scripture like the Psalms that cannot be easily fitted into the story format.

Going “beyond Noah’s ark.” Ignoring the honest teaching of Psalm 78, we prefer to tell children an “easy Good News,” that all’s right with the world and we should just try harder to be good. Yet, “the Bible helps us understand what it means to be human: fallen and living in a fallen world, but beloved, and ever with reason for hope,” says Garrett. “Why, then, do we so seldom go beyond the stories of Noah’s ark, David and Goliath, and Jesus blessing the children? Wonderful as these stories are…, there is far more to tell.” Indeed, the Bible asks us to imagine “a new and bigger world than the one we have previously known,” Garrett observes, and “to give the Bible to our children means allowing them to enter into that world and inhabit it for a time. We cannot control all that they will take away from the world of the Bible, but we can trust that they will be richer and more competent human beings because of what they encounter there.”

Study Questions

1. What methods and opportunities of sharing Scripture with children have been successful in your family?
2. How does your congregation help parents answer children’s questions and explore the Bible ‘beyond Noah’s ark’?
3. Westerhoff identifies four stages of faith: experienced, affiliative, searching, and owned faith (Children, p. 91). Describe the faith of the children who are in your care. How can Scripture reading and study benefit them at each stage?

Departing Hymn: “Lord, Open Now My Heart to Hear”

Lord, open now my heart to hear
and through your Word to me draw near;
your Word my soul with joy will bless,
your Word brings peace and happiness.

Your Word will deeply move the heart,
your Word will perfect health impart;
let me your Word e’er pure retain,
let me your child and heir remain.

Johannes G. Olearius (1671), translated from German by Matthias Loy (1880); text adapted from verses 1 and 2.

Suggested Tunes: CANONBURY or HESPERUS
Caring for Children in Crisis

How should we respond to the pain and grief that children suffer in crises such as sexual abuse, divorce, and death? We can respond in creative ways to God’s call to care for children beyond our families and faith communities.

Prayer

God of compassion and understanding, may we work diligently to develop a loving and caring family in which each member is recognized as a special individual.

We pray for boys and girls who are grieving today, who suffer the losses of divorce, who endure sexual abuse, who face death, or who even are caught in the horrors of war.

In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, we pray for and care for these children in crisis. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:33-37

Responsive Reading†

Jesus calls the children dear, “Come to me and never fear, for I love the little children of the world.”

Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

He’s a Savior great and strong, and he’ll shield them from the wrong, for he loves the little children of the world.

Jesus died for all the children, all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight,
Jesus died for all the children of the world.

And your cross we’ll always bear, and for you we’ll do and dare, for you love the little children of the world.

Reflection

Often we’ve sung “Jesus Loves the Little Children” without confronting its powerful verses. Jesus didn’t express his love through gentle thoughts from a distance, but by active intervention to “shield them from the wrong.” He enlists us to join in their defense: “And your cross we’ll always bear, and for you we’ll do and dare, for you love the little children of the world.”

We can use resources, like those Harris reviews in Caring for Children in Crisis, to prepare ministries for children who suffer the loss of their family in divorce, endure sexual abuse, or face death. She reminds us to arrange our ministry to include the entire family, and even pastors and professional caregivers.

Taking seriously the grief that children experience is an important first step. “Adults may assume that the young person’s grief
experience will be brief and have no long-term consequences,” McClintock explains. “A well-meaning grown-up may even attempt to expedite the ‘rebound’ by engaging the child in cheerful activities. A far more helpful response would be to guide children in developing healthy patterns of grieving.” In Good Grief! he teaches children about grief through the dark story of Jesus’ sorrow at the death of his friend, Lazarus.

“Jesus died for all the children of the world,” and many Christians are called to care for children beyond their family and congregation. Shannon Sedgwick left a lucrative job to help International Justice Mission employ “individual countries’ own legal systems to document and help combat oppression, including forced prostitution, bonded child slavery, illegal detention and torture, sexual abuse, and widow’s lands rights cases.” For two years she and IJM colleagues worked with Cambodian authorities to rescue young girls kidnapped for the brothels in Svay Pak. Sedgwick describes herself as “an attorney who has been given a most unbelievable opportunity to save human life every day around the world. I am humbled and fascinated that I am given a divine opportunity to bring justice to so many suffering and dying around the world.”

Gloria Hammond-White, a pediatrician and co-pastor in inner-city Boston, could not assist all the at-risk kids who came through her private practice as she longed to do. “I was feeling confined by the practice, since I only had them for a minute,” she says. “While I had them, we could hear each other and we could meet each other in that place, but then they’d go off and there would be all those other people they would hear” as destructive influences in their lives. She and a professional writer in her congregation began meeting with girls on a weekly basis to help them write about their experiences. A vital ministry, Do the Write Thing, gradually emerged. “It wasn’t necessarily starting out with a plan that says, ‘In January of 1994, you’ll start a girls’ group.’ It wasn’t like I planned to do it other than seeing a need, and trying to get a sense from God how to respond to the need.”

Study Questions

1. According to McClintock, how can stories and imaginary characters like his puppet Sidney be effective counseling tools with children who are grieving?

2. How do we hear God calling us to serve children in crisis? Discuss what we can learn from the examples of Shannon Sedgwick and Gloria Hammond-White.

3. How does your congregation help children in crisis and their families? What other local resources can you recommend when children are grieving a divorce, sexual abuse, or death?

4. Within your community, is there a group of children in crisis to whom your congregation should minister?

5. What are the dangers of child abuse in our churches? How can we make church programs safer for children in our care?

Departing Hymn: “We All Are God’s Children” (in Children, pp. 40-41)

†Adapted from “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” Clare Herbert Woolston.
Parenting can be an unnerving prospect, for it opens us to vulnerability, change, and being permanently shaped by the habits we practice. Yet, as we parent with Christian intentionality, how may we be advanced in holiness by our children and shaped into new creations embodying hope, humility, and hospitality?

**Prayer**

**Scripture Reading:** 1 Thessalonians 2:5-12

**Responsive Reading**

Hear, O Israel: The L ORD is our God, the L ORD alone.

We shall love the L ORD our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our might.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

We shall recite them to our children and talk about them when we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we rise.

**Reflection**

Using beautiful images of wonderful parenting, the Apostle Paul describes his first visit to Thessalonica. Like a mother “tenderly caring for her own children,” Paul and his colleagues, Silas and Timothy, gently shared “our own selves” with those who “have become very dear to us.” With “pure, upright, and blameless conduct” they approached the Thessalonians as a father loves his children individually, “urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God” (2:7-8, 11-12).

A similar image of good parenting emerges in the instructions that go with the “greatest commandment” to love God: parents should not only love God in their heart, but also teach and practice that love daily before their children (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). They should be examples of faithfulness to children. “What parents do may very well be the best teaching tool of the gospel,” Sloan observes. “If we want our children to possess virtue, then we must be serious students of our own souls.... If we pray that our children mature to dream dreams worthy of the Kingdom, then we must allow a Kingdom vision to guide our lives.”

A consistent practice of godly virtues does not leave parents unchanged. “To parent with Christian intentionality opens us to vulnerability, change, and being forever marked by the habits we practice,” Johns reminds us. “By parenting with Christian integrity we can be shaped into new creations and advanced in holiness by our children.” He describes three parenting virtues:

- **Hope**—grounded in God’s grace and love, rather than in us or even our children—is foremost among parenting virtues. If we “hope in the Lord” (Psalm 39:7; cf. 65:5), “our perspective on our own life and our children’s lives elongates,” Johns writes. “This present moment does not contain all meaning; and ... we realize it is premature to give up on any child, because their final chapter has not yet been written and God continues to build ‘a way in the wilderness’ (Isaiah 43:19).”
Humility challenges the persistent temptation in our materialist culture to regard children as “consumer items to acquire” to display our success, provide ‘meaning’ to our lives, or even help reunite a couple drifting apart. To be “clothed in humility” (Colossians 3:12 and 1 Peter 5:5) is to understand “that meaning, significance, and worth are not attainments awarded to the most industrious, but that these—like children themselves—are gifts to us from God.”

Hospitality, or a willingness to welcome the stranger (Romans 12:13 and Hebrews 13:2), may seem like an odd virtue in regard to our children. Yet parents welcome one who is not them, but an other, into their lives. Our children are persons who are always different from our images of who they are and should become. Moreover, “notions of blood, kin, and seed are no longer adequate to account for the many ways that we are in parental or parental-like relationships with children. Cultivating hospitality will help us learn to embrace those who do not share our DNA: adopted children, stepchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins.”

Study Questions

1. Parenting requires “living today in the light of God’s promised future,” Johns says. “It is a vocation that requires a longer view, a confidence in Someone greater than ourselves and something more expansive than the present moment” (Children, p. 57). How are the virtues of hope, humility, and hospitality linked to this view?

2. What are some additional parenting virtues, or traits of holiness, that parents need today?

3. Discuss Sloan’s recommendation that we cultivate a habit of blessing children. “By simply and regularly hugging them and whispering a prayer in their ear,” Sloan writes, we invite “the Spirit of the living God to become part of the parenting and maturing process. In this sense, a parent’s blessing of a child acquires a certain sacramental quality” (Children, p. 64).

Departing Hymn: “See Israel’s Gentle Shepherd Stand”

See Israel’s gentle Shepherd stand
with all engaging charms.
Hark! how he calls the tender lambs,
and folds them in his arms.

“Permit them to approach,” he cries,
“nor scorn their humble name;
for ‘twas to bless such souls as these
the Lord of angels came.”

We bring them, Lord, in thankful hands,
and yield them up to thee;
joyful that we ourselves are thine,
thine let our children be.

Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), published by J. Orton in 1755; alt.
Suggested Tunes: ST. PETER (Reinagle) or NEW BRITAIN

†Adapted from Deuteronomy 6:4-7 (RSV).
Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.
A Vibrant Theology of Children

Lesson Plans

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Teaching Goals

1. To introduce a rich understanding of childhood which combines six contrasting views of children in the Bible and Christian tradition.
2. To examine how some simpler, less complete views of children can lead to their neglect or even abuse.

Before the Group Meeting
Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Children (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the closing hymn “We Come in Childhood’s Joyfulness,” locate the tune AZMON in your church’s hymnal. An alternate tune is ST. COLUMBA.

Begin with an Observation
“Churches have not been consistent public advocates for children. Mainline Protestant churches support legislation to protect children’s health and safety, yet they hesitate to contribute significantly to public debates about strengthening families. Protestant evangelical and conservative churches, on the other hand, are more vocal in nationwide debates about marriage and the family. These churches sometimes focus so narrowly on the rights of parents to raise and educate their children without governmental intrusion, however, that they inadequately address the responsibilities of parents, church, and state to protect, educate, and support all children” (*Children*, p. 12). What explains the fact that Christians express many concerns about children today, yet lack consistent commitment to them?

Prayer
Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with a prayer that members will discover in Scripture and Christian tradition a richer picture of childhood that will lead to their renewed commitment to serve all children.

Scripture Reading
Ask two group members to read Matthew 18:1-5 and 19:13-15 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading
The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection
What explains the fact that we express many concerns about children today, yet in our society and even in our churches, we lack commitment to children? Bunge suggests that our lack of commitment flows from our lack of understanding of the complexity of children and their intrinsic worth.

Some dangerously simple conceptions of children are that they are “either all good or all bad; for instance, popular magazines or newspapers tend to depict infants and young children as pure and innocent beings whom we adore and teenagers as hidden and dark creatures whom we must fear. In the
Christian tradition, we have often focused on children merely as sinful or as creatures who are ‘not yet fully human.’”

Other views of children are inadequate because they do not emphasize, or even recognize, children’s intrinsic value. These views value children for the pleasures they bring or the services they provide. “In a consumer culture, the ‘market mentality’ molds our attitudes toward children … as being commodities, consumers, or even economic burdens,” Bunge warns.

Bunge offers a more complex conception of children by combining six views of them from the Bible and Christian tradition. Though these views are in some tension with one another, she holds them together in order to point toward children’s complexity and intrinsic value.

Briefly outline the six aspects of her richer, more balanced view of children. Members can explore several of these aspects in other studies in this series. The aspect of guiding and nurturing children is the focus of “Beyond Noah’s Ark.” The aspect of learning from children can be explored in the studies “The Childhood of Jesus” and “Parenting Virtues.” Two studies, “Living in the Shadow of the Manger” and “Caring for Children in Crisis,” develop the theme of our responsibility to serve all children who are vulnerable in our society.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to explore how children interact with adults in their families and congregation. How well is each aspect of children addressed? What forms of instruction and nurture, correction and advice, do children receive from parents and older siblings in the family or congregation? How do they experience respect and love from older persons? Are children encouraged to contribute to their family and congregation?

2. Members may brainstorm ways that each aspect is neglected in our society. Some examples: Does our focus upon genetically designing ‘perfect’ children neglect their being gifts of God? Do we sometimes take a ‘hands off’ attitude toward children’s moral formation, neglecting that they are sinful and selfish, or that they need instruction and guidance? Do we focus too much on our own children’s health and education, neglecting the biblical command to care for the orphans and strangers?

3. When we view children exclusively as sinful, we may be led toward severely punishing or even abusing them. This must be rejected in Christian communities. “Recent studies of the religious roots of child abuse show how the view of children as sinful or depraved, particularly in some strains of European and American Protestantism, has led Christians to emphasize that parents need to ‘break their wills’ at a very early age with harsh physical punishment” (Children, p. 15).

Bunge says the notion that children are sinful can helpfully remind us of three important truths: (1) children are born into a “state of sin”—their families and communities are broken, and there is brokenness and self-centeredness within children; (2) they have growing moral capacities and levels of accountability for their actions that are sometimes self-centered and harmful to themselves and others; and (3) children are not as sinful as adults, but are more easily formed in ways of righteousness (Children, pp. 15-16).

4. Congregations aren’t fully committed to children if they “lack a strong religious education program for children: the lessons are theologically weak and uninteresting to children, and qualified teachers are not recruited and retained,” Bunge warns. “If we truly believe, as Jesus did, that children can teach adults and be moral witnesses, models of faith, and sources of revelation, then we will listen more attentively to them and will learn from them. We will structure our religious education programs in ways that honor their questions and insights, and we will recognize the importance of children in the faith journey and spiritual maturation of adults” (Children, pp. 12 and 18)

Departing Hymn
If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.
The Childhood of Jesus

Lesson Plans

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Teaching goals

1. To understand how the Gospel of Luke presents the childhood of Jesus.
2. To reflect on the model of Mary and Joseph in caring for Jesus as a child.
3. To consider how Christian artists, in painting and song, have depicted the young Jesus and his earthly family.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Children (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “O Master Workman of the Race,” locate the tune ELLACOMBE in your church’s hymnal. An alternate tune is FOREST GREEN.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with prayer that members will faithfully nurture the children in their families and the congregation, and be blessed by seeing these children grow physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 2:39-52 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The gospels offer little information concerning the childhood of Jesus. The Gospels of Mark and John have no information, and the Gospel of Matthew mentions only the visit of the magi, and Herod’s subsequent killing of the young children in Bethlehem and his family’s flight into Egypt. The Gospel of Luke records two stories: Jesus’ presentation in the temple as a newborn for circumcision, and his visit to the temple for Passover when he is twelve.

This study deals with the latter account (Luke 2:41-51), as well as the summary statements in 2:40 and 2:52 that frame the story and guide our reading of it.

We should not over-interpret or speculate beyond the few insights that the Bible provides into these years between Jesus’ birth and adulthood. However, we can study this material for the light it sheds on childhood and our care for children.

Luke highlights Mary and Joseph’s nurturing of Jesus (though, as typical in this gospel, Joseph remains in the background): they raise Jesus according to Jewish law and take him each year to the Passover festival at the temple in Jerusalem.

Why did his parents lose track of Jesus on their return from the Passover? They are traveling with a number of extended family and friends from Nazareth (2:44-45). Some scholars suggest that because Jesus was on the verge of adulthood, he could have been traveling with either the women (as a child) or
the men (as an adult); perhaps Mary thought Jesus was with Joseph, and Joseph thought he was with the women. Once again Luke highlights the parents’ love as evidenced in their anxiety when Jesus is discovered to be missing and their return to Jerusalem to find him.

Luke also focuses on Jesus’ growth in the context of his parents’ care (2:40 and 2:52) and his love for them. Though they cannot fully understand his reasons for staying with the teachers in the temple, he is “obedient to them” (2:50-51). Perhaps Luke’s framing comments in 2:40 and 2:52 (because they are echoes of 1 Samuel 2:26) tie these two themes together: Jesus’ growth is possible because of the love and commitment of Mary and Joseph, just as Samuel’s growth flowed from his parents’ sacrificial love.

Of course, we wonder about Jesus’ relationship with Joseph. Did Jesus practice carpentry with him? Since Joseph is not listed among Jesus’ family at the beginning of his public ministry (Matthew 13:55-56), an early church tradition held that Joseph was much older than Mary and had died before Jesus was thirty. Gerrit van Honthorst’s *Childhood of Christ* imagines a scene in which Jesus is about twelve, which is the time of Luke’s story. Both *Childhood of Christ* and *Jesus Among the Doctors* depict Joseph as an older man.

**Study Questions**

1. Jesus, elevated on a throne above books of scripture, teaches from a book to the teachers below who look toward him. A nimbus is prominent around his head. Yet, Jesus is also a pupil, listening to his parents as he holds a wax writing tablet. In a single image with two moments, the artist points to the paradox that his mother, Mary, “treasured in her heart.”

2. Both passages emphasize Jesus’ physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth, repeating the themes of “wisdom” and “God’s favor.” The second passage refers to “Jesus” instead of “the child,” and adds that he also grew in “human favor.” Jesus has matured, achieved an identity, and by his wisdom and obedience gained the admiration of his human family as well as the teachers in the temple.

3. *Childhood of Jesus* presents a child’s dream: to be present with and a helper in a parent’s work. Children may examine the interesting tools, the two angels at the right of the composition, and Jesus’ candle, but they will surely notice that “Jesus intently watches his father with admiration and tenderness. Children are especially impressionistic at this age and parents are their most important role models.”

   Certainly the rich colors, repeated gestures (e.g., Jesus and the teachers pointing to the books; Joseph and Jesus pointing back toward the temple scene), cartoon-like expressiveness of the faces, and *istoria* or multi-part narrative structure that may be read from left to right, make *Jesus Among the Doctors* easy for children to interpret. They may enjoy the image details: the colorful books, Jesus’ writing tablet, the cut-away view of the temple interior revealing its simple curved bench, platform, stairs, and doors. “Children will relate to Jesus as a child who, like themselves, wants to be listened to by adults,” Hornik suggests. “So often, children have much to say to busy adults who could learn much by taking time to sit down and listen; their honest and clear-thinking minds may reveal profound insights.”

4. In the first stanza, the young Jesus is a model of faith and purity of heart because he is focused on “my Father’s work to do.” The second stanza shifts to the metaphor of carpentry and extends Jesus’ role in our discipleship: he is not only the model for our lives (“yourself the fair design”), but the one who “fashions us” to live in ways that please God. How does Jesus enable us to live for God? He raises us to a height to view the world from a less narrow and selfish perspective, to see the landscape of our lives as he himself sees it; he calls us to a particular task for God; and he emboldens our conscience to pursue God’s purpose. Jesus enables us to make God’s purpose our own, so that in doing “our Father’s work” we find true fulfillment and joy.

**Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.
Living in the Shadow of the Manger

Lesson Plans

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Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood.
2. To understand the motivations that Christians have to care for the suffering and vulnerability of children.
3. To prayerfully reflect through guided meditations from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and on the condition of children today.

Before the Group Meeting
Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Children (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. You may download the PDF file for the Children issue to make extra copies of Guider’s meditations on pp. 23-25. For the departing hymn “Child in the Manger, Infant of Mary,” locate the tune BUNNESAN in your church’s hymnal. This lovely Gaelic tune is often paired with the hymn “Morning Has Broken.”

Begin with a Story
Shannon Sedgwick, a former attorney for International Justice Mission, recounts the story of IJM’s rescue of thirty-seven young Cambodian girls from child prostitution. Before IJM arrived, “purchasing” (that is, raping) children in Cambodia, for the sexual pleasure of grown, primarily Western men, was as simple as buying a bag of rice, perhaps easier.

In the sexually abused bodies of five-year-old girls, Shannon Sedgwick has surely seen hell. But she has a different take on it: “Nom, Lan, and thirty-five others are free,” she reports. “It was the closest I have ever come to seeing my God as I played with their beautiful smiling faces. I can only imagine what heaven looks like, but I did get a glimpse in Cambodia of all places. I am certain of that” (Children, p. 83).

Prayer
Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with a prayer that God’s suffering as the Infant Christ will be a window through which we can clearly see Christ suffering with and for children today.

Scripture Reading
Ask a group member to read Matthew 2:13-23 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading
The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection
The lesson explores one key motivation that Christians have for caring for the suffering and vulnerability of others, even when they are strangers. We may say about the one who is in distress, “This is someone for whom Christ suffered and died,” “In the person’s suffering I can recognize again the suffering of
Jesus,” or “I know that, even now, Christ shares the suffering of this person.” Of course, seeing our Savior’s suffering exhibited through other people’s distress is not our only motivation to help them; but what a powerful connection it is that binds us to one another!

Guider invites us to deepen and extend this regard for others, especially children, by considering how God endures suffering, danger, and vulnerability as an Infant Child, and not only as the Crucified One. She provides ten meditations to guide us to reflect prayerfully from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and on the condition of children today (see Children, pp. 23-25).

The U.N. Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959) provides an outline for the conditions addressed in the meditations. Without endorsing all of “the ideological motivations and political agendas associated with the United Nations,” Guider believes “some gospel value is witnessed by our upholding the aspects of Rights of the Child that can be supported and strengthened by Christian churches and church-based non-governmental organizations. When it comes to taking seriously the Rights of the Child, throwing the metaphorical baby out with the bath water is not an acceptable strategy for Christians whose vested interest in following Jesus requires pursuing all that is truly in the best interests of children.”

Guide group members through at least one of the meditations suggested in the study questions: “Meditation on Name,” “Meditation on Personal Safety,” or “Meditation on Protection from Cruelty.” Encourage members to use other meditations in personal devotion. Or, you may plan a second session in order to share some of these meditations as a group.

Study Questions

1. A selected reader might read each part of the meditation and provide members a few minutes to reflect silently on that part. Or, members might be given printed copies of the meditation to read and reflect on several minutes individually. In either case, offer members a chance to share their memories, images, emotions, and ideas with one another.

   For example, when members recall Christ’s identification as “King of the Jews” and how this naming shaped the course of his life and ultimately cost him his life, what biblical events and images do they remember? What emotions do they experience? After reflecting on how Christ’s being identified as the infant king of the Jews, not only threatens his life, but endangers the lives of other children as well, what images, ideas, or feelings have they experienced that they would share with the group? Do they have a suggestion how they or your congregation might be called, either locally or globally, to ensure that children have a name, family identity, nationality, and sense of belonging? Encourage them to mention individual children they care for, as well as projects or programs of ministry that are available to them.

2. Use the meditation as described above in question 1. Give members an opportunity to share their reflections from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and about the condition of children today.

3. Use the meditation as described above in question 1. Give members an opportunity to share their reflections from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and about the condition of children today.

4. Encourage members to write short journal notes on each meditation and to share some of these in a follow-up group session. They might record biblical passages or events that they thought about, as well as personal memories, images, emotions, or ideas that occurred to them. Ask them to notice in their news sources this week any relevant information about the condition of children in the world. How do these stories relate to their prayerful meditation?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.
Beyond Noah’s Ark

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Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on the value of reading Scripture with children.
2. To consider how we can respond to three challenges: finding time for sharing Scripture with children, answering their questions, and leading them to explore the riches of the Bible beyond their favorite stories.
3. To share our experiences in exploring the Bible with children.

Before the Group Meeting
Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Children (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the hymn “Lord, Open Now My Heart to Hear,” locate the tune CANONBURY in your church’s hymnal. (An alternate tune is HESPERUS.)

Begin with a Story
“Stephanie Paulsell, now a professor of theology at Harvard, writes, ‘When I was a little girl, I used to read psalms every day with my father. He reads six psalms a day and writes down one verse from each in a little notebook, whatever strikes his heart on a particular day. I used to sit in the backyard with him and talk about which verses we might write down. I loved the feeling of handling those holy words with my dad as a child.’ That is what we want to give to our kids: a sense that handling these words is both a privilege and a great source of joy!” (Children, p. 32).

Prayer
Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude the prayer time by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading
Ask two group members to read 2 Timothy 1:1-7 and 3:10-17 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading
The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection
Group members may focus on a few of the challenges that adults face in sharing the Bible with children. If members are just starting to study the Bible with children, the most relevant challenges may be finding the time for the activity and answering children’s questions. The challenge of exploring “beyond Noah’s ark” becomes more important as adults gain experience in studying Scripture with children.

Another variable to consider is a group member’s own experience with Bible study. Those who are just beginning to read the Bible carefully may need to hear the honest questions, doubts, and learning experiences of more practiced readers in the group. The lesson should encourage adults at all levels of experience to share Scripture with children. The point is to learn with the children and to make Scripture
central to our faithful walk with God. Explore how group members can support and encourage one another as they study the Bible with children.

**Study Questions**

1. Members might share how they find time to share Scripture with their children. Perhaps a single time or schedule is successful, or they are experimenting with different times as their family grows and their children mature. Do they have resources to recommend for reading the Bible with children? Encourage members to share their frustrations and failures as well as their successes.

2. Encourage members to reflect on the congregation’s Bible study programs for children. Do children have guided opportunities to ask their questions and explore the Bible with one another, or is their study regimented and instruction-based? What range of biblical books and forms of writing (letters, songs, stories, parables, proverbs, etc.) do they study? Do they memorize Scripture, discuss biblical concepts, and explore widely within the Bible?

   Children also learn by hearing the Bible read frequently and discussed honestly in worship, and by observing adults interpret and apply Scripture in conversation.

   Members should also reflect on how adults in the congregation study the Bible. Are parents reading the Bible in ways that enrich their understanding? Are they exploring and asking their own questions? Are they networking with other adults who could help parents answer their children’s questions or would be resources for their children? Does the congregation offer resources and training for home Bible study? Are parents familiar with kid-friendly translations, such as the NIrV (New International readers’ Version), the CEV (Contemporary English Version), or the NLT (New Living Translation)? A church library might have a collection of devotional guides for children, or parents might share these in a book coop. Susan Garrett and Amy Plantinga Pauw’s *Making Time for God: Daily Devotions for Children and Families to Share* is a valuable guide because it addresses a range of difficult biblical passages as well as the more familiar stories and themes.

3. Faith is *experienced* when one is aware of the faith of others; it is *affiliative* when one chooses to belong to a community of faith; *searching faith* is characterized by embracing doubts and experimentation; and *owned faith*, which is traditionally called “personal conversion,” is faith that possesses its holders. Westerhoff does not assign an age-range to each stage, and persons’ faith may remain in a stage for varying lengths of time. In this discussion we will assume that the individual is a child or young person during these stages.

   Members might describe the faith of their children and relatives, or of children whom they know within the congregation.

   Exploring the Bible at the stage of *experienced faith* guides one to understand the faith experiences of others. Adults can direct the child to their own favorite stories, meaningful instructions, significant psalms, and so on, as a means of sharing their faith. Even now, the adults might share biblical passages that they struggle to understand or apply. The child should also read the foundational biblical passages that outline the story of God’s creation of the world, its fall into sin, and its redemption. These passages, with special emphasis on those passages that are basic to the congregation’s theological understanding, prepare the child for *affiliative faith*. During this stage, the child learns to read the Bible under the direction of the faith community. As a child continues to explore the Bible with *searching faith*, the child’s questions may lead the child to study specific parts of the Bible, or to re-read portions with particular issues and problems in mind. A maturing *owned faith* will be interested in exploring more nooks and crannies of the biblical story, for now the person senses a call to take up a role in the larger story of God’s redemptive plan for the world.

**Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.
Caring for Children in Crisis

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Teaching Goals

1. To understand how we should respond to children’s grieving.
2. To inventory what the congregation is doing to minister to children in crisis.
3. To consider how God provides specific opportunities for us to care for children in crisis who are beyond our families and congregations.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Children (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus articles and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“In Children, Divorce and the Church ... Pastor Douglas Adams recalls the devastation he felt as a child when his father left the family. Adams was further wounded when the pastor came to their home and offered support to his mother, but ignored him and his siblings. He makes a strong case for the role of the church and the pastor in ministering to the children of divorce: ‘If my pastor had stopped to talk to me that summer afternoon when my dad left, maybe my life would have been different today’ (p. 115)” (Children, p. 85).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with prayers by name for children whom members know are grieving.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Mark 9:33-37 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Do we usually visualize Jesus gathering a group of happy, healthy, laughing children when we read Mark 9:33-37? What if, like the hymn-writer C. H. Woolston, we visualized children who require to be shielded from the wrong and who need for us to act on their behalf with cross-laden daring?

Allow the brief glimpses into the ministries of Mark McClintock, Shannon Sedgwick, and Gloria Hammond-White to inspire members to review their own sensitivity to children’s grieving and the congregation’s support for children in crisis. McClintock’s ministry is church-based and includes teaching children and worship; Sedgwick’s is through an NPO (non-profit organization) and involves legal work with governments; and Hammond-White’s is a creative outreach to the community using church personnel and volunteers.

You might invite members to share other aspects of the assigned articles that they benefited from. Move the discussion toward an inventory of their personal and the congregation’s discipleship in relation
to children in crisis. This can be a great opportunity for members to share concerns, discover opportunities, network with one another, and make some initial plans for a new ministry.

**Study Questions**

1. Imaginary characters “can diminish the communication barrier that naturally exists between an adult and a child,” McClintock writes. “A puppet on the adult’s hand functions as a peer and advocate for the child; a puppet on the child’s hand allows the child to express troubling thoughts and emotions, projecting the responsibility for these ideas onto the puppet.” Members may report their experiences with grieving children. Did writing stories, drawing pictures, discussing characters in stories, or other uses of imaginary characters help the adult and child to communicate their thoughts and emotions?

2. Shannon Sedgwick and Gloria Hammond-White found ways to utilize their career gifts, in law and medicine, to help children. Sedgwick joined a non-profit organization that had an important mission in progress; Hammond-White addressed a problem on a small scale, yet saw her work grow to involve many others contributors. Each woman received support from working with others in their ministry, rather than working alone. They interpret their opportunities as “gifts” from God and sources of joy, rather than as burdens put upon them.

   Furthermore, each woman had to be patient in waiting for successful results. “You can’t spot your success stories right away; they’re not intuitively obvious,” Hammond-White comments. “You just sometimes have to wait—which is of course what God does for us. He waits until we get it, and keeps hanging in with us through it all. That’s the definition of grace.”

3. Members may mention the regular actions of individual members as well as church ministries and support groups. These congregational programs may involve preparation, information, clarification, and ongoing discussion with children in families dealing with divorce, abuse, or death. Do children see members express their grief in worship services and prayer sessions, or are they ‘shielded’ from the grieving process? Are children allowed to mention their own losses, no matter how insignificant they appear to adults?

   Do other congregations and agencies in your community offer appropriate support groups to children and their families? Which local professionals do members recommend as both knowledgeable and experienced in working with children in crisis?

4. Encourage members to think of children in crisis beyond the church family. Perhaps these will be children who need advocates in the court system, a group with special physical needs, or children of recent immigrants. Consider how your congregation might cooperate with other churches or agencies to care for these children.

5. Church pastors, teachers, and workers are trusted with spiritual authority as well as the leadership of programs. This concentration of power can be a temptation to their physically and sexually abusing children. Compounding the problem is the fact that “discussion of child sexual abuse remains a taboo subject in most congregations,” Harris notes.

   Congregations can begin by being more open in discussing the problems. Proper direction, procedures, and encouragement should be provided for church employees and members who work with children. Most congregations discover that background checks for workers and other precautions are increasingly necessary, though these must be handled in ways that preserve trust and mutual respect among members.

**Departing Hymn**

“We All Are God’s Children” is on pp. 40-41 of *Children*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.
Parenting Virtues

Lesson Plans

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Teaching Goals
1. To understand how the virtues of hope, humility, and hospitality, as understood in the Bible, are necessary for parenting today.
2. To reflect on how we are changed into new creations and advanced in holiness by our children.
3. To consider why we should cultivate the habit of blessing children.

Before the Group Meeting
Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Children (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “See Israel’s Gentle Shepherd Stand,” locate the tune ST. PETER (Reinagle) in your church’s hymnal. An alternate tune is NEW BRITAIN.

Begin with a Story
Parents can exhibit hope, humility, and hospitality when they wisely refrain from discouraging their children’s dreams. Gloria White-Hammond is a successful pediatrician, co-pastor of her African Methodist Episcopal Church, and community leader in Boston. “The calling to pediatrics, she recalls, came early in her own childhood: ‘I always had the sense that I wanted to go into medicine. I was one of those readers who spent lots of time in the library, and when I was around eight years old, there was this blue book called How to Become a Doctor. I remember reading that and then deciding, ‘That’s it! That’s what I’ll do!’ Fortunately, I didn’t have parents who said, ‘Are you crazy? Do you know that you’re black and you’re a girl? None of that stuff goes together.’” (Children, p. 74).

Prayer
Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with prayers by name for children who are in members’ families or are entrusted to their care.

Scripture Reading
Ask two group members to read 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8 and 9-12 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading
The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection
What are the virtues, or admirable character traits, of a good parent? Encourage members to draw biblical guidance for answering this question from the images of a good mother and father in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 11-12. (The context of these descriptions is Paul’s defense of his motives in bringing the gospel to Thessalonica. Apparently, some unidentified opponents claimed that Paul and his associates were doing it for money. Paul responds that he approached the Thessalonians in the manner of good parents who love
their children.) Compare these images of parenting to the instructions given to parents in Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

Johns highlights three virtues that are “essential to Christian parenting in our culture” (emphasis added): hope, humility, and hospitality. He selects these three because they are correctives to the “materialism, cynicism, fear of the other, loss of hope, self-absorption, and regarding children as mere instruments to our self-fulfillment, status, security, or immortality” which are characteristic of our culture (see Children, p. 54). You can enrich the brief presentation of each virtue in the study guide by referring to Johns’ discussions of hope (Children, pp. 57-58), humility (p. 58), and hospitality (pp. 58-59).

By the way, Johns provides a helpful introduction to the concept of virtue (pp. 54-56) that may be of interest to group members. He defines virtues as admirable character traits that enable us to enjoy and fulfill the moral life. (“Parenting virtues,” specifically, are character traits that enable us to enjoy and fulfill our vocation as parents.) Virtues, he emphasizes, (1) are habits or dispositions to think, feel, and respond in appropriate ways, and (2) are developed over time by practice. Virtues become “second nature” and “so deeply ingrained that they no longer need to be consciously monitored or maintained, but are always ‘in play’ as we face each situation in our lives.” Of course, we are not born with these virtues, but develop these habits over time as we make good choices and approach situations properly.

**Study Questions**

1. The phrase “living today in the light of God’s promised future” is a linchpin for understanding the three virtues. Christian hope is grounded in God’s promises and faithfulness, rather than a parent’s goodness or a child’s abilities and potential; it keeps a longer view in our heart and opens new possibilities for love, endurance, and salvation because God’s Spirit is working within the parent-child relationship. Humility is not denigrating ourselves, but having a proper sense of value and self-respect; it includes the realization that we are not self-made, but that our greatest goods—including our children and even our good character traits—are gifts from God. Hospitality reminds us that children are more than we can create, or even understand; they are more than we desire for them to be. It encourages us to welcome all children gratefully as God’s gifts, rather than manipulate them as our creations and possessions.

2. Members might list character traits exhibited by the mother and the father described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-12, such as sharing of oneself, being present with each individual child, encouraging, or ready to guide. Or, they might brainstorm about other traits that would help parents resist the salient temptations of our culture—“materialism, cynicism, fear of the other, loss of hope, self-absorption, and regarding children as mere instruments to our self-fulfillment, status, security, or immortality”—such as trust in God, love for God over self, patience, willingness to seek help and support from others, being interested in other’s lives, or having a secure sense of self. Or, members might list still other traits that they admire in parents, regardless of the cultural context.

3. Sloan’s recommendation involves hope, humility, and hospitality: he invites us to shift away from seeing children as our production, but rather see them as God’s gifts and individuals for whom God cares. As parents, we can be partners through whom God works. (This is what Sloan means by the “sacramental quality” of parents blessing their child: it is an action that they do, but simultaneously it is an action through which God is present and working.)

    Heidi Hornik, in Invoking God’s Care (in Children, pp. 48-49), says Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s sons has been a model for Jewish parents to bless their children on each sabbath. The writer of Hebrews describes Jacob’s blessing as an act of faith and worship.

**Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.