

Engaging Under 5's in Liturgy Through Play

What babies and young children experience see and hear lays the foundations for their future development, this includes their spiritual development.

Very young children learn through looking, touching and playing.



Today their world of play is often dominated by plastic toys, although plastic can be colourful; it also is dull and disappointing. Toys may look different but to a small child they all feel, smell and taste the same and are therefore not stimulating to their senses. Have you ever wondered why children prefer the box and its wrapping to the contents, that's because it is far more interesting!

Too often our churches children's areas are filled with a variety of these toys, which have little or no connection to the Christian faith or to the world around them.

The need for the sensory and experimental is not understood, resulting in the spiritual needs and development of the under 5's often being neglected.

Experiencing aspects of the Christian faith and worship, through objects, symbols and play is an important part of developing faith from the earliest age.

This is not a new idea and originated in the 19th century by Maria Montessori who developed the idea of hands on tactile materials to enable children to learn about their Christian faith through play.

How can we help nurture the spiritual development of our under 5's?

Firstly, we need to look at what we are providing in our churches.

- Does what we offer to our under 5's help nurture their spiritual development?
- Do we need to re think our provision for this age group?
- Could we be doing more?

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What is Heuristic Play?

Heuristic play is a very simple approach to helping babies and young children learn.

The term Heuristic play which means to “Explore and discover” has been around for a number of years and was pioneered by Elinor Goldschmeid. Her approach always placed babies and young children at “the centre of any experience”. Not an analogy that many churches have adopted, more usually placing this age group at the back of the church.

Above all, she saw infants and toddlers as individual people whose experiences and feelings are just as important as ours” Guidance for the Early years foundation stage tells us “That when children have opportunities to play with ideas and a variety of resources in different situations, they discover connections and come to better understandings and ways of doing things “. Sadly this is something that is often forgotten and yet vital to them becoming an inclusive part of the worshipping life of the church.

Heuristic play is rooted in young children’s natural curiosity. As babies grow, they move beyond being content to simply feel and ponder objects, to wanting to find out what can be done with them. Toddlers have an urge to handle things: to gather, fill, dump, stack, select and manipulate in other ways. Heuristic play through the form of treasure baskets is a fantastic experience for babies and small children and can easily be used in church settings. The treasure basket is designed for the months when a baby can sit up comfortably, but is not yet mobile. Heuristic play is a form of group activity for children in their second year, onwards.

Children with special needs can engage successfully in heuristic play, as it stimulates their senses and is open ended.

The Materials

The materials used in these areas should be connected with Bible stories, worship, seasons and the sacraments.

Think about how you will display them, perhaps a simple focus table if you have the space, consider what you will store these items in. Materials need to be attractively displayed, items placed in wicker baskets for children to be able to see and access easily.

If at all possible it is best to have this area as close as possible to the central focus of the worship; this way enables children to be able to see and engage in the worship, because they are playing does not mean they are not engaging with what they are seeing and hearing.

“Heuristic play is an approach and not a prescription. There is no right way to do it and people in different settings will have their own ideas and collect their own materials”

Exactly how we provide this kind of activity does not matter, so long as we recognise the significance of spontaneous exploratory play for children’s spiritual development and offer them plentiful opportunities. **Enjoy it!**