

The importance of working with under 5s

The Jesuits are credited with saying " *Give me a child until they are seven and I will give you an adult for the rest of their lives.*"

The Jesuits realised that through their teaching ministry they were making disciples for Jesus. As these young disciples grew up they formed Christian communities planted by their missionary order. God doesn't call us to just baby sit our children but to look for every opportunity to share the Christian faith with them and encourage each of them on their own unique journey of faith. I believe it's important to work with our youngest children in order to grow our most mature disciples of Jesus.

Secondly the Bible makes it clear that we are not only to welcome children but to teach them the words, ways and works of God. We should know the importance of nurturing the very young child but often we are ignorant of what the bible says about it.

"So it is not the will of my Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." Matthew 18: 14

"Let the little children come to me and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Mark 10:14

How many of us have read stories to our children before they could read for themselves? So why not use the many opportunities we have to read and tell them stories about God and his followers? If we want to lay biblical foundations in children's lives that means they grow up to be disciples of Jesus we need to teach them the doctrine of God. Simple things like God made you, God loves you, God wants to be your friend and fill you with his Holy Spirit to help you be his followers.

Thirdly Young children are particularly open to spiritual things like sponges waiting to soak in all that we can teach them about God. We have therefore a responsibility to make sure we are teaching young children the words and works of God in a way that is appropriate to their ages and stages of faith and which covers in a simple way the basics of the Christian faith.

Fourthly through under 5s work we have the opportunity to reach out to parents and carers who often have no idea how to encourage a child's spirituality. If educationalists recognise that children are spiritual as well as emotional, intellectual and social beings how about making more space in our church curriculum for the under 5s and using that space even more creatively to teach our young children in ways that are appropriate, engaging and fun for them.

The Old Testament writers recognised that young children were of vital importance to the health and welfare of God's people (Deuteronomy 11: 21 - 25) Another reason for arguing the importance of teaching under 5s.

Lastly, the New Testament writers record Jesus as warning adults not to stumble 'little ones' (Matthew 18: 18:6-7), using children as a visual aid for the kingdom, warning his followers not to stop the *little* children coming to him and most importantly of all for saying that:

"It is not the will of my Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost".