

EARLY CHILDHOOD FAITH FORMATION

PHILOSOPHY

Early Childhood Faith Formation is the process by which young children come to know God. Early Childhood Faith Formation is based on developing the child's awareness of God using life experiences relevant to the developmental level of a pre-school aged child: 3, 4 and 5. The child at this age learns to relate to the care and love of God through self-identity, nature and the love of others.

Faith formation is an awakening process. This awakening has its beginning in early childhood and continues throughout the child's, and ultimately the adult's life. "The Church's catechetical mission aims to help the faithful of all ages grow in both human and Christian maturity" (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, no. 64). The Early Childhood Faith Formation program focuses on teaching catechists *HOW* to help young children grow in their awareness of God - God the Creator, God the Loving Parent, God the Friend, and The Wonderful World of God.

The early childhood philosophy primarily focuses on God. It is difficult for pre-school aged children to understand suffering (such as the death of Jesus and His resurrection); therefore, great care is taken in selecting age appropriate stories for children at this age.

As far as the life story of Jesus is concerned, we suggest that pre-schoolers be told little (by way of formal teaching, that is) other than the simple story of his birth as a Gift to us from God our Father. We do not believe that young children should be told about the suffering and death of Jesus until they are old enough to understand something of the purpose of His coming and the meaning of the word Savior.

Sr. Mary Irene Flanagan, C.S.J., (Early Childhood Minister at American Martyr Parish, frequent columnist for *Catechist* Magazine and first Early Childhood Consultant for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles), suggests that "the use of Bible stories that give a false impression of God, such as Old Testament stories telling of a vengeful God destroying people and things, should be avoided. Rather, a pre-school aged child needs to experience and associate God with positive, joyful occasions".

Early childhood is a time of allowing children to experience God in concrete ways through what they can see, touch, taste, hear and smell. The human experiences of children form the basic content of their religious development. Themes that are used to teach these concepts include: self-esteem, feelings & emotions, family, friends & community, senses, music & movement, storytelling, animate objects (animals, plants, fish, birds), inanimate objects (wind, air, light, earth), new life and various celebrations.

These themes provide the opportunity for the children to experience God's wonderful world. The experiences lay the foundations upon which faith can grow. Our philosophy in early childhood is to awaken the child's faith, provide a strong foundation on which children can grow in the love of God, help children learn how God's love is reflected in

their everyday experiences, and through reflection on experiences in God's world, initiate a spontaneous prayer life.

Finally, the Early Childhood philosophy supports the parents as the primary religious educators of their children. "Parents need to nurture in their children a love of God that can serve as an anchor throughout life" (*Krock, p. 15*). Therefore, it is critical that parents understand and live the philosophy as stated above. A parent's role in the religious growth of his/her children extends far beyond formal teaching. It is in living the Christian message of love, day by day, before the eyes, ears and impressionable minds of little ones. Parents must be given opportunities to understand how they too can assist in their child's developmental awareness of God.

GOALS/OBJECTIVES

The primary goals and objectives of the Early Childhood Faith Formation program are to lead the child to a loving, personal relationship with God. This involves the child, parent or adult caregiver, catechist, parish administration and the parish community.

Child-Oriented Objectives

Early Childhood Faith Formation strives to assist each *child* to:

- ❖ Develop a sense of wonder at the world around them.
- ❖ Become sensitive to the spiritual.
- ❖ Come to know that God is loving and caring.
- ❖ Develop an awareness of the presence of God in themselves, in others, and in all things.
- ❖ Appreciate themselves as gifts of God.
- ❖ Have a sense of belonging to the Christian community.
- ❖ Experience joy and ease in spontaneous prayer.
- ❖ Become aware of the attitudes and elements of celebration and worship.
- ❖ Develop their meditative and contemplative capacities through sensitive use of silence.
- ❖ Develop an awareness of the community of church as an important and continual support mechanism in their faith formation.

Parent or Adult CareGiver Oriented Objectives

Early Childhood Faith Formation encourages participation from the *parent/adult caregiver*:

- ❖ Parent/Adult Caregiver involvement is essential for optimum spiritual development of the child.
- ❖ The parent/adult caregiver is the primary religious educator and has the ultimate responsibility for imparting religious and spiritual values.
- ❖ The level of successful Early Childhood faith formation is based on the involvement of the parents/adult care givers in that process.

Parents/Adult Caregivers are encouraged to discuss themes presented to the children during formation. Themes that are used to teach these concepts include: self-esteem, feelings & emotions, family, friends & community, senses, music & movement, storytelling, animate objects (animals, plants, fish, birds), inanimate objects (wind, air, light, earth), new life and various celebrations.

- ❖ Parents/Adult Caregivers are invited to attend early childhood training sessions along with the Coordinator/DRE, catechists and volunteers.
- ❖ Parents/Adult Caregivers are encouraged to promote spontaneous prayer with the child at home. Spontaneous prayer provides a comprehensive learning experience that blends language development, creative and critical thinking, communication, active expression and provides a window into the child's understanding of God.
- ❖ Celebrations are basic to the program. Table and non-Eucharistic celebrations, help prepare the child for future involvement at Mass and prayer services. Additionally, this may be experienced at home through meaningful family meals shared with an attitude of thanksgiving.
- ❖ Some Parent/Adult caregivers involvement options include participation in the Early Childhood Program as a catechist, adult aid, or support person during the pre-school session; assistance in craft preparation; phoning/e-mail or similar activity; reinforcement of the session theme through home activities with the child and being present at the various child's celebrations in the program during the catechetical year.

Catechist Objectives

Early Childhood Faith Formation encourages participation from the *catechist*:

- ❖ Realize that parents/adult caregivers are the primary religious educators of their children and come to a greater understanding of the responsibility of the parent in their child's religious and moral formation.
- ❖ Understand the concept that the parent/adult caregiver and the child relationship is symbolic of the God/child relationship.
- ❖ Provide the child with a safe, loving, Catholic-Christian atmosphere in which to help with the religious formation of the child.
- ❖ Engage the children in activities using imagination and sensitivity to help foster a deeper understanding of their faith.
- ❖ Encourage spontaneous prayer and expression of the child's relationship with God using all the senses: sight, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching.
- ❖ Understand that sharing wonder at the works God gave us, with the children is forming them in their Catholic faith.
- ❖ Attend Early Childhood Specialization workshops and other on-going catechetical workshops to increase the level of comfort in the formation setting and enhance knowledge of child development, spirituality and learning styles.

Parish Administration and Community Objectives

Early Childhood Faith Formation encourages participation from the *parish*:

- ❖ Understand the importance and process of faith formation of pre-school aged children.
- ❖ Support the faith formation programs for young children and for the catechists who teach them.
- ❖ Assist in establishing a Early Childhood Formation program if one is not in place in the parish.
- ❖ Recruit a Coordinator of Early Childhood Faith Formation as part of the umbrella of religious formation in the parish. It is optimal that an Early Childhood Director be employed by the parish.
- ❖ The Early Childhood Consultant shall provide assistance to parishes in establishing a Pre-School faith formation program.
- ❖ Utilize the resources available for early childhood ministry from the Archdiocesan Center: Consultant, web site, printed literature, workshops, etc...

RECOMMENDED PROGRAM/POLICIES

Catechist:

- ❖ Catechists are encouraged to complete Basic Certification to become a Certified Catechist for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Basic Certification includes *Theological Phase* – participation in a ministry formation center within a pastoral region; *Applications Phase* – Specialization in Early Childhood Faith Formation offered by the Los Angeles Archdiocese Early Childhood Advisory Board; *Practicum Phase* – observations and final interview.
- ❖ It is recommended that catechists working with pre-school aged children, ages 3, 4 and 5 complete the Early Childhood Faith Formation Specialization training consisting of three 7 hour sessions. This specialization series is offered annually during Spring, Summer and Fall throughout the Diocesan regions by the Early Childhood Advisory Board through the Office of Religious Education.
- ❖ The course provides catechists hands-on experience and training in developing the religious dimension and faith formation of various child-related themes.
- ❖ Each participant receives a packet of materials to support each early childhood workshop presentation/theme. This information includes religious dimension, spontaneous prayer suggestions, basic craft ideas to support the lesson, story telling and ideas, music and movement activities and a bibliography for further study.
- ❖ Catechists who complete the workshop sessions will receive an Acknowledgment of Attendance in Early Childhood Faith Formation. In order to remain current in Early Childhood Faith Formation, the catechist must renew every three years. Renewal of the certificate is accomplished by attending workshops in faith development, early childhood education, spiritual growth and similar courses.
- ❖ Each formation class is under the responsibility of an adult, 18 years or older, who has been fingerprinted in accordance with Archdiocesan guidelines and who has completed VIRTUS Adult Awareness Training Session.
- ❖ Prepare lesson and activities for scheduled class well in advance.

- ❖ Collaborate with Early Childhood Coordinator or DRE in preparing yearly calendar or timeline of events for Early Childhood Program.

Formation Setting & Curriculum:

- ❖ A safe and child friendly environment for children of this age with class size in recommended groups of 8 - 3year olds; 10 - 4 year olds and 12 - 5 year olds.
- ❖ Use recommended textbooks, audio and visual aids, and other materials that support the Early Childhood Faith Formation Philosophy.
- ❖ Use of non-toxic and non-hazardous craft supplies when doing creative art experiences encouraged to enhance lesson themes.
- ❖ Music, movement activity, storytelling, craft experience and spontaneous prayer should be included in each lesson.
- ❖ Positive images of God should be used in each lesson theme to aid children in their awareness of God the Creator, God the Loving Parent, God our Friend and the Wonderful World of God. Formal study of scripture is not part of the early childhood curriculum.
- ❖ Special celebrations should be planned keeping the developmental level of the children in mind. Table celebrations (gatherings that celebrate the whole child in perceptual, emotional, symbolic, social, intellectual and religious dimension) are encouraged for three and four year olds, while non-Eucharistic celebrations (preparation for celebrating Mass) are appropriate for five-year-old children.
- ❖ Parent meetings are needed to insure parent support, awareness and involvement in the program.
- ❖ Because catechesis is not separate from culture, sensitivity is stressed in understanding the unique ways in which people celebrate and express their faith. A greater understanding of the diverse cultures in parish membership, will aid religious formation educators in facilitating catechesis more effectively.
- ❖ Incorporating whole community catechesis strategies into the early childhood program is an opportunity for young children to interact with parents, grand parents, older adults, youth and teenagers to grow together in God's Wonderful World throughout the liturgical year.

Parents/Adult Caregivers:

- ❖ Parents/Adult Caregivers are the primary educators of their children. Their care, support and example are necessary for the faith life of the child to grow and flourish.
- ❖ Parents/Adult Caregivers are expected to attend periodic meetings to stay informed on the religious formation of their child and to become aware of parent/adult care giver involvement opportunities in the Early Childhood program.
- ❖ Parents/Adult Caregivers are encouraged to participate by assisting in their child's formation class at least two times each catechetical year.
- ❖ Parents/Adult Caregivers are encouraged to attend weekly Mass and practice formal and spontaneous prayer with their children.

- ❖ Parents/Adult Caregivers are encouraged to volunteer at the parish level as a catechist or aide. In order to maximally assist and develop the early childhood ministry, those who love teaching, forming and caring for children are needed.

Directors In-Service:

- ❖ Parish Directors and/or Coordinators of the Early Childhood Faith Formation Program are encouraged to attend the Early Childhood Directors In-Service Training held annually by the Archdiocesan Early Childhood Advisory Board.

Networking:

- ❖ Directors and/or Coordinators, and catechists of pre-school aged children are encouraged to attend specific workshop sessions given by the members of the Archdiocesan Early Childhood Advisory Board and taking place in the local parishes that address a specific topic of concern to the parish program.

RESOURCES

Specialization & Net Working Sessions:

- ❖ Net Working Sessions are given throughout the year upon request of the parish administration and are usually targeted to specific needs of the parish.
- ❖ Early Childhood Workshops are presented at each of the Regional Congress held during Fall of each year.
- ❖ A part time Consultant staffs Early Childhood Faith Formation Ministry.
- ❖ The Los Angeles Archdiocese Early Childhood Advisory Board, whose members are parents, catechists and educators, strive to help others appreciate and acknowledge the importance of experiencing God's love concretely during the crucial, formative years of a child ages 3, 4 and 5.
- ❖ The Los Angeles Archdiocese Early Childhood Advisory Board participates in providing catechetical training for Directors of Religious Education, Early Childhood Coordinators and catechists. Parents and Care Givers are always welcome.

Publisher Textbooks:

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| ❖ <u>Discovering God's Child: Age 3</u> | William H. Sadlier, Inc. |
| ❖ <u>Discovering God's World: Age 4</u> | William H. Sadlier, Inc. |
| ❖ <u>Discovering God's Love: Age 5*</u> | William H. Sadlier, Inc. |
| (1-800-221-5175 or www.sadlier.com) | *Available in Spanish |
| ❖ <u>Stories of God's Love (Ages 3 & 4)</u> | RCL Benziger |
| ❖ <u>Stories of God's Love (Ages 4 & 5)</u> | RCL Benziger |
| ❖ <u>Stories of God's Love (Kindergarten)*</u> | RCL Benziger |
| (1-877-275-4725 or www.rclbenziger.com) | *Available in Spanish |

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| ❖ <u>I Am Special – 5th Edition (Ages 3, 4, 5)</u> | Our Sunday Visitor, Inc. |
| ❖ <u>Allelu! (Ages 3-4)*</u> | Our Sunday Visitor, Inc. |
| ❖ <u>Allelu! (Ages 4-5)*</u> | Our Sunday Visitor, Inc. |
| ❖ <u>Allelu! (Kindergarten)*</u>
(1-800-348-2440 or www.osv.com) | Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.
*Available in Spanish |
| ❖ <u>God Made Me (Age 3)</u> | Loyola Press |
| ❖ <u>God Made the World (Age 4)</u> | Loyola Press |
| ❖ <u>God Loves Us (Kindergarten)</u>
(1-800-621-1008 or www.loyolapress.com) | Loyola Press |

Recommended Reading:

- ❖ Epstein, Ann S. The Intentional Teacher (Revised Ed.). Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2014.
- ❖ Hunt, Jeanne. Celebrating Saints and Seasons: Hundreds of Activities for Catholic Children. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2010.
- ❖ Hende, Lisa M. The Handbook for Catholic Moms: Nurturing Your Heart, Mind, Body and Soul. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2010.
- ❖ Walsh, David., Ph.D. Smart Parenting, Smarter Kids. New York, NY: Free Press, 2011.
- ❖ White, Joseph D. & Ana Arista. TEACH it: Early Childhood. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2004.
- ❖ Krock, Marilyn. Building a Family: A Handbook for Parenting With God. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2003.
- ❖ Stankard, Bernadette T. How Each Child Learns. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007.
- ❖ Easton, Laurine M. 101 CRAFTS to Help Kids Grow in Their Faith. Rockford, IL: TEL Publishers, 2008.
- ❖ Vogt, Susan V. Raising Kids Who Will Make a Difference. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2002.
- ❖ Elkind, David. Miseducation – Preschoolers at Risk. New York, NY: Albert A. Knopf, Inc., 2006.

Websites:

- ❖ www.archdiocese.org/ore/ec
- ❖ www.catholicmom.com
- ❖ www.childfun.com
- ❖ www.cambridgeeducational.com
- ❖ www.childfaith.com
- ❖ www.parentingeducation.com
- ❖ www.sundayschoolcrafts.com
- ❖ www.familycrafts.about.com
- ❖ www.naeyc.com / www.caeyc.com