

Quick Guide - Using Godly Play & Reflective Storytelling

'Godly Play' refers to an imaginative approach to religious storytelling. It has roots in Montessori education practice and philosophy. It is an approach, unlike any other I know, that genuinely invites and enables children to participate for themselves in the exploration of collective and personal meanings found in religious stories. Evolving from decades of action research conducted by Sophia Cavalletti (in Rome) and Jerome Berryman (in the USA), Godly Play is very sensitively tuned to children's known psychological and spiritual capacities and needs.

Respect for the Story

Religious stories are 'presented' in a thoughtful, prayerful manner in which the storyteller takes second place to the story, allowing the listeners to experience directly, without unnecessary mediation, the message contained in the story for each listener.

Language

As in all good storytelling, 'presentations' employ very careful use of language, bearing in mind the significant difficulties and significant opportunities the vocabulary and grammar of spiritual expression creates for children. The experiential context for the spoken word (through the visual, kinetic, creative emphases of this approach) aims to ensure that children don't hear the story as an end in itself. Instead, children are actively encouraged to recognise clues to profound experiences and insights.

Dimensions

More unique to Godly Play is the careful and deliberate use of 3-dimensional space and materials to elaborate on the spoken word. This is achieved in two ways – for each story and for the storytelling environment.

Each story has its own simple set of materials (wooden figures, felt underlays etc) which the storyteller uses to shape the unfolding drama. Following the initial storytelling presentation, children are encouraged to 'work' (or play – whichever you like) with these materials for themselves. Observation of children in 'Godly Play' suggests the majority of spiritual insights and discovery of personal meaning occurs through this 'work/play'. This allows the child to work at her own pace, according to her own needs and experiences, but in response to, and in the context of, a supportive communal storytelling encounter.

Materials that tell 'stories' about Christian baptism and Holy Communion are also found here. Creative materials (paper, paint, clay, costumes, musical instruments etc) are provided so that children can choose to extend their response to a story.

In using the Godly Play approach, storytellers and other assistants adopt (and therefore teach) a deep respect for individual insight and personal meaning making. There is explicitly no agenda to 'explain' what stories 'really' mean, and there are no 'right' answers.

Immediately following each story, the group shares in a 'wondering' session, reflecting on how different people, feelings and issues in the story raised feelings or thoughts in their own minds. Authenticity is seen as an important virtue here, in what is after all intimate spiritual conversation. What seems to be a key element of Godly Play is an ability to demonstrate the open potential, the infinite layers of meaning and connections that faith stories contain. It tries to avoid, at all costs, the impression that religious narratives have a closed system of meaning, a code that, once cracked, does not need further thought or engagement. This approach has much to recommend it as an innovative way of working with children in Church, school and family settings. It offers both Christian teaching and support for children's 'natural, spiritual lives (see 'The Spirit of the Child' by Hay and Nye). Godly Play creates opportunities for ministry to children, with children and of children.

Dr Rebecca Nye

"I wonder....."

Questions after Godly Play

Each session should end with a regular pattern of questions, depending on whether the story comes from the historical stories of the Old and New Testament, or from a parable. For parables ask the first set then add the others.

The basic questions:

- I wonder which part of the story you like best?
- I wonder which part of the story is the most important?
- I wonder which part of the story you like the least?
- I wonder if there is a part of the story we could leave out and still have all of the story?
- I wonder which part of the story is most about you?

You may also wish to ask some wondering questions about the particular story you have just presented, e.g. "I wonder what it felt like for Noah and his family to be shut inside the ark for so long?" or The Good Shepherd e.g. "I wonder who the sheep could really be?"

Storybag Storytelling has very similar principles, I suggest that you use the 'I wonder prefix to all the end of story questions.

Remember that closed questions or right/wrong questions have no place in Reflective Storytelling.

Everyone's thoughts and contributions are equally valued and valid, and must be treated as such.