

Religious Diversity, the New Reality

There you are, your group gathered round as you conclude the story of Noah and the ark. Cedar, an earnest eight-year-old, responds with this question: “Why would the Great Spirit want to destroy Mother Earth?”

Obviously Cedar has grown up listening to different stories than you are telling. And Cedar is not the only child in your class with different ideas, especially if you are using the curriculum in an outreach context. You may be working with kids who haven’t heard much about God, or whose family faith practices directly contradict the Christian message.

Before we consider how to answer Cedar’s question, we need to honor two principles in this context:

- First, God has given parents the task of teaching their children spiritual truths, whether they recognize this or not. If we honor this principle, we must show respect for children’s beliefs (even if we personally consider them strange). To undermine parental teachings by pointing out how wrong they are—or how they contradict God’s Word—is to dishonor the trust parents have placed in us to nurture their children on their spiritual journeys.
- Second, God loves every child and calls each one into a life-giving and loving relationship. God’s desire is that all children will come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. Our role as leaders is not to convince children of the truth—that’s the job of the Holy Spirit. We don’t need to be God’s sales force! The church’s role is to proclaim the good news in such a way that children gladly hear it and receive it. God will take care of the rest. (For further help read the article, *Leading a Child to Jesus*, available at Dwellcurriculum.org)

Even if all your children come from a church background, you will find wide variations in their knowledge and beliefs. In our postmodern world there’s increasing divergence in basic Christian beliefs. In a sense, your job has become like that of a missionary, even if you are working right here in North America. Here are some ideas for teaching God’s Word in a multi-faith and multicultural context:

- Focus on what you have in common, not on the differences your children bring to the group. We may find Cedar’s language strange, but he is asking about God and God’s creation. You might want to answer Cedar’s question by saying, “The way we tell the story here at our church is that God . . .” and proceed to share each story of faith using the religious language of our tradition. This allows kids to see that their story is reflected in the one true story of the whole world, namely the gospel.
- Learn more about the children you teach, and, especially about the beliefs and faith practices of their families. The more you know about them, the better your relationship with them will be. As well, remember that children are very adept at reading body language. If they ask a question, and your body suggests surprise, shock, or anxiety—even if your words say otherwise—they will be less likely to listen to your answers. Knowing more about other cultures and faiths makes us less likely to be taken by surprise—and we’ll be better equipped to find commonalities and answer children’s questions more intelligently.
- Connect with families. You are a faith-nurturing partner with the families of the children you teach. If you build relationships with them, they are more likely to trust you and listen to you. If some parents don’t attend church, a simple phone call can open the door to better communication.
- Use lots of wondering questions (see the training module on questions and wondering). Wondering questions rely less on information that a child already knows and more on a child’s thoughts and feelings. Questions that ask kids to wonder provide a level playing

field for children who don't know as much about the Bible—and you'll learn much from their answers!

- “The truth is out there—somewhere” has become a guiding principle for people who are seeking spiritual certainty. But you know and have experienced God's truth. So share it! Be confident but humble—after all, faith is a gift of grace, and our message should come from grateful, not arrogant, hearts. (Check out the training module on faith modeling)
- Pray! Pray as you prepare your session; pray for each of the children in your group; pray as you open your mouth to teach; pray when you are not so sure about how to handle a sensitive situation. Pray at all time and in all places, and the God of wisdom will keep your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

From the book *Dwelling: Helping Kids Find a Place in God's Story* by Jessie Schut.