

What Works for Younger Children

Often times we recognize that younger children need to be taught differently than older children. What should we do differently?

- We have a vague idea of perhaps making it more simplified with less content.
- We might think about using the body a bit more.
- We sense that we might need to use more concrete thinking skills, instead of abstract concepts.

Those are all true. But what is it that really grabs a child of that age and attracts them to learning? What are some tried and true ideas that work when we teach a song to a 4, 5, or 6-year-old child? (Note: There is also a section of this book devoted to young children from ages 1 to 3.)

A young child learns through his or her *body*. We can see that in the emerging walker/runner, in the child that puts everything in their mouth, and in the exuberant movement of children on a playground. Young children love to move. Moving creates new brain connections within them. The brain cells that control movement-through-space change, as a child gets older, into brain cells that think through to the end of a sentence or phrase. The frontal lobe of the brain, so important in controlling impulses and making responsible decisions, is developed through movement to a steady beat. Successful reading abilities are helped (as well as helping the two sides of the brain to communicate more effectively together) if the child engages in movement that crosses the two midlines of the body. Movements with criss-crossing of arms, elbows to opposite knees, and legs purposely crossed are a huge help to the brain. Children need to move to learn.

A young child learns through *visual images*. What shape is a cow, what color is an orange, and how large is a truck? Shape, color, size, and how things reflect light are being absorbed like a sponge into the child's mental images. Emotions are often connected with these images. A young child sees faces and senses emotions. A young child sees a fuzzy pillow and remembers a feeling of softness. A young child sees animals and is peeked with curiosity. Children link emotions and meanings to different pictures, representations, and views of physical things. One of the most amazing facts about young children and visual images is their ability to "see" a sequence of pictures in their mind that tells them a story. They literally can recall amazing lengths of stories through a long chain of visual images. Because of this, story telling is a great way to teach younger children. Children learn through visual images.

A young child learns especially well through *music*. She or he bounces to a beat, twirls and dances to a rousing musical, and "rocks out" to a popular song on the radio. Drumming comes naturally. Making the high and low sounds of driving an airplane or truck is a natural part of play. Tiptoeing is a natural reaction to sneaky, soft music. Commercials stick in the brain because of the music line that is sung.

Unbeknownst to the child, the steady beat and patterns of music help to bring order to the child's brain. Children learn to hear the nuances of voices and expression used in human relations through their experience with the nuances in music. The ability to attend to the details of music, yet hear the whole piece help a child to attend to both the whole picture and also the details of life situations. Words, numbers, and sequences of memory items are learned more easily if set to music. Children gravitate to music in their lives, and use it unconsciously to take in a great deal of learning. Children learn through music.

A young child thinks in *concrete* terms and does not think in full abstract concepts until about age 8, when a profound thinking change takes place. Until that developmental step, concrete thinking (things you can see, hear, touch, smell, and feel) is how the child takes in information about the world. Because of that, children learn the words to a song best in concrete ways. Words represented by movement and/or images communicate well to the young child. Especially if the word is naming something abstract like peace, frustration, or well-being, the child will often remember and begin to understand the concept if represented through a movement that captures the essence of the word. For instance, the American Sign Language sign for "faith" uses a motion that points to the head then grabs something tightly in the fist. It gives a child a great concrete image and feeling to apply to the abstract concept of faith. A short video clip of family life (with sound turned off), something they can see concretely, communicates quickly and easily to a child about the complex relationships of a family. Children learn through concrete representation of the words they are hearing or singing.

Note of caution: At times adults will use the rebus symbols of a bee to represent the verb "be" or a picture of a can to represent the verb "can." Because of the child's literal thinking, this confuses a young child with the real intent of what you are trying to communicate. Be extremely careful to capture the true essence of the word with your concrete representations.

A young child is innately *spiritual*, sensing deep things about life, humans, and the relationship to a Higher Being. They willingly listen to an inner voice of the Spirit speaking truth to children. They have faith in this voice and are eager to hear it. They seek after truth about their Heavenly Father. They rely on faith and hope as a normal part of their being. They do not doubt things taught to them through the Holy Ghost. Young children learn through the Spirit.

I use these five modes of learning as I plan: *Kinesthetic* (purposeful movement), *Visual Intrigue* (visual images and thus, story telling, that both lead to thought), *Living Music* (playing with music in a way that makes it come alive to the child), *Representations of Concrete Words* (words represented through a movement or visual image), and *Spiritual Connection* (bringing spiritual moments to the child's attention). I have tried other many combinations of learning styles in my teaching career, and have found that these five modes of learning reach and touch a young child extremely well.

What are hands-on ways of using these five learning styles, so well suited for younger children? Let's look at what some of the activities might look like within each of these learning modes in our next chapter.