

Wiggles and Giggles: How to Creatively Tell Stories to Young Children

by Steven James

Young children present special challenges for the biblical storyteller. Their little bodies aren't made for sitting still! They wiggle and squirm and run around and look at birds flying past the window and play with their shoelaces and just want to have fun! Let's explore five characteristics of young minds and then discover four storytelling techniques that work great with preschool- and kindergarten-aged children.

Abstract vs. Concrete

Young children don't think in abstract terms. They don't understand the hidden meanings, metaphors, and symbolism in stories. Usually, the power of parables comes from weaving a spiritual truth into a story that's essentially about something else. The more abstract the parallels, the less young children will understand them.

This doesn't mean you should never tell parables to young children, just be aware that you may need to explain the symbolism in as concrete a way as you can. As you craft stories for young children, look for simple, clear, easy-to-understand stories that are concrete rather than abstract.

Sitting Still vs. Paying Attention

Don't mistake sitting still for paying attention. Listening is not the same as sitting still! Focus more time and energy on grabbing and keeping the attention of the children than on trying to get them to sit still.

Listening, really listening, is tiring. It's not the same as watching TV since listening to a story requires the listener to create all of the images in his or her head. Be aware that listening to a story is usually something that a child will consider fun, but sitting still while someone tells a story is something difficult and not very enjoyable. Focus more time and energy on grabbing and keeping the attention of the children than on trying to get them to sit still.

The key to keeping children interested is realizing that they're more easily distracted and more easily bored than adults. So the challenge is to tell stories in a way that children can understand and relate to, that engages their imaginations, and that actively involves their bodies.

How do you do this? By choosing appropriate material, taking the time to prepare and shape it so that it relates to your students, and then telling your stories with energy, imagination, enthusiasm, and participation.

Reading vs. Telling

Many educators simply read each lesson or story from their curriculum. While there is nothing wrong with studying the ideas found in your curriculum, be aware that the way the story is written is not necessarily the right way for you to tell it. You're a different storyteller than the

author, and your class is unique! It's much more important for you to connect the story to the lives of your students than get through the material in your lesson. Your job isn't to get through the material, but to get through to your students.

Look for ways to learn and tell the story yourself (from your mouth!) rather than just reading it from your teacher's guide.

Explaining Stories vs. Telling Stories

For the most part, children (and adults) will pay attention only as long as they're curious about what's happening. In other words, if you're telling a story and the children know how it will end, they begin to lose interest. Children will start thinking about snack time, crafts, or playing on the playground.

Use your children's natural curiosity to your advantage. Don't tell them what the story will be about.

I've found that the more time I spend preparing my lessons, the less time I end up lecturing, yet, the more the children end up learning! But the less time I spend preparing my lessons, the more I lecture and the less they learn!

If kids aren't having fun, they probably aren't learning. And if kids are interested and engaged in the lesson, they probably aren't misbehaving. So spend more time preparing your lessons and thinking through transitions from one activity to another. Look for ways to include more learning activities, attention-getting object lessons, and application games in your teaching time.

If things get boring, direct the attention of the students to another activity. Remove distractions and keep the children focused. Be prepared. And remember, your lesson begins when the first student arrives!

Asking Questions vs. Telling Stories

Sometimes teachers ask questions hoping to get their students to pay better attention. But a poorly directed question will distract more than focus children. Whenever you ask questions, make sure they're not open-ended questions that will get the children thinking about something other than the story you are telling.

If you ask any questions, let them direct attention to the main part of the story. Remember every question you ask must move the story forward, not cause your children to become distracted from the story.

Four Storytelling Techniques

- *Adding sound effects to a story.* Look for opportunities to include sound effects in your story. As you tell the story and include sound effects, encourage the children to join you!

- *Adding gesture and actions to a story.* As you tell stories with lots of action, build the sense of mystery and what is about to happen. Involve your audience. Create simple actions for children to do. These actions can include wiggling fingers, using gestures, and even moving your whole body!

- *Adding refrains and rhymes to a story.* Whenever a story has repetition, it allows you to include the audience. Invite children to join you on refrains.

- *Adding movement and imagination to a story.* Young children love playing pretend! As you look at Bible stories, think of ways you can help the children picture what's happening by pretending to be present in the story. Before asking young children to act out a story, tell it to them first. That way they'll be familiar with the story when they act it out!

Remember, practice your story, but don't memorize it. Feel free to adapt the storytelling methods to your situation. Then trust that God will use you to impact young lives as you are faithful in serving Him.

“Wiggles and Giggles: How to Creatively Tell Stories to Young Children” is an excerpt from *The Creative Storytelling Guide for Children's Ministry* and is used by permission. Author Steven James is one of the most innovative storytellers. He speaks throughout North America and has taught creative storytelling and writing in South Africa, Ukraine, Canada, Kazakhstan, and India. Steven has penned more than 25 award-winning books of both fiction and nonfiction.

For more storytelling tips and examples of well-written stories, order *The Creative Storytelling Guide for Children's Ministry* (Item no. 42048) from 21st Century Christian or your local Christian bookstore.