

about Godly Play

Godly Play is a unique method of telling Bible stories which allows children to explore their own spirituality, and to seek and find their own answers to questions about faith, God, themselves and the world. It was originally designed to be used regularly with children in church settings; however it is now used in a variety of settings including hospitals, schools, prisons, care homes, with adults as well as children.

Godly Play is:

- a discovery method of teaching and learning;
- a method that is focused on the need of the whole child: body, mind and spirit;
- a multi-sensory approach that combines and integrates language and play;
- an approach that encourages a calm, quiet and deliberate way of working.

Godly Play aims to:

- provide a safe space in which children can encounter and engage with Bible stories;
- help children make connections between these stories and their own experience;
- support spiritual development;
- make the language of religion familiar.

A Godly Play session usually includes:

- **A special environment** – ideally a dedicated room where all the story and art/craft response materials are available for the children to work with.
- **Welcoming** - the children are welcomed by a 'doorperson' and encouraged to get 'ready' or to become calm before being invited to sit in a circle with the storyteller.
- **Building the circle** - the storyteller welcomes each child to the circle and then settles the group in preparation for the story.
- **Presenting the story** - the storyteller focuses on the special materials used to present the story. These are usually three dimensional figures crafted in natural materials.
- **Wondering questions** - the children are invited to wonder about the story, explore its meaning and how they are connected to it. Some wonder aloud; others in silence.
- **Response time** - the children decide how to respond to the story - this may be through art work, creative writing, or exploring the story materials and perhaps retelling the story for themselves.
- **The feast and time of sharing** - the work is put away, everyone returns to the circle and the feast (drink/snack) is shared.

Using Godly Play in a school (or school visit) setting will be slightly different to using it in a church setting. The children may not be familiar with Godly Play and time will often be limited. For Ultimate Church Visit, the story scripts have been adapted slightly and not all of the elements of Godly Play are used.

The notes below should help you understand more about Godly Play and prepare you to lead the Bible zone, or a whole class Godly Play session.

Building the circle and being ready

Godly Play usually begins with welcoming the children and building the circle, encouraging pupils to be ready – calm and focused – before they join the circle. If you are using a Godly Play story as part of the Bible zone you may want to ask the children to move from their chairs and sit on the floor in a circle (or move onto mats or carpet squares if you have some) to show that you are going to do something different. If they are already sitting on the floor in a circle, encourage them to get 'ready' by becoming calm and focused. Model how you would like them to sit (crossed legged or similar). If the children know what it means to be 'ready' it can be easier to deal with any disruptions later on.

Presenting the story

As you take the materials out of the box and put them away again, model how you would like pupils to handle them – with care. In Godly Play the stories are illustrated using hand crafted materials that, in a way, symbolize the beauty and value of the ideas contained within the stories.

The actual telling of the story should be unhurried. Once the storyteller has learnt the story and become more confident with the presentation, it should begin to feel as if the story is being told from the heart – as it would have been passed on originally! By looking at the story figures, rather than making eye contact with the children, the storyteller encourages the children to do the same and the unfolding story or message is the focus rather than the storyteller. This can be very powerful, and has to be seen to be believed! It turns ordinary teaching and storytelling techniques on their head and creates a compelling contemplative level of attention in even the youngest of children.

Dealing with disruptions

If children are new to Godly Play they may well make comments about what is happening as you tell the story. Sometimes these can actually be helpful and will show that they are entering into or engaged in the story. However, if there are disruptions which are distracting other children and make it difficult to continue you can pause, look around at all the children and say calmly, 'We need to get ready again' and wait for the child or children to settle. If a child continues to disrupt the session then another teacher or leader can be ready to quietly take them out of the circle and sit with them, but so that they can still hear and see the story. When they are ready they could rejoin the circle, perhaps as the wondering begins. Discuss this with the teacher/helper before you begin the session.

Wondering questions

At the end of the story the storyteller looks up and asks wondering questions, inviting the children to reflect on the story. Whilst some will prefer to wonder silently, others may respond verbally. Affirm their response or ideas by repeating what they have said, or simply nodding or saying 'Hmm, he could have felt that way' or something similar. It is important to show that all their contributions are equally valuable. There should be no attempt to manipulate their responses to reach a premature 'teaching point' or to explain what the story 'really means'. This ensures that the children learn that the Bible holds never ending layers of meaningfulness for each person, rather than a collection of finite answers or recipes for Christian life.

Response time

Once the shared wondering has finished, children can go on to respond to the story in their own way. The storyteller usually remains in the same place beside the story figures whilst another leader/teacher helps the children with any materials they need. It is important that the children know that this is their own personal response and that they are free to choose how they respond - they are not producing a piece of work in order to gain praise by a teacher or leader. Some children may want to explore the story materials before (or instead of) doing their own art or written response.

Having said this, a space has been provided in the Ultimate Church Visit pupil book for children to respond through art or through writing if they want to, and in the context of a school visit, this may be valuable to the teacher as they assess the learning and reflection which has taken place during the visit.

The feast and time of sharing

Usually a Godly Play session ends with the children coming back into the circle and sharing a 'feast' (drink and biscuit/snack) before they leave. This may not be appropriate or possible if you are using the story in the Bible zone (but it could work at the end of a longer whole class session). Instead, bring the children back into the circle and use the Bible zone script to think about the impact of the story/Bible on Christians within The Salvation Army. Some children may also want to share their written or art response but no one should feel they have to.

Parables and sacred stories

Parables begin *and* end with wondering questions, so the storyteller would usually make some eye contact at the beginning so the children know they are invited to suggest what the different materials might be, as well as during the questions at the end. Parables can also be slightly more playful in character and the materials are usually flat to show that this is a made-up story rather than an event which took place.

Sacred stories are usually more reflective than parables and all the wondering comes at the end. The figures are plain and three-dimensional to show that this is something which happened and is recorded in the Bible.

To find out more about Godly Play visit www.godlyplay.org.uk or www.enablingmission.org.uk/godlyplay.