

## HELP FROM GODLY PLAY TRAINERS

# GOING DEEPER

### ISABEL

*When our daughters were two-and-a-half and four-and-a-half, my husband and I hired two trusted babysitters, one for Friday evening and another one for Saturday, so we could attend a local conference. Something happened that weekend with our youngest child, Isabel. Something happened that we may never completely understand. Our older daughter, Madeleine, said it was the animated movie, 101 Dalmatians, that frightened her. "I told her not to watch it," Madeleine said.*

*After this experience, Isabel would curl her toes and clench her fists in a posture of fear at certain times of the day. When I asked her what was wrong, she responded, "I'm scared," or "I'm afraid of the boppers." When I asked her what the boppers were, she would shake her head or maybe substitute the word "monsters." Before her father came home from work she often pleaded for Daddy. After her father came home, she would plead for Grandpa.*

*Of course she was unable to analyze her fears with us. She was also very quiet and fearful around strangers. Putting her to bed became torture. Isabel was truly terrified. Thus, my husband or I would sit in a chair at the foot of her bed and read until she fell asleep. I talked with our pediatrician about Isabel when the problem persisted for over a week. She concurred that it might have been something from the movie and guessed that her anxieties would continue for a few more weeks, which they did.*

*I offer this story as a way of thinking about children's spirituality. Although Isabel did not have words to express herself, she made herself clear with her body language and physical gestures. She "knew what she knew" and her inability to fully articulate those fears did not negate her experience. Thus, adults cannot use mere language to reassure small children. Isabel needed physical signs: holding, hugging and sitting by the bed. We did use words to comfort her and read books that echoed themes of love and safety, but words could only take us so far. Isabel's posturing suggested fearfulness and anxiety about something to which she could not put words. In short she was experiencing what might be called an existential crisis.*

—by Cyndy Bishop

# ***THE BEST WAY: GODLY PLAY AND BRAIN-COMPATIBLE LEARNING***

*by Becki Stewart*

Godly Play is about creating a special place and time when learners, whether they are children or adults, can experience the presence of God. We are aware that the creation of this “thin place” takes much time and effort. As teachers we spend a great deal of time learning the words to the stories, organizing the environment, gathering materials and discussing the children we teach. While teaching about our Christian faith we concentrate on the content. We think deeply about the story’s words and movement, how lessons fit together and build on one another. All of this is a good thing.

However, the Godly Play classroom has an invisible support system. The class structure, method of teaching, the environment and the attitude toward the learner are based upon a set of best teaching practices. Best practices form a framework that maximizes learning thus opening the door to spiritual growth and faith development.

Godly Play springs from the Montessori tradition. Marie Montessori instinctively knew what was good for children. Hundreds of examples abound—from using child-sized furniture to hands-on discovery learning. Indeed, good teachers have always found the best way to teach by “following the child.” Today extensive research into how humans learn best reveals just how wise she was. The elements Montessori incorporated into her schools and learning environments match exactly the recommendations based on research done using sophisticated techniques of MRIs, brain scans, neurological science and years of educational research. This best-practice framework is an essential part of nourishing faith formation, which is the ultimate goal of our time together as Godly Players.

Although we have a deep affection for Godly Play and believe that it is the way to best help support the faith development of children, it is a helpful exercise to compare it to the best teaching practices used in education settings today. It is not enough to say, “because Jerome says so.” Jerome Berryman’s Godly Play exemplifies the brain-compatible model of education.

Experts in brain-compatible learning—also known now as bodybrain learning because of the direct link between the brain and all the body systems to learning—such as Eric Jensen, Spencer Kaegan, Caine and Caine, Leslie Hart and Jeanne Gibbs are some of the most notable spokespersons for this method of teaching. I’d been a Godly Play teacher for about six years when I began to learn about brain-compatible learning in the public school where I teach. Immediately I saw the parallels between this method and Godly Play. For seven or eight years, I’ve been working with an educational model called Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) authored by Susan

Kovalik. The ITI model is based on the nine bodybrain components described below. By exploring the link between the brain research on teaching and learning and Godly Play we can better implement our program with the assurance that we are teaching children the in the best way.

### ***NURTURING REFLECTIVE THINKING: AN ABSENCE OF THREAT***

The most powerful learning takes place in a trusting environment where children can explore without fear of being put down, made fun of or dismissed. Long-term learning takes place only in a safe environment where children are able to fully engage in the process. The Godly Play classroom is just such a place. Here structure and procedure provide safety. Each class follows an established pattern and activities are done a certain way. Everything from crossing the threshold to helping with the feast has a pattern. Teachers follow a format for each lesson.

Repetitive phrases such as “There was once someone...” and echoes of language that link one lesson to another provide connections that aid the learner in memory and learning. Children hear echoes of the Exodus story “they had to get up when the Pharaoh said” in the lesson about the Exile, “They had to eat what the soldiers said, go where the soldier said.” The room itself is an organized and comfortable, welcoming place. Children can always find their favorite material or story. Teachers make a point to show where each lesson belongs on the shelves. This familiarity with the room helps children feel secure.

Our first duty as teachers is to create and maintain a safe environment for all children. Managing the circle from beginning to the end of the session is the storyteller’s duty. He or she will guide the children through the lesson and keep the boundaries of the telling, wondering and work time. Whenever a problem arises in the circle, the storyteller assesses the situation and makes decisions that respect the individual while guarding the work being done by the community of children. Sometimes a simple redirect will work: “I need you all to be ready.” On occasion the teacher must help the child choose to be ready or move to be with the door person.

The door person sits by the door to keep others from interrupting or disturbing the work of the children. When a child is not ready to be in the circle or threatens to take over the lesson, the door person is there to provide a safe place for that child to see and hear everything without disturbing others. When a child is unsure what to do with a response material or the procedure for feast, teachers assist him or her in finding the right way. The co-teachers work together showing children how to live and work together as Christians.

Perhaps the most critical element to making the Godly Play room a safe place is the respect with which the teacher treats the child. The quality of the relationship between the child and the teacher is the foundation of all that takes place here. This respect can be heard in a teacher’s voice and seen in his or her body language.