

How can we use catechism with children in the Church school?

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In 2004, General Assembly presented *The Catechism for Today*. It was adopted and recommended as a teaching resource by the Assembly. Some people have inquired about how they can use it with children. I hope that my reflections will be helpful in assisting congregations to make decisions around this issue.

In planning Christian education resources with children, youth and adults, I have often found it helpful to use the work of Ninian Smart, a British philosopher of religion. Although known for many things, he is best known for his seven part definition of religion.

He describes religions—all religions—but certainly this applies well to Christianity—as having 7 “components.” They are doctrine, ritual, social life, institutional care, experience, ethics, and stories. I found this a helpful description for at least two reasons:

1. Since there are so many aspects to religion and faith, it is impossible for one individual to love and care for all aspects. (This helped me alleviate some guilt...since there are aspects of religion that are difficult for me to like!) In other words, I think it is important for the whole body of Christ to engage in all seven aspects, but it probably not possible or wise for a “super-Christian” to engage in all aspects. We can simply do the ones we love and are suited for, and leave the rest to others.
2. Secondly, Smart’s descriptions are helpful as they lead us to discern, based on what we know about child development, which religious tasks are important at what times. For instance, doctrine (the study of religious beliefs) is more suitable for older people than small children while experience can be part of religious awareness for everyone. For instance, the experience of an infant baptism can be participated in by people of all ages—the baby, the parents, the older sibling, the congregation, the grandparents. While all can be active in the experience, it will have a different meaning for each age level. But it is probably only the teens or adults who could articulate verbally what baptism is about.

In other words, I find that some aspects of religion are easy to adapt to young children or to people of all generations while other aspects are not appropriate because of human development. I would put doctrine—the study of catechism—in the area of “not appropriate” for young children. For this reason, I’ve done a simple chart which helps me, in curriculum development, decide what should be the focus for various ages.

Aspects of religion	Ages/stages when these aspects are most suitable for study
Social	All ages
Ritual	All ages but ... the meaning and importance change as understanding develops. For instance, a baby will experience communion in a sensory way, a 7-year-old in a concrete literalistic way, a teen or adult will use symbolic thinking while taking communion. All find meaning. It is simply a different meaning.

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Aspects of religion	Ages/stages when these aspects are most suitable for study
Stories	All ages but... stories of the faith are particularly powerful and important for ages 4-12 as they need role models to follow. Stories help children understand “the tribe” to which they belong
Experience	All ages but... meaning and importance change as understanding changes. For instance, an infant can participate in holding hands for family dinner prayer but may not understand for a few years why everyone is quiet with heads bowed.
Doctrine	The study of doctrine is best left to teen and adult years when people are becoming/have become concrete, logical-sequential thinkers.
Ethics	While ethical guides are helpful for even small children, middle children and youth, the formulating or re-formulating of ethical beliefs is best left to people with profound life experience—usually middle and older adults, but occasionally youth and young adults.
Institutional care	While everyone benefits from institutional care, this, too, is a task of adults and, on occasion, youth.

In other words, while I think it is important to have catechisms, I don't consider them a good teaching tool until the teen years. (I've heard, however, from many Presbyterians that, in the “olden days,” they had to learn the catechism as children. I didn't have that experience so I am not nostalgic (or resentful) of this experience.

I went on-line and downloaded the new catechism produced by our denomination and the “Early Catechism” of the Presbyterian Church USA. You will be interested to note that the reading level of the “Early Catechism” is grade 4 and the reading level of our newly revised catechism is Grade 4.8. (You can check this out for yourself by using the Spell/Grammer check in your Word program.)

If you proceed with introducing your children to *The Catechism for Today*, the earliest you should start is Grade 4 or 5.

May I suggest some alternatives which, I believe, are respectful of children's abilities, and may accomplish what you would like to do; that is, have the children and youth better know what it means to be a follower of Christ.

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For ages 4-8

- Focus on story, ritual and experience. The best program I know for this is *Young Children and Worship*. It is a beautiful program, and I have seen amazing things happen with young children in this program as they internalize the stories. Our denomination provides trainers for this program across Canada. (See www.presbyterian.ca.)
- Work hard at making the church—all aspects of worship, learning and serving—hospitable to young children. You can do simple things like making sure that children can see something more than the back of the pew in worship, providing a children's bulletin, preparing worship bags, and so on. The "incorporation" of the children as full members (because of their baptism) is an on-going challenge and needs lots of attention by most congregations.

For ages 8-12

- Instead of focusing on catechetical teaching at church, (focus instead on the stories and what they mean to lives) invite parents to teach their children some of the main truths of the Reformed/Presbyterian faith. A good resource for this is the *Seasonal Family Resource Table 06-07* found on our church website (www.presbyterian.ca) Or invite families to sign up for a pot luck dinner and present some creative ways to learn to memorize important religious verses, creeds, prayers or parts of the catechism. Then, have the families, at a later time, give a "group recital" for the congregation.

It has been my experience that teachers and ministers often say, "But our families won't do that. They're too busy." On the contrary, I've found that most parents are eager to help their children learn about their faith. They just need the tools to help them. In a Search Institute survey of several thousand youth in the U.S. in 1998, the surveyors found that over 90 per cent of the youth said that they became people of faith because of their mom or dad. So, perhaps we educators and ministers take ourselves too seriously...or, perhaps, we would be wise to know that our job is not so much to teach the children as it is to help the parents.

- Children between 8 and 12 are amazingly eager to do...do...do. I always try, in my home congregation, to give our middlers lots of opportunities to act out their faith. Once, a couple of years ago, we were studying HIV/AIDS and a young girl came up to me and said in an indigent voice, "Mrs. Henderson, we've got to stop *talking* about AIDS...and do something about it!" Ashleigh expressed what really motivates kids between 8 and 12. They are keenly interesting in doing...so I would try to involve them in as many ways as possible with other members of the church—visiting nursing homes, ushering, packing food for community pantries, washing the nursery toys, etc.

I hope these thoughts are helpful. In the meantime, if you wish to purchase a catechism, the Book Room at the national office (800-619-7301) carries two forms of the new Presbyterian Church in Canada catechism, one with space for study notes. The Presbyterian Church USA also offers a kit (\$65.26) which includes catechisms for children and confirmation as well as family conversations about the catechism, pastor and educator's guide, catechism questions cards and art cards.