

Growing Up with God

An age-by-age guide to nurturing your child's faith
by Marlene LeFever

Four-year-old Alicia made a slight mistake when she said her Bible verse: "That who so ever believes in him should not perish but have ever *laughing* life." Grinning, her mother didn't correct her. That's exactly how she wants Alicia to feel about Jesus.



From their earliest days, we want our children to know the joy of learning about Jesus. But how much can a child really understand about God? And how does that change as she gets older? To help our children develop a faith that will carry them into adulthood, it's essential we play off their strengths at each stage of development.

A Solid Start:

Birth to 2

Even these early years are critical to your child's spiritual development. As a parent, you're always there, ready to feed your baby when he's hungry, play with him when he's awake and rock him when he's fussy. Through these experiences, your child develops a foundation of love and trust in you that will later lead to trust in God.

Children under 2 also learn by imitating. When you pray with your toddler, she might fold her hands and try to copy the language and tone of your prayers. These activities will eventually help your child make sense of the concept of having a relationship with God.

Children first become conscious of God around age 2. The God-images they develop now are crucial to their future concept of who God is. You can help shape your child's idea of God by talking about God's love and kindness. You can assure your child that we can trust God to take care of us.

This is also a great time to use your child's natural curiosity as a spring board for talking about God's power and creativity. Talk about God as the Creator as you walk outside, read about nature or visit the zoo.

Bible truths for Birth to 2-year-olds:

- ☀ God made all things.
- ☀ God loves and cares for me.
- ☀ Jesus, God's Son, loves me.

Learning Explosion:

Ages 3 and 4

At this stage, a child will often express his thoughts and feelings through play. As your child learns more about God's love, he'll want to show God love in return. He can do that through simple songs and prayers.

This is also a stage of rapid mental development. Between the ages of 3 and 10, the activity level in your child's brain is about 225 percent higher than that of an adult brain.

With this expanding mental ability comes a better understanding of right and wrong. So as your preschooler learns Biblical truths like loving others and respecting parents, he can begin to apply those truths to his actions. Now is a good time to talk to your child about his conscience. Explain that the conscience is one way God talks to us. When our conscience tells us something is wrong, we need to listen.

Bible truths for 3- and 4-year-olds:

- ☀ The Bible tells me about a loving God and his Son, Jesus.
- ☀ I can listen to Bible stories and learn Bible verses.
- ☀ I'm beginning to understand that the Bible is God's Word.
- ☀ I know that Jesus feels sad when I do something I shouldn't.