

Involving Children in WORSHIP



BY DOROTHY EATON WATTS

Os boring a word your students use to describe morning worship? Do they look forward to it with anticipation, or do they dutifully sit through it because it is required?

I've discovered that a child's attitude toward worship is greatly improved if I make it a time of participation and surprise. I call this the "P. S. Factor."

Why do children love recess? Because they are doing something that they think is fun. Why do they like ball games? The element of surprise is certainly there. And they can participate by cheering for their team.

The "P. S. Factor" not only takes the boredom out of games, it can also do the same for morning worship. Following are some participatory activities with an element of surprise that I have used to make worship a fun experience in the early elementary classroom.

Prayer Journal

This year in grade 3 we are keeping a prayer journal. We use a brightly colored notebook. In it we write down specific prayer requests. Requests include safety for a grandmother's trip, for a father to pay family support, for a child to overcome her terrible temper, for God to heal a mother, and for us to find a lost pet rat. One girl asked us to pray for

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a neighborhood friend who had been struck by a car while riding his bike.

Our journal also records answers to prayer and special "thank you's" to God. We have recorded such things as thanks for protection from a near accident and praise for a mother's successful surgery. When our pet rat returned, the children wanted to record that in our journal as well.

Sometimes the requests are shared with the whole class. Other times the children want to whisper their secret request in my ear because it is something too personal to share with the group.

One day when there were problems on the playground and several children ended up in tears because of the

thoughtlessness of others, I threw up my hands and said, "Oh, dear! Whatever am I going to do about this?"

One girl put up her hand. "What about our prayer journal?"

"Do you want to put our playground problem in the prayer journal?" I asked in surprise. She nodded.

"What do you want me to write?"

"We don't want anyone in our room to feel sad," she said.

All were quiet as I wrote the request, then turned to put away the prayer journal. Another hand went up. "Teacher, aren't we going to pray about it now?"

"Of course!" I said, feeling ashamed that I hadn't perceived their need to pray right then. In that moment I realized that the prayer journal had made communication with God a real experience for our class, not just an activity that happens from 8:30 to 8:40 every morning.

Treasure Boxes

I collected a number of greeting card boxes. When we had enough I gave each child a box to decorate as a "Treasure Box." Wallpaper edging works very well to cover such boxes. The children chose the design they wanted. They cut a strip to fit and pasted it in place. As they worked I heard several say, "This is so much fun!"

One of our worship activities is to select Bible promises, or “treasures,” to put in our boxes. The children each receive a 3" x 5" card on which to write their promise. They may decorate the card however they like. Through the year the children have fun adding “treasures” to their box. Other small but important objects find their way into the boxes as well. The Bible promises are becoming a cherished part of the children’s lives.

Warm Fuzzies Jar

During worship on Monday morning I talk about the power of words and how they can make us feel good or bad. Then I introduce the Warm Fuzzies Jar, a large bottle that I have decorated with colored paper and stickers. I suggest that the children try to think of a nice thing to say to someone so they can put it in the jar. They can tell about something someone did for them, or what they like about a classmate. On Friday morning I promise to open the jar and read the notes for worship. The children can sign their name or may remain anonymous. We get notes such as these: “Mike helped me with math.”

“Sara shared her lunch with me when I forgot mine.”

“Chelsea asked me to play with her.”

“Danny got a Band-Aid for me when I was hurt.”

“I like Jennifer’s smile.”

Younger children may ask an older child or me to write the note for them. I usually read through the notes and add some anonymous ones for children who have fewer notes, so that all have some warm fuzzies on Friday morning.

Parable Bags

I bring to school enough brown bags for everyone in the class. Inside each bag I place a common household or schoolroom object such as a comb, an eraser, a pencil, a mirror, or a bar of soap. The children each choose a bag, not knowing what is inside. At a given signal all look inside and see what is there. I play quiet music for a short time (three to five minutes) while they try to think of something that object tells them about God or the Bible. They might think of a Bible verse or a song. I give a few examples to get them started:

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- Soap—God washes away all my

sins and gives me a new, clean heart;

- Eraser—God will erase the record of my sins when I confess them to Him;

- Mirror—The Word of God is like a mirror, showing me where I need help;

- Candle—Jesus wants us to shine for Him;

- Red crayon—Red makes me think of the blood of Jesus, who died for my sins.

Have ideas in mind for each object so that you can help those who can’t figure out a parable from the object. After two or three times of doing this activity, the children become very good at making object lessons.

For variation, let the children find an object in their desk or in the classroom that makes them think of God in some way. Or send them outside for five minutes to find an object from nature that tells them something about God. You will be surprised at how proficient they become in creative devotional thinking.

Toothpick Messages

Give each child an envelope with 10 toothpicks. Tell them they are to use the toothpicks to create a message about how they feel about God, how God feels

about them, or what God does for them. They may bend or break the toothpicks. They may spell words or form a picture with the toothpicks.

Play soft music for five minutes or more as they arrange their toothpicks. Instruct them to be absolutely silent as they prepare the message on their desks. Circulate through the room during the quiet time, giving hints to those who are having a hard time coming up with anything. When the time is up, go around the class and ask each one what message he or she has made.

Circle Game

Have the class sit in a circle. Ask the first child to tell something he or she is good at doing. The second child then says the first child’s name and tells what the first child is good at doing, then tells something he or she does well. Each child continues in that way, mentioning in order those who came before, then telling about his or her own proficiency. This activity offers several opportunities to talk about how God makes us all different, giving us unique talents and abilities. It is an excellent springboard for talking about how special each one of us

is to God.

Many variations are possible. Have each child name something for which he or she is thankful, or give the name of someone he or she is looking forward to meeting in heaven. Children might name their favorite Bible person and tell why they like that person. Another time they could give one reason they want Jesus to come soon.

I find that I can add comments here and there, bringing in Bible texts, or brief personal experiences so that the whole game becomes a very meaningful worship experience about a particular topic.

Color Coding

For this activity the children need to have their own Bibles. Make special colored pencils available to be used only for worship. Let each color stand for a different topic. Use the color to underline verses on that topic. You could spend a whole week on each topic, looking up and marking two or three verses each day for worship. At the end of the week, play a little game. Ask the students to flip through their Bible pages and scan for the color-coded topic of the week. When they find a text, have them raise their hand, stand, and read it to the class.

Let the children help you decide what colors to use for each topic. Some ideas are: Red—promises; yellow—Second Coming; green—salvation; blue—heaven; purple—prayer; pink—Sabbath.

As a variation, make copies of one Bible chapter. Read through it with the children and see how many colors you can use in that one chapter. The Psalms are good for this activity.

Notes to God

Children love to write notes to one another. They find it just as much fun to write a note to God. For many, this makes the idea of prayer more real. The children might place their notes in their Bible, in a special prayer box, or simply hold them in their hands as the teacher says a special prayer presenting all of the notes to God.

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Give each child some pretty note paper and an index card. Play soft music. Tell them that no one is to talk as they write their notes to God. If they need to know how to spell a word they may raise their hands, and you will write the word they need on the index card. However, spelling should not be the focus. God can read whatever they write. He will understand what they are trying to say.

A variation is to have the children write out confessions of sin, something they know they need Jesus to help them overcome. Then they can bring the notes to a metal container where they are burned, symbolizing the power Jesus has to cleanse us of sin.

Another idea is to write a note of love or draw a picture for God, then to wrap it up as a gift, and put it under the Christmas tree or in a special basket at some other time of year.

Surprise Box

Place an object or picture inside a box to illustrate the worship topic for the morning. The children will look forward to seeing what you have in the box each day. After seeing how you bring a spiritual lesson from an object in

the box, the children will be able to create their own object lessons.

Rebus Games and Puzzle Codes

Use pictures to represent sounds or words. A picture of an eye and a paper bag can be used to represent the name Isaac (Eye-sack). A picture of a barn, the letter A, and a bus would form a rebus puzzle for Barnabas. A whole series of Bible character rebus puzzles can be made to use for worship time. Tell a worship story from that day's rebus puzzle.

Bible verses may be handled the same way. Example: 4, picture of Jesus, needle and thread, heart, world, outstretched hand, sun, word believe, knot, flames, heaven (John 3:16). This is a fun way to do memory verses or texts you want to emphasize for the day. Children love codes and puzzles.

Place a code on the board. For example: Have one number stand for each letter of the alphabet, or have another letter stand for each letter, such as Z for A, Y for B, etc.

Write a Bible verse or devotional message in code. Let the children work in teams of two or three to figure out the puzzle.

Other Possibilities

Almost any method for getting children actively involved in learning language arts, math, science, and social studies can be used to draw them into the worship experience. I have used charades, role playing, skits, games, quizzes, writing poetry and acrostics, crafts, experiments, and drawing.

Stories and singing are important worship activities, but I have found that my students get more excited about worship when these activities are interspersed with surprise activities in which the children themselves are involved. ☞

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