

Deepak Reju and Marty Machowski

BUILD

ON

JESUS

A Comprehensive Guide
to Gospel-Based Children's Ministry

“Every church wants an effective children’s ministry, but implementing one is easier said than done. It’s certainly not for the faint of heart. In *Build on Jesus*, Deepak Reju and Marty Machowski distill decades of experience into a practical guide for building a culture marked by excellence and molded by gospel grace. As a new pastor, I am immensely grateful for this resource and will be handing it to every children’s ministry leader at our church.”

Matt Smethurst, Managing Editor, The Gospel Coalition; planting pastor, River City Baptist Church, Richmond, VA; author of *Deacons* and *Before You Open Your Bible*

“In a post-Christian environment, we must not be casual about evangelizing and discipling the next generation. The need is urgent. I assure you the enemy is not casual in his intent to wound and destroy our children. This book is already helping me refocus and reprioritize how we love and lead the precious children in our church to a rich, vibrant faith in Jesus.”

Bob Lepine, Teaching Pastor, Redeemer Community Church, Little Rock, AR; cohost of *FamilyLife Today*

“Deepak and Marty’s *Build on Jesus* is a great foundational resource for building a Christ-centered children’s ministry. Theologically astute and sensible, this book is a great summary of what children’s ministry should be all about. Applying these principles will help your children grow in Christian discipleship in a safe environment. The appendices are extremely helpful in developing a child protection policy that will ensure that your church is equipped to care for the most vulnerable in your congregation: your children.”

Jeff Dalrymple, Executive Director, Evangelical Council for Abuse Prevention

“Deepak and Marty share a message that resonates deeply, one that the church needs to hear more than ever: children matter and so does children’s ministry. *Build on Jesus* is weighty yet accessible, comprehensive yet succinct. From the purpose of children’s ministry, to leadership roles, to ways to teach and protect children, this book provides ideal help for those new to ministry and is a valuable refresher for those who are seasoned.”

Brian Dembowczyk, Managing Editor of *The Gospel Project*; author of *Cornerstones: 200 Questions and Answers to Learn Truth* and *Gospel-Centered Kids Ministry*

“When I was a children’s and family pastor, I benefited greatly from Marty and Deepak’s biblical resources, and I highly recommend *Build on Jesus*. This isn’t one of those pragmatic, entertainment-driven, or church growth kinds of books. It’s a doctrinally strong, biblically-based, gospel-centered guide by two experienced shepherds that is well worth your time. If you are involved in children’s ministry, then you need to buy this book. Better yet, buy three copies and give one to your team and senior pastor. You will be glad you did!”

Josh Mulvihill, Author of *50 Things Every Child Needs to Know Before Leaving Home*

“Written by two seasoned family pastors, *Build on Jesus* is a perceptive portrayal of the blessings and challenges of ministry to children. Their book is engaging and replete with wise counsel gleaned from real life situations. This much-needed book will help children’s ministry leaders set priorities, care for the people in children’s ministry, and find practical guidance.”

David and Sally Michael, Cofounders of Truth78

“*Build on Jesus* has a biblical foundation and includes ready-to-implement counsel for ministries and classrooms. But the strength of this book is Marty and Deepak’s conviction that God uses people—pastors, the children’s minister, church members, and parents—to proclaim his glory to the next generation. This focus is why I’ll be reading *Build on Jesus* with children’s ministry leaders for many years.”

Jared Kennedy, Managing Editor of *Gospel-Centered Family*; author of *The Beginner’s Gospel Story Bible* and *Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission*

“What a great handbook for children’s ministry! *Build on Jesus* is practical, spiritual, and an easy read. The authors give clear guidance for creating a ministry that is effective, sensible, safe, and fun. This book will be a great resource to those new to children’s ministry and a great checkup for veteran children’s ministers.”

Annette Safstrom, Coauthor of *Sustainable Children’s Ministry*; senior consultant, Ministry Architects

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Where it is helpful and appropriate, names and details have been changed to protect the identity and confidentiality of people in the stories.

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Introduction

Your Children's Ministry—Porsche or Junkyard Truck?

Picture a sunny day, and you're standing roadside, next to a racecourse. A 2020 Porsche 911 Carrera zips by you, moving at one hundred and eighty miles per hour. It's fast, sleek, and built for speed. Then, about fifty-three minutes later, here comes the competition—a 1977 Ford F-150, puttering along at twenty miles per hour. It's chugging along, with plenty of smoke coming out of the exhaust pipe. It looks like it's limping along. Your son whispers in your ear: "The F-150 is a classic!" but with the paint worn out and the frame bent out of shape, you're wondering if it belongs in the junkyard.

Is your church's children's ministry a Porsche or a junkyard car? Let's lift the hood and take a look at what's underneath.

A TYPICAL SUNDAY—HOW DOES IT LOOK?

You stroll through your children's ministry wing at church on Sunday morning. You see smiling volunteers and colorful classrooms. Children and parents are moving everywhere, back and forth. Everything looks like it's running smoothly, maybe even like a fine-tuned Porsche engine that purrs like a kitten.

If you get under the hood, however, what you'll find is an old, beat up 1977 engine, barely alive. If you stood in the place of

your children's ministry deacon or lead volunteer (or whoever oversees the kids in your church), what you'll see from *their* perspective is that problems abound.

- It's ten minutes before worship service begins. Cecelia just texted, "I'm horribly sick. I'm not going to make it in this morning." Where do you find a last-minute backup?
- Parents are standing outside of a classroom with their children, but none of the volunteers have shown up yet.
- An hour later, you walk by the kindergarten class. The smidgeon of volunteers is overwhelmed. There are a billion kids stuffed into the classroom (the first problem) and the volunteers clearly don't know what they are doing (the second problem).
- A teacher asks you, "Remind me what the bathroom policy is? I know you've told this to me before . . ." You get asked this question weekly by someone.
- A panicked mother grabs you after the service. "I saw a bruise on a one-year-old boy's leg. Should I call Child Protective Services? What should I do?"
- You're exhausted but survived the morning. You get home for a bite to eat and your traditional Sunday afternoon nap, but an irritated parent calls. "My son has got a cut on his arm. What happened in his class today?" No one told you about this, so you don't know what to say.

This sounds like the ministry is running much more like a junkyard Ford than a brand-new Porsche, right? The world of children's ministry, if you've ever served in it, is full of difficulties and frustrations. *Anyone* who has run a children's ministry can testify to it:

- There are not enough volunteers to keep the children's programs going.
- The volunteers that you do have are overworked and on the verge of burnout.

- You've never practiced an emergency evacuation and don't know what you'd do if there ever was a fire.
- There is pressure from church leadership to add additional programs, but they are reluctant to announce a need for more volunteers, unwilling to increase your budget, and they haven't set foot in children's ministry in years.
- There are reports about another church where the youth minister abused the teenagers. You think that couldn't happen here. But truth be told, if it happened in your church, you don't have the faintest idea how to handle it.
- Your curriculum is laden with moralistic lessons. You're fearful of creating little Pharisees in your children's programs. You want to change things up, but the teachers say, "We've always done it this way."
- A registered sex offender shows up at your church. You and your pastor don't know what to do.
- There are no clear check-in or check-out procedures, or no one follows the procedures you've put in place.
- Volunteers struggle to manage a rowdy crowd of children. There are more paper airplanes thrown around than Bible verses.
- You haven't been to a worship service in months and you're getting worn out. You'd love to attend regularly, but you constantly get stuck in the children's ministry, solving problems and filling in for last-minute dropouts.
- If something goes wrong (literally anything), you're winging it. There are no proactive plans or policies in place, or the policies you do have were written a decade ago and are no longer relevant.

That's not everything. We could fill up a few more pages with the problems that overrun children's ministry on a typical Sunday. If you are a children's ministry person, you think, *Yep. I've seen all of this. This is not new territory for me.* Or if you are the pastor, you think, *I knew there were problems, but I didn't realize*

all of what's gone wrong. That's a lot. Or, if you are a parent, you might think, *Gosh, I had no idea.*

Is all of the time and effort put into children's ministry worth it? You're wondering what to do about these problems. What are effective ways to manage and get ahead of these challenges?

THE OPPORTUNITY: RAISE UP A PASSIONATE GENERATION

Ten minutes. Ten children. Nothing to do. That's all it takes. Boredom is one of the great archenemies.

If you give a room full of children nothing to do, in a short while, they get rowdy and pick on one another, make paper airplanes, and find ways to get in trouble. The doctrine of depravity is foolproof (Romans 3:23). Children don't need to prove that they are sinners. Most kids by nature care more about themselves than God. Their short attention spans, their immaturity, and their nitpicking at each other all show that they are by nature foolish (Proverbs 22:15).

But with every challenge comes an opportunity. The vast majority of children waltzing around your church are not Christians. This means that by and large, the chance you have in every Sunday school class is to do more than teach a Bible story about David defeating the Philistine giant (though teaching Old Testament stories is good!). It's more than just providing safe childcare so the parents can attend the services undistracted (though that's a good thing to do!). It's more than singing gospel songs and memorizing Scripture (even more good stuff!). All of this is thinking far too small. What are you here for? Why are you laboring every Sunday morning for the sake of these kids? Stated simply, we organize children's ministry, recruit volunteers, and teach the Bible to these children because *our zeal is to see an entire generation of faithful believers raised up to proclaim the gospel to a world that needs it.*

That's right. This all starts in your class with a group of young children entrusted to you every Sunday morning. Are you up for the task?

Here's what we want to see. We want children who grow up to become Christians who stand firm when the cultural pressures contradict the Bible; boldly share the gospel with lost people; stand out as light to a dark world, a stark contrast to the self-glory, gluttony, and greed of this world; and willingly suffer and even die for the sake of Christ.

In short, we want another generation to carry the banner of gospel truth. How does this happen? Where does this new generation come from?

It comes from the Lord, of course. What we want—another generation of faithfulness—is what God has promised. He's told you that his Word will not fail (Isaiah 55:10–11), his kingdom has arrived and will go on (Matthew 4:17; 12:28; Revelation 11:15), he'll continue to draw sinners to himself (John 10:27–29), and—ready for this?—he'll use you to declare the saving work of Jesus to the upcoming generation who walks into your classroom.

Rest assured, you don't have to fix all of this mess on your own. Your job is to be faithful to teach, lead, and pray for the children, and God will do all the rest.

THE GOAL: GATHERING—BOTH NOW AND FOREVER

You might say, "I can barely get the kids to pay attention, let alone cooperate. What you're asking for is a tall order." Well, we're not done yet.

Our more *immediate goal* is to see our children converted, growing up into believing adults who gather with the rest of the church. You want these children to know the Lord, and to be healthy, gospel-loving, servant-minded contributors to a local church. You can't save these kids; only God can (Jonah 2:9). But you are a means to point them to Christ and the cross. We share the gospel and pray that the Lord will convert their hearts and join them to our churches.

Our *ultimate goal* is to see our children one day gather with the great throng of believers—the thousands from every faithful generation—to worship the Lord in glory and enjoy him

forever. We want to stand alongside these children—to sing, laugh, dance, embrace, and praise the greatness of our God.

Nothing short of these goals is worthy of your time or attention.

YOUR MAP FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

Here's where we're headed.

Part 1 will cover the *priorities* of a children's ministry. We teach the Bible, and it's the foundation in everything we do. We think about children in the life of the church. What place do they have? What role do they play? We hold out the urgency of the mission—we instruct on the Great Commission as a worthy goal for their life.

Part 2 will deal with *people*. We want a hearty partnership between children's ministry and parents, pastors, and the congregation. If we sputter along like the junkyard Ford, the children's ministry director and a few volunteers will carry a thousand pounds of labor on a few people's backs. But, for this ministry venture to work well, all hands need to be on deck, lest this ship sink faster than the *Titanic*.

Part 3 will explain *practicalities*. We need best practices. How do we efficiently check in the children? How do we screen and train our volunteers? How do we design our children's ministry area to make it safe? We also need robust policies so we don't just react in the moment. What do we do if a fire takes place or an active shooter walks into the building? How do we respond to abuse and neglect? There are nuts and bolts to any children's ministry that need to be adequately dealt with to make it run smoothly.

If you are a children's ministry director—the main person who runs children's ministry in your church—we've composed this book for you. You're our target audience. There are no playbooks for your job, so we've compiled one for you. But we've also written with pastors in mind because they provide leadership to children's ministry and church members, especially the folks

who volunteer day in and day out to keep it running. If you are a parent, reading this book will provide a guide for how to help improve your church's children's ministry. After all, you have a personal stake in the health of your church's ministry to the next generation.

God has entrusted to us the responsibility for these children. We desire nothing short of the best for our kids—a safe, well-run, creative, gospel-rich children's program that holds out the glories of Christ. If this is what you want too, then keep reading.

Part 1

The Priorities of Children's Ministry

We start by reviewing the priorities of children's ministry. Every ministry has priorities—the values, governing principles, and essential components foundational to our goals. We define and review these matters to help our ministry remain focused.

Take a minute and consider what values and principles define your ministry. What kind of foundation are you laying? What do your values reveal about your commitment to the gospel? Do your guiding principles show a commitment to the Bible? Do the leaders and adults in your church value children? How can you tell? What is the mission and how is it expressed?

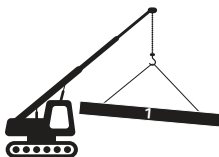
Be aware that a church can run a successful children's program that everyone loves yet fall short of key priorities. We want to help our families reach the hearts of their children. When our kids reach their teen or young adult years, we hope they'll come to know and love the Lord personally, join the ministry, become members, and join the mission of our churches. We don't want our teenagers' beliefs to crumble and see them walk away from their faith.

Our foundation is key. We want our kids to stand on stable building blocks. These three priorities offer a rock-solid platform for any gospel-centered children's ministry:

Teach the Bible. The authority of the Bible and the gospel are the cornerstones on which we build our entire children's ministry. Everything we do is shaped and defined by these two values, including the gospel-rich curriculum we teach to our children.

Value the Children. Because Jesus valued children, so we also love and cherish them. That leads us to teach truth to little hearts and model the gospel in community for them.

Focus on the Mission. We want all of our kids to support the Great Commission and reach the world with the gospel, whether that's teaching a Sunday school class for thirty years in their local church or going overseas as a missionary.



1. Teach the Bible

Peter, a thirty-year-old father of two preschool children, looks out at a room of seven six-year-olds. With eager anticipation, he stands tall on a chair and bellows with a loud voice, “I am the giant Goliath. Who here believes they are strong enough to fight me?” The children are instantly captivated by the dramatization, and several raise their hands to volunteer. The class follows along as Peter teaches them never to be afraid of the giants in their lives. The kids swing their imaginary slings with all their might and let their pretend stones fly. Then they watch as Peter falls in dramatic slow motion to the floor and then leads the class in a cheer. “We did it! We won! Thank you, God!”

The children return to their seats and color in their David and Goliath coloring sheets while Peter travels from table to table to help the class write their names on the upper right corner. The class is still abuzz as the parents come back to pick up their children.

“What did you learn about today?” Jennifer asks her six-year-old daughter, Kala.

Kala shouts her answer, “We beat the giant Goliath! We won, Mommy, we won!”

Peter quickly pipes in. “God helps us battle the giants. Doesn’t he, Kala?” He makes sure Kala remembers that God is behind every victory.

Kala nods her head and takes her mom's hand. Jennifer leads her down the hallway and out the back door. She's grateful. "I'm so glad I started coming to this church. Peter is a great teacher."

Peter watches as the last of the kids exit the classroom. He is glad to teach, but he wonders how much of a lasting influence his lesson will have on the kids.

What's right or wrong with what Peter did here?

ARE YOU BUILDING ON A SOLID FOUNDATION?

Just behind our house, I (Deepak) watched over the last year as construction workers built five three-floor, brick townhouses. Our family had a front-row seat to everything. Before they started building up, they dug down and set a solid foundation.

Before we answer the question about Peter ("What's right or wrong with what Peter did here?"), let's set out a few building blocks for your children's ministry—like the foundation for a building. Whatever you do stands atop some kind of foundation. When the tsunamis of life come blistering through, buildings with faulty foundations will crumble, like a toy house hit with a sledgehammer. Your building stands or falls based on the quality of your foundation.

Two crucial foundations stabilize our children's ministry: the authority of the Bible and the priority of the gospel.

First foundation: the authority of the Bible

The first foundation for your children's ministry—in fact, the cornerstone of the whole thing—is the authority of the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 reminds us, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

The Bible is not just any book. It's the book of books. It's the norm of all norms. It's God-breathed. God is the author. The text was shaped, defined, and written by God, though the Lord used

humans as a means for writing everything down. He's behind the men he inspired to write. The Bible has authority because God—who is the ultimate authority in this universe—wrote it. So, when the Bible speaks, God speaks. They are one and the same.

In light of this truth, we can draw out two implications.

1. Because the Bible is God's very own Word, it is trustworthy and true, without error.

We don't need a Thomas Jefferson Bible. The founding father used a razor and glue to cut and paste the parts of the Bible he liked. He got rid of all the parts he didn't like. The result was a Bible of his own making. Jefferson didn't believe in miracles (including the resurrection) so he literally cut them out.

Unlike Jefferson, we believe every book of the Bible is worthy of our children's attention because it is all from God. Though children gravitate to stories, let's not avoid using the Psalms, prophets, or New Testament epistles. Let's not create our own "Jefferson Bible"—cutting out the parts about sin and judgment or explaining away the miracles of Jesus. All Scripture is profitable for teaching!

2. Everything we do should be shaped by the Bible, because it's the very Word of God.

This second implication flows out of the first. If the Bible is written by God, then we should follow what it says. What God values, we should value. What God hates, we hate. His priorities should be our priorities. If God tells us to love him above all else, to serve others, to deny ourselves, to make sacrifices, then we show we trust him by following through with everything he commands.

The truth of Scripture should color all that we say and do in the classroom. When raw wool yarn is dyed, workers plunge the whole skein into the vat of dye. A sprinkle here and there is not sufficient. The goal is for the color to permeate every fiber. That is how we should use the Bible in our classroom. Scripture should shape what we teach, what we sing, the games we play,

and the illustrations we use to present our lessons. Our kids are the wool that we plunge into the Bible vat of truth so that it soaks through to their heart and soul.

You want God's thoughts, God's words, and God's love to echo through all of your work.

Let's not allow our views, opinions, or philosophy of life to trump what the text of the Bible says. The Bible should be the heartbeat of your work.

We apply what the Bible says to our lives and allow it to shape how we live. If you allow the Bible to frame your teaching and permeate all that you do, you're building a rock-solid foundation for your ministry. Congratulations, that's a great way to start.

Second foundation: the gospel

The second cornerstone is the gospel. Gospel means "good news." It's God's good news of his one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

This gospel is the big picture theme of God's plan of salvation—it weaves its way through the whole Bible. Once you learn how to recognize it, you can see how every story connects to the larger gospel picture. The application of the gospel is the goal of every story. We want our children to know God personally through his Son, Jesus.

Consider the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." He tells the Corinthians that he didn't teach with lofty speech or all kinds of worldly wisdom (v. 1). The focus of his ministry was proclaiming Jesus's death on a cross on Calvary. In fact, all of Christianity can be summed up in four words: Christ died for sinners.

God's rescue plan can be summed up with just four words: GOD, MAN, CHRIST, and RESPONSE.

GOD. God created men and women and put them in Eden, his perfect paradise (Genesis 1:26–28; 2:15).

MAN. Adam and Eve sinned. They rebelled against God and doubted his command (Genesis 3). They chose to trust the Satan's words rather than God's. Sin is our violation of God's law. All of mankind has turned its back on God; we have all declared we want to live life our own way (Isaiah 53:6).

CHRIST. God sent his only Son Jesus to redeem us. He took on the punishment we deserved, bore God's wrath, and then rose three days later as God declared him victorious over death itself (Mark 10:45; Romans 3:21–26; 6:9).

RESPONSE. What's required of all of us (including our kids) is to respond to this truth (John 1:12; Acts 17:30). We can't ignore or suppress it. We must decide if we'll give our life to Christ, as our Lord and Savior, or if we'll reject him.

We teach God's plan of salvation to our kids. The stakes are high. If we water down the gospel or replace it with a moral lesson, we deprive our children of God's true power. The apostle Paul said the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). Our salvation is rooted in believing and trusting in the substitutionary death of Jesus—that is, that Jesus absorbed God's wrath against our sin on the cross. Take that out of a Bible lesson, and you strip God's power from the story and leave your children empty. There are plenty of people who go to church, try to follow the Ten Commandments, and do good deeds but who are not trusting in Christ for their salvation. They remain lost.

It is through the gospel that our children come to know God and come to find joy, peace, and contentment that transcends their circumstances. This is how our living hope is passed down to the next generation. Because the gospel alone has the power of God to save, it is the key to ensuring our kids will one day be

with God in heaven and join us in our mission to reach the lost (otherwise, they'll spend eternity in hell apart from the Lord).

We *must* teach the gospel. We don't have a choice. Eternity hangs in the balance.

Let's now answer our original question: What's right or wrong with what Peter did in the opening lesson at the beginning of this chapter? Peter certainly gave his all in his Goliath impersonation. Clearly, Peter cares about the kids in his classroom. But Peter missed the gospel in his retelling of the story. He took the famous story about David and Goliath and made it about underdogs beating the champions. The little guy beats the big, bad giant. We are to face the "Goliaths" of our day—whatever is big and scary in our life, whether that's a bully at school or a sickness at home.

Was that really the point of this story from 1 Samuel 17? In our evaluation, Peter's lesson is no better than generic proverbial advice you get from a fortune cookie or a high school coach in the locker room ("I know we've got a losing record, but we can beat the reigning champs!"). When Peter looked up from his script and gave the kids his own personal interpretation of the story, he turned it into a modern-day moral lesson about beating the big, bad things in your life—bullies, sickness, or the like. He got it wrong.

A careful look at 1 Samuel 17 shows what the point of the story is—in our weakness, we must fight to preserve the Lord's honor in all things.

1. Goliath defies the armies of the living God (vv. 26, 36). As sinners, we often do the same; we defy God and his ways.
2. David shows us what faith looks like—what trust in God is, even when the circumstances are bleak (vv. 46–47). God's past deliverance is the basis of our hope that he will continue to preserve us (v. 37).
3. David's weakness shows off God's strength (vv. 28–40). Despite how David's older brother Eliab (v. 28) and

Saul look down on David (v. 33), David's trust was in the Lord (v. 37). Saul tried to compensate for David's smaller size or strength (compared to Goliath) by giving David his own armor (vv. 38–39).

4. David is not the hero of the story. God is. God is the great deliverer of Israel. David's hope is in the Lord, not his own strength. So also, it is in God that we must put our hope. This story is not about little guys beating big, bad giants. It's about God, who will deliver the giant into David's hands ("This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands," v. 46).
5. David foreshadows Jesus. Goliath asks for a representative to stand for all of Israel. Not a single Israelite trusts God. They stand on the sidelines, afraid to fight. They need God to provide a savior, and God provides young David. When retelling the story, we shouldn't compare ourselves to David. We should compare ourselves to the sinful Israelites who needed a rescue. Jesus came, born in the city of David, in the kingly line of David, as one man who would represent sinners (that's all of us) and win the battle over sin and death (Romans 5:15). Everyone who puts their hope and trust in Jesus shares in Christ's victory and will live forever in heaven with God.

If one of your teachers taught 1 Samuel 17 next Sunday in your children's ministry, what would they say? Would they teach a moral lesson or connect the story with gospel truth? What would be the main points they communicate about this text? Here's our challenge to you: assign this text to one of your teachers and see what happens. It might be instructive.

Self-Evaluation: Are you building on a solid foundation?

What are the foundations for your ministry? What would people say is most important in your program? If you are not sure, a simple way to figure this out is to ask the senior pastor

and a few parents whose kids attend your children’s ministry. Are you building your children’s ministry on these two solid foundations—the Bible and the gospel?

HOW TO ASSESS YOUR CURRICULUM

With two solid foundations of your building in place, we can now pick out a curriculum to help you fulfill these scriptural, gospel-driven goals. As children’s ministry leaders, we show our true colors by what we pick for our curriculum. We live and die by our curriculum choices because it shapes everything our teachers present to our kids. It’s what our teachers teach and what our children consume. In whatever you pick, you communicate your priorities, hopes, and burdens for your children’s ministry.

Most churches don’t have time or energy to write their own curriculum. You buy prepackaged material—a curriculum in a box. What makes for a good curriculum? How do you evaluate it? What benchmarks do you use to pick out a curriculum that fits with your church?

Let us offer four criteria.

1. Content: Is it biblical and gospel-rich?

As you might expect, we want a curriculum that’s rooted in the Bible and infused with the gospel. It should teach what the Bible says, so we can let God speak to our children. And it should regularly refer to the gospel because we desire our kids to hear the good news every time we gather. Do the children get the gospel in every lesson?

The gospel provides our main content. That’s what we want woven throughout each lesson. If the lessons just teach good morals (“Be nice to old people.” “Don’t fight with your brother or sister.” “The little guys can beat the champions if they work hard!”), then our children will never be saved. Our Sunday school will produce little Pharisees—religious people who know the rules but don’t know Jesus. Is that what we really want?

2. Developmentally appropriate: Does it match a child's learning level?

I (Deepak) noticed my six-year-old son, Abraham, fidgeting. He squirmed in his seat and then blurted out, "I don't want to go to Sunday school." This surprised my wife and me. Our son has never been reluctant to go to church, so we were thrown off by his comment. My dear wife offered to sit in the class with him, and he reluctantly agreed to try again.

After church, I asked, "How did it go?" The response on her face communicated a lot (after twenty years of marriage, you don't have to exchange words to know if something is wrong). Here's what happened. There were two teachers, Zachary and Adeline. Adeline was crowd control—she was responsible for keeping the kids in line. Zachary "taught." He read from a script, with no enthusiasm in his voice, using big words like "atonement" and "justification." We're not opposed to teaching young children theological terms. But too many big words will zoom over the kids' heads faster than an F-15 fighter jet. My son didn't want to go back because he was confused and bored.

Your curriculum needs to be suited for where the children are—it should line up with what they can do cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually. Peter can tell a six-year-old, "Jesus atoned for your sins and propitiated God's wrath" or "Jesus died for you." The former is theologically accurate, but it's just too much for a first-grade boy or girl.

3. User-friendly: Is it easy to use?

You could tell by the creases in her forehead, the grimace, and her tightened facial muscles. Patricia looked like a deer in headlights. She had just picked up a copy of the Sunday school curriculum and was quickly overwhelmed. There were too many instruction pages, and there was so much material, she didn't know what to do. She was discouraged before she'd even started.

Curriculum should be easy to use and never overwhelming. If you've ever built something from IKEA, you know that they

make the instructions as basic as possible. Otherwise, people like us would need to hire someone to build the furniture. If the instructions and curriculum aren't clear—if they are too cumbersome or confusing—the teacher will be discouraged. That's a problem. You want a curriculum that's user-friendly—easy to use and understand. That helps make the volunteer's preparation more efficient and enjoyable, and it removes barriers to communicating God's truth to children.

4. Fun and creative: Does it keep the kids engaged?

If we put seven six-year-old boys in a room for an hour with no toys, no lesson, and nothing to do, we're not sure they'll all make it out alive by the end of the hour. We're kidding (sort of). Kids get in trouble when they don't have anything to do. The last thing we need is more trouble in children's ministry.

Curriculum should be fun and engaging for the kids. If you throw truth at them, but your only target is their minds, the kids will struggle in class. The Puritan John Bunyan talked about the different gates to the heart—like the eye, ear, mouth, and nose gates.¹ A good curriculum will make use of these different senses and engage all of them.

I (Marty) recently taught the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). I wanted to help kids connect with the big idea—*it's not important what we are like on the outside, but what we are like on the inside*. So, I purchased two apples: one large, top shelf apple with a sticker, and one small, ordinary apple. The large apple was my Pharisee, and the small one my tax collector. Prior to class, I hollowed out the large apple from the bottom and stuffed it full of dried prunes. Then I used the two apples as props to tell the story.

I connected the New Testament story to the principal God taught Samuel, “[M]an looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). As I spoke these words, I cut through the large apple with a knife, revealing the rotten core (the prunes). The children reacted predictably. Then

I told them. “The Pharisee trusted in his good works, but inside he was full of sin.”

Then I cut through the middle of the smaller apple, revealing the star pattern formed by the seeds radiating out from the core. As I showed the children the star inside, I said, “The tax collector knew he was a sinner and asked God to forgive him. When we trust in Jesus who died on the cross in our place, God takes our sinful heart away. Instead of a rotten core, the tax collector had the Morning Star, Jesus, in his heart.”

The kids didn’t leave the classroom confused by Jesus’s conclusion, “I tell you this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other” (Luke 18:14). The kids knew exactly what they needed: God must change their rotten heart of sin and the Morning Star (Jesus) must come to live in them. I’m sure at least some remembered God’s words to Samuel, that God looks at the heart.

That’s the big idea for the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector. But to be well rounded, engaging, and memorable, you can add more—a song, a craft, a skit, and even a snack—but let each and every activity reflect some aspect of that truth. Like the different sides of a diamond, we view this same truth through many different lenses.

You can sing a song about God changing our hearts. Have the children draw the two apples, one with a star and one with a rotten core, and even eat apples as a snack, to help the children remember the object lesson (always keep allergies in mind, though fresh fruit is one of the safest choices). You can have two children act out the proud words of the Pharisee in contrast to the humble tax collector. All together, these fun components work to underscore the gospel.

HOW YOUNG CAN YOU START WITH GOSPEL-RICH CURRICULUM?

We start teaching gospel-rich content to young children—classes for two- or three-year-olds. Volunteers are often surprised by

this. We've had teachers ask, "Are we really making a difference with children who can barely pay attention for more than two minutes?"

Yes, you're making a difference—in at least four ways.

1. *A young child's intake and processing of information is greater than his or her capacity to interact verbally.* At two years of age, a child can only speak fifty to two hundred words. But there is a lot more rolling around in the young child's head than can be expressed by his limited vocabulary.
2. *Repetition aids retention.* Have you ever had a young child ask you to read a favorite story for the twentieth time? A child can take in the same material over and over and over again because they enjoy it. We might only teach two-year-old kids a few minutes at a time because of their short attention span. But when you repeat the material, it greatly helps the child to retain and remember what he repeated.
3. *Children are sponges.* They absorb and learn from most everything around them. Adults tend to underestimate what little children can pick up.
4. *It is important to teach children ahead of their ability to understand.* Let's give them the gospel before they fully understand it. In this way, once they're able to understand, they'll have the gospel. Think of it in terms of building blocks. You can't build higher levels (of thinking) without laying down foundational layers. If we lay down a rock-solid, stable foundation, we can build more later on.

These kids learn more than they let on. For those who aren't quite ready to comprehend, let's share the good news about Jesus anyway. That way, as soon as they can understand, they'll have a foundation that will help them know Christ.

THIS MATTERS

It's Sunday morning at 9:30 a.m. Jake and Susan arrive at church with a quiver full of kids at hand and head to the children's

ministry area. Jake pauses for coffee in the lobby and chats with a few other adults. Susan follows her kids as they race to the children's area. After she checks in their kids, Charlotte, their daughter, enters into her first-grade class.

Here's what we want her to encounter:

- Warm, kind, and gracious teachers. ("Good morning, Charlotte. I'm so glad to see you!")
- A solid Bible-based, gospel-centered curriculum.
- Fun, engaging, developmentally appropriate lessons.
- A welcoming and inviting environment.

What Peter teaches in his Sunday school class matters. We don't trivialize or minimize what he's doing. We help Peter get the lesson right so that Charlotte and the other kids can hear the gospel—the one truth that can change their lives. Through Peter's teaching, the Holy Spirit can bring conviction in the hearts of these little children, moving them from the domain of darkness to God's kingdom. Moral lessons won't suffice. We need them to walk away with more than just "The little guy beats the champions!" We need gospel-rich, Bible-saturated, developmentally appropriate, and creative truth that engages hearts, transforms minds, and changes lives. Glory be to God.