



Practical input

2. Learning the way of love – establishing purpose at every age

This article is part of a series of resources exploring the relationship between worship and justice and how this specifically applies to children, young people and all-ages together. (Find the others, podcasts and more at www.thesanctuarycentr.org-whereworldandworshipmeet-everyage or www.rachelturner.org.uk)

Like the other practical input sheets in this series, it is structured in two parts. The first provides a brief teaching overview on values, and the second explores practical approaches for parents and leaders to explore in order to apply these principles.

The big questions:

Is the most important thing to teach our children that they are loved by God, and invited into a relationship with him? Or is there more to faith – even for our youngest children – than this?

How can we help children understand what it means to love God and love others?

How can we help children connect with their purpose in the world, as well as their identity in Christ, and their relationship with God?

How do we move beyond telling kids to be nice, and instead help them to develop compassion and courage in love?

Part 1 – Value input:

Do you remember the kind of dreams you had when you were young? Who were you most inspired by? Who did you wish you were back them – and what did you want to be when you grew up? What did you think was unfair?

Our guess is that you still remember the answers to some of these questions now, and that they somehow relate to the heart of who you have become as an adult – even if you now accept you probably won't ever be able to be a full-time super-hero, or actually rule a fairy kingdom!

Childhood is a key time for developing – physically, emotionally, educationally, spiritually – everything is in flux, and learning is happening literally all the time. It's also a key time for forming world views and determining how people will understand, and interact with, the world throughout their whole lives.

We all know it's important to get it right – to help children grow healthily; develop well; and become balanced, inquisitive people, who are motivated and focused on the things that really matter. As Christians, we want our children to have the best start with God and to begin journeys of faith that will last a lifetime. But what are the key elements needed to secure this?

In the first article in this series, *Telling the whole story – learning about justice at every age*, we discussed the need to tell children the “whole story” of the gospel – which must include referencing an unjust world, and the role Christians have to play in partnering with God to transforming his world alongside the truth of how much God loves us, and the invitation to have a relationship with him because of what Jesus has done for us.

In this article, we talk about how to help children explore this adventure of transformation God has invited them to be a part of, and to ground this in the context of their wider faith journeys. Love and mercy for other people, as well as for ourselves, are central to the gospel. And so, by extension, they should be central to the way we are framing our young peoples' discipleship.

Identity, relationship and purpose

In order to grasp, and live out of, the whole gospel, Christians need to be sure of how their lives as disciples fit into God's bigger story. There are three crucial elements to grow in, and balance:

1. Identity – we need to know who we are in Christ. We have been redeemed and restored into relationship as God's children. We are deeply loved, and are being shaped into who we were created to be.
2. Relationship – God formed us for relationship with him (and others). Our faith journey is about moving closer *to* God, but also moving forward *with* him. Through his Word and Spirit, we come to understand him more; recognise him at work; and worship him through devotion and obedience.
3. Purpose – first and foremost we are called to relationship; this is our purpose. But relationship doesn't happen in a vacuum... we join in with what those we relate to are doing – and in God's case this is loving other people; beckoning them closer to him; and securing justice and transformation for the whole world.

Most Christians would agree with this – even if their understanding of how these three elements are balanced, or expressed, might differ according to background or style of worship. And yet often when we are teaching, mentoring, and preparing our children for a life of faith, we don't include all three of these elements.

In recent years, many parts of the church have developed excellent curriculum for teaching young people to understand, and live out of, their identity in Christ. There are books; songs; teaching notes; films and more that all help children connect with the truth that God loves them as his special child – and that in Christ they are secure, accepted and forgiven. Thank God for this. It's vital, particularly in our image-obsessed culture, that children learn that they are valued for who they are, and that they discover God's heart of love for them.

More recently as well, more churches have been waking up to the need to encourage children to develop their own relationships with God from an early age. Rachel discusses the need for relationship in her book, *Parenting children for a life of faith: Helping children meet and know God*, where she distinguishes between young people who are "God-smart" and those who are "God-connected". It's not ever going to be enough to teach our children facts about God as if he was another subject on the school curriculum – they need to be empowered to seek God, and to find him. These are crucial tools that will set them up for a strong walk of faith in the present and the future.

But more work is needed to help purpose come through fully in children's discipleship at the current time. The reasons for its relative neglect are in many ways good and sound. We are cautious of over-burdening our children; or of exposing them to negative emotions such as sadness or guilt. But sometimes, we are so keen to keep children safe, or to ensure we don't over-emphasise good works, or duty in service, that we neglect to focus on the plans and purposes God has for his next generation of world-changers.

If we over-focus on identity and relationship, but cut off purpose, we are creating a situation where children cannot fully understand or function in their Christ given identity and their relationship with God. To only understand identity and relationship in abstract, rather than in action, is not really to understand them at all.

Purpose = love

We can start to feel fearful when we talk about the need for our children to explore their purpose. It can all begin to sound a bit too grown-up when we use language such as outward-focused disciples; missional individuals; campaigners for justice; world-changers; or history-makers.

After all, children have their whole adult lives ahead of them to serve; love and lay down their lives and it feels dangerously counter-cultural – even within the church – to suggest that such a thing would be appropriate now. Even in our own lives, the cost of truly following Jesus can be great. Many of us are wrestling with our own issues around acting justly, and worry that these issues are too heavy or depressing for our children.

But we must remember that at root talking about purpose is simply talking about love – and that loving others is simply speaking out for them; taking care of them; interceding for them; and structuring our lifestyles around preferring them, because of how God feels about them.

We don't need to get bogged down in how we are going to explain complex systems of economic injustice or globalisation to our children, or whether they can cope with the full reality of the abusive situation our next door neighbour is facing – this is part of the detailed story, not the “whole story”, that we discussed in the first article in this series.

Instead we simply need to undertake a short litmus test for our curriculum, teaching, and modelling to young people. Are we communicating that God's justice is steeped in mercy and rooted in love? Are we teaching them to act in love; speak up for love; and reach out in love? Are we asking them to respond to hate with love? Are we modelling how to recognise unloving actions and behaviours in themselves and others – and to challenge and change these – in love and with grace?

Loving our neighbours Jesus' way

As long as we are bringing through Jesus' definition of the greatest command (Mark 12:29-31) to all who would seek to follow God, and ensuring that we do not limit the application of the term “neighbour” like the religious expert was hoping to do in Luke 10:25-37, we are helping our children understand what God's love means for us, and others – and building in them the foundation to hold both together, now and throughout their lives in all the different contexts and spheres of influence that they have the power to effect.

Put very simply, as Jesus explained it, following him means loving him, and loving our neighbours as ourselves. And loving Jesus does mean thanking him, and praising him. But it also means caring about the things he cares about, and talking to him about the people he loves.

And our neighbours are literally everyone who we have anything to do with – so yes, acting justly does mean looking out for friends and siblings; sharing toys; and tidying rooms but it might also mean being friendly to the old lady next door who lives alone; trying to understand someone at school who is unkind; going without a favourite type of chocolate in order to commit to only buying fair-trade; or praying for situations in the news which seem far away.

Holding Jesus' principles of love against everything we teach will ensure we are growing a new generation of missional disciples – young people who look up to God, and out to the world – children who are learning to love in two directions.

Growing disciples of love

But how do we grow genuine compassion and love in children and empower them to minister it with courage?

Firstly we need to stop thinking that children need be introduced to, or can be protected from, the idea of unfairness and injustice. Children live in the world and already feel the reality of it. Relatives and pets die; friends can be cruel; teachers are sometimes unjust; and families experience all kinds of heartache. We have the privilege of being able to name these experiences and help children process their feelings and actions in response to them. By empowering children in their purpose to love, we are saying to them “God cares about this stuff and is doing something about it; you to help him”. It is much better to confront these issues, and to proactively hold them in tension with God’s perfect love, because doing this enables us to communicate a message of hope instead of letting the silence imply we are helpless in the face of suffering or injustice.

We also need to redefine “love” for children because for many of them, it has become a passive emotion, associated far more with politeness and being “nice” than with the kind of active adventure of transformation that Jesus was referencing in Mark 12.

Our culture uses “love” for so much that it has been robbed of its power, and many children switch off when they hear it. It is an exaggerated version of the problem that faces adults too. In New Testament Greek there are five loves (storge, agape, charis, eros and phileo) not just one, and this enabled a distinction and even to a certain extent, a ranking, of loves. “Agape” – the compassionate, unconditional love that God has for his people – gained new meaning in this context.

God’s love is powerful – it can rescue people from the depths of loneliness; seek out the lost and hidden; motivate the unimaginable good in people; and bring peace to places that have previously known only war. It never comes to the end of itself.

This is the love we are invited to partner with. Loving people in this kind of way changes their lives and ours. We need to communicate the true power of love through stories in scripture and testimonies of changed lives in our church communities. And we need to celebrate the impact that God’s love, and others’ love has had on our lives, and how the community of faith has changed lives through proclaiming the gospel, and giving sacrificially.

If we don’t, and we continue to allow a weak definition of love to remain, we will not only reduces our children’s sense of their purpose, and the possible impact that they could have, but also potentially negatively impact their relationship with God and their understanding of his mission as well. If love seems passive and weak to them, then the Father’s love for *them* may seem tokenistic too...one big flourish with Jesus on the cross, and then distance. And every time we mention how Jesus loved people, and how the Father loves us and others, no matter how powerful we believe what we are communicating is, our children are actually hearing about passive emotion instead of radical motivated action.

It is absolutely essential that children know the intensity of emotion the Father feels for them, especially children who come from broken circumstances or painful home lives. But they must also understand that God’s love is more than a feeling – it is an active pursuit of us, and the best for us. It is the kind of love expressed in Jesus laying aside his majesty and coming to dwell with us; in giving up his life on the cross to reconcile us; in reaching out in acts of mercy and transformation throughout history in order to see lives transformed.

This kind of love is a verb, and we are invited to join in its action. It is a considered and genuine response which makes Christ known, and builds his kingdom. Philippians 1:9-11 puts it another way:

“So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in

fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.” *The Message*

Disciples of compassion and courage

In order to further combat the weakening and pacifying of love, we must stop using it as a synonym for “nice”. Is it really a “loving thing” for a child to share their toys when asked? At one level of course the answer is yes. Doing what you are told is clearly not unloving. But love is so much more than this. What would truly make this a loving act? Perhaps sharing the toy before being asked, and then being happy for another child to enjoy it instead. Is that possible for a child in their own strength? Probably not. But loving others as ourselves rarely is. It requires us to step beyond ourselves; see people how God sees them with his help; and then loving them out of his heart and strength.

By setting the bar for what constitutes love so low, we often also end up turning love into a rule, or a certain behaviour against which children should perform. For example, we can find ourselves enforcing “love” when we actually really mean “stop whining and get along”. This is confusing for some children and again has the potential to further shape a weak view of love.

If love flows out of our relationship with God and how we see each other in the light of this, it is a worldview to cultivate, not a rule to enforce.

Instead of just emphasising good behaviours (or “good works”) we need to train children to look for opportunities to change the world with love. So for instance, when we are teaching children about giving financially, it’s good to work with them in order to prayerfully perceive needs; see the impact theirs or others’ generosity might have on meeting these; and understand how others’ generosity in the past or present has helped meet their needs too.

We need to lead children to Jesus’ example, and encourage them to learn about him, and from him, as the Holy Spirit leads them deeper into relationship. And we need them to see that just as Jesus’ time on earth was grittily relevant and rooted – theirs, as his followers, should be the same.

If we can train children to see a need and respond with courage, compassion and radical love then we are growing in them a heart pattern of loving God and loving others. We are enabling them to respond to personal, community and world issues with purpose. And helping them grow in faith enough to believe that they can, and will, make a difference.

Part 2 – Doing things differently

Families

- Include your children in your journey of loving God and loving others. Talk with them about why you do what you do (whether that is personal devotions, intercession, or acts of loving sacrifice for others) and allow them sneak peeks of you acting with courage and compassion.
- Notice and praise your children when you see them acting in loving, compassionate and creative ways. Noticing and descriptive praising are helpful tools in letting your children know that you see their sacrifices and heart discipleship as well as their actions. Instead of saying, “Well done for not yelling at your sister”, try “I noticed how you chose to use kind words back to your sister when she said hurtful things to you, that was really loving of you.” Or instead of “I am so proud of you for sharing your lunch” try “I heard that you gave half of your lunch to a younger kid at school who didn’t have any. I’m sure that really made that child

feel loved and cared for.” This technique often helps a child feel proud of their journey and discipleship, rather than on performing to get our approval.

- Go looking for opportunities for your family to practice loving God and loving others in different ways, encouraging children to build a definition of love that is active, and also to explore what they particularly connect to. Try exploring lots of different “languages” for both directions of love.

By this we mean two things. Firstly, help children try a range of different activities in both contexts which make use of reflection; chatting; drawing; writing; singing; bakery; sport; giving etc.

Secondly, help children understand that love can be expressed and understood through different types of interaction, and that some people find some “languages” easier to give or receive than others. Gary Chapman has written a number of books considering the five love languages which he initially set out in the context of building lasting marriages, but have since been developed for all types of relationships. These are defined as words of affirmation; acts of service; gifts; physical touch; and quality time. These can be applied to children too – i.e. by helping children see, and choose, to love through: their words; help; gifts (e.g. pictures they draw as well as money or presents); hugs (where appropriate); and the time they spend with people.

- When you are talking about how much God loves your child, try not to always only land on the feeling side of this. Connect the core actions of God’s story, and the gospel specifically, to love, and also explore what God has done, and is doing for you and them personally which helps them understand God’s love as active.

Children’s work

- Think through ways of demonstrating the power of love on a Sunday or during a mid-week group.
- Often we can jump to teaching the “shoulds” of how love behaves instead of trying to cultivate a heart of love within the children. What is the next step on the journey of your group towards authentic love for others?
 - Love for God – The first step on the road to authentic love for others, is an authentic love for God. As you look at the children you work with, do they have an authentic love for God? If not, relationship with him may be your next step.
 - Redefinition of love – Are your kids bored as soon as you mention the word love? A redefining couple of weeks may be the next step to help your kids see love in a different way.
 - Radical action – Some kids have been told so much that they are loved, that they are desperate for an opportunity to spill the love they feel out to others. Is the next step for you creating wide and various opportunities for your community of children to express love for others? Or is the next step a more individual encouragement and empowerment of each child to find what God is asking each one of them to do?
 - Why not set “Love challenges” each week? Suggest to the children a way of loving someone radically that week, and share stories the following week. Try something like “make it your job this week to pray for God’s help in noticing who’s left out at school and to help them feel more included” or “ask God whether there’s anyone he’d like you to share with, or give to, this week”.

Youth work

- Encourage young people to re-mystify love by exploring just how big God’s definition of it is. As a group get them to brainstorm as many possible different uses of the word, and then as a group, try and classify these

examples under a few main areas, and come up with your own words to describe each type, or level of love that you have identified. As a group discuss the greatest acts of sacrificial love they have ever heard about or experienced, then identify which of these help them to better understand God's love for us, and how we are called to love him and others in response.

- Encourage the group to create a big piece of graffiti art, songs, or poems, which explore what love really means – contrasting society's definitions, with God's definitions.
- Introduce young people to the five loves (storge, charis, agape, eros and philia) and encourage them to make up a short drama sketch to exemplify the differences between them. Then explore as a group what agape means in more detail, with reference to God as a father, and Jesus on the cross. Ask the group to make up some more sketches showing what Christians demonstrating agape love to others would look like.
- Divide your group in half, and get one group to work together with as many examples of loving God with all their minds, souls and strength that they can think of. Meanwhile, ask the other group to explore as many ideas as they can come up with of loving other people as themselves. Get a spokesman from each group to report back what they have learnt and then as a group explore areas of overlap, and gather reactions. Divide the group into pairs to chat with each other about any areas that they think they'd like to try, or particularly struggle with, and encourage them to pray for each other.

All-ages together

- Testimonies are powerful tools in all-age settings and help build the whole community, as well as teaching the children and young people. Try asking people of all ages to share stories of how people loving them completely changed their lives, emotions, or circumstances and how that impacted their relationship with God.
- Show videos of circumstances that are difficult from the news, or in your community and discuss together what radical love could do to change them. What would love look like put to work in each of these specific contexts?
- Look at a mock timetable of the average week together... and plot the different types of activities people are involved with on them... Ask which ones are explicitly about loving God, which about loving others, and which about developing, or loving, ourselves? Explain that all are important, and explore together how you can love more genuinely in each scenario.
- As a church, explore the different "languages" that you can express love to God, and others in. (See the families section for more background on this idea.) Invite different members of the congregation to talk about the different ways they worship God, and give and receive love to each other. Or ask a number of people to say what the most loving thing another person has ever done for them was and why it was so special to them; and then to list the things in their walk with God that have made them feel most loved.