

Kids in His Presence

Parents and children's ministers often are eager to introduce children to the deeper things of God. Kids will benefit most if they first are given time to become grounded in the gospel.

Children who are hungry for God's presence may seek signs and wonders, but they must first trust Jesus Christ for salvation before entering into genuine worship and spiritual gifts. Lenny LaGuardia, director of Passing It On Ministries at Mike Bickle's International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri, says some churches get caught up in the hype of manifestations. "We've talked way more about the Holy Spirit and never introduced our children to Jesus," he says.

The same oversight applies to teaching children good behavior without pointing out their need for the Savior. It's like lowering the standard and giving them a law they can't keep, writes author-pastor-counselor Tedd Tripp. In his book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Shepherd Press), Tripp instructs parents on how to raise children with an emphasis on spiritual redemption, not just good behavior.

"The central focus of child-rearing is to bring children to a sober assessment of themselves as sinners," he writes. "Dependence on their own resources moves them any self-assessment that would force them to conclude that they desperately need Jesus' forgiveness and power."

Salvation is definitely the foundation for all other faith experiences, but as some ministers point out, children who have faced difficult life experiences may first have to work through issues of trust before they can begin to believe in a good God.

"When you trust, you surrender," says LaGuardia, "and then Holy Spirit moves!" His tape series, *Equipping the Smaller Saints*, is a popular resource that identifies roadblocks that prevent children from developing their spiritual potential.

Missionary Jeanene Thicke, founder of Children's Vision International, parents more than 90 castaway children at her orphanages in Bogotá, Colombia. Many of her children were malnourished, abused and abandoned in sewers before she and her staff rescued them. Some even witnessed the murder of their parents on the streets.

In the early 1990s, before she built the orphanages, up to 1,000 kids at a time would attend Thicke's all-night prayer meetings. They were desperate for an experience with God. "We would literally pray for every child," she says. "It would take hours!"

Supernatural healings, such as the one that occurred when a boy "fell under the power of God" for more than an hour, were common, she says. The next day the boy's doctor pronounced him unexplainably free from cancer. Other kids were delivered from drug addiction, suicide and more.

Today Thicke is able to establish trust in practical ways, also, by meeting the children's physical and emotional needs on a daily basis at the orphanages. This trust carries over into their ultimate reliance on God.

"Once they trust us, their world changes," Thicke says. "We are the real gospel to them and the very image of God."

When trust in their caretakers leads to trust in God, the children have the grounding they need to move into deeper spiritual experiences. Camila, age 5, is a good example. She says she wants to take care of sheep when she grows up so God will speak to her. "One thing I wish for is that God would put His hand on my heart and touch it so I would feel it," she says.

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