

Find Your Voice

Think back to a time in your childhood when someone told you a story. What do you remember? You may recall the illustrations from a picture book or what the story was about, but something that probably stuck with you was *how* that person told you the story. For instance, when you think of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, I'll bet you remember the full expression of the phrase "Someone's been sitting in *my* chair!" Now, if someone read that story with no emphasis on the word "my" or without an angry tone in his voice, no one would know how incredibly upset Papa Bear was that someone had been sitting on his furniture! Notice the difference that inflection makes when reading stories, and do the same when you read stories from Scripture, teach about what we believe as Catholics, and talk about the saints. The ideas in this booklet will help guide you in telling stories to young children from ages three to eight.

Activating your "storytelling voice" is key to grabbing the attention of young children when you tell sacred stories. Don't be shy: using expression in your voice draws children in and helps them visualize what is happening in the story. An animated storyteller captures the attention of young children, who have short attention spans. For example, convey suspense when telling the story of Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea. Tap into

feelings of sadness when reading passages describing Jesus' Passion and death. Reveal anger in your voice when Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. Bring excitement into your voice when the two disciples recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread at Emmaus. In each story, imagine how you would feel if you were really there. Storytelling is a lot like acting; you must place yourself in the story to help bring it to life for children. Emotion and tone really make a difference.

Also, don't be afraid to be silly at times! The story of Zacchaeus always brings lots of laughter; kids can't believe that Zacchaeus, a grown man, would climb a tree to see Jesus. Exaggerate how funny this must have seemed to those around him when you retell this gospel narrative. If you need to create a story to help explain Church teaching, use characters who make comical mistakes. For instance, when teaching about loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, introduce a fast-talking rabbit and a slow-moving tortoise. The rabbit rushes around and talks so much that he forgets to bring breakfast to his sister, while the tortoise slowly but surely makes a loving choice by bringing a juicy carrot to the little sister rabbit. Children easily relate to imperfect characters—and the added giggles will have a lasting impact on their learning. (Research shows that appropriate humor boosts retention.¹)

The same rules apply when telling stories about the saints. However, since many saints lived centuries ago, and we don't

1 Sarah Henderson, "Laughter and Learning: Humor Boosts Attention," *Edutopia* (March 31, 2015), <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/laughter-learning-humor-boosts-retention-sarah-henderson>; John A. Banas et al., "A Review of Humor in Educational Settings: Four Decades of Research," *Communication Education* 60:1 (2011), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03634523.2010.496867#.VRGwQDvF-nR>.

always have extensive records of their lives, it can be harder to tell their stories in a way that resonates with children. We often marvel at the piety and courage of saints, who seemed to possess a holiness that is unreachable. Just remember that saints were human, too. Find a balance between telling their heroic stories and reminding children that saints were just like you and me. When you humanize saints and give them a voice through your storytelling, children realize that they, too, are called to be saints.

Pace Yourself

Have you ever been speaking to a group of children and realized that, within a few minutes, some of them are looking around, daydreaming, or bothering their neighbor? We know that kids have short attention spans; child development experts generally agree that children can pay attention for about two minutes per year of age. So, if you're teaching a group of four-year-olds, you generally have eight minutes of their attention. That time will fly, so it's important to make every minute count!

Implementing faster-paced lessons can retain the attention of little ones and save time so you can teach all the content in a given lesson. That doesn't necessarily mean talking at breakneck speed, though. If you talk *that* fast, you may gloss over some important points. Speak slowly enough that children can understand you, but not so slowly that they will lose interest. Finding the right balance comes with practice.

Sometimes during class time or prayer time, you'll notice

that kids want to tell you all about something in their lives. They'll often piggyback on their neighbors' answers. This can slow down the pace of a lesson, and you might lose the attention of the rest of the class. Kids make wonderful connections and are excited to share with you, but you can gently steer the conversation back on topic. For instance, during the Prayer of the Faithful at our parish's Children's Liturgy of the Word sessions, we often heard little ones pray for a sick pet or a pet who had died. Then, other children would raise their hands to tell us all about their cat Fluffy or their dog Max. You could kindly say something like, "Oh, how nice that you have a pet, too. Does anyone else have a pet?" (Wait until more children raised their hands.) Then say, "Let's pray for all pets today. If you have a pet, say your pet's name in your heart right now. (*Quick pause.*) We pray to the Lord..." Then, move on. Redirecting like this can help children stay on topic while still building a caring classroom community.

Also, make sure to have all materials prepared and nearby for easy access. In my early days of teaching, I didn't realize how critical this was, and I would often lose my students' attention as I fumbled for my materials. Even a few seconds of waiting can result in kids' minds wandering or students talking to one another. If you have a leader's guide from your religious education curriculum, make sure it is open to the correct page so you're not leafing through it to find that day's lesson. If you need to have items cut out for a saints craft, be sure to do that the night before. If you use a CD or mp3 player to play music, make sure it's already out of the supply cabinet and you have the music cued up. Think ahead so that lessons go smoothly and without unnecessary delays.

Speak the Language of Children

One of the most important tools a catechist or teacher can wield is speaking the language of young children. Transitioning from adult conversation to child conversation can be a little tricky, but you'll reap many benefits. Most importantly, little ones will be able to comprehend their faith more fully.

When speaking, make sure to use simple language that young children can grasp. If you encounter a word in your lesson that some children might not understand, give a quick explanation or ask other children to be helpers. For instance, many young children might not know what the word "prophet" means. So, you could say, "Isaiah was a prophet. Do you know what a prophet is? A prophet is someone who tells messages from God." Or, if a child raised their hand when you asked, give the child a chance to explain it to their peers (and add to or correct their explanation as needed).

When we talk about the lives of the saints, children are often unfamiliar with terms related to consecrated or religious life. It is helpful to explain or show a picture of what a nun or sister looks like, as many children may not encounter a sister or nun in their journey of faith formation. Paint a picture with your words of what a monastery was and tell them what monks do. (Don't fret if you don't know—the beauty of catechesis is that we grow and learn together on our faith journey! Just do a little research from a trusted Catholic source before your lesson; showing a picture would be a bonus.)

How can we tell Scripture stories to children in a way they can understand? Often, Scripture is well above a young child's oral listening comprehension level. At school, we

don't expect four- or five-year-olds to read or comprehend a high school text. For young children, listening to Scripture readings from an adult Bible may be akin to hearing a text read in a different language. Giving young children a chance to hear Sacred Scripture in a language they understand is critical because we want to draw children to God's Word. So, think like a child thinks. If your parish offers a Children's Liturgy of the Word program, use the *Lectionary for Masses with Children* to help them understand Sunday Mass readings. If you need to read other passages from Scripture, use a Catholic children's Bible, which often adopts easier vocabulary so that children can better understand the Word of God and the story of salvation. If you are in charge of creating a gospel reflection, make sure it is on the shorter side so you don't lose the attention of little ones. After writing your reflection, look it over again to make sure the text is developmentally appropriate for the age group, and change any words that might be too high above their level of comprehension.

Speaking the language of children restores dignity to God's little ones, honoring the fact that they deserve to hear Sacred Scripture and learn about their faith in a developmentally appropriate way.