

Postmodern Pew Fillers:
Keeping Children's Ministry in Sync with Emerging Generations

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At 8:17 am – Kayla pops out of bed, runs into her sister’s room, climbing up the bunk bed to surprise her older sister, Stephanie, and wake her up for church. 8:23 am – Youngest sister Mandi stands up and begins singing from her crib, Kayla dances like a ballerina and flies like a fairy into her parents room. Their morning routine is full of life, full of energy. Lots of little girl squeals fill the house as they line up to get their hair done, and songs fill the mini-van as they drive to church. When the girls walk into church in their Sunday best the whole environment seems to change. Like a time warp, suddenly the three girls are expected to act properly, sit in straight rows, and listen quietly to an elderly lady who recites a familiar story about Jesus. All the life and energy builds up inside these girls, and when Kayla wants to fly like a fairy during their worship time, suddenly the fairy is put to rest by an adult worker who simply does not understand that to learn, Kayla needs to fly.

Why the misunderstanding?

This miscommunication is due to a generational gap filled with unrealistic expectations that clash with the learning needs of children in this generation, who learn in a completely different fashion than children did twenty years ago. This generational gap exists because there are currently two different learning patterns and two contrasting worldviews prevalent in our churches. Within Protestant church congregations today exists a delicate blend of modern and postmodern thinkers. Though more postmoderns can be located in the younger generations, Ivy Beckwith’s research finds that about “30 percent of Baby Boomers, 50 percent of Baby Busters (or Xers), and 60 percent of

millennials have postmodern sensibilities.”ⁱ This means that well over 60 percent of individuals age 25 and under in today’s church congregations view the world and learn in a completely different way than the adults of the congregation. Cultural transitions do not happen all at once, but rather their belief pattern gains strength over a period of time.

Beckwith agrees, stating, “These cultural changes while tumultuous and significant, are gradual... We find ourselves in a world slowly leaning toward postmodernism but still populated by a lot of people who hold a modern worldview.”ⁱⁱ Even though Beckwith wisely states that Protestants are a congregation in transition, it is important to realize that the majority of our children learn in a different fashion than their parents did 30 years ago. In this transitioning society of primarily modern Baby Boomers and postmodern millennials, it is vital for children’s ministers to understand the postmodern worldview and adapt teaching materials and resources to best suit the interactive learning styles of Generations Y and Z.

Before teaching materials and resources can be adapted to meet the new learning style of emerging postmoderns, the postmodern mentality must first be clearly understood. Understanding the postmodern worldview is an important first step for the church to take in reaching out to children. Children’s ministry experts Sue Miller and David Staal of Willow Creek Community Church echo that if their Sunday morning programming “plans to deliver the best hour of every kid’s week, we had better understand what happens during the other 167 hours.”ⁱⁱⁱ Miller and Staal continue saying that their aim is to “reflect their world in how we execute ministry every week. And that is accomplished when a children’s ministry understands the world of their kids, and then

deliberately develops core ministry values accordingly.”^{iv} The world of kids today functions much differently than those of children twenty years ago. Children born in the early 1980s through 2001 are millennials, or members of Generation Y; while kids born after 9/11 are commonly known as Generation Z, or adaptives. Millennials and adaptives are currently growing up in a shaky and unsafe world. These kids are being reared in a world where terrorism threats are prevalent and the U.S. economy is slowly headed toward recession. In return, millennials and adaptives do not foolhardily trust authority figures and prefer to discover truth through life experience. These two elements are key aspects that feed into the postmodern worldview.

The postmodern worldview holds that there is no absolute truth. Beckwith adds, “Postmoderns believe that reality or truth is always subjective,” and continues saying, “One’s reality or truth grows out of one’s perspective and life experiences. It is not imposed from the outside.”^v This viewpoint stands in stark contrast with those of typical modern Baby-Boomers. Moderns hold steadfastly to absolute truths that are scientific and logical in nature. Moderns long to be told directly what truth is, while postmoderns prefer to discover and determine truth for themselves. This emerging preference for discovery and experiential learning creates a need for children’s ministers to revamp old curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of postmodern thinkers. To begin to bridge this gap, a transition must be made from a style of what author Don Tapscott calls broadcast learning to interactive learning.

What style of learning best fits these postmodern thinkers?

Broadcast learning fits the needs of modern thinkers, while interactive learning best suits the learning patterns of postmoderns. According to Tapscott, broadcast learning

is a more teacher-centered approach of instruction where all kids absorb the same one-size-fits-all material in a classroom. In contrast, interactive learning curriculum is learner-centered and the teacher acts as a facilitator to promote lifelong learning. Lessons are customized to meet each child's needs and the child learns new material through discovery and construction.^{vi} To teach kids effectively in today's churches, programming must begin to reflect this interactive learning approach. While the best method of engaging kids in interactive learning must be decided on a case by case basis, many churches are beginning to successfully integrate computer technology and entertaining storytellers into teaching time. Computers are growing in popularity as a resource for interactive learning because kids are very comfortable with this technology.

Children of today have never known a time when computers, internet, cell phones, and other forms of mobile communication did not exist. Where as kids twenty years ago played with Barbies or Hot Wheels, kids of today seek entertainment through AIM, Webkinz, and YouTube—all products of computer-based, interactive media. Some scholars are beginning to think that to reach kids of this generation, education programs must be entertaining and technology based. Author Neil MacQueen believes that integrating technology is part of speaking to kids in their own language—"the language of multimedia and computers."^{vii} After integrating a computer software curriculum into his Sunday School classroom, MacQueen stated that "Something special happens when students begin to interact with software. They are eager, they are cooperative, they are intrigued, and they are ready to open up."^{viii} Though this medium of teaching kids is significantly more expensive than the traditional flannel board or coloring sheet, kids

seem to benefit from computer software programming. New kinds of Christian education software are generated weekly. Software exists to aid children in learning memory verses, engage groups in multimedia worship, teach interactive lessons in an appealing, animated media format, and promote Biblical teachings and morals through computer games. Even if churches do not have the money to keep a computer securely in every classroom, MacQueen suggested having a computer cart with a laptop that could rotate rooms based on the learning material for the day. Some churches are still wary of using computers and are choosing to meet the children's need for interactive learning through engaging storytellers.

Engaging storytellers are a prized gem in children's ministry because their energetic approach to learning allows children to listen actively and imagine the small details of Bible stories. While the approach may at first resemble the teacher-based broadcast style of learning, storytelling can be harnessed as an extremely valuable method of interactive learning. Storyteller Steven James notes that the difference is made in the storyteller's approach to the kids. James notes that the challenge shouldn't be getting kids to sit still, but rather to "tell stories in a way that they can understand and relate to, that engages their imaginations, and that actively involves their bodies."^{ix} Storytelling like this allows kids to participate in the story by listening. Active listening is a powerful force in interactive learning. As kids are engaged to listen actively, words allow their imaginations to give color to formerly bland Bible stories. The pivotal factor in a teacher's approach to interactive learning, whether based on storytelling, computer software, or the good old flannel graph, is making discovery-based learning fun and entertaining.

How can this be implemented through curriculum in children's ministry?

Entertaining education does not imply what Beckwith noted as “a birthday party with a Bible.”^x Children's ministry does not have to be glitzy and Veggie Tale-centered, but rather entertaining education should creatively harness a child's energy to focus on the enormous greatness of God and allow the child's mind to wander excitedly and imagine the unfathomable power of Christ's love. In their handbook on children's ministry, Miller and Staal state an important goal to keep in Christian education, “We want to *teach the Bible* first, and do it *creatively* second. However, they are not mutually exclusive—we can do both.”^{xi} Teaching the Bible should rightly be the first aim of children's ministry, but children's ministers should not leave out doing so creatively. Only when children's ministry teams harness both goals, can children's ministry be a powerful and memorable experience.

Part of the challenge in bridging the gap to interactive learning and thus making children's ministry a memorable experience, is choosing curriculum that makes Christian education both entertaining and conceptually sound in theology. In Maria Harris' book, *Fashion me a People: Curriculum in the Church*, she notes that “the word ‘curriculum’ is derived from the Latin verb *currere*, which means to run. In literal terms, a curriculum is a course to be run.”^{xii} In the realm of children's ministry, kids can be inspired to run in step with Biblical teaching through interactive curriculum that invigorates their senses and intrigues their minds to grasp Biblical truths. If kids can excitedly engage these kinds of truths at a young age, it can instill a passion for Scripture that lasts a lifetime. However, the trick is finding a curriculum program that can ignite a passion for Scripture in the hearts of kids today.

A majority of children's ministry curriculum programs on the market today contain watered down truths and concealed details that weaken the Scripture's power to speak truthfully to this generation. Much of the focus on curriculum by Group or Standard Publishing is on keeping kids busy with worksheets and crafts instead of allowing children to fully experience the Bible story of the week. Standard Publishing's website contains a sample lesson on Moses' obedience for their Sunday School curriculum, Heart Shapers, designed for Middle Elementary students in 3rd and 4th Grade. In this lesson, only surface level truths of Scriptures are addressed, like the fact that Moses said yes to God's call to go back to Egypt.^{xiii} The lesson is 2-D with no soul searching application. All of the real emotions Moses would have experienced, like the fear of returning to a culture that rejected and hated him, were left out. Though Standard's lesson of Moses' obedience is very applicable to kids in elementary school, the story is watered down and devoid of heart shaping meaning.

In churches today it is increasingly difficult to find pre-made curriculum that engages kids at the level of age-appropriate spiritual maturity they are ready for. These programs map out an entire action-packed hour and teachers rarely have the opportunity to further explore issues children bring up in classroom conversation because they are too intent on finishing the lesson. In Karen-Marie Yust's paper on Theology, Educational Theory, and Children's Faith Formation, she notes that "Most lesson plans provide little time or direction for encouraging children to reflect on their relationship with God apart from prescribed truths."^{xiv} As these prescribed truths become a routine part of Sunday School lessons, Yust continues by warning, "When we tightly script teacher's roles and insist on children's business and productivity through numerous activities and rewards

for quickness, we fail to communicate the value of silently experiencing or pondering the amazing love of the God upon whom we depend for our creation, redemption, and sustenance.”^{xv} Too often Christian education becomes overly involved with the check-list of accomplishing lessons and placing stickers on a memory verse chart. This obsession with keeping children busy completing tasks contradicts the postmodern interactive style of learning. Children participating in curriculum based on rigid schedules and watered down Bible lectures are often bored and uninterested because the teaching style does not meet their learning needs. This misguided focus causes even the most well-intended educators to miss the mark of mentoring their students’ spirituality and establishing within each of their students a firm foundation of faith.

Because teachers use whatever type of curriculum provided by a congregation, it is vital that the focus be firmly rooted on teaching the Bible first and doing so creatively second. Even within watered down Sunday School curriculum remains the penetrating truth from God’s Word, it just takes a dedicated children’s ministry staff to expose it. As a staff commits itself to meeting the needs of emerging interactive learners, a careful balance between delivery and content must be made each week. The next challenge is training volunteer teaching staff on how to meet the needs of interactive learners and find the balance between Biblical content and delivery.

How can we shepherd volunteers and adapt teaching methods?

A continual challenge within children’s ministries today is shepherding all volunteers within children’s ministry teams and encouraging them to focus on these two goals and embrace teaching the Bible in a new creative way. Many times it is tempting to teach Bible stories in the same way that these stories were taught to us. However, to reach

children of this generation, our teaching styles must be reformatted so that kids want to learn and become passionate about Biblical teachings. In her book on Christian Education, Karen B. Tye recognizes that the reasoning behind this “teach as you were taught” method is that “We assume that this is the way to do it and we continue with what is familiar and comfortable. However, this limits our ability to educate when the setting, the content, or the students call for another approach.”^{xvi} Students in today’s congregation call for a new approach to learning Scripture, and the teaching style that parents absorbed 30 years ago simply will not appease postmodern generations.

Volunteers belonging to the modern mindset need a team of encouragers, coaches, and fresh volunteers who not only cheer on these seasoned veterans, but also bring fresh eyes to the potential of a ministry. For a children’s ministry to thrive and continue to get kids excited weekly about learning the Bible, it takes a team of passionate volunteers who are like-minded and can focus their teaching to meet the learning needs of emerging generations. When a children’s ministry team wholeheartedly seizes this goal, and focuses on the learning needs of these children, kids respond and get excited about Scripture. Volunteer teachers who are shepherded and encouraged to mentor the spiritual growth of children under their care are vital in passing the torch to learners of this generation.

Recruiting this team of passionate volunteers and placing them in a position in children’s ministry that best suits their spiritual gifts is often the most difficult task. In *Foundations for Christian Education*, Dr. Eleanor Daniel notes that “The task of recruiting leadership is one of the most important—and most difficult—of the leadership functions in Christian education. Yet, most churches—perhaps all—have human

resources available who can be encouraged to join the leadership team.”^{xvii} For children’s ministers recruiting volunteers, it is extremely important to instill the vision of children’s ministry and get potential volunteers excited about their position to teach kids the very foundation of faith. As volunteers grasp their potential to impact a child’s spiritual life and show kids how to fall passionately in love with a merciful Savior, it is hard to be anything but overwhelmingly excited to take a place in Christian education.

Recruitment does not need to be a dreaded process where children’s ministers are wishy-washy and fear inconveniencing congregants, but rather the recruitment process should be a way for children’s ministers to share dreams and visions for generations to come. Miller and Stall note that when they recruit volunteers at Willow Creek they realized that “To be effective, we must create a customized vision for children’s ministry for every single volunteer we hope to recruit.”^{xviii} To customize this vision for potential volunteers the message of the vision had to be significant to the listener’s heart, the volunteer had to see how they could fit into the ministry, and the time commitment had to fit the volunteer’s availability.^{xix} At Willow Creek there are five different levels of time commitment for their children’s ministry volunteers: the church body, special event volunteers, 1-6 Adult volunteers who serve in a classroom once every six weeks, weekly volunteers, and coaches and core ministry team members. Willow Creek’s volunteer commitment options allow volunteers to serve in children’s ministry in an outlet where they feel comfortable and supported by the children’s ministry staff. This intentional design for volunteer support creates a strong children’s ministry program. Miller and Staal concluded by saying that “Kids benefit from a strong ministry, because everyone serves in a layer of the vision that fits them just right.”^{xx} When volunteers find the place

within children's ministry that best fits the gifts that God has given them, kids thrive because they are part of a ministry that is maximizing the God-given potential of each individual in ministry.

As volunteers maximize their potential by being plugged in to serve where they fit best, it becomes easier for a children's ministry team to adapt to an interactive learning style. When volunteers feel like they are actively contributing to a vision, they are more apt to change their teaching style to meet new standards of excellence if that goal is communicated clearly. As churches begin to change curriculum and teaching methods to meet the learning needs of postmodern thinkers, it is important to clearly communicate the reasoning behind the change with all members of the children's ministry team. In James Michael Lee's book, *Forging a Better Religious Education in the Third Millennium*, Robert Pazmino notes "The challenge for religious educators is to balance change with the affirmation of continuity so that growth occurs across the entire community."^{xxi} To affirm volunteers for their valued service and clearly communicate how the educational needs of children are changing, all volunteers within children's ministry team should set a day to meet with the core administrative leaders of the children's ministry program and make a game plan of how to execute change within the ministry. The change that is required to keep children's ministry in sync with children of this generation is a positive change that will purposefully establish an environment where kids can learn about the Bible in a style that is designed specifically for the way that they learn best. This change within children's ministry does not need to be feared. Instead, as churches begin to understand the pattern of postmodern thought, a change to teaching

styles should be embraced because through this change children will be able to focus their energy and excitement on learning about Christ.

Understanding the postmodern mindset of children today is a vital part of focusing creativity to better teach children in the interactive style in which they learn best. When a ministry takes time to truly understand how its kids think and process information, they reach kids at a personal level and have greater potential to get kids excited about Christ. The natural excitement and passion children bring to learning should be harnessed in children's ministry. Children's ministers must begin revamping curriculum and teaching styles to fit the interactive learning style of postmoderns. This can be accomplished through integrating computer technology and passionate storytelling into weekly lessons and avoiding watered down Biblical truths. To make weekly programming successful, the entire children's ministry team, volunteers included, must adhere to the mission of inspiring children to learn more about the greatness of God and the love of a merciful Savior. Churches do not have to add glitter and smoke to get kids excited about Christ. However, to reach kids of this generation effectively it is time to step out of the time warp and realize the potential of interactive learning. As children's ministries understand the mentality of postmodern thinkers and harness the natural excitement kids bring to church each week, they reach out to children like Kayla, the dancing 4-year-old fairy, and enable them to fly.

Notes

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2. Beckwith, Ivy. *Postmodern Children's Ministry*. ed. Carla Barnhill. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 21.
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6. Tapscott, Don. "Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation". <http://www.ncsu.edu/meridian/jan98/feat_6/digital.html> (accessed February 27, 2008), 3.
7. MacQueen, Neil. "In Their Own Language: Kids, Computers and Christian Education" *The Clergy Journal* (2003), <<http://www.sundaysoftware.com/articles1.html#intheir>> (accessed February 27, 2008), 1.
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12. Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*. (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1989), 55.

13. Standard Publishing Heart Shaper Curriculum. "Heart Shaper Sample Lesson: Middle Elementary." Standard Publishing, <<http://www.heartshaper.com/files/LessonSamplerMiddleEle.pdf>> (accessed April 16, 2008).
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16. Tye, Karen B. *Basics of Christian Education*. (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2000), 92.
17. Daniel, Eleanor A. *Foundations for Christian Education*. ed. Eleanor A. Daniel and John W. Wade (Joplin: College Press, 1999), 312.
18. Miller, Sue, and David Staal. *Making Your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid's Week*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 105.
19. Miller, Sue, and David Staal. *Making Your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid's Week*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 106.
20. Miller, Sue, and David Staal. *Making Your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid's Week*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 115.
21. Pazmino, Robert W. *Forging a Better Religious Education in the Third Millennium*. ed. James Michael Lee (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 2000), 87.

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- ^{iv} Miller, Sue, and David Staal. *Making Your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid's Week*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 64.
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- ^{xi} Miller, Sue, and David Staal. *Making Your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid's Week*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2004, 64.
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