

# **GODLY PLAY**

**IN MIDDLE AND  
LATE CHILDHOOD**

**CHERYL V. MINOR**

FOREWORD BY

**Jerome W. Berryman and Heather Ingersoll**



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Research Consultant: Hannah Sutton-Adams

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# Contents

<i>Foreword by Jerome W. Berryman and Heather Ingersoll</i>	v
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Chapter 1: The Children	1
Chapter 2: The Environment	13
Chapter 3: The Spiral Curriculum	27
Chapter 4: Leading the Session	39
Chapter 5: Response Time	59
Chapter 6: The Feast	75
Chapter 7: Nurturing the Nurturers	81
Chapter 8: Why Do It?	89
<i>Appendix A: Maps of the Godly Play Room</i>	111
<i>Appendix B: Chart of the Spiral Curriculum</i>	121
<i>Appendix C: Sample Story Schedules</i>	125
<i>Appendix D: Annotated List of Suggested Print Materials for a Godly Play Room</i>	131
<i>Appendix E: Chart of Six Conditions Needed to Nurture Children's Spiritual Lives</i>	151
<i>Appendix F: Young Person's Drawing of a Cross</i>	159
<i>Bibliography</i>	161

# Play

## CHAPTER 1

# The Children

*The goal of Godly Play is to play the ultimate game for itself. The players are God, the self, others, and nature. The place for play is at the edge of knowing and being. The time has a very clear limit. It is for our lifetime.<sup>1</sup>*

Godly Play is a comprehensive approach to Christian formation that consists of eight volumes of lessons. Together the lessons form a spiral curriculum that enables children to move into adolescence with an inner working knowledge of the classical Christian language system intended to sustain them all their lives. Much has been said about how Godly Play is for children ages three to ninety-nine, meaning it is an approach that nurtures children and adults equally. Still, many users abandon the approach as children move out of early childhood (aged three to six). Why? Some of it is a lack of training and understanding. The name, Godly Play, is enough to make people think this must be something for young children. However, it is also because as children move into middle and late childhood (aged six to thirteen) adult mentors begin to feel some resistance from the children and their parents.

This book is about both the challenges and deep joy of doing Godly Play with children in middle and late childhood. As children move into this developmental stage, they find themselves at a significant and serious crossroads. I have strong memories of that time in life growing up as the middle child, the second of three sisters. I would often find myself looking ahead at the excitement of what growing up meant as I watched my older sister's life expand before my eyes, longing to be included in what seemed like such an exciting life. At the same time, I looked back at my early childhood through the lens of my little sister, sometimes with great nostalgia. I remember sneaking down to the playroom to play with my little sister for hours, hoping my older sister would not find us for fear of her making

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1. J. W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1991), 8.

Godly

fun of me. Our favorite game was to create big houses with our blocks and then fill them with little wooden people, acting out their lives in great detail. I did not know it of course, but I was making meaning about all of the things that were happening in real life as we created those worlds. I knew that I was supposed to be leaving those childhood things behind, but I also knew that on some level, I still very much needed that time of uninterrupted and glorious play.

Early childhood and adolescence often get more attention than middle childhood. That is why I love a poem by Billy Collins called, “On Turning Ten.” I challenge you to read it and not feel the pathos of it. Collins’s poem tries to capture that feeling I had as a child, standing between my older and younger sister. He gives voice to the real grief children can feel at this stage in life as they mourn what was a seemingly simpler time. In the poem the child, who is turning ten, stands at the window, realizing that his bike that he sees leaning against the garage has lost its magic, and that even the way the light hits the landscape looks more serious. As children move into middle and then late childhood, life shifts in dramatic and complex ways for them. It is a time filled with existential anxiety and questions, as the child struggles to discover their particular meaning and purpose in life. This book is about these children, and it is a call to persevere with Godly Play, despite the resistance you may feel, because it is exactly what they need.

So, what are children in middle and late childhood like, and why do they create challenges for Godly Play mentors?

### **“Savvy School-Goers”**

As children move out of early childhood, they spend most of their days at school. Very quickly they become what I call “savvy school-goers.” It starts as early as kindergarten. If you peek into a typical kindergarten class in most Western contexts, here’s what you might see: a teacher reviewing sight words with students; children reading to one another in pairs; students practicing addition or subtraction; children learning about earth or plant science; students writing in journals; children and teachers engaged in state-mandated assessments. Even art and music classes are focused heavily on teaching specific content, concepts, or skills. I am not here to argue about what is happening in the schools, because I know from talking with teachers and parents that they are all under enormous pressure to perform at

# Play

a higher level academically. Everyone—children, teachers, administrators, whole school districts—is being assessed and held up to public scrutiny. What this does mean, however, is that from an early age children are learning how to succeed in that sort of environment. Success means getting the right answer in school and will for the rest of their lives. Even in schools that value creativity and independence, there are clearly right and wrong answers, and children learn early on that the right answers bring rewards. The rewards include praise from their teachers and parents, admiration from their peers, sometimes physical prizes, and for themselves a sense of accomplishment. What effect does this have on Godly Play?

Those experienced with Godly Play know that one of the distinctive features of the approach is the “wondering” done by the community of children and mentors about the lessons. We often refer to the wondering as “wondering questions,” but they are not questions in the proper sense, nor are they statements. They deserve their own kind of punctuation, but there is none, so we are stuck with the question mark. The question mark is used to evoke an openness to the wondering, not to elicit a particular answer. We hope it communicates to the children that we are curious about what they are thinking about the lesson and that the Godly Play Room is a safe place to share those thoughts. That safe place is created by valuing every answer that is offered, as opposed to choosing the right answer. Once children start going to school, however, they often struggle to trust that. School convinces them that there must be a right answer, and if they are not sure what that is they will often just say nothing. Furthermore, they begin to be very aware of their peers and worry that if they say something wrong, they will look silly in front of them. This can also cause them to say what they *know* are silly or outrageous answers in order to make their peers laugh.

When volunteer mentors begin to encounter this sort of resistance to the process from the children, they start questioning the effectiveness of the method. When presented with this information, church leaders are also quick to decide a change of curriculum is needed. I will talk more about what the mentors can do when this begins to happen in chapter 4 on leading the session, but for now it is simply enough to name the challenge.

“Savvy school-goers” will also struggle with the Response time during a Godly Play session. In my description of kindergarten, above, you did not see much time for

Godly

open play. Children as young as five are often given just twenty to thirty minutes on the playground, and even less if you count the time it takes to move them from the classroom to the outdoor space. Furthermore, virtually every moment of their time indoors is programmed. This is compounded by the myriad of after-school programs parents feel compelled to provide for their children to be sure they are getting all they need to be successful adults (sports, music lessons, dance lessons, tutoring, and so on). They get home late, and even young children have homework, reading, dinner, chores, and more. Then the whole family collapses in bed just to be ready to do it all again the next day.

This makes open Response time (I can do anything?) a kind of crisis for the child, especially as they move into middle and late childhood. They feel pressure to make a choice that is right, or at the least will not look silly to their peers. Suddenly the idea of coloring or painting a picture becomes very risky. Open-ended response time is already a challenge for many volunteer Godly Play mentors. They wonder how allowing the children to work with the materials freely is helping them learn anything, so when they encounter resistance to even making a choice, they quickly question the effectiveness of the method. It is often hard to really see how a child's work is connected to the lesson or to their relationship with God. Such thinking is hard to put into words, much less create a visual representation of what is going on deep inside. Trained mentors know this and learn to trust that whatever is being created is being done in the context of the room where the child is surrounded by the Christian language system, so much more is going on than meets the eye.

### **The Fast Pace of Life**

A second challenge to doing Godly Play with children in middle to late childhood is the ever-increasing pace of life. Not only are children and families navigating a jam-packed schedule of activities, but even the in-between time is filled with some sort of stimulation. Children as young as eight or nine are often given a smartphone, presumably for safety's sake—a way to contact a parent for a ride, for example—but nonetheless it means they are never without a means of entertainment. Younger children are handed tablets and phones to keep them busy while parents need to complete a task, or while waiting for an

Play

appointment or class to start. Many cars are outfitted with equipment to show movies, so just driving to the store becomes another opportunity to stare at a screen. Technology also means things are available to children almost as soon as they can think of them. I want to hear a song, I need an answer to a question, I just want to know how to spell something—all are questions or needs that can be answered in just a few moments on a smartphone or tablet. The bottom line is children are generally overstimulated and that stimulation robs them of the capacity for introspection.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. As a child growing up in the 1960s, I can remember people saying that one of the challenges of the future would be what to do with all our time. Technology was supposed to free up hours and hours of our time so that we could focus on what really matters: friends, family, fun. Instead, the opposite has happened. In recent years we have seen an amazing proliferation of time-saving innovations—airplanes, personal computers, smartphones, microwaves, drive-through restaurants, Amazon, and the entire World Wide Web—yet the pace of life has been cranked to a level that would have been unimaginable three decades ago. All of this makes the kind of slow pace and silence that is part of a typical Godly Play session almost radical.

In recent years I have noticed increasing evidence of this as children enter a Godly Play Room. They often appear on a Sunday morning with glazed eyes as if someone just yanked them out of bed (or more likely yanked whatever device they were looking at in the car out of their hands and sent them to Sunday school). The mentor in that situation has a herculean task to get the circle ready to hear a lesson, much less think deeply about it. The silence inherent in many of the presentations is almost painful for children accustomed to so much stimulation, and so the negative behavior begins. Exploring a story more deeply, or looking at some of the print resources, are choices that do not make sense to these over-stimulated children, so work time becomes just “busy-time.” The children can be seen working aimlessly with the supplies that are available while chatting with their peers. In truth, they struggle to focus on anything in the room whether it is a lesson, the mentor presenting the lesson, or even their peers. The average volunteer does not have the resources to work through all of that, and so, once again, the method gets blamed.



## Technology-Heavy Schools

Technology is also everywhere in education. In many school districts the traditional black board has been replaced with a “smart board,” which is just a large, touch-controlled version of the teacher’s computer. The teacher can pre-load notes, images, videos, and perform internet searches in real time with the children. This, naturally, speeds up everything, making downtime almost nonexistent. At the same time students are often given laptops or tablets to use in and out of school to complete assignments. The pandemic that hit in 2020 moved all learning to screens for months and will likely change the nature of education forever. By necessity, teachers learned many ways to deliver instruction via screens and my guess is a great deal of this will continue whether there is a pandemic or not.

Once again, this makes what happens in a typical Godly Play Room feel strange and foreign to children coming from a culture that has such a high value for technology and certainty. One guesses children, especially when they are new to Godly Play, come in looking for the computer center or TV. These children are baffled when asked to sit on the floor and watch a teacher tell a story with handmade materials. This gets worse when the teacher starts asking “wondering questions.” Who wonders about anything these days when knowledge and information can be accessed with just a click of a button for everybody at any time?

Children whose learning during the week is so screen dependent also find open-ended work time strange. They are so unaccustomed to having the space to explore an art medium for themselves, for example, with no particular goal or product in mind that they become almost paralyzed by the choices. The idea of working with a story material is equally bizarre. They may be asked to read books in school but sitting and working with a three-dimensional version of a story could feel like something only little children do, for example the way they observe younger siblings, cousins, or neighbors building with blocks or playing with dolls. It just isn’t sophisticated enough for a child who does their homework on a computer! Even those who might feel drawn to the art materials or stories will often stifle that impulse, as I mentioned earlier, for fear of looking silly in front of their peers. Instead of finding a way over this obstacle, most volunteers simply blame the method and beg for something new.

## Normal Self-Differentiation

As children enter middle and then late childhood, they are deep into the process of self-differentiation: a time when they begin not simply to spend more time apart from their parents, but also begin to define themselves quite apart from their parents. This is generally referred to as normal self-differentiation, and it is a critical part of development. A helpful definition comes from Bowen Family Therapy:

Differentiation is the process of freeing yourself from your family's processes to define yourself. This means being able to have different opinions and values than your family members but being able to stay emotionally connected to them. It means being able to calmly reflect on a conflicted interaction afterward, realizing your own role in it, and then choosing a different response for the future.<sup>2</sup>

Positive and healthy self-differentiation is happening when you hear people speaking their minds with thoughtful conviction even though others might disapprove. You know it is a struggle when you observe someone spending most of her time fighting against the views and values of her parents and clinging to their opposite view at all costs. It's missing when someone represses his feelings and ideas in fear of being rejected or shamed by them.

How does this become a challenge for children in Godly Play? In my experience, as children enter middle and late childhood Sunday morning becomes one of the many places where children and parents battle. The busy lives described earlier mean that children are weary of schedules and are yearning for some unscheduled time. Because of the increasing prevalence of activities scheduled on Sunday mornings (sports, birthday parties, family outings, and more), church attendance is fast becoming something that happens “when we have time.” Children are quick to pick up on this, learning that church is in many ways an optional activity for their parents. This means Sunday morning suddenly feels like a place where a child can flex her newly developing skills of self-differentiation. A parent who begins to experience pushback from a child will often “dig in their heels” and expect

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2. Bowen Family Therapy, <http://www.psychpage.com/learning/library/counseling/bowen.html>

compliance from the child, but that often means the child enters the Godly Play Room with a kind of “chip on their shoulder.” You can see it on their faces—a defensiveness against finding anything meaningful in the process. They may not say it directly, but you can read it in their behavior. It is as if they walk in with a sign, warning the well-meaning Godly Play mentor, “I don’t intend to enjoy this. I will not find anything meaningful here. I am just here because my parents said I had to come.” As the battle at home continues, they may in fact start winning from time to time, especially if other parts of life are becoming a battle (for example, homework, practicing an instrument), or if one of the parents is not active in church. An astute child may suggest to the active parent, “Why do I have to go if Dad (or Mom) is staying home?” This means when they do come, they have missed important lessons, and are even more defended against the process.

As these battles rage at home, the parent, at least in my experience, is often quick to blame Godly Play. They assume that the child does not want to go because they are bored with Godly Play. The crisis hits hard when that parent calls the leadership of the parish to complain. All churches, particularly those in the mainline tradition, are struggling with attendance and giving. This leads to an attitude of “the customer is always right,” and so everyone blames Godly Play, and there is a scramble to find something that will miraculously fix the situation. There may even be some small wins if the program chosen has a high entertainment value, but in the end the issues do not change, and the normal process of self-differentiation continues, leading to the same sorts of battles despite the shift in program.

The process of self-differentiation also involves “carving a place” for themselves among their peers.<sup>3</sup> This means they are keenly aware of how they look to their peers, what some might call “the cool factor.” This can make them alternatively very shy and quiet, for fear of saying something that might make them seem too young or silly, or cause them to play the part of the clown in the circle, looking to get the approval of their peers for being especially clever. It is hard not to see how this could cause issues in a Godly Play room.

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3. S. M. Gavazzi, S. A. Anderson, R. M. Sabatelli, “Family Differentiation, Peer Differentiation, and Adolescent Adjustment in a Clinical Sample,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 8, no. 2 (1993): 205–225. doi:10.1177/074355489382005,

## Additional Factors That Inhibit Spiritual Growth for Children in Middle and Late Childhood

Godly Play with children in middle and late childhood can also be difficult because of the cultural pressures they encounter in their daily lives that devalue spirituality and religion. Research conducted by David Hay and Rebecca Nye in England on children's spirituality, for example, revealed some of the pressures that children as young as ten years old begin to feel from their peers and even well-meaning adults.<sup>4</sup> The children in Hay and Nye's study often spoke about the "consequences" of their spiritual experiences. Several described feeling calm, peaceful, holy, a sense of oneness, and feeling free, during and after having a spiritual experience or insight.<sup>5</sup> However, negative consequences were also mentioned, particularly by the older children. "Children spoke of the danger of feeling embarrassed, ridiculed or undermined as a result of exposing their experience in the public domain."<sup>6</sup> These were mostly predictions on the part of the children, since many told the interviewer that they rarely, if ever, spoke about these experiences with other people. Hay and Nye proposed that this is evidence of the cultural taboo regarding the sharing of spiritual experiences, which can lead children to repress and even discard spirituality altogether. They said:

Whilst most people know they have a spiritual life, they are usually embarrassed about it, fearing they will be thought stupid, foolish or even mentally unbalanced if they speak about it in public. Our research has shown that a similar shyness is already evident in most children by the age of ten, including those who are religiously practicing.<sup>7</sup>

Support for this claim is provided by Brendan Hyde's study of the spiritual lives of Australian children.<sup>8</sup> Hyde observed factors that he suggested were inhibiting children's expression of their spirituality. For example, when children were asked what mattered most to them, "the children genuinely believed that what mattered

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4. D. Hay and R. Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, rev. ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006).

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 127.

7. *Ibid.*, 144.

8. B. Hyde, "Weaving the Threads of Meaning: A Characteristic of Children's Spirituality and Its Implications for Religious Education," *British Journal of Religious Education* 30, no. 3 (2008): 235–45. doi: 10.1080/01416200802170169.

most to them was the acquisition of money and/or material possessions.”<sup>9</sup> Hyde proposed that this is indicative of the consumerist culture that children, at least in the West, inhabit. He also observed what he calls trivializing, described as “the avoidance of confronting issues of meaning and value in life, as well as making light of such issues.”<sup>10</sup> The children were heard laughing about the question, or worse showed a disinterest in the question, thinking it was unimportant. Hyde suggested that this is a reflection of the culture the children inhabit, which does not value much of anything.

How does this manifest itself as a challenge in Godly Play? I have observed in recent years a growing sense in children that what we are doing in Godly Play is not valued in the world they usually inhabit (school and even at home). You can see it in all the ways children in middle and late childhood approach the process, including how they respond during the Lesson, the Wondering, Response time, and even during the Feast. In general, it manifests itself in harmless ways, such as silly comments about materials. It gets more problematic when a child, or the whole circle, laughs at one child’s serious comment. A child may also simply opt-out, making a decision, for example, to try and sit outside of the circle, suggesting to the others in a nonverbal way that whatever is happening in the circle is unimportant. Children will also sometimes resist making a choice during work time, bringing with them a book to read from home for instance. All of this presents a challenge to the Godly Play mentor, who is seeking to not only engage the child in question, but also battling the effect that behavior has on the whole community of children. Even those (or perhaps especially those) who are interested in participating in the process may feel stifled in the presence of a child who is trivializing the experience, not willing to risk being laughed at. It only takes one child to stifle all the children in the circle. Finding the strength to trust the process in the face of this kind of resistance is hard for even the most seasoned Godly Play mentor, not to mention one who is new to the practice. The real issue is that no matter what the mentor does, it does not disappear altogether. Children are under enormous

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9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 236.

pressure from the world that devalues anything spiritual, but I do believe that our efforts make a difference even when we cannot see the evidence.

Now that we have described most of the challenges that make doing Godly Play with children in middle and late childhood difficult, we will turn our attention to the ways the Godly Play method is particularly designed to help the children navigate this time in their lives, how Godly Play mentors, church leadership, and parents can respond to the challenges, and why it is worth it.