

Listening to God with Kids

Presented by Gordon D. West

Reflect on your first experience of God. How did this experience shape what you believe about God?

A starting place...

“Developmental psychologists tell us that every human comes into the world looking, reaching, and longing for connection.”

Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations with Children* (p. 9).

“When children have a listening companion who hears, acknowledges, and encourages their early experiences with God, it creates a spiritual footprint that will shape the way a child engages with God, others, and themselves.”

Borgo, Lacy Finn. *Spiritual Conversations with Children* (p. 5). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

- Children are different than adults
- Children are the same as adults
- Children are able to have deep relationship with God – without us.

- Do I value children’s spirituality as much as my own?

“When we adults fall into broken patterns of thinking about children and about God, we tend to move toward models of babysitting, entertainment, or, worse, manipulation through shame and fear. Jesus seems to be asking less of the adult and more of the child. Jesus seems to be inviting the adult to empower the child and move out of the way. He is inviting the child to direct encounter.”

Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations with Children* (pp. 11-12).

S.P.I.R.I.T.

(Adapted from Rebecca Nye, *Children’s Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*)

- **Space**

“Love. An adult can participate in a child’s awakening by being a listening presence, but the adult cannot make the journey for the child. They can help a child recognize and respond to Love’s divine invitation, but they cannot force sight or connection.”

Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations with Children* (p. 23).

- **Process**

- **Imagination**

- **Relationship**

“Offering authentic models of relating to one another is right at the core of spirituality, especially for Christians. Although it can sometimes seem quite a private matter, spirituality is always an urge to relate and to connect.”

Nye, *Children's Spirituality (What it is and why it matters)*.

“A child’s picture of God is formed in the beginning by the most powerful adults in their lives.”

Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations with Children* (p. 27).

- **Intimacy**

- **Trust**

As you move forward...first steps

“While we can invite and encourage children, the ultimate power of choosing lies with the child.”

Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations with Children* (p. 38).

1. Is there room for greater trust in God in this process?
2. Is there room for greater trust in the child in your approach?
3. Is this approach signaling basic trust in the faith (the Bible, the liturgy, our doctrines)?

“The great law of the spiritual world through which things are accomplished in cooperation with God and yet in harmony with the freedom and worth of every individual.”

Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (loc 4352) Kindle Edition.

Featured Resources

- *KidZ at Home*, KidZ at Heart’s free, reproducible resources for families to share spiritual practices with kids as they fall deeply in love with Jesus together (www.kidzathome.org)
- *KidZ on Mission*, KidZ at Heart’s free, reproducible resources for churches and families to help kids live missionally as they learn to “love their neighbor as themselves” (www.kidzonmission.org)
- *Children’s Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*, Rebecca Nye (Church House Publishing)
- *Spiritual Conversations with Children*, Lacy Borgo (Intervarsity Press)
- *Praying in Color (Kids Edition)*, Sybil MacBeth (Paraclete Press)

Suggested Readings for Further Study

- *Compass: A Guide for Character and Spiritual Formation in Children*, Vernie Schorr (Love) (Character Choice)
- *Formational Children’s Ministry*, Ivy Beckwith (Baker Books)
- *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, Catherine Stonehouse (Baker Academic)
- *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey*, Catherine Stonehouse & Scottie May (Baker Academic)
- *Spiritual Disciplines for Children*, Vernie Schorr Love (Character Choice)

KidZ at Heart International (www.kidZatHeart.org)

KidZ at Heart is a global Christian community that trains, partners with, and mobilizes networks of leaders to help kids fall deeply in love with Jesus across North America and in over 45 countries around the world. Through a variety of conferences and programs hosted by KidZ at Heart, we offer training and equipping for you, the home, church, or ministry leader, so that as you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength you may also influence children to love God and live life abundantly with him.



KidZ at Heart also challenges you to go beyond the walls of your church or home...to help others reach and teach the kids of their own culture or communities. KidZ helps you train leaders, teachers, and parents across town or around the world, through training teams using proven materials that are field tested in multiple cultures and appropriate for teaching people how to invite children into a personal relationship with God.

We offer a number of free, reproducible resources for the church and home: **KidZ at Home** (www.kidzathome.org) helps you help families create space for the Holy Spirit’s work by introducing children to spiritual practices in everyday life. **KidZ on Mission** (www.kidzonmission.org) helps adults and children extend God’s loving invitation to others as they learn to “Be Close,” “Love Differently,” and “Reach Wide.” Visit our website (www.kidzatheart.org) to find these and other resources to help encourage parents, grandparents, teachers, and leaders who are nurturing the next generation.

(877) 778-KidZ ♥ (877) 778-5439 ♥ info@kidZatHeart.org

CONVERSATION WITH GOD

“Prayer is listening as well as speaking, receiving as well as asking;
and its deepest mood is friendship held in reverence.”

—George A. Buttrick

What makes you walk away from a conversation saying, “Good talk!” ... or what makes a conversation satisfying? Many times, it comes down to being heard by the other person and hearing loving truth from them, a place of mutual listening and acceptance.

Those same things that make for genuinely good conversation are valuable to us when we pray. Prayer is a place of both awe and intimacy. Prayer is “a climbing up of the heart unto God” (Martin Luther). Prayer is a place where deepening relationship flows in both directions.



We might need to broaden our understanding of prayer. We might need to take the time to marinate our hearts in the Lord’s Prayer, since those are the words that Jesus used to teach his first disciples how to pray. Acknowledging who God is, trusting in his will, forgiveness and forgiving, and rejoicing in provision, guidance and deliverance.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 tells us, “Don’t stop praying.” From that we know that prayer is more than a mealtime, “Thanks,” or a bedtime, “Bless me.” Prayer is not an event; it is a lifestyle. Prayer is, according to Richard Foster, “a life of constant conversation with the Holy One.” Imagine a child who converses with God as she plays, does her chores, tries hard to learn a new concept in school, faces failure as she practices, or endures disappointment when plans change. **What a wonderful existence if children can go through life with the habit of talking to God and hearing from him — in conversation.**

As we enjoy the soul-satisfying habit of a continuing conversation with our God, we can influence the children in our lives to abide there also. And as we invite children to engage in ongoing conversations with God, we are showing them a place where they can have heart-to-heart authenticity, acceptance, understanding, encouragement, and his lingering presence. And it is a place where they can hear from God — where they become familiar with the loving whisper of the Spirit of God.

Start the conversation with your child!

“Come and sit with me a minute. Let’s have a conversation about conversation.”

CONVERSATION WITH GOD

INVITATIONS TO ENGAGE

EARLY CHILDHOOD (2-6 years old)

(Sit on one side of an open door and have the child sit on the other side of the door.)
Can you hear me? Even though we can't see each other, you know I'm here and you know that I can hear you. Tell me something that makes you happy. Now tell me something that makes you sad. I care about those things so much! And God cares even more than I do. Even though you can't see him, God loves to hear from you and he loves to talk to you.

Let's sit together, and you can tell God what you told me. Now let's sit quietly for a minute to see if God has something to say to you.

Isn't it wonderful that we don't have to come to this door to talk to each other? Praying to God is like that. You can talk to him anytime about anything.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 tells us, "Don't stop praying." That means that all day long you can say, "Help me!" or "Thank you!" and God will hear you and answer.

ELEMENTARY AGE (5-10 years old)

When we have a conversation with someone, part of the time we talk and part of the time we listen. Sometimes we forget to listen, don't we? Prayer is a conversation with God, and sometimes we talk so much that we forget to listen to him, too.

Let's use two colors of paper strips and create a prayer chain to hang in your room. As you pray, write on one color of paper strip the things you are saying to God. Then on the other color, write the things God has said to you when you listen to him while you pray. Then add them to the chain.

Each night as you remember what you've prayed about through the day, add to the chain and you will learn something about your conversations with God.

PRETEEN/EARLY ADOLESCENT (10-14 years old)

(Have the child cut three or four small circles out of red paper or use red stickers.)

Good conversation means that there is both talking and listening. That's true even when we are in conversation with God. Maybe if we had some red lights, like we see when we are driving, we would remember to stop and pay attention to what God might be saying.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 tells us, "Don't stop praying." That means that we can talk and listen to God all day long.

You can think of places to put these red circles. Then when you see them all through today, you can stop and talk to God and then wait there a little while to listen to what he might want to say.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCE

Children, Can You Hear Me?
by Brad Jersak

SCRIPTURE PRAYER

“God Himself is here waiting our response to His Presence.

This eternal world will come alive to us the moment we begin to reckon upon its reality.”

— A.W. Tozer

Think about how you came to love the person that you love the most.

Did your love for them grow as you learned more facts about them? Did you become more attached to them because you did research about them at the library? It’s hard to imagine how that might be possible. And yet, we often attempt to fill children’s heads with facts about God in hopes that somehow that cognitive accumulation will result in a love relationship with God.

Being with the ones we love, enjoying conversation (listening and responding), expressing real emotion and opinion, sharing common loves — those are things that cause a love relationship to grow. If we approach prayer from that perspective

as we mentor our children, then our children can acquire habits that will bring them to **authentic encounters with the God who loves them.**

When we (and our children) pay close attention to God talking to us through his Word, we can enjoy personal conversations with God. We can experience his involvement in our personal world. And then, who God is begins to soak into who we are, so we will start to become like Jesus. This is true for our children, too.

Think of that! Think how a child’s life can be changed when they believe that they can talk to the Creator of the universe anytime they want! Jeremiah 33:3 has no age limit. God’s promise is to young ones when he says: **Call to me and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.** God will hear the children. He will respond. Your children can hear from God when they open his Word and have conversations with him.

The more time we spend with God, the more we will enjoy and understand his love for us. The more we are aware of his nearness to us, the more we will accumulate proof of his love. As we begin to truly understand how much God loves us, then we will be able to face hard things much more easily. Hearing from God in prayer!

Start the conversation with your child!

“Come and sit with me a minute. I found something that I think you will love to know about. God speaks to us from his Word, and I want to make sure that you know what he is saying to you. First, we are going to ask God to speak to us from his Word. Then, let’s see what will happen when we listen for God’s voice from His Word ...”



SCRIPTURE PRAYER

INVITATIONS TO ENGAGE

EARLY CHILDHOOD (4-6 years old)

“There is a special word from God for you in the Bible.”

(As you read the verse, put the child’s name into the verse to personalize it for them. Try this with Jeremiah 33:3.)

Make a pretend phone from a piece of paper.

“What do you hear God saying to you from the Bible verse?”

Write the message from God on the back of the pretend phone. Pretend that the phone is ringing and when the child answers, it is God speaking with a message for them. Then put the “phone” in a special, safe place where the child can reach it.

“Any time you want to talk to God today, come and get your phone and we’ll read God’s message to you again.”

ELEMENTARY AGE (7-9 years old)

“There is a special word from God for you in the Bible.”

(As they read the verse, encourage them to put their own name into the verse to personalize it for them. Jeremiah 33:3)

“Why don’t you read it one more time and listen carefully. What do you hear God saying to you from that verse?”

Have the child write what they hear God saying on a 3x5 card or piece of paper. Put the message in a special place — maybe under their pillow or on a message board.

“Every time you think about it today, you can go back to your special message from God and talk to him about it.”

(Mealtimes are easy times to remind the child to hear the message from God again.)

PRETEEN (10-12 years old)

Introduce your child to this process of praying Scripture:

Pray — ask God to speak to your heart.

Read a verse — slowly.

Read the verse again — slowly — pay attention to words that seem most important.

Read the verse one more time — slowly. This time pay attention to ways that God might be asking you to live by what this verse says.

Pray — ask God to remind you of what you have heard from him throughout the day.

Write what you prayed about in your journal and then at the end of the day go back and see if it had an impact on the rest of your day.

MAKE WISE CHOICES

“The Spirit will never lead in opposition to the written Word that he inspired.”
— Richard Foster

Remember making a big decision as a child? What was your first Grand Conundrum? Decisions come very early in life. Before we can make sentences, we are making choices. And very early on we need guidance in making those choices.

Most of those early choices are easy, almost self-evident. Then, little by little, we acquire a decision-making grid to help us sort out what makes life work well. We catch on to what makes mommy smile and what keeps us out of the time-out corner. But as we go along, things aren't always

as clear to us. Soon we must choose between what is good and what is best. We have to discern if things are not as they seemed at first glance. We need to “play the movie forward” to figure out if the long-term result will be as welcome as the short-term gratification. **Our need for guidance grows. And we need to know which voices will give us good guidance.**

There are times we get mixed signals from sources of guidance. Cultural voices will change over time. The voices of authority can waffle depending on hidden agendas and personal benefits. Even the laws of the land can be altered. We need something that gives us enduring and reliable guidance. **As Christ followers, we believe that God has communicated his will and his way in the Scriptures. We also hear his instructions through the written and verbal counsel of people who love him and walk with him. And we have the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit with us.**

If we really want to enjoy close friendship with our loving Creator, we will take the time to sit with him, quiet our own desires and listen to the Holy Spirit. We will identify and listen to other people who are familiar with his voice. We will linger as we read the Word of God and other writings that echo that eternal truth. And we will influence the children we care for to do the same. **We need wise companionship to make wise choices. The Christian community can be extremely helpful to this process.**

If we don't acquaint the children with ways to identify godly wisdom and guidance, we rob them of life-giving wisdom — the Word of God; the unity of understanding with other wise Christians; and the loving promptings of the Spirit of God.



MAKE WISE CHOICES

INVITATIONS TO ENGAGE

Start the conversation with your child!

Come and sit with me and we'll talk about how you can know which voice to listen to as you make wise choices.

EARLY CHILDHOOD (2-6 years old)

Pretend that you are a mouse and say, "God made me strong." Now use your kitty voice and say, "God made me strong." Now use your lion voice and say, "God made me strong." Which voice do you believe?

Different voices tell us different things. If daddy says, "Here is some bread for you to eat," what would you do? If a stranger says, "Here is some bread for you to eat," what would you do? We don't believe every voice, do we? (Stories from Elementary age can be used here, too.)

We need to listen carefully to know who is talking to us. **Whatever God tells us, we can always trust.** What does God say to you that you can really believe? Let's make up a song with those words.

ELEMENTARY AGE (5-10 years old)

When we hear people telling us what to do, how do we decide if it's a good idea? Several places in the Bible we hear people saying the same thing, "Take some bread." But the responses are very different.

As we read these stories, tell me who is talking, who they are talking to and what happened. John 6:5-11, little boy with 5 loaves; Matthew 4:2-4, Satan tempts Jesus to make stones into bread; Matthew 26:20 and 26, Jesus at the Last Supper.

(After each story, ask the child to consider the following questions) Where do you see yourself in that story? Would you have taken the bread? What helps you know what is a wise decision? **Let's ask God to help us listen to his voice and be wise today.**

PRETEEN/EARLY ADOLESCENT (10-14 years old)

When you want to know whether a course of action is wise or unwise, read James 3:14-17. Let's put those descriptive words in random places on a page in your journal (jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, vile practice, pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, mercy, etc.).

Now I'll say a word and you write it — and the opposite — on your page (peace, clarity, joy, quietness, rest, apathy, condemnation, chaos, hope, love). Take a red pen and make an X over the things that are not heavenly wisdom. Cross out the things that do not sound like God. **All the things that are left are words to help you make decisions.**

Are there people who speak godly words into your life? Let's talk about a decision you need to make right now and see how those words might help.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCE

Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups
by Ruth Haley Barton