# HOW TO MODIFY LESSONS FOR TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS

Young children learn through play by exploring the world around them in a natural, hands-on way. Through play, they develop cognitive, social, and motor skills as they interact with their environment and peers. Whether building with blocks, pretending in a play kitchen, or solving puzzles, children are experimenting, problem-solving, and making sense of new concepts. Play allows them to practice language, creativity, and critical thinking, making it an essential part of early childhood learning. By integrating Bible stories, values, and themes into play, teachers can also introduce the gospel in a way that is engaging and relatable for young children.

Play centers in a preschool classroom create structured spaces where children can explore, engage, and learn through hands-on activities. These centers, such as blocks, puzzles, art, and imaginative play, encourage creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction. By providing children with the freedom to choose their activities, play centers foster independence and self-directed learning, all while helping children develop important cognitive, motor, and social skills, in a fun and engaging environment.

Play centers can be a powerful tool for teaching new information in a preschool classroom. Each play center can be designed with specific learning goals in mind, such as using blocks to create a manger scene or Noah's ark. Teachers can guide children's play by asking questions, introducing vocabulary and names from Bible stories, and encouraging problem-solving. Through play, children can absorb new information in a hands-on, interactive way that makes learning enjoyable and meaningful.

When modifying lessons for toddlers and preschoolers, use the *Wonder Truth*, *Scripture*, *God's Big Story*, and *Word of Wonder* from the elementary lesson for the basis of your lesson, play centers, and the recommended schedule on the following page. Teachers should use the *A Message for Children's Leaders* and *A Road Map* sections from the scheduled elementary lesson to assist in their lesson planning.

## Classroom Materials and Set Up

Play centers should be set up and available to children every Sunday. To set up play centers in a preschool classroom, choose at least 3-5 play centers from the list on the next page and ensure each play center has enough space and materials for up to 4 children. No more than 4 children should play in a center at one time and children should have at least 3 play centers from which to choose. Use shelves or rugs to define the boundaries of each area. Organize materials in clear bins with picture labels to help children easily access and return items independently. This set-up promotes structured play, independence, and easy clean-up. Details about each play center are listed below.

## Play Centers

**Books:** A cozy space with a variety of age-appropriate picture books that promote literacy, storytelling, and imagination. Books can include sacred and secular topics but should be of interest to young children.

**Puzzles:** Table space with simple, large-piece puzzles to encourage problem-solving, hand-eye coordination, and fine motor skills. Puzzles can include sacred or secular pictures but should be easy to handle and assemble by young children.

**Art Supplies:** A creative space with materials like crayons, markers, paper, glue, coloring sheets, and safe scissors, allowing children to explore their creativity and practice fine motor control. A picture from the lesson or a sample of an art project should be included at the Art play center to provide inspiration to children. Children should be encouraged to create freely, allowing their imagination to guide them in assembling art projects. Offer assistance only when they ask, supporting their independence and creativity.

**Blocks and Accessories:** A space on the floor with building blocks of varying sizes and related items (like cars or figures) to support construction play, spatial awareness, and early math concepts. Allow children to construct and deconstruct freely, but remind them to only deconstruct their own structures, not others'. The block play center is a good place to reenact the Bible story. Connective blocks such as Legos is not recommended for this play center.

**Imaginative Play:** A play space with costumes, dolls, play kitchens, or toy tools for role-playing, encouraging social interaction, conversations about or reenactments of the Bible story, language development, and creativity.

## Schedule

| Lesson Section | Setting | Time |
|---|---|---|
| Curiosity | Play Centers | 15-20 minutes |
| Belief | Whole Group | 10-12 minutes |
| | Movement Break | |
| Faith | Play Centers / One on One | 1-2 minutes / child |
| | Healthy Snack | |
| Identity | Whole Group | 3-5 minutes |

# CURIOSITY

*15-20 minutes*

Begin your lesson time by welcoming children with excitement, calling them by name, offering hugs or high fives, and asking them to Check-In using the directions below and feelings chart.

Use the feelings chart and ask each child how they are feeling (refrain from asking "How are you?" as children may be accustomed to responding with "fine"). You may want to print and post the feelings chart in your classroom for ease of use.

- Allow each child to name their feeling or to use a color to name their feeling. Older children might use words, younger children might point to the pictures or use the colors to express their feelings.
- There are no wrong feelings and all feelings should be acknowledged.
- Acknowledge how children feel by giving each child time and space to share anything they might need or want to share in regard to their feelings. For example, you can ask "Why are you angry?" or "What made you sad?".
- If you can, address the feeling (hunger/thirst - provide a snack/drink, sadness - give a hug, joy - give a high five, tired - let the child rest, anger – a calming space, etc.).
- Keep in mind throughout the lesson how each child is feeling and that feelings may change during your time with the child.
- If you notice a change, you may want to allow the child to rename their feeling and again address the feeling if needed.

Acknowledge all feelings, concerns, joys, and celebrations in your opening and closing prayer. Use a grace-based approach to the learning as feelings will impact how children learn (adapted from the Zones of Regulation).

# SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL CHECK IN

Angry



Scared



Panicked



Inconsolable



Happy



Focused



Calm



Proud



Worried



Frustrated



Silly



Excited



Sad



Bored



Tired



Sick



Allow children to choose a play center. To facilitate play in play centers:

- Set clear expectations for behavior (sharing, taking turns) and give children a gentle reminder to clean up one play center before moving to another.
- The teacher should rotate between play centers, guiding and engaging with the children as needed, but encouraging independent play and creativity.
- Allow children to freely choose where they want to play and to explore at their own pace.
- Keep the environment relaxed and fun, fostering both social interaction and individual exploration.

This is a good time to build trust and relationships with children and to nurture relationships between children. Ask questions that help you learn about the child and to prep children for the Bible story:

- Use the *Welcome Question* from the elementary lesson, if appropriate.
- Share the *Wonder Truth* with children as they play and ask what they think it means.
- Ask, "What are you playing, making, drawing, building, etc.?"
- Ask, "What is something fun you did this week?"
- Ask, "Who do you think we will learn about today?"

Let children tell you about their play and try to connect their play to the Bible story for the day. For example, say "I like what you made with your blocks. Can you tell me about it? We're going to learn about a man who made a very big boat called an ark. His name was Noah." At the conclusion of this time, encourage children to assist with clean-up.

# BELIEF

*10-12 minutes*

Gather the children and open in prayer using the prayer in the elementary lesson or your own prayer. Allow children to sit comfortably while you tell the Bible story. Use the *My First Hands-On* Bible version of the story to read to the children and to show pictures. If the story is not available in the *My First Hands-On* Bible, use the *Hear It* or *Experience It* version of the story in the elementary lesson. To tell a story to preschoolers in an engaging way:

- Use the story telling tips in the margins of the *My First Hands-On* Bible.
- Use expressive voices, facial expressions, and gestures to bring the characters and scenes to life.
- Keep the story simple and interactive by asking questions or inviting the children to repeat phrases or make sounds.
- Use visual aids, like props or pictures, to capture their attention and help them follow along.
- Keep the pacing lively but not too fast, allowing time for reactions and engagement.
- Most importantly, make eye contact and stay animated to hold their interest throughout the story.

Be sure not to let this portion of the lesson last more than 10-12 minutes.

Children will need a movement break after this portion of the lesson. Movement breaks can include but are not limited to:

- **Animal Walks:** Have them crawl like a bear, hop like a frog, or waddle like a duck around the room.
- **Jumping Jacks:** Do slow, small jumping jacks or just arm and leg movements if space is tight.
- **Stretching to the Sky:** Encourage them to stand and stretch their arms high, pretending to reach for stars or balloons.
- **Freeze Dance:** Play music from the Spotify Playlist and let them dance, then freeze when the music stops.
- **Marching in Place:** March like a parade while swinging arms high and stomping feet.

These activities help release energy and refocus attention while keeping the movements simple and safe for small spaces.

Allow the children to go back to the play centers. Ask a child to join you at the table and use the *Questions: Younger Kids* from the *Faith* section of the elementary lesson and pictures from the Bible to review the story with the child. To encourage preschoolers to answer questions or retell a story:

- Start by asking simple, open-ended questions that relate to key moments in the story, for example, "What did [character] do next?" or "How did that make them feel?" .
- Keep the tone upbeat and patient, giving them time to think.
- Encourage them with positive reinforcement like, "That's a great answer!" or "You remembered that part so well!".
- Point to the pictures in the Bible if the child struggles to remember details from the story.
- Be sure to share the *Wonder Truth* with the child as you review the story and repeat it several times.

Only spend 1-2 minutes with each child, so you can meet with all of the children in the class. If you have a large class, meet with 2-3 children at a time. Close this portion of the lesson by encouraging children to assist with clean up, and then gather the children for small group prayer time using the *Prayer Time: Younger Kids* activity in the elementary lesson.

Show the *God's Story Video* while serving a small healthy snack after the *Faith* section of the lesson. It is essential to be aware of each child's food allergies to ensure a safe environment and prevent any allergic reactions. Always check with parents or guardians about specific dietary restrictions and make sure that all volunteers are informed to avoid any potential risks during snack time or special activities involving food.

# IDENTITY

*3-5 minutes*

Use the activity from the *Curiosity* or *Identity* sections of the elementary lesson if appropriate. Modify materials, directions, or rules to better accommodate young children.

To close the lesson, gather the children and engage them in a choral response of the *Declaring God's Wonder* statement from the *Curiosity* section of the elementary lesson. If children are very young, you can simplify the *Declaration* statement or use the same statement each week. See below:

**Thank you, God, that You are good** (children repeat)

**You know me** (children repeat)

**Jesus loves me** (children repeat)

**The Holy Spirit leads me** (children repeat)

**My life can tell of Your wonder** (children repeat)

Consider allowing children to stand and add movements or gestures to the *Declaration* statement.

Be sure to end your time together by speaking the *Blessing* over the children from the *Identity* section in the elementary lesson.