Playful faith



Gail Adcock explores the value of fun when helping children to discover more about God. Gail shares her time between being associate vicar with two churches in North Hertfordshire and a consultant for all things family and intergenerational church related.

The purchase of a Lego™ set in spring 2020 led to my rediscovery of play. Lego is named after a Danish word for play – *lege*. It describes 'open-ended, creative, and imaginative play without a specific desired result'.[1]

In childhood (and beyond) curiosity and play are formational. Jesus alludes to this when speaking with his disciples about the kingdom of God, bringing a child into their midst and inviting them to become more childlike. Jesus nurtures faith in playful ways, using storytelling, sensory and everyday experiences to reveal more about God.

Yet opportunities for wonder and play can be sidelined in children's experiences of church. Knowledge and learning may be prioritized above play and discovery. Play nurtures awe and wonder and can lead children into profound encounters with God, fuelling their faith day to day. Finding ways to incorporate p lay into the spaces where children gather – both with peers and other generations – helps them to flourish, putting down deep spiritual roots that last a lifetime.

Play occurs in a myriad of mission and ministry settings. I've observed in toddler groups how young children spend time exploring textures, squeezing slime, sifting sand, feeling spiky fir cones or touching cuddly toys. Children taking part in the 4 to 7s venue at 3Generate (the Methodist Children and Youth Assembly) wander through the barefoot walk over and over, enjoying the sensations of soil, leaves, twigs and wood under their feet. In holiday club, older children are imaginative and creative – building bridge structures and problem solving and using materials in fun and quirky ways. In youth group, 'Taskmaster' style challenges with few rules and endless possibilities always lead to fun, laughter, as well as discussion and debate!

Whether planned or unintentional, children are fully present as they play, question and experience, developing their knowledge and understanding. According to Godly Play[2], sacred space is created during play, giving rise to questions of meaning and purpose, pertinent for children and adults alike. 'Play', says Joy Wendling, 'is an experience of abundant life and complete joy for all who know and love Jesus.'[3] Becoming more playful is an aspect of discipleship that leads us into greater knowing and deeper relationship with God. As Chris Sinkinson explains, 'the good use of our imagination to create and play games fulfils part of what it means to be made in the image of God.'[4]

Play was at the heart of the missional community we hosted for families with teenagers; from simple science experiments, playing the PlayStation™ game *Joust* in our garden, to telling Bible stories with props and using our senses. Time together was creative by design, so all ages and abilities could take part meaningfully. Play provided a rich resource for spiritual exploration, prompting conversation on a variety of themes and allowing space for different perspectives.

How to adopt a playful approach in spaces where children and young people are growing as disciples

Firstly, look for **sensory opportunities:** where can taste, touch, smell, sight or sound be introduced? When exploring Scripture, this could involve making bread, smelling herbs, washing feet, making the sounds of a storm, or placing ourselves inside a piece of art. The Methodist Modern Art Collection WEB has over 50 works offering ways to dwell in Biblical scenes and stories.



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Secondly, use **board or card games** to provoke conversation and create stories. This builds relationships as well as exploring themes such as wealth, justice and equality. From simple matching games for young children, through to Taco, Cat, Goat, Cheese, Pizza™ and Herd Mentality™ as they get older. These are quick and easy to pick up and play.

Thirdly, **maximise the potential of devices and video game platforms** with young digital natives. Building in Minecraft™ or collecting in Pokemon Go!™ can be great as communal activity. Or play interactive games such as Knowledge is Power on the PlayStation™ or Quiplassh™, where players give funny answers to prompts. These offer everyone a chance to get involved.

Finally, understanding that play is a natural place of being for children and young people, means we need to **begin with their preferences and ideas.** Play in the 21st century is a world away from what many in older generations may have experienced. So, involving them in the planning and design of play opportunities is crucial.

Space to play is a route to discover meaning: when released to explore, new questions and insights emerge. When play is part of our life as the body of Christ in age-specific and intergenerational settings, everyone stands to benefit. There is a wealth of opportunity waiting for us as curious and playful beings which lead to dynamic and beautiful growth for the entire community, wherever they are in their journey of faith.

Check it out

Methodist Modern Art Collection: https://bit.ly/3NQqZj4

Quiplash: https://bit.ly/49RHCnn

The Best Board Games for 2026: https://bit.ly/4q22Tzl

Sensory play ideas: https://bit.ly/3Nz7T10

Godly Play: godlyplay.uk

For more resources, see WEB.

[1] Joy Wendling chapter from Intergenerate book p.29
[2] Godly Play website: https://www.godlyplay.uk/about-us
[3] Joy Wendling chapter from Intergenerate book p.26
[4] Sinkinson, Chris https://www.premierchristianity.com/culture/why-christians-are-joining-the-board-games-resurgence/16721.article

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