

How The Praise Factory Family of Curriculum Developed

The story of Praise Factory is very much tied into how I've developed as a Christian and an educator over the years.

Growing Up and Growing in Christ

I was born in Tennessee and lived there until I was ten years old, when we moved to Colorado. I was raised in a church-attending family, yet one without a definite emphasis on the need of Jesus as a personal Savior.

While attending a camp in North Carolina at the age of eight, I heard and responded to the gospel at the age of eight. Though my conversion was real and I had great, spiritual hunger, I had little input of Christian teaching or fellowship through family or church. Except for Bible studies and Christians I met at summer camps, most of the time I was a loner Christian, simply praying and reading the Bible on my own. I followed Christ best I could, based on my limited knowledge and teaching, making a few Christian friends where I could find them.

Upon completion of high school, I returned to the South to attend Duke University. If spiritual life had been a starvation diet up to this point in my life, Duke was a feast. I became very involved in a strong chapter of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, filled with men and women seeking to know God and His Word and bring glory to His name in their hearts and with their lives.

If Duke was a feast, the keeper of the feast was Mark Dever—now my husband. We would spend hours discussing the Bible and the things of God like two Bible geeks. It was simply wonderful!

Needless to say, it was a match made in heaven. We were married right after university and headed off to Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, outside of Boston. It was to be the beginning of ten+ years of theological education and ministry, not only at Gordon Conwell, but the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky; and finally, at Cambridge University in England.

My primary love and duty during those years was being wife, mother to our two children, and adopted mom, aunt, and/or "hospitality queen" to many high school, university, seminary students and others who crossed our doorway.

At the same time, however, I also had the huge blessing of being theologically "home-schooled" by my husband. Many nights Mark would read and discuss with me the things he was learning in his classes and textbooks. It was wonderful!

Theological Home schooling

As ministry and life experiences melded with theological education, it quickly became apparent to me that theology—so often thought of as simply a cerebral exercise, was actually the backbone of truth which God, in His kindness, has given His people through His Word. Sound, biblical doctrine helps keep the Church pure against the lies of many worldviews that bombard us. Sound, biblical doctrine helps keep God's people steadfastly joyful, hopeful and steadfast in the face of the hardships of life. God and His great and glorious plan of redemption of His people will prevail. They will be like Him and will enjoy Him forever, all to the glory of His name. I could see that every Christian needed to be a biblical theologian, in a sense. That is, they all needed to understand who God is, who He made us to be, His plans for us and this world, His work of salvation for His people, and the wonderful things of the world to come. A Christian's understanding of these truths was like the lenses of the spiritual glasses through which he would see and understand life, in all its ups and downs.

Enter Children's Ministry

During this same time, I started working with children at the local churches in which we were involved. These first experiences were both delightful and disturbing. Delightful, for that is what children can be with their inquisitive, fresh hearts and minds. Yet disturbing, for so much of curriculum being used seemed to either be repetitive and, well, boring; or, creative and fun, but without much substantive truth. Truths drawn from many Bible stories were too often moralistic or misapplied to make a point not faithful to the text. It was disturbing to see the precious moments teaching them about eternal matters being wasted.

A stimulating workshop, a few good books and I'd like to think the Holy Spirit working inside me, fueled my desire to make a better connection between kids and the great Truths of God's Word. An after-school "Good News Club" started by a group of us mothers at our children's elementary school in England provided me with many opportunities to experiment with presenting children with deeper, meatier biblical truths, brought to life and reinforced by creative activities. After four, fruitful years with that club, I felt more convinced than ever that this was not just a possible combination, but a powerful combination. Kids did care about the deeper things of God—just like I had when I was young—and their active, energetic bodies provided many gates to the mind and soul that made learning memorable and effective.

In 1994, our family moved from Cambridge to Washington, DC where Mark had been called as senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church. It was here, more than any other place, that I was given free reins to develop a "dream" children's curriculum. Tired volunteers happily handed over the children's church program to me without a single glance back.

Beginnings: Looking for Answers, Starting with Questions

Starting with a clean slate, I started with three questions I wanted a curriculum to answer. It was these three questions and the answers to them that have shaped the development of the Praise Factory curriculums.

Question #1: *What Would Be Best for the Children to Learn?*

If I could teach children anything about God, what would it be?

Question #1: Answered—The Three Goals of Praise Factory

The answer to this question developed into the three goals of Praise Factory: Active Minds, Joyful Noise and Prayerful Hearts.

Goal #1 Active Minds

To challenge and equip the children with a thorough, ordered study of who God is, who He has made us to be, His plans for us and this world, His work of salvation for His people, and the wonderful things of the world to come. ...otherwise known as...a systematic theology!

To help the children see the great, unchangeableness of God and His faithfulness to His people throughout all ages, by learning stories from church history and missions as well as from the Old Testament and New Testament that reflect the same concept.

...so...a systematic theology with three stories on each key theological concepts, one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, one from church history/missions.

To give the children Bible stories, filled with the rich details that make the story come alive and can have a greater spiritual impact because they are based on a deeper understanding of the story.

...so...a systematic theology with three stories on each key theological concept, one from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and church history/missions...with geography, climate, setting, cultures, customs and manners woven into them.

Goal #2 Noisy Joy

To encourage the children to be lovers of God and lovers of people. To help them understand how to apply the truths they are learning to their relationship with God, themselves and with others, that they might live joyful lives, pleasing to God; and, be encouraged to reach out to all with the good news of Jesus, with love, in word and example.

So...a systematic theology with three stories on each key theological concept, one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, one from church history/missions...with geography, climate, setting, culture, customs and manners woven into them....and with discussion questions to encourage them to think about applying these truths to their lives.

Goal #3 Prayerful Hearts

To help them understand what a church is; to help them develop a loving and prayerful knowledge and concern for the Body of Church, both locally and around the world.

To introduce them to key people who serve in their local church, outreach ministries and around the world to further the cause of Christ. To develop and deepen their worship of God through prayer and have hearts that cry out to Him to grow His Church with more people and to build up His Church to glorify Him as a beautiful reflection of His character and response to His love.

So...a systematic theology with three stories on each key theological concept, one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, one from church history/missions...with geography, climate, setting, culture, customs and manners woven into them....and with discussion questions to encourage them to think about applying these truths to their lives, and a prayer time to reflect on what they learned about God and to ask Him to work in their lives based on what they've learned. And, a chance to learn about people important to their local church and pray for them.

Why do all this?

In hopes that the children might have a more knowledgeable understanding of the Bible; that they might be better equipped with truth in their own struggles as they live in this world. And most of all, that they might discover our wonderful God, come to know, love and glorify Him with all their being.

Question #2: "How could we structure a curriculum to be enjoyable and memorable for the children, yet keep the learning –not the fun—the main point?"

If the answers to my first question became the goals of The Praise Factory curriculum, then the answers to my second question led to the Praise Factory structure.

Question #2 Answered: The Praise Factory Structure

If the answers to my first question became the goals of The Praise Factory curriculum, then the answers to my second question: “How could we structure this program to be enjoyable and memorable for the children, yet keep the learning –not the fun—the main point?” led to the Praise Factory structure.

Kids like to eat, to move, to make, to sing, to pretend, to present, to ask question. So what about a rotation of different creative, active activities that capitalize on what they like to do; yet, do it in a way that directly links back to discussion and reinforcement of the lesson’s most important concepts. (What I like to call conduits of truth: the things kids like to do used as vehicles of truth to their hearts and minds.)

So, Praise Factory includes a story-related snack (a snack that refers to a food in the story or looks like something from the story), 8 different activities--everything from games to crafts to drama to songs and sign language--and a presentation time of each of these different activities at the end of each session.

Why do all this?

In hopes that by harnessing the children’s energetic, creative bodies, to activities that underscore rather than overshadow what we want them to learn, we might reach their hearts and minds in a memorable, enjoyable way.

Question #3: “Seeing as we would have the children once a week, and the parents the rest of the week, how could we provide resources for the parents to use with their children, as their primary spiritual teachers?”

Question #3 Answered: Parent Resources

The third question led to more than a little hunting and pecking on the Christian book market and in the end, a lot of creating.

The answer to this question meant finding and/or creating parent resources that ran in tandem with the curriculum that parents could use at home to discuss and reinforce the same ideas their children were learning at church. So Praise Factory offers take home sheets of that include the key concepts and the Bible story, as well as downloadable music of all the hymns and Bible verses used in the curriculum.

Why Do This?

Because children learn best with lots of reinforcement! In the limited time we have with the children, we cannot nor should not try to assume primary spiritual care giving. Our best way to serve the children is to serve the parents and enable them to do their God-given job better.

Putting It All Together: The Praise Factory

Put all these questions and answers together...and you get the original The Praise Factory curriculum (now Praise Factory Investigators)... as well as now its two little sisters: Hide ‘n’ Seek Kids; (2’s, 3’s and up) and Deep Down Detectives (older pre-school, early elementary). All three of these curriculums build upon the same key concepts in an expanding spiral that is both developmentally appropriate for each particular age group, yet preparatory for the next curriculum in the progression. By putting it on the web, I hope that the curriculum will become a useful resource to other Sunday school teachers as well as the most important teachers of all: the parents.

Since 1997, The Praise Factory has been an experiment, an adventure and a work in progress that God has graciously seen fit to bless, both here at Capitol Hill Baptist Church and in other churches. I hope that as you consider how to use it in your church, that God guide you in using these resources in the best way possible to grow the children in your church—or family--too, that they might know, enjoy and glorify God with all of their lives.