



Helping Children When They Have “Trouble with God”

A girl of seven lingered after the rest of the the Church school students had left the classroom. Something was clearly bothering her, and she wanted to tell her teacher about it. The teacher put down the papers she had gathered up in preparation for leaving, and gave the child her full attention.

“I’m having trouble with God,” the girl said. “Why did He let my dad lose his job and make my family so sad?”

How can we help children who are having “trouble with God?”

Finding out what’s on their minds. Activities like the following can help discover what children are thinking about, particularly if you suspect that one or more are worried about something.

Hands Up. Ask children to raise their hands if they agree with a statement like, “People get sick because they have done something bad.”

Finish the Sentence. Have children complete a sentence, such as, “I get scared when...” or “I wonder why....”

Draw a Feeling. Have children draw faces to match emotions you suggest.

These activities should generate discussion, and may offer valuable insights to help guide children. For example, a child who writes, “I wonder why my big sister gets to go to bed later than I do” is expressing normal sibling complaints. But if a child writes, “I wonder why people die from thirst like the kids I saw on television,” there is a deeper issue, a deeper disturbance, to be addressed.



A teacher who had asked his students to draw a face showing “surprise” noted that one child had drawn what looked like terror. He was able to talk with her about a nighttime break-in at her home a few years earlier. It was still bothering the child, though the family had assumed she was “over it.”

Another way of finding out what children are feeling and thinking is to give them means of identifying with and expressing emotions. Have children look at the icon of Christ on the cross, and ask what the other people in the icon are feeling. Establish that the people (and even the angels) are sad because Jesus is suffering, and He is their beloved friend. Children can then talk about their own experiences of loss and, perhaps, of seeing people they love suffer. Stories can help, too. Ask children to talk about how the father felt when his prodigal son returned. Remind them that, like that father, God is always ready to forgive us and welcome us back when we are sorry for the bad things we do that take us away from Him.

Being of real help. Here are some ideas that will prove helpful in such situations.

Choose your words carefully. Don't say, “God needed a good singer in heaven, so He took your grandmother because she had such a beautiful voice.” Rather, assure the child that he or she will see grandmother again in God's Kingdom, so that he or she will not be led to believe that God is an enemy who takes away the people and things we love most. In the same vein, don't tell a child that seeing grandma again will only happen “if you are good.” Offer reassurance.

Let grieving happen naturally. After major loss, children need time to grieve, and it's better to be



sympathetic than to try to “jolly them” out of sadness, or to encourage them to smile when they may not be ready to do so. Realize, too, that a child may need to revisit and retell the sad event. Talking about it a single time might not be enough.

Share some of your own experiences of having “trouble with God.” Knowing that you pray and have faith when you have doubted or felt unsure of God’s presence will help children to do likewise.

Prayer. Encourage troubled children to pray during the day. Basic to our Tradition is “Lord, have mercy.” Assure them that you are praying for them. If possible, get in touch with them during the week to remind them that you are praying, and that you hope they are praying, too.

Be approachable. Let children know that you won’t be shocked or turned off by anything they want to tell you. The teacher of the seven-year-old who was having trouble with God was like this. As a result, the teacher was able to give comfort and to say that we can trust God even when we don’t understand things. The adult’s willingness to listen was a model of God’s care and trust for that student.

“Listen and repeat!” Tell children over and over again that God loves them, no matter what. We will never “get” everything that happens in life – as children or as adults – but He knows everything and is always working for our good. That is His promise, and it is our sure hope.

Valerie Zahirsky chairs the OCA’s Department of Christian Education.

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