

Teaching Biblical Truth through Structured Instruction

As important as play time can be in laying a foundation of skills on which to place future understanding of God's truth, preschoolers are ready even at the age of two to begin to hear and understand God's truth now. This is done with age-appropriate amounts of structured teaching time and activities.

Teaching Two Year Olds

Two year olds have a very, very limited attention span for group teaching, say about five minutes. Keep it short. Keep it simple. And keep it moving. Incorporate movement and use plenty of visuals. Use an interesting tone of voice.

Two year olds love repetition. It's how they learn. About the time you are perhaps getting beyond bored with a story or concept, your two year olds are beginning to really love it. They love to be able to participate and predict what will happen, so they thrive on routine and hearing the same stories again and again.

Change activities frequently. Tell a little story, then sing a song incorporating movement. Prioritize what you want to teach them, realizing that you may only get to a small portion of what you would like to do with them.

Having the children sit together for a short Circle Time can be quite a chore in itself. They will probably wiggle around, even when they are sitting together. Don't be discouraged by this! You can't make a two year into a five year old... at least not without waiting three years! These first attempts at teaching group behavior are so important for preparing them for group learning in the future.

Use carpet squares. Two year olds are not used to sitting in a circle time, so having a clearly defined area in which to sit helps them learn that circle time is a time for them to sit still and listen & participate.

Use wisdom with the lessons. If you are on week one of a new month and have five new two year olds, you should probably limit your circle time to five minutes of activities.

Train two's to transition from activities. Make it a game (move to circle time by hopping like a bunny, creeping like a caterpillar, etc) or a race.

Typical Classroom Skills and Behavior

- Enjoys simple stories, action rhymes and songs over and over again. Tries to sing along.
- Extremely short attention span, especially for structured group activities
- Largely engages in individual activities rather than group activities
- Has a hard time sitting still for long periods
- Often plays with the same toy for more than a few minutes
- Likes to learn about new things by tasting, touching, smelling, listening, etc.
- Enjoys pouring, sifting, sorting, moving things
- Does best with simple 1,2 or 3 step directions

Summary: Key Goals for Teaching Two's

- Keep children safe
- Teach them truth from God's Word
- Help ease separation anxiety
- Acclimate children to functioning & participating in a group,
- Give no more than 2 or 3 step directions
- Train them to sit still for 5+ minutes in structured group story time

Teaching Three Year Olds

Three year olds are growing in their ability to sit still and to be interested in structured group activities for longer periods of time. However they are still very young and still very new to the concept of structured group learning. Proceed with lots of visuals, movement and an interesting voice. Keep your expectations low for their attention span, especially with the youngest threes.

Change activities frequently. Tell a little story, then sing a song incorporating movement. Prioritize what you want to teach them, realizing that you may only get to a small portion of what you would like to do with them.

This is another important year for beginning good group behaviors. Within Circle Time, this is a good age to begin really working on taking turns talking and raising their hands. They will often forget to raise their hands (I mean... when else are they practicing this. They don't have to raise their hand to talk to their parents or friends), but be patient and persistent to help train them.

The more familiar you are with the lesson, the more comfortable you will be keeping your eyes on the kids instead of your teaching binder, which significantly helps your ability to manage the children.

Don't feel chained to the lesson plan! The classroom is not a theatrical performance where teachers follow a script word-for-word. Gauge how well children are engaging. Do you have a handful of boys with excess energy that would benefit from a quick, impromptu game of "Duck, Duck, Goose" or "Simon Says" to get out some of their energy so they can listen to the lesson? Does the lesson seem to be running long and your kids are losing interest? Shuffle things around, and perhaps do the game right after the story, and then get back to the music at the end of class.

Typical Classroom Skills and Behaviors

- Enjoys hearing familiar stories, doing familiar action rhymes and singing familiar songs. Will often ask for the same stories, action rhymes and songs again and again.
- Enjoys short books and stories
- Does best with activities/games in which everyone is busy at the same time, rather than waiting for their turn.
- Growing attention span for group activities, but still quite short.
- Enjoys moving and dancing to music. Can sing a simple song
- Enjoys simple puzzles, playing with play dough, matching games
- Enjoys acting like different animals (hop like a rabbit, slither like a snake, etc)
- Likes to count things
- Does best with simple, 1 step directions
- Loves follow the leader games
- Thrives under praise

Summary: Key Goals for Teaching Three's

- Keep children safe
- Teach them truth from God's Word
- Grow children in their ability to function & participate in a group
- Give them no more than 3 or 4 step directions
- Sitting still for 10+ minutes in structured group story time

Teaching Four/Five Year Olds

Four and five year olds are beginning to hit their stride. They are getting more confident in their ability to communicate with others and more used to group behaviors. Their attention span allows them to sit in a group for longer periods of time. But, preschoolers are still preschoolers. You still want to incorporate lots of visuals, movement and use an interesting voice as you teach.

By the time a child is four, they are familiar with the group-norm of raising their hand when they want to talk. Because they are not usually in large groups, it's easy for them to forget, yet it is a great habit to encourage. You can encourage children by lavishing the positive reinforcement when they do raise their hand. "Oooh! I love how Lisa is raising her hand because she has something to say! What a good example! Thank you, Lisa." If you have lots of blurting out going on and you have just asked the kids to raise their hand when they have something to say, you can be lighthearted with them and say "Wow! I hear a lot of noise right now, but my ears just can't listen because no one has raised their hand and so all I hear is 'blah blah zzzzzzzz blah wooooo.' What should we do? I know someone has something good to say?" When children correctly raise their hands, immediately encourage and compliment them.

Typical Classroom Skills and Behavior

- Can begin to learn to raise hand to answer a question, rather than blurting out comments.
- Can understand and follow simple rules. Many fives can understand and follow multi-step rules.
- Growing ability to play games in which they must wait their turn.
- Enjoys mastering a skill, idea or story. Enjoy getting to share their ability/information with others.
- Still enjoy listening to familiar stories, doing familiar action rhymes and singing familiar songs repetitively.
- Enjoys dancing and moving to music. Often can sing fairly well.
- Expanding attention span for structured group activities
- Can organize objects from smallest to largest
- Can recognize and maybe write his own name
- Can recognize familiar words, like "Stop" on a stop sign. Some 5's begin to identify letters of the alphabet, sound out letters and do simple reading.
- Can follow multi-step directions
- Loves play-acting and role-playing
- Enjoys creating and telling their own stories
- Loves follow the leader games
- Can tackle more complex puzzles and games
- Likes to thread beads, form shapes out of play dough, including simple animals and people
- Likes to count.
- 5's can understand yesterday, today and tomorrow
- 5's like to plan and build more elaborate pictures, buildings, scenes
- Loves nonsense rhymes

Summary: Key Goals for Teaching Four's/Five's

- Keep children safe
- Teach them truth from God's Word
- Grow children in their ability to participate and share in a group
- Following 3 or 5 step directions
- Sitting still for 10-15 minutes in structured group story time