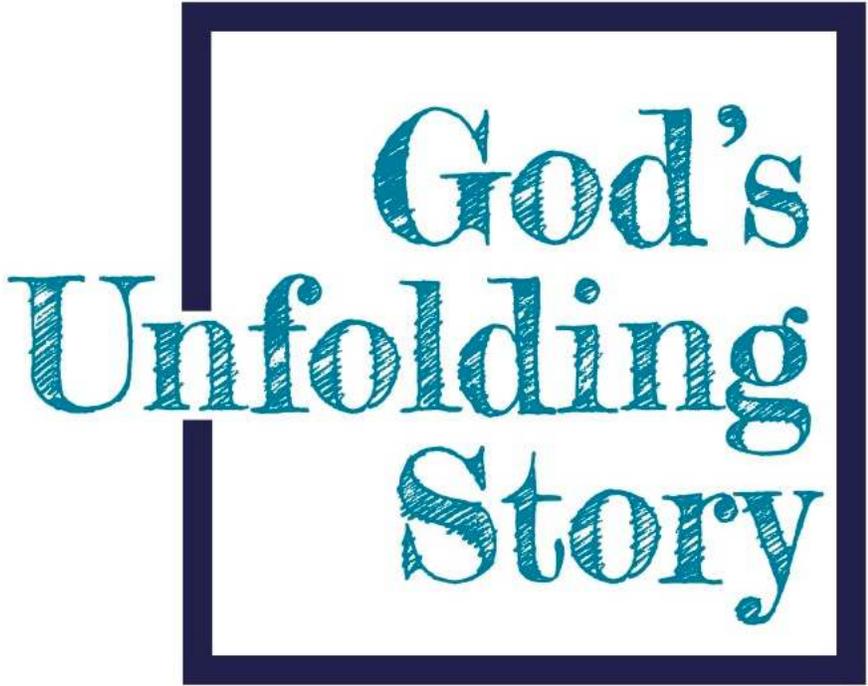


Getting Started With



for Babies

Welcome to *God's Unfolding Story for Babies!*

If you work with babies, you have the opportunity to shape the future in a way that is greater than if you worked with any other age group. These precious young gifts are learning at a faster pace than any time in their lives. Their brains are more easily influenced than they will ever be. They are forming attachments that will shape how they view the world for the rest of their lives. This means your capacity to shape them and their future through your ministry is greater at this time than at any point later in their lives. It is no overstatement to say your ministry to babies can be the most powerful discipleship ministry in your church!

The purpose of *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* is to help babies begin building biblical identity through an attachment to the people in the local church. This booklet will help you, as a teacher, make the most of this resource by helping you develop a good understanding of how babies learn and how you can guide this learning for the Kingdom of God.

It is no overstatement to say your ministry to babies can be the most powerful discipleship ministry in your church!

At the core of the *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* strategy is a flexible session structure that calls for teachers to *Keep, Love, and Teach* the babies in the class. We call these the *Building Blocks of an Effective Babies Class*. The content to be taught week after week are four *Lesson Essentials* (simple statements) that are spoken to the children at multiple times each session.

God's Unfolding Story for Babies consists of a downloadable packet of resources as well as other online, supplemental resources to facilitate the *Building Blocks of an Effective Babies Class*. And all of this is absolutely free!

You will want to begin by reading the following pages and exploring WHY *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* is designed the way it is and how to maximize its potential. In order to

receive additional content about teaching babies, as well as ideas for expanding the sensory learning experience for babies, be sure to sign up for the *God's Unfolding Story for Babies Newsletter* by using the



QR code to the left or link on page 4. Soon you'll be shaping the lives of these little ones and the very Kingdom of God itself.

Thank you for allowing God to teach these children through you. Our prayer is that *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* will enable you to begin the discipleship process in their lives as you *Keep them, Love them, and Teach them!*

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Getting Started with God's Unfolding Story for Babies

God's Unfolding Story for Babies is a free, undated, downloadable curriculum resource for use by churches to help babies begin building biblical identity through an attachment to loving, caring people in the local church. It is part of the *God's Unfolding Story Bible Study Curriculum System*, but it has been developed specifically for babies.

Defining "Babies" For the sake of this curriculum, we are defining "babies" as the youngest of children who are not yet walking. This typically will include newborns through children who are roughly one-year old.

Scope and Sequence The phrase "scope and sequence" generally refers to WHAT is being studied (the "scope" or subject) and the SEQUENCING of lessons that are planned through the life of the course. The scope of study for *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* will be key elements that help establish the foundation of a biblical identity and attachments that babies need to be forming.

There will be no ongoing, weekly sequence of studies. Rather, the content to be taught will be statements (see "Lesson Essentials" on page 2) that are spoken to babies in every session. That is, there will not be a new lesson every week. Every session will focus on the same content, week after week. This level of repetition is the most appropriate approach for teaching babies.

Can We Really Teach Babies? Can infants and those who are not yet walking really be expected to "learn" anything at church? We believe there is, in fact, very real learning taking place at this important stage of a child's life and this learning can be directed to help establish a foundation for biblical faith in the child's life. In fact, some of the most important things a child will EVER learn are learned during these early days. The real question isn't whether a baby CAN learn, but HOW do they learn and how can we direct that learning for the sake of God's Kingdom?

Rick Edwards, Publisher
Trish Weeks, Developer/Consultant
Ruby Pauly, Editor
Jennifer Eck, Heather Bonds, Hannah and Josh Zello provided valuable feedback



Identity, Attachment, and Environment The earliest steps in a baby's "education" are about building identity through meaningful attachments. The young child is developing a very rudimentary understanding of "who I am." This is essential and is taking place very naturally in the context of the broader physical environment in which he or she is living, but it is most shaped by the attachment of the child to parents or caregivers and the

The real question isn't whether a baby CAN learn, but HOW they learn and how we can direct that learning for God's Kingdom?

relationships that develop with these people. Somehow during these early days, a baby learns who he or she is through an attachment to another person or other persons. A baby's identity is directly related to the relationship with this other person who is holding, feeding, and caring for the child.

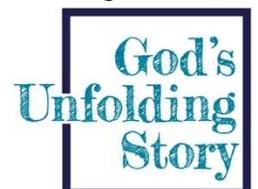
Consequently, the attachments that form as a result of the consistent, ongoing relationships with teachers at church are a very significant part of the child's early learning and identity development. These attachments help establish a foundation for what the child will come to believe about God and His people in the coming months and years.

The child's budding identity, the attachments he/she is forming, and the warm church environment provided for the child are all significant elements in the real learning taking place in the baby's life at this age.

But, there is another element involved in teaching a baby that is often overlooked in our ministry to babies, and that is content.

Teaching Babies Content Parents and caregivers are, in fact, teaching real content to these youngest of learners. And, they do it quite often without thinking...

"Mommy loves you."



"Mommy missed you today."

"Daddy loves your smile."

We would contend that these kinds of repeated statements, paired with the physical presence of a loving adult in the context of a comfortable classroom where the child's physical needs are being met, DO make a genuine, educational difference in the life and mind of a child. And, we believe *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* is able to help teachers and churches direct this learning in a very intentional way.

"Teacher," "Classroom," and "Session" Labels For many "nursery workers," the notion of "teaching" babies may seem strange, so the session structure and other resources included with *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* will encourage leaders to think of themselves as teachers rather than "workers." For that reason, *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* will refer to...

- Leaders as **"teachers"**
- The room as the **"classroom"** (rather than the nursery)
- The time spent with babies as the **"session"**

Building Blocks of An Effective Babies Class A session for babies should consist of three overlapping components referred to as *Building Blocks of An Effective Babies Class*. That is, the time a teacher spends with one or more babies should call that teacher to do three things during the session. There is no prescribed sequence for when these things should happen. The teacher will simply do the following things as needed and appropriate during each session.

A session for babies should consist of three overlapping components referred to as "Building Blocks of An Effective Babies Class."

1) Keep them. The teacher is responsible for meeting the most fundamental physical needs of the babies in his or her care every time the children gather. It is the teacher's responsibility to keep them safe, to keep them clean, to keep them comfortable, and to keep them adequately and appropriately fed. This can be a constant challenge for the teacher during the session, but it is impossible to imagine anything of substance taking place if this doesn't happen. Babies need to be kept safe and comfortable.

2) Love them. The teacher in a session for babies has the responsibility to love those babies genuinely and

deliberately. There are many ways to express deliberate love, and it needs to be a proactive choice of every leader and for every moment of the session. It is hard to overstate the importance of the love a child experiences while he or she is in the classroom.

3) Teach them. Babies are learning in genuinely substantive ways. Their capacity to process and articulate information is in the earliest stages of development, but they are learning nonetheless. Teachers of babies can influence this learning in ways that are intentional and strategic. The *Lesson Essentials* (see below) have genuine educational value for the baby when repeated deliberately during a session.



The *Building Blocks of An Effective Babies Class* (*Keep, Love, Teach*) are easy to remember and, over the course of time, should become one of those things that all teachers understand as something that should happen during the session.

Further, this session structure enhances the "story" that a church tells to parents who leave their babies in its care. Most parents will expect the first two of these (*Keep* and *Love*) to be done, but when they hear that the time their child is in the church's care will be spent deliberately focusing on all of these three things, it will give them comfort AND let them know the church is providing more than childcare for their children.

These three components function as a sort of "job description" for teachers. But unlike the sequential nature of a lesson plan for older children, these three components should be perceived much like the toy blocks with which a child plays. The order in which a child plays with various blocks is random, and so is the "sequence" of the above responsibilities. At any given moment, the teacher may be doing one or all of them in an effort to conduct a successful session.

Lesson Essentials Because real learning is taking place during the session, the following content statements

taught through *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* are called *Lesson Essentials*. Teachers are encouraged to speak all of these *Lesson Essentials* to each child at one or more times in every session.

1) "We love you." - It's hard to imagine a more crucial or fundamental statement than this coming from someone representing the church. A healthy self-identity requires the awareness of an "other." This statement affirms the reality of more than one "other" while also pointing to the love that is given to the child. Every child needs to hear that they are loved unconditionally and this *Lesson Essential* associates unconditional love with the teachers in the classroom.

2) "Jesus loves you." - Names will become increasingly important as the child develops. This statement will begin to affirm Jesus' name and identity as a significant "other" (even if unseen). It will also help the child associate Jesus' name with the love and care the child is experiencing in the classroom.

3) "Your family loves you." The church should perceive itself as a partner with the family as both seek to establish a foundation of faith in the young child. This statement affirms the child's most significant relationships (family) and associates the church and classroom with that relationship. It should also give the parents comfort that the church is affirming their love and role in the child's life.

4) "The church loves you." - As the child grows, he/she will have an increasing awareness that this place is unique. Eventually the child will begin to understand the church is more than a classroom or building and that the people associated with this place are special and the child has a place in it.

The list certainly could go on, but the above four *Lesson Essentials* provide a wholistic, "360" perspective that is fundamental to the child's identity while also being associated with the church and the people vocalizing the statements.

The above four Lesson Essentials provide a wholistic, "360" perspective that is fundamental to the child's identity while also being associated with the church and the people vocalizing the statements.



Parent Partnership *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* supports a very specific strategy for teaching babies, but teachers and church leaders must recognize that we are merely partners in God's overall plan to raise young followers of Jesus. Parents have been given the primary responsibility for discipling their children. The church can, however, partner with parents in very deliberate ways. By teaching children while they are in the church's care, the church is coming alongside the parents in a very intentional way.

The *God's Unfolding Story for Babies Parent Page* is a single printed page to be given to parents that will help them understand what is happening during the session as well as provide additional helpful resources for parents of babies. The PDF version of the parent page

By teaching children while they are in the church's care, the church is coming alongside the parents in a very intentional way.

that comes with the *God's Unfolding Story for Babies Packet* is rather generic and will not change from week to week. There is, however, a Word document version of the parent page available which will allow the church to customize the parent page in any number of ways.

Sensory Experiences We encourage teachers to engage the children in as many sensory experiences as possible in any given session. Unique sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, and visual images can enhance the learning experience by allowing the child to attach additional meaning to the *Lesson Essentials* they are hearing. Pleasant background music can be an important sensory experience. *The God's Unfolding Story for Babies Newsletter* will offer creative suggestions, including music, for how to do this as time and space are limited here.

Supporting Resources In addition to *Getting Started With God's Unfolding Story for Babies*, the curriculum provides a variety of free, downloadable or digitally accessible supporting resources to help the church and teacher(s) maximize the curriculum's effectiveness.

1) A Building Blocks for An Effective Babies Class Poster.

A printable poster (8.5x11 or 11x17) to place on the walls at appropriate places in each classroom as a reminder to the teachers that every session calls for them to *Keep* the children, *Love* the children, and *Teach* the children. This is a PDF and is part of the *God's Unfolding Story for Babies Packet*.

2) A God's Unfolding Story for Babies Lesson Essentials Poster. A printable poster (8.5x11 or 11x17) to place on the wall at appropriate places in the classroom. It will list the *Lesson Essentials* so teachers are easily reminded of the things they should be saying during the session. This is a PDF and is part of the *God's Unfolding Story for Babies Packet*.

3) A God's Unfolding Story for Babies Parent Page. This will be given to parents upon arrival so they can know what will be happening with their kids during the session. This is a PDF and is part of the *God's Unfolding Story for Babies Packet*, but it will also be available as a customizable Word document so churches can include their own desired messaging at their discretion.

4) The God's Unfolding Story for Babies Newsletter. This free e-newsletter includes articles related to babies,



teaching babies, parenting, and other content relevant to teachers and parents. The newsletter will also include ideas for using the curriculum and expanding the sensory learning experience for babies. You can subscribe to the newsletter using the QR code to the left or the link below.

God's Unfolding Story for Babies newsletter will include ideas for expanding the sensory learning experience for babies.

5) God's Unfolding Story for Babies Facebook Group.

This group allows for the online exchanging of ideas and other information related to the resource as well as a place to post and receive relevant announcements. You can find this group using the QR Code to the right or the link below.



Relevant Links If you're not able to access the online resources via the QR codes placed earlier in the document, here are the relevant links...

Sign up for the God's Unfolding Story for Babies Newsletter... <https://bit.ly/3vxIJUk>

Visit and join the God's Unfolding Story for Babies Facebook Group... <https://bit.ly/3oKF9CK>

Download the Word document version of the Parent Page... <https://bit.ly/3STeC47>

Notes

To the Preschool Pastor/Minister/Director

Choosing a curriculum to use for the first time is a big deal, especially if you are changing from one curriculum resource to another. We hope to make that transition easy for you. We also hope you find *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* to be compelling and truly effective in your church.

In all likelihood, you have questions that we hope to address here. If you have additional questions, we invite you to email us at Admin@SevenInteractive.com or post questions and comments on our Facebook Group page. We welcome your questions and feedback.

Relevant Articles Be sure to notice the relevant articles to be found later in this PDF packet. These can be printed and distributed to your teachers at your discretion. They are designed to help identify the foundational rationale for how *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* is designed.

Who Developed This Resource? *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* was created by a host of people associated with the *God's Unfolding Story Bible Study System* and SundaySchoolZone.com. Sunday School Zone provides free, printable children's Bible activities for use with kids at home, church, and school, as well as resources for teaching children the Bible. We do this because we want to impact how parents, churches, and other organizations go about educating their children. We believe the Lord has called us to help the church teach His story to successive generations. We hope to do this by providing free, quality, children's Bible teaching resources.

What We Believe *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* is published and managed by a group of people committed to helping the church teach His story to successive generations and growing mature followers of Jesus Christ. We are solidly and unapologetically evangelical in our theological commitments and strive to be thoroughly biblical in our content, in our business practices, and in our lifestyles.

We are committed to the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. We believe that in Scripture God has spoken intelligently and intelligibly. That is, we believe God has spoken with specific words that convey specific and intended messages that we, as created human beings, can understand. That's why we are producing Bible study resources for churches and individuals. We want to help people hear from God through the Bible.

We believe Yahweh, the God of the Bible, is the only true God, and we believe in the church's historic commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity and affirm that Jesus is fully God and fully man. The risen Christ is alive today and present among God's people in the person of the Holy Spirit.

The nature of the content we publish in *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* and Sunday School Zone is doctrinal and interpretive. If you really wish to know what we believe, look at our content. We invite people to examine our resources to determine for themselves if the content is biblical and falls within the parameters of historic Christianity. If you feel we have erred in any way, we ask that you contact us to share your concerns at Admin@SevenInteractive.com.

Why Is There Advertising in the Curriculum? *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* is completely free to the church and user. There are, however, costs associated with creating and producing the resource. We sell a limited amount of advertising space to appropriate organizations in order to cover our costs and enable us to continue providing free resources to churches and families.

If you are interested in advertising through *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* or Sunday School Zone, please use the QR code to the right to learn more about our audience.



Permission to Photocopy and License Limitations

When you download *God's Unfolding Story for Babies*, you are granted a limited license to use the materials in your church as they were designed and intended. You have permission to print and photocopy the material for as many classes as you need. You do NOT have permission to repackage, sell, give away, claim as your own or use the content in ways for which they were not designed. Please remember the resource is free to churches, parents, and teachers to download and use as intended. We ask that you not distribute the related files beyond your own church. Rather, we invite you to encourage other churches to check it out for themselves.

God's Unfolding Story for Babies is not for use in any way other than intended. To contact us regarding permissions or for more information, simply email us at Admin@SevenInteractive.com.

Training Teachers to Use God's Unfolding Story for Babies

If you have responsibility for managing a group of teachers who are working with babies, then you likely understand the value of getting everyone on the same page when it comes to caring for the children, teaching them consistently, and communicating with parents of the children. Here's a fairly simple plan for interpreting *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* to your teachers in a 50-minute session.

Preparation Be sure you read and understand *Getting Started with God's Unfolding Story for Babies*, including the various articles that explain much of the rationale for the curriculum. Understanding this rationale and interpreting it to your teachers will be an important factor in the success of the curriculum.

Print a copy of the first six pages of *Getting Started With God's Unfolding Story for Babies* (including the cover, welcome page, and pages 1-4) and the *God's Unfolding Story for Babies Parent Page* as handouts for each teacher in attendance. Be sure to print a copy for yourself to highlight as needed in advance.

Print a single copy of the *Building Blocks of an Effective Babies Class Poster* and a single copy of the *Lesson Essentials for Teaching Babies Poster*.

Use a highlighter to mark the segments of the welcome page and other sections of *Getting Started with God's Unfolding Story for Babies* that you will want to share with the group as part of the training session.

Acquire an oil diffuser or scented candle (and matches or a lighter) to use in Step Three.

Make sure teachers know the time and location for the training session.

Arrive early to prepare the room and greet teachers as they arrive. Distribute the handouts to each teacher as they arrive.

Special Note You may or may not want to provide copies of all of the articles provided in this packet. There may be value in "holding" these articles for future, ongoing training. Either way, you need to be familiar with the content of the articles as they will help you interpret the philosophy behind the curriculum.

Step One - Welcome and Introduction (5 min.)

Welcome the teachers and explain that the purpose of the session is to train participants in the philosophy and

use of *God's Unfolding Story for Babies*. Be sure to thank them for their important service and the impact they will have on the babies in their care.

Encourage participants to record notes as appropriate in the space provided on page 4 of the handout.

Call attention to the welcome page of the handout and read or put into your own words the relevant segments of the welcome page.

Encourage questions throughout the training session.

Step Two - Can We Really Teach Babies? (10 min.)

It's very possible that some of the participants may be skeptical about "teaching" newborns and pre-toddlers. Take a few moments to explain that research reveals that babies are, in fact, teachable from the start (see *Teachable From the Start*) and that what they do during a typical session can have a real impact on the children (see *Can We Teach Babies?*). Allow for discussion as this is an important principle behind *God's Unfolding Story for Babies*.

Step Three - The Value of Attachments (5 min.) Start the diffuser or light the scented candle.

Draw attention to the section "Identity, Attachment, and Environment" (page 1). Note that the attachments babies form with teachers in the classroom are significant to the child's developing identity. It's these attachments that allow the child to associate meaning with the *Lesson Essentials* that will be spoken to the children during each session. It's the combination of loving attachments and the *Lesson Essentials* that produce real learning in the session and help lay the foundation for future faith in the child.

Ask if the participants can smell the candle. Explain that they are more likely to remember and "learn" the value of attachments because an additional sensory experience has been associated with the discussion. Similarly, babies will more easily "learn" the *Lesson Essentials* because of the attachments they form with the teachers.

Allow the diffuser to keep running or the candle to continue burning.

Step Four - Building Blocks of an Effective Babies Class (5 min.)

Call attention to this section (page 2) of the handout. Review the descriptions and explain that all three *Building Blocks of an Effective Babies Class* are distinct and important to creating an environment where attachments can be created that associate meaning with the *Lesson Essentials*.

Hold up a copy of the *Building Blocks of an Effective Babies Class Poster* and explain that copies will be

placed on the walls of each classroom so teachers will be reminded regularly of the need to *Keep, Love, and Teach*.

Allow for questions and discussion.

Step Five - Lesson Essentials (10 min.) Use the section on pages 2 and 3 of the handout to review and interpret the four *Lesson Essentials*. Explain that the list could be longer and there are certainly other important things that can be said to babies, but it's important to limit the number for the sake of impact through repetition. And, these particular statements recognize and support a wholistic "circle" of relationships that include Jesus, the family, the church, and the teachers themselves.

Allow for discussion as this is an important aspect of the philosophy behind *God's Unfolding Story for Babies*.

Hold up a copy of the *Lesson Essentials for Babies Poster* and explain that copies will be placed on the walls of each classroom so teachers will be regularly reminded of the statements they're being asked to speak to the children during each session.

Step Six - Parent Partnership (5 min.) Draw attention to the *God's Unfolding Story for Babies Parent Page* in the handout and the relevant section on page 3 of the handout. Underscore that the purpose of the parent page is to help parents understand what is happening during the session as well as provide additional helpful resources for parents of babies.

Special Note The parent page is also available as a Word document so it can be easily customized by the church to include relevant messaging and seasonal announcements. If you intend to do this, you may want to address how this will be handled in your church.

Step Seven - Supporting Resources (5 min.) Identify the supporting resources listed on page 4 of the handouts. Be sure to note the following things:

- All *God's Unfolding Story for Babies* resources are free. The teachers will not be charged anything or "pitched" anything.
- The free newsletter will provide ongoing suggestions for ways to enhance the session, such as ways to provide additional sensory experiences and fun ways to highlight seasonal emphases.
- By participating in and contributing to the Facebook group, teachers will be helping to constantly strengthen the curriculum. The publishing staff will be watching the Facebook group for ideas and suggestions and ways to improve the resource.

Conclusion (5 min.) Ask for any additional questions or comments and allow for any final, relevant discussion. Thank the participants for attending and close with a prayer that God will use their efforts to establish a foundation of faith in these young children. Dismiss.

Notes

BUILDING BLOCKS OF AN EFFECTIVE BABIES CLASS



Keep them

Love them

Teach them

BUILDING BLOCKS OF AN EFFECTIVE BABIES CLASS



Keep them

Love them

Teach them

**We love you.
Jesus loves you.
Your family loves you.
The church loves you.**

A wooden pencil holder filled with various colored pencils. The pencils are in shades of pink, orange, yellow, purple, blue, and black. The holder is made of light-colored wood and has the words "LESSON ESSENTIALS" written on it in a dark, hand-drawn font.

LESSON ESSENTIALS

**We love you.
Jesus loves you.
Your family loves you.
The church loves you.**



Thank you for trusting your baby with us!

While your child is in our care, we will be committed to the following *Building Blocks of An Effective Babies Class*...

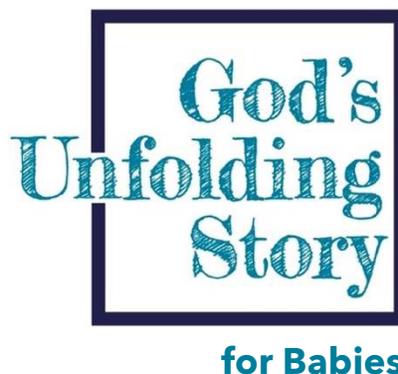
- *Keep Them*: We will make certain your child is kept safe, comfortable, clean, and appropriately fed.
- *Love Them*: Your child's well-being is our highest priority. He or she will be well-loved by the teachers in the class.
- *Teach Them*: We believe babies are learning from the start. We are, therefore, providing more than childcare. We will be teaching your child by speaking the below *Lesson Essentials* to him or her.

Your baby's brain is developing as it encounters all of the new experiences of life. That means real learning is taking place in your baby! And, for the time your baby is in our care, they will hear the following *Lesson Essentials* that will help establish a foundation for future biblical faith...

- We love you.
- Jesus loves you.
- Your family loves you.
- The church loves you.

Thank you again for allowing your baby to experience the love of Jesus through us!

Your Babies Class Teachers



Can We Teach Babies?

The fact that we are producing Bible study curriculum for infants and babies not yet able to walk will raise inevitable questions. Most churches recognize the value of "childcare" for newborns. After all, it's important to provide a proper "nursery" so adult parents and older siblings can attend other activities taking place at church. But what about teaching newborns? Can we really teach babies? Should churches give serious consideration to "discipling" (teaching) babies? Can infants and those who are not yet walking really be expected to "learn" anything? Should publishers even offer products and resources to help "workers in the nursery" actually "teach" these kids anything?



Photo by Garrett Jackson on Unsplash

We believe there is, in fact, very real learning taking place at this important stage of a child's life and that this learning can be directed to help establish a foundation of biblical faith in the child's life. What's important for teaching this age is an understanding of the KIND of learning that is happening and HOW it can be directed.

Any caring parent or adult working with babies already has an awareness that these children can't be expected to "learn" in the sense of grasping any kind of "fact," storing that fact in his or her memory, accessing that memory at will, and articulating the fact as needed. But, this doesn't mean learning isn't happening.

In fact, some of the most important things a person will EVER learn are learned during these early days. The real question isn't whether a baby can learn, but HOW do they learn and how can we direct that learning for the sake of God's Kingdom? The challenge for us as Christian "educators" (parents, volunteers, church staff, etc.) is to adjust our thinking about what it means to "teach" these little ones.

Changing Our Thinking

Babies may not "know" or "understand" things in the sense of the classic levels of learning. But they certainly understand that upon arrival this world can be quite inhospitable as compared to the comforts of the womb. Somehow they "know" when they are hungry. Somehow they "understand" that they are uncomfortable due to a wet diaper. And somehow they manage to "learn" that they are in a relationship with their caregivers.

The problem is that we as Christian educators tend to define learning and teaching in adult terms. "Babies can't 'really' learn." "We can't 'really' teach them." "We can't 'really' expect discipleship to happen in the crib." We believe this adult-influenced way of thinking is simply wrong and is, in fact, dangerous to the future of the church and its efforts to achieve Kingdom discipleship.

The problem is that we as Christian educators tend to define learning and teaching in adult terms.

The fact is that the kind of learning taking place in the life of a newborn provides the strongest model for ANY age group. Rather than dismissing the capacity of a baby to "learn," we should, in fact, consider how their learning can shape the discipling strategies of other age groups. That, however, is a conversation for another place. The point here is that real learning is taking place with babies of even the youngest age and we have the ability to impact that learning if we will merely adapt to it.

The Nature of Learning for Babies

The earliest steps in a baby's "education" are about building identity through meaningful attachments. The young child is developing a very rudimentary understanding of "who I am." This is essential and is taking place in the context of the broader environment in which he or she is living, but it is most shaped by the attachment of the child to parents or caregivers and the relationships that develop with them. Somehow, during these early days, a baby learns that he (or she) is who he is in relationship to another person or other persons. The child's identity is related to this other person who is holding, feeding, and caring for it.

These attachments help establish a foundation for what the child will come to believe about God and God's

people in the coming months and years. Positive, healthy relationships that create significant attachments with the family and church will go a long way to shaping the child's early faith. It's hard to overstate the significance of these attachments.

Real learning for the baby is, therefore, identity-based (understanding who I am), environmentally-conditioned (am I comfortable and cared for), and relationally-driven (attachments to other people). If you want to achieve real discipleship in a baby, you must do so by 1) addressing its identity 2) through attachments 3) with an appropriate ability to influence its immediate environment. This model of learning is relevant for ANY age, but is never more apparent and intuitive than when the learner is a baby. These three educational elements (identity, attachments, and environment) are so interconnected in fact, that we take them for granted. "Yes, of course. Everybody knows this is how babies learn." But, there is a fourth element involved in teaching a baby that is often overlooked in our ministry to babies.

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The Fourth Element... Content!

There's more than identity-building taking place here through attachments. Parents and caregivers are, in fact, teaching real content to these youngest of learners. And, they do it quite often without thinking...

"Mommy loves you."

"Mommy missed you today."

"Daddy loves your smile."

Now, are these children "consuming" these kinds of "truth statements" the way a seminary student might learn that Calvin was instrumental in fueling the Reformation? Certainly not. But now we're back to comparing apples to oranges. Models of adult learning should not be applied to babies.

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But, do we really believe that the kind of statements above can be considered "content?" Or are these

merely the loving pronouncements of a doting parent or grandparent? Could it be that we say these things for our own sakes more than the sake of the child?

We would contend that these kinds of repeated statements, paired with an attachment to the physical presence of a loving adult in the context of a clean and comfortable and sensory-rich environment where the child's physical needs are being met and appropriate sensory stimulation is provided, DO make a genuine, educational difference in the life and mind of a child. We believe that real learning is taking place in the lives of babies and that real content can be taught to babies when the content is fashioned appropriately and shared in strategic and intentional ways. Learning for babies is, we believe, content-receptive.

Principles of Teaching Babies

When we break down the above convictions and examine them more closely, we can identify several principles that can be applied to teaching babies genuine biblical content that lays a foundation for future learning and discipleship.

1. Biblical learning for babies takes place in the context of physical care. No one would imagine that an audio recording of affirming voices would have any positive impact in an environment where the child's physical needs are not being met. Whatever else happens, biblical learning for babies can only happen as the child's immediate physical needs are being met by caring people.



Photo by Chiên Phạm on Unsplash

2. Attachments to people are essential. Learning occurs in a baby as meaning becomes associated with various experiences. Loving adults provide the richest form of meaning that becomes associated with other experiences such as the tender words they hear from

that adult and others present. When a child HEARS a statement ("The church loves you") and that experience is then associated with a loving teacher with whom the child has a meaningful attachment, real learning occurs.

3. The content being "taught" must be simple. However strongly we may feel about a baby's capacity for learning, we must remember that we're dealing with "brand new brains" that are in the earliest stages of development. And, however profound the truths may be that we are attempting to teach, they must be fashioned in the simplest of ways. "Jesus loves you." "We love you." No statement should be over three to five words at the most.

4. The scope of the content must be limited. Time with babies at church is limited. It's important to identify the most essential and limited number of truths and focus on those rather than attempting to cover a broad range of concepts.

5. The content must be repeated. Any language, for example, is learned by hearing words and phrases over and over and over. Even adults have difficulty remembering things they hear only a time or two. Repetition is essential to learning for this age. We suggest that strategic content be repeated weekly in church and daily at home as much as possible.

6. Learning for babies should engage all of the learner's senses. This is especially important when a baby is not able to discern how "content" is coming at them. Every sense is a portal of learning. In the appropriate environment, teaching babies will utilize physical touch, hearing, and visual stimulation, as well as the senses of smell and even taste. A sensory-rich environment provides additional opportunities for the baby to associate meaning with the things they are hearing.

Can we teach babies? Yes! But the ideal approach to teaching babies will utilize a limited number of brief statements that are spoken to a child by a caring adult in the context of an environment where the child's physical needs are met and all of the child's senses are involved.

Notes

Teachable from the Start

Even before birth, an infant is interacting with and genuinely learning from their surroundings. Scientists now understand that a child's brain development begins in the womb and continues most rapidly from birth to age 3. As educators in the church, we need to recognize this as a great opportunity to influence genuine biblical learning (discipleship) from the very beginning. Babies are teachable from the start!



Photo by drz on Unsplash

Newborns Are Learning

Every baby is born with 100 billion brain cell "neurons" that are mostly unconnected. Connections between these neurons, called synapses, are created as a baby has sensory experiences (touching, hearing, etc.) in their emotional and physical environment. As a synapses pathway is used more often, the brain recognizes its importance and strengthens it so that messages may be sent more efficiently. Basically, a baby's brain develops in a "use it or lose it" fashion. The more often a message is received from its environment or caregivers, the more the infant's brain will consider that it's an important learning to "hold on" to.

Caring Is Teaching

While babies require their every need to be met by caregivers, this "helplessness" can actually be considered a strength because baby's brains are using this time to learn from their caregivers' responses. "If babies' expectations for protection and nurturance are met, then their brains experience pleasure and delight"

(Lally & Mangione, 2017). At birth, babies begin actively seeking out care in a way to elicit responses from others to gain attention, contact, and closeness. As parents and caregivers react lovingly to an infant's needs, the infant learns that they can trust others for their care and they begin to form secure relationships. "Tender loving care' is not only the kind way to treat children but a crucial part of early brain development" (Lally & Mangione, 2017). From these first interactions, babies learn by the modeling of caregivers how to feel, think, and act. They also begin to form understandings of how much they are loved. Scientists have shown how these emotional wirings are fostering the dominant brain development during the first two years of life. Being sensitive to an infant's needs and responding in a timely manner are two easy ways to support this need for a baby to create secure attachments.

Attaching Meaning to Experiences

A baby's brain grows and adapts based on its environment and early experiences. In turn, these experiences will determine how a child expresses emotions, gets along with others, and views future learning. Caregivers can help infants learn by providing loving interactions that help the baby attach meaning to words and experiences. Learning will occur after a baby creates multiple memories by these repeated interactions. A baby's brain doesn't retain irrelevant information. In order to create a memory that translates into learning, meaning must be attached to what the infant experiences.

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An effective way to create this meaning with infants is by pairing experiences with the warm touch, language, and emotion of a responsive caregiver. (Marshall, 2011) It has also been noted that babies will learn with less repetition when they are learning through play.

"Serve and Return"

When caregivers share secure attachments with babies and ensure that interactions include both meaning and play, they are engaging in immediate brain building as well as building a firm foundation where additional learning can later be added. Child-adult relationships that are responsive, attentive, and based on back-and-forth interactions are called "serve and return." First, the

caregiver notices what a baby is paying attention to. This is the "serve." The caregiver then "returns the serve" to the child by providing encouragement, support, or acknowledgement. During this "return," the caregiver can also provide words to reinforce the learning and then wait for the baby to respond in some way. A caregiver can continue to take turns interacting with the child until the baby's interest wanes. "Serve and return" allows caregivers to capitalize on what a baby is showing interest in by adding further insight and meaning to the learning. It also reinforces to the baby that they are well-loved and important to the caregiver and can trust the caregiver to interact in warm, consistent ways.

Early Learning

Our understanding of brain development has exploded in recent years, showing scientists how an infant's brain begins developing well before birth. Instead of the outdated notion that babies are just in a waiting period

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to begin learning, we now understand how vital the first months are to real learning and setting a foundation for further growth. Whereas infants begin their learning by trusting others for their care, they continue by learning from the everyday experiences in their lives, especially those experiences that are repeated often. This earliest learning contributes to babies' current and future emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social growth and development.

Article by Heather Bonds

Additional Resources

Lally, J.R. & Mangione, P.L. (2017). Caring Relationships: The Heart of Early Brain Development. *Young Children*.

Marshall, J. (2011). Infant Neurosensory Development: Considerations for Infant Child Care. *Early Childhood Education Journal*.

Arnold, R. & Colburn, N. (2005). Oh! What a Smart Baby. *School Library Journal* (51,2).

Notes

Rock the Cradle... Rule the World!

William Ross Wallace was a 19th-Century American poet who wrote *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (see below) and understood what the contemporary church has too often forgotten... "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."



Photo by Alex Bodini on Unsplash

Wallace wrote the poem as a tribute to mothers, but the truth underscores the power of anyone who influences "the cradle;" church volunteers, caregivers, moms, dads... the list could go on. When you impact the life of a baby, you impact the world!

We often wrongly imagine that power rests only in the hands of powerful adults.

This simple reality is too often dismissed in the church as meaningless sentimentality. That's because we wrongly imagine that power rests only in the hands of powerful adults. We forget that every adult is the product of someone who once rocked the cradle.

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* By William Ross Wallace

Blessings on the hand of women!
Angels guard its strength and grace,
In the palace, cottage, hovel,
Oh, no matter where the place;
Would that never storms assailed it,
Rainbows ever gently curled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Infancy's the tender fountain,
Power may with beauty flow,
Mother's first to guide the streamlets,
From them souls unresting grow—
Grow on for the good or evil,
Sunshine streamed or evil hurled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Woman, how divine your mission
Here upon our natal sod!
Keep, oh, keep the young heart open
Always to the breath of God!
All true trophies of the ages
Are from mother-love imperaled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Blessings on the hand of women!
Fathers, sons, and daughters cry,
And the sacred song is mingled
With the worship in the sky—
Mingles where no tempest darkens,
Rainbows evermore are hurled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

If you care for one or more babies ("true trophies of the ages"), you hold the capacity to rule the world.

If you are a Christian holding a newborn, you can "keep the young heart open always to the breath of God!"

If you are a parent, you will influence whether your child will produce "sunshine streamed or evil hurled."

If you are a preacher, you can proclaim the power of the cradle and allow it to "mingle with the worship in the sky."

What work will your hand find to do? Rock the cradle... rule the world!

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Supplies, Furniture, and Equipment Needed in a Classroom for Babies

We believe strongly that babies are learning (and can be taught) from birth and even earlier. But, young babies are not able to articulate their needs beyond crying in order to express discomfort, hunger, etc. Further, these children are not able, initially, to distinguish between the importance of people vs. things. This makes the teaching environment (classroom) even more important because it is one of many things that are helping the baby learn about this new world in which they are now residing. It's important, therefore, to make sure the classroom provides whatever is necessary to keep the babies safe and comfortable so discomfort doesn't become a distraction from the loving teaching we want to see happen during the baby's time in the classroom.

*Note: **Bold type below** indicates descriptors you can enter on Amazon to find sample products.

The Room Itself

It should go without saying that the room itself needs to be secure, clean, and disinfected. The room should be easily accessible for parents, but obviously secure. You're asking parents to leave their young babies in this room. They need to know it's safe.

Avoid placing the classroom in a damp basement or location where mold may grow. Apart from the obvious allergy problems this may create, odors are important to babies (and parents), so do whatever is needed to create a clean and nice-smelling room. An **essential oil diffuser** or **air fresheners** are a good idea as long as it doesn't smell as if you're covering up a problem. If there's a problem, fix it. A proper room also means paint that isn't peeling and falling on the floor or into the cribs. If the room is carpeted, is it clean and free of stains? If you can't get it clean, take it up and trash it. These babies are worth the effort.

Furniture and Supplies

Beyond a clean room, the classroom needs to be appropriately stocked with needed supplies so the babies' needs can be met quickly without sending someone during the session to hunt down baby wipes or other essential items. Here's a list of needed furniture and supplies that should be kept in the room with additional stock nearby.

- Keep **disinfecting spray** and **disinfecting wipes** well-stocked IN THE ROOM. Cleaning isn't something to be done merely during the week or minutes before kids arrive. Surfaces and toys need to be cleaned after each use. Cleaning needs to happen AS YOU GO.
- Babies will not be walking. Much of the time, unless the children are being held or changed, they should be kept safe and comfortable in proper-size **cribs**. Safety is paramount, so don't use furniture that is barely standing. Apart from the safety concerns of using dilapidated cribs, what parent wants their child left in a crib that looks like something that might have been used for Cain and Abel? This room and the furniture in it will be the most important room in the church for many potential new church members. Invest in cribs that tell parents you care about their kids.
- And make sure you have plenty of **crib sheets** for each bed. Presume you'll need to change one or more cribs during the session.
- Some babies can be placed on the floor for "tummy time" when they can play. For these growing babies, find one or more **baby floor blankets** to facilitate their play while keeping them clean.

The classroom is important because it helps babies learn about their new world, including the church.

- Babies may not play like toddlers, but appropriate **developmental toys for babies 0-12 months** that stimulate and delight them are still important for these young children. And don't skimp! If you buy just enough for the babies attending, what happens when new children arrive? Toys that foster development in babies will reinforce the positive learning environment you're attempting to create.
- Babies love mirrors. Mirrors will help reinforce a positive identity as the teacher affirms the baby. Get some **wall mirrors** and place them in convenient places for the teachers around the room. You'll also want to get some **baby toy mirrors** to place on the floor for the babies to play with.
- Some babies may need their formula heated. Got **bottle warmers**?
- Don't wait until you're holding a dirty diaper to determine you need a proper **diaper pail**. What are you going to do with THAT?

- At some point during or at the end of the session you will need to strip mattresses and place the sheets in a dirty laundry **hamper**. Throwing them on the floor may be the only option, but it's really not a good one. And be sure soiled sheets are not left in the room so they're waiting on you next week!
- One of the great joys of teaching babies is the opportunity to sit and hold them! What could be better than holding and rocking a baby? What could be worse than looking around and realizing there's no place to sit? Get enough **rocking chairs** to have one for EVERY teacher. And maybe one extra for the times a parent is needed to rock and console. Get chairs you can keep clean and wipe them down regularly!
- Cribs are not for changing soiled diapers. Get one or more **baby changing tables**. You'll wish you had when you're bending over the railing to change a squirming seven-month old. And don't forget **changing pad covers** for the changing tables.
- Purchase and keep track of cleaning items like a **broom and dustpan, toilet brush, disposable gloves**, and a **vacuum cleaner** if appropriate. Don't make Teacher A sneak next door to steal a broom from Teacher B before class. Trust me on this one.
- We can hope that parents will bring enough diapers and wipes for their child for the session and any contingency. But don't count on it. Keep extra **diapers** and **baby wipes** in stock. Sooner or later you will need them.
- Teachers will need to wash their hands after handling each child. Make sure they have **antibacterial hand soap** and encourage them to use it. If a sink is not available, get some **disinfecting hand sanitizer** (gel or foam) for the teachers. There's a reason why hospitals use this stuff. Let's work at keeping the babies under our care from needing to go there.
- A nursing mother may bring breast milk for her baby. A **small refrigerator** would be appropriate for this. Keep it clean and running. If you have ever opened a dirty refrigerator that was NOT running, you know why.
- A **forehead thermometer** or **ear thermometer** may be a good idea for the times you have a fussy baby and need to call the parents. Is the child running a fever? Does anyone have a thermometer so we can check? Why, yes, we do!

Not Rocket Science

Your circumstances and the needs of your babies may dictate additional or different items. This is not rocket science. Think about what you may need that's not

identified here. And if you miss something, you'll soon know what it is. Maybe you should keep a simple note pad and pencil handy in the classroom to make a list of what's needed before the next session.

So, You Want A List?

Now, for those who may prefer a simple list without annotation, here you go...

Furniture and Equipment

- Cribs and plenty of sheets
- Baby floor blankets
- Bottle warmers
- Developmental toys
- Waste can and trash bags
- Diaper pail
- Hamper for soiled sheets
- Rocking chairs and chair pads
- Changing table(s) and sheets or covers
- Wall mirrors and baby tummy mirrors
- Small refrigerator
- Forehead or ear thermometer

Cleaning Items

- Disinfecting spray and wipes
- Baby wipes
- Disinfecting hand sanitizer
- Broom and dustpan
- Toilet brush or wand
- Disposable gloves
- Vacuum if needed
- Diapers of various sizes

Notes