

# Learning Capabilities in Religious Education

All teachers are aware that children of different ages have different learning capabilities. Many church-school teachers, however, often experience an initial difficulty zeroing in on the capabilities of the particular age group they are teaching. When preparing lessons, they have difficulty in determining what ideas, concepts and facts the age group is capable of understanding and difficulty in determining how ideas, concepts and facts can best be presented to the age group.

Experience with a particular age group is perhaps the best teacher; the trial and error (or trial and success) method is a time-consuming process but usually the most trust-worthy. However, the experience of other educators is also helpful... There are several important factors related to learning capabilities and religious education that might be useful for teachers to keep in mind.

**One factor is language. Language is still our chief means of conveying ideas and facts.**

But language works only so long as the receiver of the communication has meanings to place on the words we use in our communication. If someone says, "I saw a camel at the zoo," we can totally understand this fact only if we know what words such as "I," "saw," "camel," and "zoo" mean. If we know what "I" and "saw" mean but have no idea of what the word "camel" means,

we do not: totally understand the communication.

**Teachers must be aware of the language capabilities of their students.**

They must be aware of what words their students will understand and which ones they won't; and teachers must learn to gear their teaching language to the language capabilities of their students. A special problem results from the fact that there is a **"religious" vocabulary**, which often includes words not normally used in day-to-day conversation. For example, words such as "Incarnation," "Transfiguration," "vestments," "censer," etc. are not words children normally hear; hence, these words may have no meaning for them until they are taught their meaning.



In addition, some words have different secular and religious meanings; for example, "inspired," means one thing in a secular context (a poet can be inspired) and another in a religious context (the writers of the Gospels were inspired). Consequently, a church-school teacher often has the task of helping students attach the correct meaning to words and developing a

religious vocabulary. The development of a religious vocabulary also involves deepening understanding; for example, to move from an understanding of "repentance" that means, "being sorry" to one that includes changing one's way of life.

**In summary, in order to increase the effectiveness of their communication with their students, teachers [1]**

should not assume that students know the meaning of religious terms, but [2] should check first and make certain that everyone is attaching the right meaning to the words. In addition, teachers [3] should also make certain they are not using words beyond the understanding of their students. Finally, teachers [4] should attempt to build the *religious vocabulary* of their students—in accordance with the 'students' understanding.

**Another important factor in the learning process is experience.**

*[1] Things outside one's own experience are always more difficult to understand than those things within one's experience.*

Very young children have very little experience of the world to draw upon. If they are not yet in school, their experience is often limited to the home and family. Consequently, it is often wise to place explanations in this home-family context or to limit explanations to the children's experiences. ]

For example, in telling the story of the birth of Jesus Christ, a teacher can easily eliminate all mention of the Roman emperor, the census, etc. simply because very young children won't have the foggiest idea of what a Roman is, what an emperor is, what a census is; and these details will only confuse very young children. Even children who have not yet had history in school will have difficulty with references to the Roman Empire since they have not had any experience with the material.

*[2] There are also areas besides factual ones in which experience is an important part of understanding.*

Sharing, for example, is not always a positive experience for very young children; they share often because they are forced to do so when they would much rather keep possession of whatever they are asked to share.

In fact, these children do have difficulty understanding the concept of sharing as a positive virtue since they experience it as a negative giving up of something they would rather keep. This is not to say that teachers should stop trying to teach sharing to very young children. Rather, they should be aware of the obstacles to understanding that the children's experience might present.

**Teaching is often both using and expanding the experiences of students.**

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