

Core Values/Guiding Principles of Children's Formation at St. Stephen's

1. Each child is cherished in their full dignity as God's beloved. Children are honored in their already-existing relationship with Jesus the Good Shepherd through the Holy Spirit in the fullness of the Father's grace. As such, every child experiences a sense of belonging within the body of Christ, the church.
2. The pedagogy of St. Stephen's children's formation is centered on wondering together, where leaders present content and then facilitate the children's own meaning-making rather than using a solely didactic approach. That meaning-making happens in a variety of ways – through story, play, arts and crafts, movement, song, and more – fostering an ethos of embodied spirituality that engages children's minds, bodies, and spirits.
3. Every children's formation gathering aims to be a shared, mutual spiritual experience where adults and children encounter God and each other in a way that has a positive impact on them, their family, their church community, and the wider world.
4. Content presented by adults includes stories of God, Jesus, and God's people from the Holy Bible, examples of loving people from history and in our own time, and explorations of our distinctive Episcopal liturgy and traditions with the goal of helping children approach and participate in them as a part of how we love God, our neighbor, and ourselves here and now.
5. Formation gatherings also include opportunities for fellowship, service, and outreach that empower the children as agents of God's love and help create intergenerational links within the congregation.

Summary and Synthesis

A simplified way to understand this approach might be the three-fold invitation that runs throughout Scripture: Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself.

These are the building blocks of our formational approach. With the youngest group, we have and will continue to emphasize belonging and belovedness as children of God. This is fundamentally about love of self, through God's eyes. For the second age group, we continue that foundation and layer in additional Bible stories and liturgical and sacramental understanding (baptism and eucharist, prayers and songs, initial leadership roles in worship, etc.). This is about growing in love and praise of

God. With the third group, we continue those threads and add an emphasis on further liturgical leadership and intergenerational outreach activities, which is really about loving neighbors and living a Christian life. Each of these threads – loving ourselves, loving God, and loving our neighbors – weave together to form a cord of faith that is strong enough to sustain us through the storms of life and bind us together in love.

Curricular Application

The opening line in the core values above states that “each child is cherished in their full dignity as God’s beloved.” To live fully into this core value, we must embrace ministry with children by meeting them where they are and walking alongside them on their journey of faith. We do this by welcoming all children and embracing their diversity of personalities, learning styles, and backgrounds by offering a blend of different activities and curricular approaches. Offering a variety of modalities to engage the same story Bible story or concept promotes deeper understanding and fosters collaborative learning. Meeting children where they are also encourages curiosity and wonder by creating safe spaces for growth and exploration.

We have rearranged our classrooms in an effort to create spaces that welcome wonder and engagement in many forms-- movement and stillness, loud times and quiet times, sensory experience and listening. Each classroom now has an area for group movement and tables for crafts and creative work in addition to a prayer table space and some of the foundational hands-on lesson materials drawn from Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (altar, baptism, Eucharist).

In service of the vision outlined in our Core Values of Children’s Formation, we are using this year to explore multiple curricula that each offer slightly different approaches to engagement with the Bible and spiritual development while all aligning with our guiding principles. Each curriculum – Love First, Sparkhouse Whirl, and Mini-Revolutions, alongside some continuing elements of Catechesis – was recommended by our professional consultant and/or by formation colleagues at peer churches. Our eventual goal is to create a hybrid curriculum that draws from the pieces that work best in order to create a holistic formation program that fits our parish and these values. This year will be a year of sampling, incorporating these different curricula and other resources into a predictable rhythm with welcoming and closing routines that will remain consistent throughout. We will prioritize opportunities for feedback as we go, so that together we can shape a fuller hybrid curriculum for longer-term use.